

The Difficulty of All Reading and of Arriving at Universal Meaning: The Point of View of I.A.Richards

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Abstract

The problem of reading and attaining the total meaning has been a debate in the theoretical arena for a long time. I.A.Richard's critical essay, "Four Kinds of Meanings" gives solution to the problem of arriving at the universal meaning. The school, New Criticism, mainly focuses on the text and its meaning by avoiding the background of the text. As a New Critic, I.A.Richards centres his argument on the principles of New Criticism. I.A.Richards, as a proponent of text centric approach, proves the importance of *close reading* by his Cambridge experiment with his students. The result of the experiment is the book, *Practical Criticism* (1929). The essay "Four Kinds of Meanings" is the first chapter of the third part of his book. In the chapter he suggests that there are several kinds of meanings and the total meaning is the mixture of all the different meanings. The research paper attempts to critique the problem of reading and arriving at the meaning with reference to I.A.Richard's seminal essay "Four Kinds of Meaning".

Keywords: Reading, Meaning, Sense, Tone, Feeling, and Intention.

I.A.Richards delineates that the total meaning or the universal meaning is the combination of four different meanings, Sense, Tone, Feeling, and Intention. The essay mainly focuses on understanding the poetry since *Practical Criticism* centres on reading poetry with close reading. I.A.Richards is primarily known for his concept of *referential language* and *emotive language*, which can be associated with the four kinds of meaning the poetry contains. Sense and aim are predominant in referential language; Tone and Feelings are predominant in emotive language. The central idea of the essay can be explained with I.A.Richards words as, "The original difficulty of all reading, the problem of making out the meaning, is our obvious starting-point." (Practical 180). According to I.A.Richards, difficulty of reading is because of the difficulty of meaning.

I.A.Richards suggest several types of readings and its difficulty. Eventually he gives solution to arrive at the 'total meaning'. The concept of total meaning can be compared to Allen Tate's theory of Tension. Allen Tate's essay "Tension in Poetry" articulates that the real meaning, which is the tension, is attained when there is both literal meaning as well as figurative meaning. Allen Tate suggest that "that good poetry is a unity of all the meaning from the furthest extremes of intension and extension. Yet, our recognition of the action of this unified meaning is the gift of

experience, of culture, or, if you will, our humanism.”(57). Likewise, here I.A.Richards postulates the theory of total meaning. His concept of total meaning can be described as, “Whether we are active, as in speech or writing, or passive, as readers or listeners, the Total Meaning we are engaged with is, almost always, a blend, a combination of several contributory meanings of different types.” (Richards 180).

As the title suggests, the difficulty of all reading is actually the problem of making out the meaning. The close association between reading and arriving at the meaning is the centre of various language oriented literary theories. Several theories suggest several ways to read the text. Roland Barthes famously says, “The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (6). Therefore, the reader takes up full control of meaning and becomes a “super reader” as Reffatterre points out “the super reader comprehends the text to the core” (35). Thus the concept of reading has been a debate in the theoretical arena. I.A.Richard’s concept of reading is slightly different from the other Reader Response theories that give authority to the reader. According to Richards, the reader may or may not understand the meaning. Therefore he suggests a four facet reading method to avoid the difficulty of reading.

The four facet formula of I.A.Richards discusses that “nearly all articulate speech can be profitably regarded from four points of view. Four aspects can be easily distinguished. Let us call them Sense, Feeling, Tone, and Intention.” (181). As far as I.A.Richards is concerned, a reader must consider these four factors before coming to the concluding meaning. The reader is encouraged to read the text with the lens of these four concepts. I.A.Richard’s theory postulates that the reader may misread the text; therefore he suggest the reader to stick on to the four factors. The theory of Richards is different from the theory of Harold Bloom who says “every reading is a misreading” (45). In reader response theory the authority is given to the reader to interpret as he wishes but Richards gives limitations to his readers. Interpreting a poem becomes difficult if the reader is passive.

Stanley Fish’ concept of ‘interpretive community’ gives real freedom to the reader to interpret the poem, as he puts it “Interpretation is not the art of construing but the art of constructing. Interpreters do not decode poems; they make them.” (87). But here, Richards wants the reader to adhere to the rules laid by him in order to understand and interpret a text. I.A.Richards proposes the reader to consider sense first which gives the primary meaning to the text. He points out that “misreadings are commonly caused by failure to make out plain sense;” (39). Therefore he suggest his readers to understand the literal meaning of the text. I.A.Richards explain the difficulty of all readings as failing to understand meaning. He discusses that there are naturally gifted readers who can easily make out the meaning and he gives the four facet formula to the reader who has difficulty to understand poetry. He puts it as, “there are some who, by a natural dispensation, acquire the ‘Open Sesame!’ To poetry without labour, but, for the rest of us, certain general reflections we are not often encouraged to undertake can spare us time and fruitless trouble.” (180).

The first reading method Richards suggests is, reading and understanding the literal meaning of the text, which he calls *Sense*. Sense has a meaning which is not the final meaning but a dimension of meaning. Richards describes Sense as, “We speak to say something, and when we listen we expect something to be said. We use words to direct our hearers' attention upon some state of affairs, to present to them some items for consideration and to excite in them some thoughts about these items.” (181). The literal meaning of the poetry is obviously easy to comprehend, here, Richards talks about the literal understanding of the text. The reading, here, is passive. Therefore the reader can be a passive reader in analysing the sense and he gives a horizontal reading to the text.

