



Rethinking the Narrative Text: From the Centrality of Meaning to the Infinite of Interpretation

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Abstract:

This article discusses theoretical shifts in the approach of the modern narrative text, from structuralist perceptions that have made meaning a fixed and closed center, to post-structuralist perceptions that have opened the text to a plurality of interpretations and an infinite connotation. The research proceeds from the works of Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, Jacques Derrida, Wolfgang Iser, and Paul Ricoeur, to follow the path of the transfer of power from the author to the reader, and from one meaning to the open text, as well as in the Arab context, the principle of polysemy is evident in the critical heritage through the rhetorical perception of Al-Jurjani and Al-Jahz..., where the meaning is linked to the context and probability, before it is newly re-activated within contemporary Arab criticism, with Kilitu, Said Yaqtin, and Al-Ghadami, a trend that consecrates the open text and the productivity of reading.

KEYWORDS:

Narrative text - centrality of meaning – hermeneutics – post-structuralism – open text – semantic pluralism – reader – Arabic criticism.

Received: 16/01/2026 **Accepted:** 05/03/2026 **Published:** 24/05/2026

Introduction

Since the middle of the twentieth century, literary theory has witnessed profound epistemological transformations in the approach to the narrative text, in which thinking has moved from a structural conception that makes meaning an internal structure that can be adjusted and analyzed, to a post-structural conception that puts the text in the horizon of openness, multiplicity, and interpretative incompleteness. This epistemological break has crystallized with the work of Ferdinand de Saussur (1857-1913), which laid the foundation of the linguistic sign, and then developed with Gérard Genette (1918-1990) and Tzvetan Todorov (1917-1993), where meaning remained linked to the structure that can be described systematically.



However, this perception was soon subjected to a radical disintegration with Jacques Derrida (2004- 1930), who declared through this concept of "difference" (Différance) the collapse of the stable center of meaning, stressing that semantics is not exhausted but is constantly postponed within the network of signs. In the same context, Roland Barthes (1980-1915), in his article "The Death of the Author " (1967), crystallized the transfer of meaning authority from the author to the reader, as a product of semantics rather than a mere recipient of it.

Paul Ricœur (2005-1913) also contributed to consolidating the hermeneutic dimension of the text through his hermeneutic project, which sees that the text, after its codification, separates from its original poem to become the subject of multiple readings, while Wolfgang Iser (2007-1926) and Hans Robert Jauss (1997-1921) presented a perception that makes meaning a communicative act that forms within the reader's horizon and reading history.

Umbert Eco (2016 – 1932) coined the concept of “open work” (1962) as a text that generates multiple hermeneutic possibilities without losing its internal boundaries, in a delicate balance between textual openness and semantic control.

In the Arab context, the interpretation was not absent from the early critical establishment, as we find Abdul Qaher Al-Jurjani, (d. 471AH/ 1078AD) in the signs of miracle, a conception of meaning as a product of contextual relations and not of the single word, as Al-Jahiz (159AH -255AD/ 776 AD - 868AD) emphasizes in the statement and clarification of the nature of probability and multiplicity in the speech. This legacy was reinvested in modern and contemporary Arab criticism with Abdelfattah Kilito (1938-), Said Yaqtin (1945-) and Abdullah Al-Ghadhami (1946-), where the concept of open text was activated and the Arabic narrative was re-read, especially in texts such as One Thousand and One Nights, as an indefinite interpretive space.

Based on this theoretical extension between Western and Arab references, it becomes clear that the shift from the centrality of meaning to the plurality of hermeneutics does not remain merely an epistemological discussion within literary theory, but goes beyond that to reshaping the concept of the text itself, as a dynamic semantic structure based on the interaction between the linguistic structure and the historical horizon of reception. The text is no longer measured by what it " says " only, but rather by what it " produces " of renewed semantic potential within each act of reading.

In this context, the narrative text acquires, especially, its most open dimension, as it is based on phonetic pluralism and the overlap of times, pronouns, and narrative structures, which makes it a fertile space to represent this theoretical transformation. As Gérard



Genet explains, narration is not just a story, but rather an organization of narrative discourse that allows for multiple levels of vision, time, and sound, which opens the text to interpretive possibilities that cannot be limited to one final meaning.

