**Theoretical background**

# 2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Even though George Bernard Shaw's play *Mrs. Warren's Profession* was first performed in a members-only club as a way to circumvent the play's ban by the Lord Chamberlain, it still received a negative response from the press. The reason behind such a reception was the central theme of the work – prostitution. To defend his play and the titular character from what he saw as unwarranted criticism, Shaw responded by adding a preface, sarcastically titled "The Author's Apology," to the 1905 edition of the play's publication. The preface argues that the negative response of theater critics does not in any way reflect the response of the public. As it continues, "[a]nybody can upset the theatre critics, in a turn of the wrist, by substituting for the romantic commonplaces of the stage the moral commonplaces of the pulpit, the platform, or the library" (viii). Describing art as "the subtlest, the most seductive, the most effective means of moral propagandism in the world," Shaw understands that it can be used to promote or condemn ideas, manners, or opinions (x). Therefore, he insists that the audience use their "conscience" and their "brains" to properly evaluate the play's sociopolitical statement (x, xxvi). Mrs. Warren, the play's titular character, can hardly be deemed responsible for being a former prostitute when the other alternative is to be poor (xxvii-xxviii). Furthermore, Shaw did not choose prostitution as the play's focus just to shock audiences. The reason for discussing evils, Shaw argues, "is that you make people so extremely uncomfortable about them that they finally stop blaming 'human nature' for them, and begin to support measures for their reform" (xxxi). Ultimately, Shaw insists that the purpose of *Mrs. Warren's Profession* is to raise awareness about the immorality of poverty which often forces women to take up prostitution as the only possible alternative, and that the critics denouncing the play have completely missed its point.

Prefatory texts can significantly affect the overall reading experience; after all, prefaces commonly provide context to the work's creation, give a clear voice to the author, or explain the author's intentions in writing the text. As Gérard Genette explains, the purpose of an authorial preface was "to ensure that the text is read properly" (197). Unfortunately for Shaw, the theatrical production of his play could not be adorned with such explanatory material, and the work stirred up substantial controversy. Shaw defended his work by arguing that the public represents a completely different audience with different tastes and sensibilities – that is different ways of approaching a text – than the literary critics of his time. To Shaw, the general audience was more perceptive of the ideological message he had in mind than the more refined audience, which he claims failed to grasp the play's message and instead complained about its supposed immorality (Shaw vii).

Importantly, prefaces and afterwords are not the only extratextual aspects possibly affecting the way a literary text is seen. Genette thus devises the term *paratext* to address the fact that a literary text virtually always has to be presented in a certain form and therefore cannot stand on its own (1). These paratexts are then further divided into *peritexts* and *epitexts*; while the former is paratextual elements located within the physical space of the text such as the title or the afterword, the latter are found outside the actual physical space of the text, thus being represented by interviews with the author or reviews of the text (3–5). Paratexts thus do not have to be written by the text's author; for instance, numerous *peritexts* such as book covers are authored by the publisher, yet they still shape the overall reception of the text. Since readers cannot read the text in the same way after reading its paratexts as they did before doing so, paratexts, Genette claims, try to inform the reader's understanding of the text, and therefore its reception, to the advantage of the author and his supporters (2, 8). Ultimately, paratexts exist solely for the purpose of the text itself (11).

Genette thus further illuminates several issues touched upon by Shaw's preface, such as the author's intention, various audiences, different attitudes toward the message, or competing ideologies of the author and the audience. These and other factors are necessary to understand the reasons why a work of art might be hailed as a key work of its time or damned for its style, tone, or message. Different audiences might approach the text from different backgrounds, employ different reading strategies, and thus arrive at different interpretations; while sometimes these differences are rather minor and manifest themselves in small nuances, at other times these differences can lead to substantially major discrepancies in the resulting interpretations even to the point of direct opposites.

This, however, does not mean that an average text can result in an infinite number of interpretations. Nevertheless, it also means that we as readers simply cannot help contextualizing the content of a text within our knowledge, thus arriving at a different evaluation of such text (Felski 37). This knowledge is frequently

shaped by the discourse surrounding the work of art in question: the work's or its author's reputation, the other artworks associated with it, or its historical and social context. Ultimately, what is at stake here is the problematic openness of the process of interpretation itself, which could be simplified as the interplay of the text, the author, and the audience.