Secondly, Richards insists the reader to focus on the feelings expressed by the author in order to comprehend the poetry. The author may like the subject what he is talking about or sometimes have contempt on the topic he is talking about; that reflects through the language he speaks. Richards describes the formula of ‘feeling’ as,

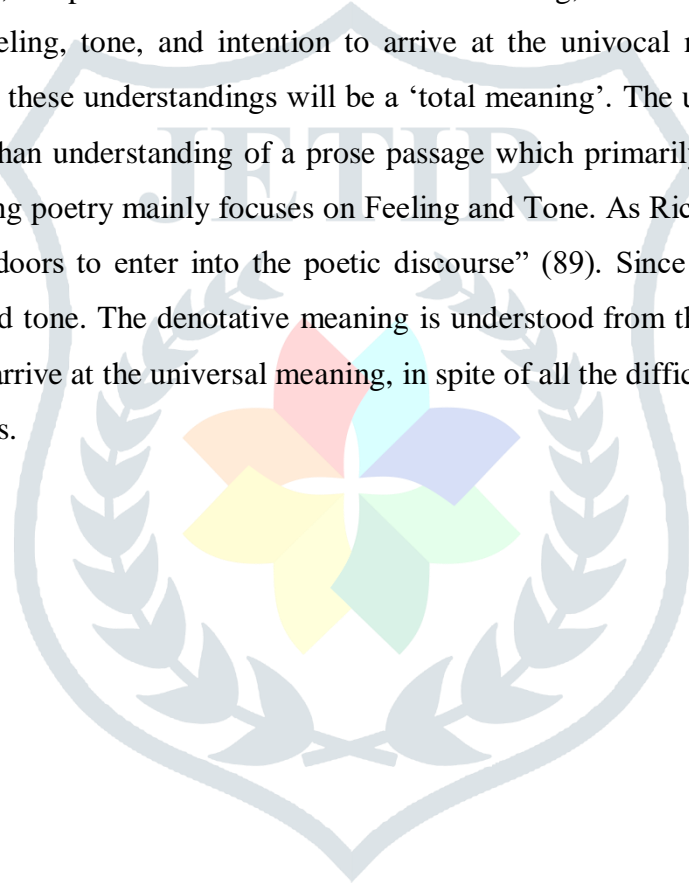
We also, as a rule, have some feelings about these items, about the state of affairs we are referring to. We have an attitude towards it, some special direction, bias, or accentuation of interest towards it, some personal flavour or colouring of feeling and we use language to express these feelings, this nuance of interest. Equally, when we listen we pick it up, rightly or wrongly; it seems inextricably part of what we receive. (181).

Thirdly, Richards insists the reader to understand the *Tone* of the speaker which reveals the relationship between the reader and the speaker. Tone may vary according to the reader the author intended to convey his thought. This notion of Tone and the reader-author relativity may be associated with reader response ideology of ‘Ideal reader’. Ian Bachanan describes ideal reader as “The role in which a reader of a text is positioned as a subject through the use of particular modes of address. This term is not intended to suggest a ‘perfect’ reader who entirely echoes any authorial intention but a model reader whose reading could be justified in terms of the text” (317). The actual reader may not be the ideal reader. When the author addresses his ideal reader, who is a child the tone may be caring and pampering but in the scientific thesis the tone may be according to the methodology. The reader of scientific thesis is a peer reviewer or an intellect. Thus, Richards insists his reader to focus on the tone, in order to understand the text.

Eventually, Richards insist his readers to focus on the aim of the author. He calls it ‘intention’. The intention of the author is, according to Richards, crucial to understand the text. The notion of understanding the author’s intention may sometimes lead us to what Wimsatt and Beardsley call, ‘Intentional Fallacy’ where, “the author's "intention" upon the critic's judgment has been challenged” (88). The notion of understanding the author’s intention is contested by Barthes’ idea of ‘Death of the author’. Therefore, the fourth formula of Richards yields to contest the new critical notion of ‘nothing outside the text’.

Understanding the 'Sense' also has a difficulty when the language is ambiguous. Saussure's notion of signifier represents the signified is thwarted in the phase of post-structuralism where Jacques Derida articulates that there is no centre. Therefore no fixed meaning can be taken. The connotative meaning may overlap the denotative meaning of the text. Eventually the reader cannot understand the correct literal meaning because of the ambiguity of the language. Feeling and Tone may reflect the author's attitude towards the subject and the reader. That may be a deceiving factor if it is an Irony or a Paradox as Cleanth Brooks points out or if he is an unreliable narrator. The ironical tone may deceive the reader to misread the author's tone and feeling.

Though the four methods can be contested even with new critical principals, the total meaning, Richard propounds can be accepted by ignoring the short comings of his theory. According to Richards, in spite of all these difficulties of reading, the reader should consider the four factors: sense, feeling, tone, and intention to arrive at the univocal meaning. The meaning which comes out of all these understandings will be a 'total meaning'. The understanding of poetry is a complex process than understanding of a prose passage which primarily focuses on sense and intention. Understanding poetry mainly focuses on Feeling and Tone. As Richards says "...Feelings and tone are the two doors to enter into the poetic discourse" (89). Since poetry is emotive, the focus is on feelings and tone. The denotative meaning is understood from the Sense and Intention. Therefore, in order to arrive at the universal meaning, in spite of all the difficulties, the combination of all the four meanings.



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