From this perspective, the transition from the "central meaning" to the "hermeneutic incompleteness" becomes a transition from a perception that considers the text a self-contained closed entity, to a perception that considers it a renewable structure through reading, a thesis reinforced by Paul Ricoeur, who links the text with time and interpretation, considering that meaning is not restored but reproduced within the contexts of historically and culturally changing reading, and accordingly: the central forms that frame this research can be formulated as follows:

The problem of the article:

- How did critical thought move from the conception of the narrative text as a semantic structure with a fixed center, to a conception that makes it an open space on the infinite interpretation? What are the limits of this openness between the freedom to read and the controls of the text?

Based on these forms, the article seeks to track this conceptual shift by analyzing structural roots, then dismantling them post-structural, leading to the repositioning of the text within contemporary Arab and Western critical thought, allowing the understanding of narrative as an incomplete semantic practice, based on tension between the text and the reader, between structure and openness, and between meaning and its possibilities.

- The centrality of meaning in the structural perception of the narrative text:

The structural perception of the narrative text is one of the most important methodological transformations known to literary studies in the twentieth century, as it sought to establish a scientific reading of the text based on revealing its internal structure as the source of the main significance. This trend was linked to the efforts of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who laid the basis for the concept of the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified, within a relatively closed linguistic system. *¹ This perception established the idea that meaning is not outside language but results from an internal relationship between its elements.

Based on this linguistic basis, narrative structuralism evolved with Tzvetan Todorov, who considered that " narrative can be analyzed into classifiable units



and functions²," making the text an organized structure that can be dismantled scientifically. Gerard Genet also deepened this perception in his book "Discours du récit, 1972" where he analyzed narrative time, formula, and sound as internal systems that produce significance from within the narrative text itself, not from outside it.

In the same context, Roland Barthes asserts, in its first structural stage, that the text is built through a network of codes that make reading a process of dismantling an organized semantic structure, as he says : "The text is not a series of sentences, but a fabric of interlocking signs³," which reflects a perception that makes meaning the result of a tight structural organization, not an interpretative openness.

However, this structural centrality of meaning implicitly assumed the possibility of arriving at a "definitive" or at least "exact" connotation through the scientific analysis of the text. So the reader in this model remained in a secondary position, as an analyst of an existing structure. No partner in the production of semantics. Thus, it can be said that the centrality of meaning in structural perception means not only the search for significance within the text, but also the exclusion of everything that is outside – textual (author, historical context, reader) in favor of a closed structure in which interpretative sufficiency is assumed. This will pave the way for a new monetary phase that will dismantle this very centralization. He opened the text to an infinite number of readings.

However, this structural perception, despite its methodological rigor and procedural effectiveness in the analysis of texts, remained governed by what can be called the "illusion of semantic completeness", that is, the implicit assumption that it is possible to reach a stable moral structure by dismantling the internal relations of the text. Structuralism dealt with the text as a self-contained system, reducible to units and functions, which made it investigate the deliberative and historical dimension of meaning, and weakened the reader's presence as an actor in the production of significance.

In this context, it is noted that even the most sophisticated structural perceptions, as in the case of Gerard Genet, did not exceed the limits of "describing the mechanisms of textual work" without a radical questioning of the concept of meaning itself, as the latter remained presupposed within the structure, not produced within the act of reading, which will accelerate structuralism, at a later moment, and subject to sharp criticism from within the field itself, when questions began to move towards the reader's location and the limits of the text.



Roland Barthes, in his transition from the structural to the post-structural stage, referred to this shift when he affirmed that the text is no longer a closed structure, but a "fabric of non-original quotations", in an implicit reference to the instability of the idea of origin and central meaning⁴, and thus, the centrality of meaning begins to erode from within the structural discourse itself, in preparation for a broader stage of deconstruction that will redefine the text as an open semantic space, and therefore: the centrality of meaning in structural perception is understood not only as a systematic choice, but as a historical epistemological moment in the development of critical thought, which paved the way for the emergence of deconstructive and interpretative perceptions that will transfer the center of gravity from the text to the reader, and from structure to reading action.