This interplay is also what my text – at least in relation to the Beat Generation authors – addresses and illuminates.

## 2.1 Theoretical Concepts – Basis of Inquiry

As Ferdinand De Saussure put it in *Course in General Linguistics*, "language never exists apart from the social fact, for it is a semiological phenomenon" (77). Furthermore, Saussure's signs do not have a meaning on their own, but rather in relation to other signs (112, 114, 118). Taking cues from Saussure, post-structuralist literary criticism abandons the formalist analysis of the New Critics and studies texts – not just literary texts, but rather discourses – in relation to their contexts. For instance, Roland Barthes applied Saussure's semiology – that is a "science that studies the life of signs within society" (Saussure 16) – in order to "demystify" ideologies. Barthes first defines myth as a system of communication, i.e. a message which is communicated, and explains that myth can be had in any medium and not only in writing (*Mythologies* 107–8). Saussure's sign is in Barthes's terminology also the signifier of the myth while the signified is an added meaning; the sign of the myth is then the act of signification, that is the myth itself (113–16). Retelling a sign even without further commenting on it is to further propagate it. By freeing the semiological analysis from the constraints of a literary text and applying it to his surroundings, Barthes is able to dissect the underlying dynamics behind larger entities – their ideology.

Barthes' work includes another notion seminal for literary criticism – that of "the death of the author." In the essay of the same name, Barthes proclaims that the author does not speak to the reader, as it is the language itself that does the speaking; importantly, authorship is not limited to a single entity of "the Author-God," but instead becomes a multi-dimensional space of various writings, none of them original (143, 146). Consequently, the author is the most important myth that has to be overthrown so that the reader can become the center of reading: as Barthes states, "the birth of the reader" is the result of abandoning the authority of the author (148). Barthes's point here is to focus on the reader who can then "rewrite" the text on their own.

Yet the study of ideology in a discourse, as put forward by Barthes or Michel Foucault, by definition leads to limited results. For instance, Rita Felski criticizes post-structuralist literary theory and its presumptions – such as analyzing the work

on its own is practically impossible or the process of reading is based on too many unpredictable factors – for being too pessimistic (3). Simply defining literature as ideology is a slippery slope, Felski argues, since it means that no new insights can be gained from literary texts and this decision is made prior to reading the given text (7). Felski essentially claims that while literary criticism from the post-structuralist point of view is instrumental in revealing the underlying ideologies, it does little to contribute to our understanding of actual reading processes. As Stanley Fish, one of the major figures of reader-response theory, further comments:

> There is a great difference between trying to figure out what a poem means and trying to figure out which interpretation of a poem will contribute to the toppling of patriarchy or to the war effort. Until recently the assertion of this difference would have been superfluous, but in many circles it has come to be an article of faith that the idea of a distinctively literary system of facts and values is at best an illusion and at worst an imposition by the powers that be of an orthodoxy designed to suppress dissent. ("Why Literary Criticism Is like a Virtue")

Therefore, it is the insertion of the reader into the context of messages that plays an important part for semantics, reception studies, reader-response criticism, and communication studies; importantly, such an approach is also the basis of this research.

The process of interpretation – with varying degrees of reader involvement – has led to numerous studies in the fields of reception theory or reader-response criticism. In their introduction to *Reception Theory: From Literary Theory to Cultural Studies*, James L. Machor and Philip Goldstein explain the following:

> Reception study has become an important mode of historical inquiry because to rehabilitate the historical method discredited by formal criticism, reception study limits or rejects the transformative force of theoretical ideals and examines the changing 'reading formations' or 'interpretive communities' governing readers' practices. (xiv)

One of the first proponents of reception theory was Hans Robert Jauss. His "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory" calls for a radical change of literary theory by trying to solve "the unresolved dispute" between the various schools; Jauss's solution is to introduce the reader to the discussion (7). He chastises the two dominant approaches of the time – formalism and Marxism – for paying only limited attention to the reader: while one dismisses the reader in favor of the text itself, the other ignores the reader in favor of an ideological reading. The audience should play a prominent role in literary criticism, Jauss argues, as "[t]he historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participa-

tion of its audience" (8). For Jauss, introducing the audience into literary criticism is a way of connecting the two opposite schools: while including the reception and impact of a text allows one to focus on literary works as parts of literary history and therefore discuss the historical consequences of these works on our current literary experience, the audience's appreciation of the esthetics and the way they evolve in history reveals the esthetic value of the analyzed text (8–9).

