The Problem of Overinterpretation in Literary Studies

Abstract

The Problem of Overinterpretation in Literary Studies

The article’s main goal is to present how the notion of overinterpretation functions in contemporary literary studies. The author reconstructs principal epistemological positions in the dispute about ways of establishing literary meanings, showing that the understanding of interpretation tasks and aims of literary research depend on the choice of one of these positions. She notes that today’s notion of overinterpretation has several homonymic meanings, and further notes important difference between interpretation in literary studies and colloquial or artistic interpretations. She emphasizes their nonidentical functions and procedures. Fifteen types of overinterpretation in literary studies are indentified, along with their causes.

Keywords: overinterpretation, analysis, contextual analysis, comparative analysis, interpretation, literary studies, homonymic meanings, types of overinterpretation, causes of overinterpretation

A reply to the question about limits of overinterpretation relates to the necessity of intellectual confrontation with the following issues: how is a meaning of a literary text formed? Does it exist objectively? Does it appear in a way that doesn’t depend on the experience and emotions of a researcher; or, on the contrary, does it depend on them completely? Can we talk about epistemological availability of this meaning? Has it been given to a receiver, does it exist in a text already prepared and entirely formed, or is the receiver in fact its creator?

When choosing one of these elements of opposition, we either become spokespersons of epistemological realism, which assumes an opportunity to cognize an object of research existing apart from a subject (thus based on a belief that an object

of cognition is both the contents of the human mind and of the outside world), or we admit that truthfulness also depends on practical effects, in the spirit of pragmatism, and elevate consensus and efficiency of actions over cognition\textsuperscript{2}. There are other possibilities for a researcher regarding the absence of unambiguous identification in any of these positions. A researcher can choose cognitive relativism, which supposes that any interpretation of a literary text’s “truthfulness” depends only on context, therefore statements seemingly true in one reference frame won’t be so in another\textsuperscript{5}. The next alternative posits that, in the process of considering approaches to the meanings of a literary text, one can try to consider the shape of a work, intentions of its empirical and/or textual author (if this was verbalized in other sources or thematized in an analyzed work), intentions and practices of a recipient, and their textual results, as well as contexts. These might include the context(s) in which a work appears, the context of its earlier reception, and finally a context in which reading for literary studies is done.

The following questions can be formed simultaneously: which factors influenced and have influenced conventionalization of the text’s meanings, and which have influenced conventionalization of reception? Can intentions of a creator and of a receiver (if known) be defined as those that have come to be reflected in the text’s meanings? Lastly, what are the goals of interpretation and – if we have to deal with this matter – how do decontextualization and recontextualization of a literary text function in a reading practice?

Within literary studies, preferences related to choosing one of these positions are integrally connected with a way of defining tasks of interpretation. The following issues appear across a spectrum of opportunity in understanding a goal or the goal of scientific activity in this field and the role of a researcher in this process:
- pointing out the only proper sense of a literary work by a literary scholar as arbiter;
- “rewriting” of available data, expressing it in other categories for use by a researcher who negotiates sense, then at an arrival point (when interpretation has been effective) uses its creator to increase of the impact of interpretation, making it performative;
- relativization of statements considered cognitive axioms by a revisionist researcher, through means of placing them in a different context from the previous one;
- results of analysis of all literary-communication components are problematized, along with chosen contexts, in interpretation by a literary scholar who is a seeker and potential discoverer, not giving one of these precedence, but striving to understand their complexity and the character of their mutual relations.


Even having admitted that the performance of these tasks is governed by scientific principles of methodical research and the use of specialized language, goals of this science will still be (re)defined within different researcher positions. In the first case, science will be understood to exaggerate what is proper and what is not (in the field of interpretation, as well). In the second case, it will be understood as a clash of “truths”, with researchers actively participating in a conflict of theoretical schools and directions with the goal of a dominant position for its interpretation. In the third case, science will be defined as an aspiration to verify existing beliefs and test authorities’ opinions; while in the fourth case, science will be defined as seeking certain aspects of truth, which doesn’t necessarily result in their discovery.