– **The Decentralization of Meaning and the Emergence of Open Interpretation in Poststructuralist Thought:**

The shift from structuralism to post-structuralism represents a critical juncture in the history of contemporary critical thought, in which the narrative text has moved from being a closed, reducible structure to an open epistemological model of multiplicity and difference. This shift was mainly linked to the philosophical juncture represented by Jacques Derrida (2004- 1930), who re-examined the concept of "center" in Western thought, considering it to be nothing but a metaphysical assumption aimed at fixing semantics within a closed system.

In his deconstruction project, especially in *De La grammatologie* (1967), Derrida presents "difference" as a structural mechanism that constantly postpones meaning, so that semantic presence can only be achieved through a network of moving linguistic referrals, without reaching a final point of stability *, and thus meaning becomes an effect⁵, not a substance, and the result of a movement that is not a fixed given, which radically undermines the idea of the center as a final reference for significance. In this context, the concept of "eccentricity" acquires a very important epistemological dimension, as the text is no longer understood as a harmonious semantic unit, but as a space of internal differences that prevent the formation of one complete meaning, hence: what was seen in structural perception as an organized structure, is transformed in deconstructive reading into a fragmented network of signs that refer only to other signs.

Roland Barthes comes to deepen this transformation from within literary criticism, himself, when he declares in his famous article "The Death of the Author" that the literary text does not derive its unity from the author as a single source of meaning, but rather is formed as an open space in which multiple voices and discourses intersect so



that meaning becomes a product of the movement of textual overlap and not an extension of a fixed individual intention, and thus the center of significance moves from the authority of the author to the act of reading itself. The text is reproduced on each reading within a renewed and infinite hermeneutic potential.

In the same direction, Wolfgang Iser provides an accurate perception of the dynamics of reading, through the concept of "text blanks", where he asserts that literary texts deliberately leave semantic gaps that can only be filled by the reader, who integrates his experience into the construction of meaning*⁶, and therefore the text is not complete within itself, but within the interaction between its structure and the horizon of its reception.

As for Umberto Eco, he proposes a more balanced formula through the concept of "open work", as he believes that the hermeneutic openness is not absolute looseness, but rather a controlled openness within textual limits that prevent arbitrary interpretations, which makes hermeneutics a movement governed by the possibilities of the text and not the wishes of the reader alone*⁷, Poststructuralism, in its entirety, does not cancel the text, but rather redefines it as a semantic event rather than a fixed structure, an event generated within the relationship between the text and the mark and its unstable references. Hence, the disintegration of the centrality of meaning does not mean the collapse of significance, but its transformation from a fixed essence into an infinite productive process.

Thus, in the light of this transformation, the narrative text becomes an open space in which readings intersect without a single reading, and meaning becomes an ever-generating effect, not a definitive discoverable fact. However, this deconstructive perception of the openness of meaning, despite its epistemological revolution in redefining the text, has not been spared from subsequent critical accountability, especially from within the hermeneutic philosophy itself. Deconstruction has taken its tendency towards "dismantling the center" to such an extent that it may lead to diluting the semantic reference and weakening the possibility of textual verification, so that the meaning becomes vulnerable to unlimited escapism.

In this context, Habermas believes that deconstructive discourse threatens the possibility of rational communication, because it exaggerates the relativity of meaning to a degree that weakens the conditions of understanding between selves*⁸, as Paul Ricoeur points out the need to "adjust the interpretation" within the limits of the text, warning against sliding towards an "excessive interpretation" that cuts off the link between the text and its reference world*⁹.



On the other hand, Umberto Eco asserts that textual openness, despite its aesthetic legitimacy, must remain governed by the "intention of the text" and not by the "looseness of the reader", otherwise the interpretation turns into an arbitrary production that is not based on any structural basis *¹⁰, and therefore the criticism directed to dismantling does not negate its achievement, but seeks to rebalance it within the field of interpretation, where the text does not turn into an infinite space of loose connotations, but rather into an area of tension between openness and control, and between the freedom of interpretation and the limits of textual structure.

