

Reading Works, Interpreting World

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**READING WORKS, INTERPRETING WORLDS: A POSTMODERN-
LITERARY EXPLORATION IN FREDERIC JAMESON'S HORIZON**
**Pembacaan Karya, Penafsiran Dunia: Eksplorasi Sastra Posmodern dalam Cakrawala
Frederic Jameson**

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Abstrak: Artikel konseptual ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi karya sastra melalui perspektif Fredric Jameson. Karya sastra mendapat legitimasi sebagai ruang kritis atas permasalahan nyata, akan tetapi, banyak juga yang menelanjangi sisi ideologis penulis atau realitas. Inilah ketaksadaran politis. Pendekatan penelitian ini adalah *grounded theory* karena eksplorasi ini bergerak dari ranah empiris ke ranah berbasis teori dalam penelaahan data. Data berupa pernyataan kutipan yang diambil dari buku referensi, artikel atau jurnal yang relevan. Teknik pengumpulan data adalah dokumentasi karena penelitian ini merupakan jenis penelitian kepustakaan. Teknik analisisnya adalah analisis tematik. Dari hasil eksplorasi, dapat diketahui bahwa Jameson melihat sebuah teks sebagai *symbolic act*, resisten tetapi reproduktif pada ideology dominan. Inilah kondisi reifikasi, di mana subjek (penulis dan atau tokoh) tunduk dalam proses totalisasi menuju ketidaksadaran yang inheren dalam kekuasaan ideology. Inilah ketidaksadaran politis yang membawa kita pada *unmasking of cultural artifacts* (teks sastra) sebagai tindakan simbolik sosial yang diinterpretasi.

Kata Kunci: Jameson; sastra; ideologi; interpretasi; ketaksadaran

Abstract: This conceptual article aims to explore literary works through the perspective of Frederic Jameson. Literary works have legitimacy as a critical space for real problems, however, many of them also expose the author's ideological side or reality. This is the political unconsciousness. This research approach is *grounded theory* because this exploration moves from the empirical realm to the theory-based realm in analyzing data. The data are in the form of quotation statements taken from relevant reference books, articles or journals. The data collection technique is documentation because this research is a type of library research. The analysis technique is thematic analysis. From the exploration results, it can be seen that Jameson sees a text as a *symbolic act*, resistant but reproducible to the dominant ideology. This is the condition of reification, in which the subject (writer and/character) is drowning to a process of totalization towards unconsciousness which is inherent in ideological power. This is the political unconscious which leads us to the *unmasking of cultural artifacts* (literary texts) as interpreted social symbolic actions.

Keywords: Jameson; literature; ideology; interpretation; unconsciousness

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INTRODUCTION

Fredric Jameson, an American literary critic and Marxist political theorist, is known for his analysis of contemporary cultural trends, in particular the analysis of postmodernity and capitalism. Jameson's most famous books are *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) and *The Political Unconscious* (1981), but the second book mentioned is the one that is commonly referenced in any Jameson discussion.

The overall concept in the book rests on at least two great terms as the foothold of Jameson's thought; Marxism and Psychoanalysis. Still, referring to the basic concepts typical of Marxism (dialectics and historical materialism), Jameson in his critique of postmodernism believes that there is still domination of capitalism present in a different face, namely advanced capitalism or what is often referred to as multinational capitalism (Jameson, 2020a). Jameson himself divided the evolution of capitalism into three stages, namely market capitalism, monopoly capitalism, and multinational capitalism (Walz, 2021).

However, in contrast to orthodox Marxists, Jameson, in line with Althusser, considered that *base-structure* does not directly determine *superstructures*. *Base-structure* is even semi-autonomous, where the literary text as a superstructure has a strong potential for resistance to it. Here, Jameson approaches the *ritual* of dialectical procedure, such as *philosophy-history*, *Hegelianism-Marxism*, *critique-understanding*, and its abolition (Jevtić, 2020). This is where the concept of such dialectics takes place, where history is always buried and found only in latent meanings through the process of interpretation. Despite this fact, the interpretation itself is rooted in history (Akmal, 2013). This sort of *utopia* and ideology will always contend in

discourse while still trying to dismantle the possibilities of oppression of the dominant ideology (Fitting, 1998).

On the other hand, from Psychoanalysis, Jameson took Freud's basic idea regarding the unconscious. It was Freud who divided the concept of human psychology into three levels: *superego*, *ego*, and *id*. Unconsciousness resides in the human *id*, where the ego as a form of self-awareness seeks to repress it, but it is not entirely successful. The researcher's task, then, for Jameson is to seek and to find the structure of the unconscious to its deepest meaning through the stages of its interpretation. This form of unconsciousness can be said to be a symbolic form of response to the resistance efforts of the text. In addition, Jameson also analogized the concept of mirror stages that Lacan proposed in his analysis (Jameson, 1977). For him, the text appears as an imaginary text that has always been under the influence of its history (Chang & Jameson, 1998). Whereas the real one appears in the context of Marxism, thus, the text has the possibility of being distorted as much as possible, in which the subject's desire is present as a manifestation of the collective desire towards *the Other* that lies at his unconscious level (Crane, 2009).