With such differentiated definitions of scientific goals, the term “overinterpretation” in literary studies begins functioning in a homonymic way connected with a necessity to clarify its meaning each time it becomes an object of reflection. Supposing a goal of interpretation is to indicate the only proper meaning embodied in a work, overinterpretation will be everything outside that sense, with the term definitely attributed with a pejorative meaning. If we acknowledge that interpretation should be restricted to the “rewriting” of knowledge existing in other categories and providing different signs of value, overinterpretation will be a practice that is only postulated at that time. However, in that understanding, a boundary is erased between something with the status of positing a fact and something that is an opinion and requires argumentation. When this happens, it may be impossible to single out overinterpretation from other reading practices. Then again, if we take it that interpretation should lead to relativizing accepted statements as cognitive axioms, we should take into account that the interpretation we consider proper in a given context will appear as overinterpretation in another. Let’s consider interpretation to be the crowning of multilayered analyses (immanent, comparative, contextual analysis) that embrace all text components, showing them in a precisely selected context or contexts. Let’s also assume that this interpretation will consider possible dimensions of literary communication. An effect of this communication will be estimable growth of knowledge about chosen aspects of a literary text. This knowledge is verifiable and indicates competences of a researcher able to critically think through procedures they use. Given such assumptions connected to interpretation, we may use the notion

---

4 Texts published in a work Umberto Eco contributed to are a good illustration of this: Umberto Eco, Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler, Christine Brooke-Rose, Interpretacja i nadinterpretacja, ed. by Stefan Collini, trans. by Tomasz Biedroń (Kraków: Znak, 1996). Eco understands overinterpretation as a result of a reading of a text that contradicts intentio operis (an intention of a work). See Umberto Eco, “Nadinterpretowanie tekstów”, in: Eco, Rorty, Culler, Brooke-Rose, Interpretacja i nadinterpretacja, 63. Also in the volume, Jonathan Culler and Wayne Booth identify overinterpretation with over-understanding and valorize it in a positive way. See Jonathan Culler, “W obronie nadinterpretacji”, in: Eco, Rorty, Culler, Brooke-Rose, Interpretacja i nadinterpretacja, 113. It is significant that the notion Culler calls overinterpretation can be called a skill of problematizing a text, which Eco does not negate in his text. Then Richard Rorty supports “using” a text for certain purposes, thus rejecting the idea of discovering, and thus erasing limits between interpretation and overinterpretation, or interpreting and using. See Richard Rorty, “Kariera pragmatysty”, in: Eco, Rorty, Culler, Brooke-Rose, Interpretacja i nadinterpretacja, 92.
of overinterpretation to mark practices aspiring to be called scientific but not meeting the requirements formulated above.

The final definition of interpretation in literary studies is the one I will use while considering a particular kind of interpretation practice within it. It is connected with a basic anthropologic disposition, as are other types of interpretation: the need to cognize the world and understand existing phenomena while categorizing knowledge about them. The interpretation in literary studies that is thus expressed has a specific character of aspect and process. This means that a literary text can be subjected to different types of interpretations of varying quality, depending on those contexts in which it is studied. This includes relevance in choosing contexts, competences of recipients, and the way in which a text has been problematized. These interpretations can be evaluated, however, as with the correctness of reasoning resulting in these interpretations’ claims. In this understanding, the term “interpretation in literary studies” doesn’t include prereflexive interpretation activity. Neither is it identical to artistic interpretation, in which freedom of operating contexts removes any limitations in principle (other than an author’s self-imposed rules in the creation process), which can also generate nontrivial cognitive values. Interpretation in literary studies doesn’t mean placing goals of persuasion over cognitive goals and the aspiration to clarify phenomena. This first kind of interpretation practice differs from scientific interpretation (reaching conclusions from the aforementioned multidimensional analyses), as it is governed by unrealized associations, has an unreflective character, and is involved in a process of unlimited semiosis. In the case of the second type of interpretation, decontextualization and recontextualization appear as essential artistic mechanisms for making sense. The third type of interpretation practice, meanwhile is ostentatiously interested in replacing a notion of cognition with an aspiration to make an impact.