– **Narration as a layered semantic apparatus:**

In the horizon of contemporary critical transformations, narrative is no longer just a representative structure that reflects the world, but has become a complex semantic device that engages in the production of meaning through internal dynamics based on multiplicity, fragmentation, and instability. The narrative text is not built according to a simple time line, but rather consists of overlapping layers (time/ sound/vision / speech), which interact among themselves to generate irreducible connotations in one final meaning. In this context, Gerard Genet's analysis reveals that the temporal structure of narrative is not a neutral structure, but rather establishes a complex semantic economy, where manipulation (retrieval / anticipation), duration (slowdown / acceleration), and frequency (repetition / singularity) displace the center of the event. and redistribute it within the narrative discourse, and therefore time does not act as a framework for the story, but rather as a mechanism for producing meaning and postponing it, so that the event itself becomes the result of a narrative construction rather than a fixed factual given.

However, this structural plurality is completed only within a dialogical horizon, as crystallized by Mikhail Bakhtin, where the text is established as a space in which multiple voices intersect, without fusing into a closed unit. The meaning in this framework is not given in advance, but rather emerges from the tension of the difference between these voices, turning the narrative into an area of open semantic conflict. If this sound plurality disintegrates the centrality of meaning, the post-structural horizon, as manifested by Jacques Derrida, thus pushes the disintegration to its maximum extent, through the concept of "difference", which is based on postponing the meaning and postponing it within an endless series of referrals. The text according to this perception does not produce a complete connotation, but rather is open to deferred semantic effects generated by the divergence of signs and the disintegration of their references.



Thus, narrative analysis intersects with philosophical deconstruction in considering the text as a structure that is not self-sufficient, where the meaning does not settle at a central point, but is distributed through a network of internal relations that constantly postpone its presence. The narrative does not provide meaning, but rather puts the reader within the movement of his production, through technical mechanisms that seem formal on their face, but establish in depth a semantic economy based on difference.

Therefore, narrative as a multilayered device is understood only in the light of this tension between structure and deconstruction, between the internal organization of the text and the loosening of its significance. Hence, narrative analysis becomes a search for " what the text says" but rather in " how it postpones its saying", that is, in the ways in which meaning is produced through its continuous shifts. However, this trend, despite the analytical richness that the perception of narrative as a multilayered semantic device has allowed, and the wide potential it has opened to understand the mechanisms of meaning production, has not been spared from deep critical accountability in turn, especially when it has been expanded within the horizon of deconstruction to an extent that is almost conducive to dissolving the same structure within the infinity of difference, as it tends to amplify the dynamism of postpone and multiplicity at the expense of the place of systematic adjustment, which may lead to a kind of semantic fluidity that weakens the susceptibility of coherent analysis.

In this context, some critics raise epistemological forms related to the limits of narrative analysis itself. If each technical element (time, sound , vision) is capable of producing multiple unstable connotations, how can critical knowledge of a scientific nature be built that does not slip into free interpretation?

This question reintroduces the tension between analysis as a description of a structure, and interpretation as an openness to infinite possibilities, a tension that deconstructionist approaches have not been able to resolve definitively. On the other hand, some thinkers, such as Jürgen Habermas, argue that over-dismantling the structure and undermining the center of meaning may lead to a weakening of the communicative dimension of the text, as the meaning becomes non-negotiable, threatening the possibility of a common understanding among readers.

In the same vein, Paul Ricoeur warns against slipping into an over-interpretation that separates the text from its internal boundaries, calling for the emergence of a distinction between the openness of interpretation and its permissiveness. Umberto Eco also asserts that the text, despite its openness, remains governed by what he calls "the intention of the text ", that is, the sum of the semantic potentials allowed by its internal structure, which imposes on the reader a kind of hermeneutic discipline. Pluralism does not mean



chaos, and openness does not eliminate boundaries, but rather redefines them within a dialectical relationship between the text and its reader. Accordingly: Criticism of this context does not aim to abolish or dismantle the class perception of the narrative, but seeks to rebalance it by emphasizing the need to combine structural analysis and hermeneutic openness, so that the text remains an area for the production of meaning without turning into an uncontrollable semantic space that defies any scientific approach.