However, as Jauss points out, reception theory avoids the danger of slipping into psychology by clearly defining the audience's frame of reference rather than relying on the critic's own (11). Importantly, Jauss explains that tracking the reception of a literary work is not merely a collection of reviews or opinions, but "the successive development of the potential meaning which is present in a work and which is gradually realized in its historical reception by knowledgeable criticism" (21). In other words, Jauss tries to link a purely esthetic perspective with a historical approach through a diachronic analysis as a way to refocus on the reader.

That is not to say that reception theory envisions itself to be outside of its object. As Stanley Fish acknowledges in his essay "Why Literary Criticism Is Like a Virtue," to step outside of ideology is impossible: "Nothing stands alone; no discipline is an island; no fact – be it legal, literary, historical, physical, psychological – rests on its own bottom or on the bottom of a self-sustaining practice; all facts are pickoutable only against a background of the entire array of practices, no one of which has a substantial (self-authorising) existence." It is impossible, Fish further argues, for a text to be truly impartial and balanced – such a text would mean everything and therefore nothing. After all, "[h]uman beings are always in a particular place; that's what it means to be human; to be limited by what a specific coordinate of space and time permits us to see until we move on to another coordinate with its equally (if differently) limited permission." Ultimately, the focus on the audience and how it impacts – and is impacted by – the text should provide information not only about the text, but also about the audience itself and its interpretive practices.

Studies of the ways the audience interprets a work of art (or a text in general) substantially differ in their approaches and therefore in the results they obtain. For instance, Umberto Eco argues that the reader can make a limited amount of assumptions about the text without any prior knowledge of it.[5] Importantly, this also works vice versa, as every type of text has a certain model of reader in mind at its general level, for example considering linguistic code, literary style, or specialization (*Role of the Reader* 7). This means that in general, one cannot use the text as they want (9). One of Eco's main concerns is interpretation, which he defines as "a dialectic between openness and form, initiative on the part of the interpreter and contextual pressure" (*Limits of Interpretation* 21). As Eco further

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5    For instance, one can make a safe assumption that this book is aimed at university-educated readers rather than kindergarteners or that it will be written in a formal tone rather than being a series of oddball jokes.

explains, there can be numerous interpretations that may be very different from each other, but one also has to agree that some interpretations are simply more legitimate than others, and while finding consensus on a good interpreter can be difficult, identifying a bad interpreter is usually quite simple (41–42). This is because, Eco argues, symbols are "paradigmatically open to infinite meanings but syntagmatically, that is, textually, open only to the indefinite, but by no means infinite, interpretations allowed by the context" (21). Therefore, it should be possible to reach an agreement about a text's interpretation, even though it may be only about what sort of interpretation the text discourages (45). Ultimately, this leads Eco to the concept of a Model Reader, which can be further differentiated into a naive and a critical Model Reader: while the former is "supposed to understand semantically what the text says," while the critical one is "supposed to appreciate the way in which the text says so" by understanding its textual strategies (55, 58).

Taking a more esthetic approach, Wolfgang Iser states in the preface to his *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* the following: "As a literary text can only produce a response when it is read, it is virtually impossible to describe this response without also analyzing the reading process" (ix). While Eco is more interested in the organization of the text in relation to the reader, Iser is more directly engaged with the reader by explaining that esthetic response ought to be analyzed "in terms of a dialectic relationship between text, reader, and their interaction" and even though "it is brought about by the text, it brings into play the imaginative and perceptive faculties of the reader, in order to make him adjust and even differentiate his own focus" (x).