Numerous intellectual struggles take up questions about the limits of overinterpretation. The practice, after all, doesn’t admit or recognize limits, and does so ostensibly by definition. Thus it doesn’t aspire to constantly define such categories as subject, object, text, remitter, recipient, context, code, or message. Neither does it seek to establish relations between them. These categories can also swap places; a category of a limit can be problematized. In the practice of interpretation in literary studies, one can relate it either to an issue of delimiting a text, or identify with factors that

---

5 Regarding clarification as an essential goal of science, thus defined by Aristotle, see: Karl Popper, Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach. Popper wrote: “I suggest that it is the aim of science to find satisfactory explanations of whatever strikes us as being in need of explanation […]. The question ‘What kind of explanation may be satisfactory?’ thus leads to the reply: an explanation in terms of testable and falsifiable universal laws and initial conditions. […] In this way, the conjecture that it is the aim of science to find satisfactory explanations leads us further to the idea of improving the degree of satisfactoriness of the explanations by improving their degree of testibility, that is to say, by proceeding to theories of ever richer content, of a higher degree of universality, and of higher degree of precision. This, no doubt, is fully in keeping with the actual practice of the theoretical sciences”. Karl Popper, Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 191, 193.

6 Concerning delimiting a text see, e.g.: Teresa Dobrzyńska, “O delimitacji tekstu literackiego”, Pamiętnik Literacki 2, (1971), 115–127. The problem of limits becomes much more complicated if signals of intertextuality appear in a text, in addition to delimitators about which a researcher has written.
facilitate differentiating literary phenomena both at the elementary and more complex levels. In my view, this differentiation is particularly important, not only in research whose aim is the arrangement of knowledge about large amounts of literary works, but also in comparative research in which the skill of identifying instances where specific phenomena share similar features appears much more effective than to incoherently point out random analogies. In other words, comparative studies put greater emphasis on highlighting and understanding differences in the “similarities” than about unification of compared phenomena at the cost of erasing any distinctiveness between them. On the contrary, I think considerations connected with the limits of overinterpretation relate to overthinking how not to mistake ignorance for knowledge, and not to consider notional simplifications as complex explanations for complicated questions. Likewise, this explores how a researcher can avoid them, and how should they fail to do so, the ability to autocorrect is retained. A need to reflect upon these issues is motivated by ethical questions and then by how it appears to be a basic criteria of competent evaluation, considered the “daily bread” of a researcher engaged in standard academic / educational tasks (assessing student work, reviewing articles for journals, judging theses, etc.) and is eager to explain criteria that have been used.

So, what can constitute overinterpretation in literary studies? If we suppose that the sense of a literary text, as with jewels in a coffer, exists not only in it itself, and that a work includes both components of the sense and signals of a context / contexts that are subject to reconstruction and analysis by a recipient who has their baggage of knowledge and experiences, who begins reading at a certain place and time, reflecting the notion of overinterpretation, we can then point out some ways of understanding this term that are closest to dictionary definitions, and can describe practices which cause it.

The first one relates to defining interpretation that transcends received literary facts, the far-reaching interpretation stating that there is something in a text that is visibly absent from it (that hasn’t been explicated in it, that can’t be attributed with the status of implication). In like fashion, the element of interpretation may be insufficiently justified or guilty.

---

7 In Henryk Markiewicz’s text “On Falsifying Literary Interpretations”, he highlighted an opportunity to do a task defined in the title at three levels: “[levels] of a text, higher semantic systems as well as their typifying and figurative (allegorical and symbolical) references”. “Interpretation should be rejected if: 1. it is based on data contradicted by text information; 2. it inputs data that are additional and aren’t implicated by text information; 3. it is based on an linguistically incorrect understanding of text data; 4. it is based on an understanding of text data that contradict an internal context and/or relevant external context; 5. it extrapolates local senses of a work to the whole work; 6. it makes generalizing conclusions from marginal and irrelevant details; 7. it ignores generic conventions while making conclusions; 8. it applies symptomatic conclusions arbitrarily and ahistorically to components of the presented world; 9. it explains states of things in the world presented by outside conceptions, especially those alien to a native circle and how a culture works; 10. it attributes figurativeness to a work groundlessly; 11. it groundlessly disambiguates an ambiguous symbol or a symbol that can’t be decrypted conceptually; 12. it decrypts figurative signs when inputting emotional or valorizing connotations to their topics, different from connotations of media; 13. it decrypts a topic of a figurative sign arbitrarily, especially in contradiction to a global meaning of a work”. See Henryk Markiewicz, “O falsyfikowaniu interpretacji literackich”, Pamiętnik Literacki 1 (87), (1996), 59, 71–72.