– **The Reader from Reception to Production : Ontology of Interpretive Action**

The transition of the focus of attention from the text to the reader represents one of the most prominent transformations in contemporary literary criticism, where the reader is no longer seen as a negative recipient subject, but rather as a semantic actor involved in the production of meaning. In the light of this shift, the text is not complete within the act of reading, as an interpretive practice that reshapes significance according to the reader's horizon and experience. In this context, Hans-Robert Yaus proposes the concept of the horizon of expectations, which confirms that the receipt of the text is determined within a network of cultural and historical references carried by the reader, so that the meaning of the text changes with the change of this horizon*¹¹, and therefore reading is not a restoration of a fixed meaning, but rather a reproduction of it within a renewed historical context.

Eiser deepens this perception, through the concept of "implicit reader", as he believes that the text includes a hypothetical structure that guides the reading process, but does not define it definitively, as the actual reader remains the one who fills in the " blanks of the text, and converts its semantic potential into a verified meaning *¹², as the text, according to this perspective, is not complete, but semantic waiting to be activated.

As for Umberto Eco, he introduced the concept of the "model reader", which indicates that the text builds its own reader, and directs its reading through internal strategies, without abolishing the freedom of interpretation*¹³, as the relationship between the text and the reader is not a loose relationship, but a relationship of guidance and interpretation at the same time. On a deeper horizon, Paul Ricoeur links reading and existence. He sees that hermeneutics is not just a cognitive act, but an existential experience. He says: " hermeneutics is the way in which man understands himself through the mediation of the text." It¹⁴ means that reading does not only produce meaning, but also reshapes the reading self, giving the hermeneutic act an ontological dimension that goes beyond the limits of the text.



Therefore, in his view, the reader is no longer outside the text, but has become part of its dynamic structure, where the meaning is formed at the point of convergence between what the text proposes and what the reader conjures of a cultural horizon and an existential experience, and therefore the significance is not a ready-made given, but the result of a continuous interaction between textual possibility and reading activation, and therefore: The transition from receiving to production does not mean the cancellation of the text, but rather its repositioning within a dialectical relationship with the reader, so that the meaning becomes a common act based on the tension between structure and openness, and between textual guidance and interpretive freedom.

We say that despite the qualitative contribution made by the theories of reception in reconsidering the role of the reader, this shift has not been without epistemological problems related to the limits and control of the hermeneutic act. It has been taken in this direction, especially in some extreme formulations such as transferring the centrality of meaning from the author to the reader without offering a strict methodological alternative that defines the controls of this transition, which opens the way for a pluralism that may slide towards a kind of "hermeneutic ratio" that weakens the possibility of critical verification. Accordingly: In the theory of reception, it does not aim to undermine the centrality of the reader, but rather seeks to rebalance the relationship between the text and the recipient, so that the meaning is understood as the result of a dialectical interaction between the two parties and not the dominance of one over the other. Therefore, the cognitive value of this trend lies in its ability to expand the horizon of reading, without eliminating the reference of the text or dismantling the potential of scientific analysis.

– **The limits of interpretation between openness and discipline:**

If contemporary critical transformations have contributed to the liberation of the narrative text from the centrality of the single meaning, and opened its horizon to the plurality of hermeneutics, this same openness poses a precise epistemological problem related to the limits of reading to: To what extent can hermeneutics remain legitimate without descending into a semantic chaos that loses its reference? Umberto Eco distinguishes between “hermeneutics” and “hyper hermeneutics,” arguing that the openness of a text does not mean the unleashing of arbitrary readings, but rather presupposes the existence of internal constraints imposed by its own structure.

He asserts that "the text sets limits to its possible interpretations"¹⁵, and therefore the freedom of the reader is not absolute, but is determined within the horizon of the possibilities offered by the text itself. This perception is reinforced with Paul Ricoeur,



who warns of the need to distinguish between legitimate understanding and hermeneutic slip, considering that hermeneutics should remain linked to the textual structure, not turn into an external projection on it. In his view, hermeneutics is a disciplined dialogue between the reader and the text, not a free production that escapes every restriction*¹⁶.

