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The Reading Process, Wolfgang Iser

The one text that has overwhelmed me the most emotionally is, by far, Gone With the Wind by Margaret Mitchell, which I read at age 15. Because I was so engrossed in the 1037 page novel, I barely slept and finished reading it in almost 4 days. I had read several books set at the time of the Civil War and expected this book to be another romance story. However, all of my expectations were absolutely wrong. For example, I remember the shock when, upon reading page 100, Scarlett accepts Charles Hamilton's marriage proposal. What on earth would happen in the rest of the book if she's already gotten married? While reading this novel, I felt a complete loss of control as each successive event contradicted my expectations or renewed them.

Iser explains the idea of anticipation and retrospection and the emotional involvement necessary for the reader to become involved in the narrative. He mentions that only when characters and places become a creation, or illusion, in our own minds do we experience the imaginative unfolding of the text. In my case, the historical setting of the story supported the realism of the characters and events. In addition, I could not understand why other readers saw Scarlett as a selfish, spoiled brat. I felt that I could relate to her and so I justified her actions and feelings in my mind. Naturally I did not see myself as spoiled or treacherous and, therefore, I didn't see her as such. Therefore, the interpretation of the characters is also dependent on the attitude of the reader and the level of sympathy s/he has.

Iser also describes the importance of retrospection in reformulating expectations. Naturally, we tend to pick out patterns in the text and might thus fall into the trap of expecting similar events to unfold. However, in Gone With the Wind I fell into the trap of thinking that Scarlett would remarry a number of times until the very end, when she and Rhett would marry and live happily ever after. Sadly, the story does not develop that way and even the characters do not behave as expected. Moreover, when I reread the novel at age 18 I discovered that knowing what was going to happen at the end of the book did not destroy the power of the narrative. On the contrary, I began to see so many new connections at different levels in the story, that I enjoyed it even more in the second reading.

The notion of anticipation and retrospection in a narrative text or film is an abstraction of the process of understanding our own story, events and emotions. We hold certain expectations of ourselves and reassess our goals based on the events of the past. In addition, we are constantly discovering ourselves and why we act and react to things as individuals. Therefore, the act of reading is an exercise in our ability to expect the future by assessing events of the past.