Similarly to Eco, Iser argues that there is no such thing as an "ideal reader"; such a reader is "a structural impossibility as far as literary communication is concerned. An ideal reader would have to have an identical code to that of the author; authors, on the contrary, generally recodify prevailing codes of their texts, and so the ideal reader would also have to share the intentions underlying this process" (28). Nevertheless, each text aims at the "implied reader," or Model Reader in Eco's terms, who is a textual construct that is firmly set in the structure of the text rather than being a real reader (34). Ultimately, it is the engagement with the text which produces meaning for the implied reader:

> The significance of the work, then, does not lie in the meaning sealed within the text, but in the fact that the meaning brings out what had previously been sealed within us. When the subject is separated from himself, the resultant spontaneity is guided and shaped by the text in such a way that it is transformed into a new and real consciousness. (157)

The reader, put simply, imbues the text with a part of himself, thus creating the work. Therefore, Iser claims it is not only the text but also the dynamics of responding to the text that should constitute the study of a literary work (20–21).

Explaining that focusing exclusively on the author's writing style or on the reader's response will give us only limited information regarding the reading process, he makes an important distinction – that between "work" and "text." While text is the physical composition of a literary text, work is, Iser postulates, a reader's realization of a text; the work is therefore more than just the text itself, as it is the outcome of the text and the reader's subjectivity (21).

By distinguishing between the actual physical text and its manifested interpretation, Iser knowingly adopts the concepts developed by Czechoslovak structuralists such as Jan Mukařovský or Felix Vodička (Zima 199). The latter defines reception in "The Concretization of the Literary Work"[6] as "the investigation of the life of a work in literature" and proposes to focus "on the active relation of the reading public to a literary work perceived as an esthetic object" (107). Vodička points out that linguistic signs are not stable, therefore one can study only the image of the work rather than the work itself; consequently, this leads to a work having multiple interpretations (107, 109). His concept of *concretization* is then his methodological solution for analyzing literature through the lens of reception theory; as he defines it, concretization indicates "a concrete appearance of a specific work which has become the object of esthetic perception" (110). Usually, work is concretized – accepted in a certain appearance – after being available to the readership for a certain period of time; however, it can have more than one concretization, which means that there exists more than one norm of interpreting, and if these norms do not easily stabilize, the constantly changing interpretations can indicate a large number of possible concretizations (111, 127).

Another commentary on the reader and interpretation of a work is offered by Stanley Fish's notion of "interpretive communities." Fish's starting point is close to Iser's or Eco's, as he argues that not the text but rather the reader is the originator of the text's interpretation, therefore making it possible for several different and often conflicting interpretations of a text to exist. Importantly, a reader is only rarely alone in their approach to reading a given text. In his essay "Interpreting the 'Variorum'" Fish explains that interpretive communities "are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions" (483). These interpretive strategies, Fish further elaborates, exist outside of and prior to the act of reading, therefore influencing the final interpretation created by the readers "writing" the text. Notably, a reader is not limited to one interpretive community, but actually belongs to several communities: "This, then, is the explanation both of the stability of interpretation among different readers (they belong to the same community) and for the regularity with which a single

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6    Originally printed as "Literárněhistorické studium ohlasu literárních děl: Problematika ohlasu Nerudova díla" in *Slovo a slovesnost*, 1941.

reader will employ different interpretive strategies and thus make different texts (he belongs to different communities)" (484).

Fish also makes it clear that not only are interpretations temporal rather than permanent, but also that interpreting a text is a process the reader learns from their surroundings (484). These interpretive strategies are naturally shared across the specific interpretive community among its members. Therefore, different or even conflicting views of a single text should not necessarily be interpreted as the results of an imperfect reading, but rather as the natural outcome of different interpretive strategies being employed by their corresponding interpretive communities. In other words, reading is a product of existing discursive and ideological formations. As Fish further clarifies, each reading "only makes sense in relation to the traditions, goals, obligatory routines and normative procedures that comprise its history and are the content of its distinctiveness; as tasks geared to different purposes, they call on entirely different skills and set in motion different orders of attention" ("Why Literary Criticism Is Like a Virtue"). This has far-reaching consequences; since readings are influenced by social norms or beliefs, being a member of an interpretive community often reveals more about its members than about the given text.