of attributing a meaning unconnected to the object of research and, as such, it endows
the object with completely alien senses, as described in the previous paragraph. It is diffi-
cult to consider the term “overinterpretation” as neutral in an axiological sense, given
this definition. It includes a critical estimation of practices concerning it. If we wanted to
point out synonyms or notions semantically close to this understanding of overinterpreta-
tion, terms could include “talking into”, “talking around”, “distorting”, and “garbling”. As
Umberto Eco wrote in Interpretation and Over-interpretation, identifying overinterpreta-
tion explained in this spirit does not relate to pointing out an author’s intentions (intentio
auctoris)\(^8\) but to pointing out intentions of a work (intentio operis) and intentions
of a reader (intentio lectoris). If interpretations appear at the intersection of intentio op-
eris and intentio lectoris, overinterpretations will be created as a result of deforming an
intention of a work or of an ostentatious aspiration to eliminate this category. Reasons
for this may be that a reader will try to analyze a text, to read off interpretation instruc-
tions and any signals of a context included in it, while on the other hand they begin
reading with their established resources of knowledge, at a certain time and place, and
formulate differentiated research questions. Thus influencing the form of interpretation.
This form of overinterpretation distorts its object and makes identifying it difficult or pre-
cludes it completely.

The second way of understanding overinterpretation is connected strictly with ma-
nipulation actions. I consider these actions as influences one text has on the reception
of another. In such instances, they make a reader subconsciously attribute a given text
with meanings that agree with an implicit intention of an author of a different text to in-
fluence it. These meanings may be contradictory to the other text’s intentio operis. Thus,
a specific feature of overinterpretation through manipulation will be the subordinating
of a text to goals of persuasion, combined with an aspiration to hide the actual reasons
and nature of this influence.

The third way of understanding overinterpretation relates to its detailed definition,
as such second-degree interpretation (interpretation of interpretation) that, in the case
of literary studies, marginalizes or even leaves aside an object of research that is lit-
erature. In this context, when writing about overinterpretation, I don’t mean a certain
form of a meta-comment or just a theory of reception or reading that grow from em-
pirical research and consist of axioms, notions, definitions, and statements (as well
as generalizations that point out reading mechanisms, and witnesses and styles of recep-
tion, which can be verified through certain examples). If it was the literary theory, the the-
ory of reception, or such meta-comments that were being defined as overinterpretation,
we would have to deal with simple substitution of terms, which seems purposeless. This
is because of economical thinking and also because the use of new notions for defining

---

\(^8\) Another question, not studied by Eco but requiring particular research, is the issue of an author’s intention being
understood in reference to nonfiction prose, including literature of a personal document. Concerning this topic,
see: Georges Gusdorf, “Warunki i ograniczenia autobiografii”, trans. by Janusz Barczyński, in: Autobiografia, ed. by Małgorzata Czermińska (Gdańsk: Słowo/obraz terytoria, 2009); Małgorzata Czermińska, Trójkat autabi-
ograficzny. Świadectwo, wyznanie, wyzwania (Kraków: Universitas, 2000).
known phenomena doesn’t offer much in terms of understanding them – on the contrary, learning them often erases the history of aspirations. Autotelicity, which is difficult to justify, becomes a problem of second-degree interpretation in the particular meaning of which I’m writing: that is, an interpretation built over another interpretation, leaving aside its object. An object of interpretation isn’t an explanatory value of earlier comments that should be analyzed in terms of their object and in relation to it. An object of interpretation is an accordance of these with a paradigm of knowledge admitted by the second-degree interpretation’s author. If references to literature appear, they are pretextual – written about casually, explained indirectly without studying the literature itself. For this reason, the goals of interpretation of interpretation aren’t its verification and falsification but the establishment of meanings and attributing them to the literature (leaving aside rules of historic reconstruction). An effect of this situation is that a researcher more or less consciously realizes the process of making this kind of interpretation speculative; it becomes another argument that enforces, thus making it overinterpretation. As a consequence, it expresses a researcher’s world outlook and beliefs first of all, which – on the basis of invalid attribution – are subject to an implicit transference to literary works steeped in history; next, they become a starting point for a researcher disavowing other conceptions except their own.

