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Abstract

Reading literature requires not only understanding the literal meaning of the text, but also constructing a nonliteral interpretation of the text's deeper meaning yet little is known about the psychological processes involved when interpretations are constructed. The current paper presents a review of the extant work from literary theory, empirical studies of literature, and research from more general cognitive text comprehension to explore the conditions under which literary interpretations are made and what this discipline-specific reading behavior can tell us about more general text comprehension.

Implications

This review brings together the several bodies of work on literary reading and more domain general text comprehension to clearly outline what theoretical and empirical data tells us about generating interpretations of literary works. The extant research indicates that successful readers rely on epistemological knowledge about the nature and purpose of literature as well as knowledge about literary convention, themes, and historical context. It also suggests that interpretation can be catalyzed by both the text and the reader and that these two factors are interactive. The data also supports the notion that generating inferences about literature is a strategic, rather than automatic process. Finally, the review proposes a novel strategy activation account of literary interpretation to more parsimoniously explain this interactivity of text, task, and reader.

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