Stuart Hall's notion of "encoding" and "decoding" is another concept illuminating the process of reading and interpreting. Although Hall focuses on mass media and especially on television rather than literature, his work further corroborates Fish's claim of a text's meaning as shaped by the text's audience. Hall discusses the relationship between the author of the message – or text – and the audience and explains that the process of interpretation is not a linear mediation of meaning.[7] Quite the opposite, the majority of an interpretation is being actively negotiated by the author and the audience through the processes of encoding and decoding: while encoding describes the way the author communicates his message, decoding focuses on the audience and its method of decoding the author's message. Among other things, the resulting interpretation depends on the author's intentions and his understanding of the target audience, therefore the context of the message is also important in the process of interpretation. Writing about denotation – that is the literal meaning of a sign as opposed to its implication – Hall argues that it is rather limited in its range. In contrast, connotation, or the implied message, is more difficult to grasp:

> Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social and cultural and political world. These constitute a *dominant cultural order,* though it is neither univocal nor uncontested. This question of the 'structure of dis-

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7    Hall prefers the terms "sender" and "receiver." However, for the sake of clarity the terms author and audience are used instead.

courses in dominance' is a crucial point. The different areas of social life appear to be mapped out into discursive domains, hierarchically organized into *dominant* or *preferred meanings*. (134)

The dominant readings, that is readings preferred by the given society, support Fish's notion of interpretive communities. Importantly, these readings are only more common in the given context rather than being strictly "better" or "worse."

Since meaning depends on the communication between the author and the reader, there are numerous outcomes to such interaction. For instance, the audience can fail to understand or identify with the meaning as intended by the author and while Fish would claim that they belong to a different interpretive community, Hall would explain that this is because the audience was not operating within the dominant meaning (135). Subsequently, Hall classifies the author's encoding of the message and the reader's decoding of it into three codes or positions: *dominant-hegemonic position* or *code*, *oppositional position* or *code*, and *negotiated position* or *code*, which indicate the degree of acceptance of refusal toward the author's encoded message (136–38).

Importantly, this act of reading does not occur in the immediate context of the reader. On the contrary, literary work is created and constituted by the processes and specific contexts of large-scale cultural production. As Pierre Bourdieu in his seminal study "The Field of Cultural Production" explains his concept of a "field," it structures artists and the industry producing the artist's work in a power struggle for dominance among various types of readers. The field is not infinite, the space available within it is limited, and established authors have to constantly fend off challengers: "The ageing of authors, schools and works … results from the struggle between those who have made their mark … and who are fighting to persist, and those who cannot make their own mark without pushing into the past those who have an interest in stopping the clock, eternalizing the present stage of things" (60). Yet as new authors displace the old, the whole field changes, and since literary works depend on one another and their location within the field for their meaning, the interpretation of the work automatically changes in the given field (30–31).

Bourdieu's position might be summarized by the seemingly trivial "we define the subject, which in turn further defines the subject." Yet Bourdieu's model not only addresses the whole process of producing cultural artifacts, but also acknowledges the existence of subfields within the field of cultural production, namely fields of large scale and restricted production, as well as the field of power which is a combination of the field of politics and the field of economy. Importantly, the field of power dominates the subfield of large scale production, therefore describing mass culture, while the degree of autonomy of restricted production helps determine the existence of art independent of economy and politics. As Bourdieu puts it, "[t]he literary or artistic field is a field of forces, but it is also

a field of struggles tending to transform or conserve this field of forces" (30). Not only do different audiences prefer different works of art to exist, but also artists compete against each other within their given field as well as against the other fields. Bourdieu also makes the crucial observation that academia has a key role in defining cultural products:

> In fact, what circulates between contemporary philosophers, or those of different epochs, are not only canonical texts, but a whole philosophical doxa carried along by intellectual rumour – labels of schools, truncated quotations, functioning as slogans in celebration or polemics – by academic routine and perhaps above all by school manuals (an unmentionable reference), which perhaps do more than anything else to constitute the 'common sense' of an intellectual generation. (32)

The discourse on a work of art circulating through academia can then have a substantial impact. It not only affects the academic discourses that follow, but since it takes place in the wider context of cultural production, academic discourse can then seep into and subsequently influence the public discourse surrounding the work of art. And it is then this discourse which is circulated and therefore reacted to in the process of cultural production.