The fourth kind of overinterpretation appears when researchers consider too little data, or data that aren’t representative, in the process (of) creating generalizations. In this form of overinterpretation, a phenomenon will appear as an exception that could aspire to be a rule, while marginal phenomena can be highlighted as central ones, and incidental phenomena will be indicated as truthful.

The fifth type of overinterpretation relates to the fact that sources necessary to create verifiable interpretation aren’t available. If researchers not realizing this shortage of information simultaneously decide to carry out interpretation activity, there is the risk that they will attribute to something that is only probable the status of facts, thereby risking overinterpretation. However, interpreters aware that they don’t have enough data will classify their diagnosis as constructing a hypothesis, formulating assumptions that are to be checked, not as a result of predicating facts.

The sixth way of understanding overinterpretation defines it as a result of the identification of a researcher’s beliefs concerning a topic of a work with an unpresented, absent expressis verbis of the author’s intention while writing that work. In this case, we are dealing with someone mistaking an object of research for a subject, or with implicit substitution of knowledge about an intention, sources, and causes with speculations.

The seventh kind of overinterpretation can be an effect of understanding two literary phenomena (or their bigger group) to be similar in some terms with the sensibly organized unity or its part. This may be a result of conceptualization that doesn’t take into account effects of an accident, or removes categories of contingency from a researcher’s
view and finally displaces from the consciousness phenomena that are beyond the (chosen?) system.

The eighth way of understanding overinterpretation defines it as a result of attributing symbolic or allegoric meanings to contents of a work expressed in a literal way.\(^9\)

The ninth kind of overinterpretation assumes a priori that there are cause-and-effect relations, for example, between certain formal-constructive solutions or between solutions thematic in works. This can result in description in terms of (an) evolution of changes that are accidental.

The tenth way of understanding overinterpretation is associated with pointing out an analogy between literary phenomena, the similarities of which cannot be objectivized in an ontological sense (as the nature of similarity is random). This can, in turn, lead to the creation of phenomena that didn’t and doesn’t have any related factual relationship.

The eleventh type of overinterpretation comes from literalization of tropes and/or two-level literary constructions (metaphors, irony, allegory, parable) resulting in reading only of their literary sense, leaving out all allusions, suppositions, and figurative meanings.

The twelfth way of understanding overinterpretation relates to an aspiration to hierarchic representation of literary phenomena or their aspects that are equal, as well as hyperbolizing a role some of them have.

The thirteenth way of understanding overinterpretation relates to a form of reading of works that is an effect of implicitly lifting them from their home context, resettling them in another, and basically creating an alien frame of reference while considering it the only possible and proper one.

The fourteenth type of overinterpretation is an effect of disambiguating ambiguous literary works or solutions; in other words, attributing works that include an unsolvable problem in their construction/framework with a certain meaning.

Finally, the fifteenth type of overinterpretation can be an effect of the process when literary phenomena that aren’t unique and are related to and influence each other are incorrectly defined in isolation and described as unique and original.