On the other hand, these forms pose a deeper question about the nature of critical knowledge. If the meaning is not fixed, and the interpretation is multiple, what guarantees the possibility of building a scientific reading? Here, it is clear that hermeneutic openness does not eliminate the need for systematic control, but rather redefines it, so that it is based not on fixing one meaning but on justifying reading from the text's data. In this context, it can be said that the limits of interpretation are not understood as external restrictions imposed on the reader, but rather as stemming from within the text itself, where its linguistic and narrative structure constitutes an area of multiple possibilities, but it is not unlimited. The text does not impose a single meaning, but it does not accept all meanings.

Therefore, the tension between openness and discipline is a prerequisite in every mature critical reading, as understanding is achieved only within this delicate balance between the freedom of interpretation and the limits of the text. Hence, the scientific value of interpretation lies not only in its plurality, but in its ability to build a possible, justified, and consistent meaning with the textual structure.

consequence of:

In light of what has been dealt with in this article, it can be said that the transition from approaching the text as a closed linguistic structure to considering it as a cultural body open to interpretation has represented a profound epistemological shift in the studies of literature and anthropology together. Analyses have shown that the sign is no longer a fixed semantic unit, but rather has become a dynamic space that is formed within a network of social, symbolic and historical contexts, which has made the text a field for the production of meaning rather than a container for it.

The article also concluded that the act of reading is no longer a consumption of ready-made connotation, but rather an interpretive practice in which there are multiple entries and intersecting references, so that the meaning becomes a product of the reader's interaction with the text in its cultural and cognitive horizon, and it becomes clear that rethinking the narrative text is no longer a critical luxury, but a cognitive necessity imposed by theoretical transformations that touched the concept of meaning itself. The text is no longer seen as a closed structure that settles at a single and final connotation, but rather it has become an open space for multiple readings and overlapping



interpretations, as the centrality of meaning declines in favor of an endless movement of connotations that renews with each new reading.

Modern approaches have shown that narrative is no longer just a transfer of an event or a representation of a reality, but has become a productive practice of meaning, in which language overlaps with culture, the self with the other, and history with imagination. Therefore, the reader is no longer a passive recipient, but is active in reshaping the text and reconstructing its connotations according to its cognitive and aesthetic horizon. Accordingly, the transition from the centrality of meaning to the infinity of interpretation does not mean the fall of significance, but rather its openness to multiple possibilities that make the narrative text a living transformed entity, not reduced to a single reading and not trapped within a final interpretation. Thus, the text becomes a vast space for continuous dialogue between the sign and reading, and between writing and rewriting, in a horizon that makes literature an intellectual and aesthetic experience that does not close at all.

Footnotes

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- 1- Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, 1916
 - 2-Tzvetan Todorov, *grammaire du décameron*, Paris : Mouton, 1969
 - 3- Gérard Genette, *Discours du récit*, in *Figures III*, paris, seuil, 1970.
 - 4-Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, Paris: Seuil 1970.
 - 5-Jacques Derrida, *de la grammatologie*, Paris, 1967 : p 13 – 27.
 - 6-Roland Parthes, *la mort de l'auteur*, *Du texte in : Manteia*, 1967 ; repris dans *le bruissement de la langue*, paris : Seuil, 1984 p 61.
 - 7- Wolfgang Iser; *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* 1978, p 34 – 38.
 - 8Jürgen Habermas, *The philosophical Discourse, of Modernity*, Camberidge: Mit Press, 1987
 - 9- Paul Ricoeur, *Le conlit des interpretation*, parris: Seuil, 19699.
 - 10- Gérard Genette, *Figures III*, paris : 1972, p 72-85.
 - 11- Hans Robert Jauss, *Pour une esthétique de la réception*, Parris : Gallimard, 1978 p 56.
 - 12-Paul Ricoeur, *Du texte à l 'action*, p 107.
 - 13- Hans Robert Jauss, *pour une esthétique de la réception*, paris : Gallimard, 1978, p. 56.
 - 14-Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit*, Paris 1983, p85-90.
 - 15- Umberto Eco, *Les limites de l'interprétation*, Paris : Grasset, 1992 p 28- 32.
 - 16-Paul Ricœur, *Du texte à l 'action*, paris : Seuil, 1986, p162-165.