## 2.2 Definition of Approach

Writing about the primary purpose of comparative literature, Petr Václav Zima explains that its goals are to analyze the cultural and linguistic dependence of theories and literatures (124). However, as Zima further adds, a comparative critic should also pursue "the ideological interferences in theoretical and literary discourse" (124). This, then, gives a comparative literary critic who speaks two or more languages a considerable advantage, as the critic can see how discourses are constituted by different cultures and languages (121). If then, as Jauss claims, a reception study is not a simple connection of secondary texts related to the work in question, but rather the "successive development of the potential meaning which is present in the work" (21), a reception study focusing on two different languages and cultures can be even more illuminating than a non-comparative approach.

Zima classifies the traditional approach to comparative literature as typological and genetic: while the former focuses on the similarities in production or reception between multiple works, the latter discusses the impact of a work on the genesis of another one (130). While Zima claims that the typological approach should be the basis of comparative criticism, the genetic approach is not to be dismissed, as these two approaches frequently complement one another (131). Nevertheless,

a comparative approach can also be applied to the study of reception. A reception study is therefore different from a genetic approach, as it is not interested in establishing a direct line between two works, but rather in the reception of a work by the public; that is by literary critics, publishing houses, and lay readers (164). While there are numerous comparative approaches to conducting a reception study, this work predominantly focuses on evaluating the discourse of various secondary sources on the Beat Generation and their work. And since various criticisms or responses frequently influence one another, this study employs both typological and genetic approach views on reception. In a way, the study performs a traditional typological/genetic comparative analysis, yet it does so by promoting texts usually described as secondary to a primary position. In addition, its primary focus is not a particular work of art, but rather the concept – the sign – of the Beat Generation and what it means – or signifies – to audiences.

This study is informed by the theoretical concepts outlined in II.1 as well as by Zima's notion of the purpose of comparative literature and its application to a reception study. While they stem from different theoretical models and approaches, all the concepts occupy the same position in several aspects. They all highlight the act of reading itself as predetermined by existing discourse, tradition, and context, and they also explain the existence of multiple interpretations. Importantly, none of the theorists wishes to conduct a psychological analysis of the reader. Instead, they argue that while the reader is not the author and cannot ever approach the text from the same viewpoint, the negotiation between the text and the reader is where the important step in interpretation is taking place.

Nevertheless, the study does not aim to continuously allude throughout the text to the concepts mentioned above. While a commentary on the reception of the Beats through these concepts is provided at the end, the main body of this study is formed by documenting and commenting on the various sources used. As Zima states, a reception study entails quantitative analysis (195). However, while he insists that the common mode of inquiry for such a study should be based on empirical sociology or social psychology, this study takes a different route, as it is not interested in the reception of individual readers, but in analyzing the discourse surrounding the Beat Generation. This study then performs a typological and genetic comparative study of the secondary literature on the Beat Generation; therefore, the unifying link between the analyzed text is their topic – the Beats and their writing – and their genre usually classifying them as secondary texts (such as a review, publisher's note, or literary criticism). The importance of the short theoretical overview in this chapter is then to establish a common ground from which to proceed in such an analysis.

The study also does not say that interpretation depends solely on readers. Zima explains that ideology permeates every discourse, and several of the literary theorists mentioned above have clearly stated that the act of reading is to a great

degree contextual and conventional (124). The criticism of authors as the sole symbol creators has long reached a point of reasonability; while understandable, many of the comments have shifted from one extreme to another one, and suddenly audiences have become identified as the major creators of meaning (Hesmondhalgh 5). Readers do have leeway in interpreting the text, but the text creates boundaries in interpretation through the text's own existence and limitations. In addition, an ideology – or an opposition to one – can substantially shape one's reading practices. Finally, there exists a certain amount of inertia in the reading of a literary text and its relation to existing interpretations prior to the current act of reading. Simply put, readers navigate the existing discourses, ideologies, and structures of their context, and in varying degrees identify these as shaping their reading, thus potentially obtaining a certain degree of autonomy.[8]

Nothing more, but – importantly – nothing less.

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[8]    Alternatively, one could say that a reader will approach a text depending on the reader's interpretive communities, their familiarity with textual strategies (that is being either a naive or a critical Model Reader), or their ability to decode the encoded message.