It is worth noting that these kinds of interpretation (and their causes, among which are obvious mistakes in the use of interpretation procedures) can be indentified when we acknowledge that it is possible to distinguish interpretation actions. Those actions may have a scientific character and differ essentially from common and artistic interpretations. Furthermore, they may fall into a wide range of interpretation practices that can have both an unconscious and prelingual and conscious and verbal character. With such assumptions, scientific interpretation of a literary text will differ from the last two interpretations in that it is preceded with an analysis the procedures of which have been previously discussed and codified: contexts summoned up by an interpreter aren’t equal

---

\(^9\) Henryk Markiewicz wrote more about using these criterium. Henryk Markiewicz, O falsyfikowaniu interpretacji literackich, 66 69. The eleventh and fourteenth criteria coincide with the earlier arrangements made by Markiewicz in the present classification.
and subject to selection; at least some statements that are components of scientific interpretation can be objectivized\textsuperscript{10}, meaning that they will be verifiable in empirical research carried out by other scholars regardless of their assumptions, beliefs, tastes, and preferences. When considering these four categories, researchers can differentially value interpreted phenomena within their critical activity and formulate opinions about them more or less subjectively. However, results of an analysis – comprehended as distinguishing components, features, and properties of the phenomenon – won’t be subject to debate. In other words, overthinking a question of interpretational limits prevents a situation in which we are made to attribute the status of fact to a statement that has the character of an opinion (opinions that require argumentation) or vice versa, considering a statement of fact (proven matters) to be an opinion.

It is worth emphasizing here that interpretation in literary studies isn’t an obligation or duty for somebody who doesn’t study such/particular disciplines or isn’t a specialist in this field, as it requires competences and a perpetual renewing of cognitive skills. If it isn’t popular, this is because, unlike overinterpretation, it doesn’t offer an impression of cognitive easiness to somebody who may then work with it. Cognitive easiness relates to an ability of the human mind to operate resources of data available in the here and now without looking for additional sources of information, together with an aptitude for unifying information that is at researchers’ disposal, and choosing data that fit a formulated hypothesis, not those that deny it. If literature researchers – despite being experienced scholars or adepts in this field – don’t ask themselves the basic question “What should I know to state irrefutably, or at least with high probability, how things are going?” and don’t make any effort to learn what is necessary for drawing conclusions before doing this, they risk replacing scientific discoveries with delusions of understanding.

***

Meeting valuable literature is a great cognitive event for an interpreter of research effects. It is significant that the most eminent works are written as if, through them, their authors touched a wound in existence because they asked liminal questions or amplify/magnify fundamental anthropological problems that are a challenge for the biggest thinkers, thus demanding analysis, interpretation, and understanding. They can intellectually or emotionally stimulate readers (and researchers) so much that they are able to initiate changes in world outlook as well as to disclose situations in which available research tools appear to be insufficient or restrict cognition. They motivate us to deepen research on specific reception of a literary text, often becoming an impetus for developing new methods that can determine future interpretations or at least highlight a need for methodological innovations. Even out of respect for aesthetic and cognitive values that a culture owes to a literature, it is worth being able to recognize overinterpretation

\textsuperscript{10} While writing about objectivization, I combine it with the issue of intersubjective verifiability of data.
in literature studies\textsuperscript{11}, for both the memory of a culture and its future quality depend on them\textsuperscript{12}.

This article in Polish version was published in Tekstualia 1 (48), 2018, 5–14.

Bibliography


\textsuperscript{11} If we talk about rules of the interpretation, a separate question is examining them in reference to liminal genres. Examples of this can be an essay in literary studies or a critical sketch. Writing both, we can accept a higher degree of empowering a conclusion than occurs in a scientific article or thesis; authors are expected to carry out formal experiments that admit very differentiated rhetorical strategies. Incorrect conclusions, as one of these strategies, can be used consciously in such texts, can be classed as a device. The use of this device should stimulate reflection and helps cognition at the arrival point.

\textsuperscript{12} Thus formulated, a position will be much more convincing both for followers of a theory that says knowledge is cumulative in the humanities and for representatives of a view that there are both periods of scientific knowledge consistency and periods of discontinuity; whereas this position can be difficult for followers of anticumulativism on account of beliefs stating that development of science is based on eliminating older notions with new ones.


Roussanka Alexandrova-Nowakowska, Work from the *Pegasus* cycle