Furthermore, Jameson believed that the dominant ideological sneaks a history under a literary text. Literary texts detect the traces of continual narrative, in bringing back to the surface of the text where reality is suppressed and buried from fundamental history. Literary text is a doctrine of the political unconscious which finds its function and necessity (Jameson, 2020b; Parrinder & Dowling, 1986).

History appears at the level of unconsciousness of the text which lies in the latency of a text. Meanwhile, the

latent meaning can only be found through a deeper explanation of the manifested meaning, that is, at the surface level of the text. A literary text exists and it is a result of *rewriting* through the process of interpretation of the history behind them. In this point, history is *believed* to contain the dominant ideology of a *society*. This interpretation results in an attempt at resistance to the ideology.

On the other hand, the dominant ideology simultaneously reacts to it and *plays a role* in maintaining its *status quo* through forms of oppression that we cannot necessarily capture at the surface level of the text. For this sort of reason, a critical interpretation of the work is necessary to find out the latent meaning in literary works and dismantle the oppressive possibilities of the dominant ideology that brings the text to ambivalence or even submission to that dominance, at the same time. What is more is this; historical political control is also always related to the *interests* or *subjectivity* of the author, either pre-conscious or conscious, and even beyond it. This also generates a gap in the structure of *class consciousness* in literary works, such as high literature, lowbrow literature, and so on. It is the impact of the author's intervention in the exploration process of creating a work. In other words, the degree of difficulty in the process of creating literary works is not just about the structural level of language, the figurative language, or other technical skills, but it is about how an ideological pleasure in itself is manifested because this is a concealed space where private matter provides the author's pleasure in writing the texts. It is a pleasure tied up in the peculiarities of difficult style. It is a pleasure to grant minimal gratification for the work (Chang & Jameson, 1998).

Here can be allocated the implication referred to by Jameson that there is always a personal pleasure in some form of textual, symbolic, and so on criticism which is certainly has very much to do with the unconscious. There is a kind of satisfaction that is more than just critical, thus, literary texts are meticulously related to patterns of *legitimacy*.

As already alluded to, literature can be seen as a product of the subject's imagination with political nuance in it. This is inseparable from a sect that *believes* literary texts are the consequences of interpretations that have been carried out by preceding authors.

Furthermore, Jameson saw that literature is to be thought of as something more and other than the false consciousness, that we associate with the word ideology (Roberts, 2000). It surpasses what Marx said about false consciousness; Jameson emphasized that ideology (in the sense of dominant ideology) as something criticized by the author (political action), on the other hand, will always appear at the level of unconsciousness of the text as a form of reaction to forms of rejection.

For example, realist literary work such as Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is considered to have emerged as a form of feminist struggle at the time through the form of literary texts. *Madame Bovary* became a symbol of women's struggle and self-freedom at that time. *Madame Bovary* through his actions which were considered to deviate from social norms instead of taking the spotlight as a revolutionary subject who sought to break away from the system of society, which, at that time, Gustave Flaubert criticized sort of oppressive acts to women's rights. But the distorted actions he took turned out to be a big question mark that needs to be targeted to find the position of the text associated

with the history, where the materialistic attitude it has is precisely a picture of submission to capitalism as the dominant ideology of the time.

This is where the political unconscious side that Jameson is trying to emphasize, is that a text, which is then referred to as a *symbolic act*, contains a form of resistance, but at the same time, the dominant ideology also reacts in the level of unconsciousness itself. In this case, Jameson deploys spatial metaphors to negotiate aporia which is irreconcilable in the logical way of any theory (Crane, 2009). It should be noted that the dominant side of ideology is a totality which is unavoidable of the subject, since the subject has always been subdued by the ideological situation: *reification*.

Reification is a process affecting our cognitive bond with the social totality. It is a *disease* of mapping function whereby subject projects and models insertion into the collectivity. Reification renders society opaque: it is the source of the mystifications on which ideology is based and by which domination and exploitation are legitimized (Polan & Jameson, 1990).

A subject, who has always been subdued by ideology, will always have a distortion or a falsification in seeing a reality. It takes the subject unconsciously hostage in the shade of the ideology. It is not just a subject individually, but rather a subject communally affirming the totality of ideology in the social unconscious.

In other words, reification is not simply a process of alienation which in the sense the subject is *thrown away* at a margin drowning the subject in the reality. Alienation, in this sense, is a process of totalization of the subject towards an inherent unconscious in the power of an ideology distorting reality and illusion.

In the literary context, the author can be referred to as an *agent* or subject of political unconscious. The political unconscious seeks to explore the *multiple paths* that lead us to the *unmasking of cultural artifacts*; literary texts are a socially symbolic act (Parrinder & Jameson, 1985). For this reason, a critical interpretation of the work is necessary to find out the latent and covert meaning of the historical interpretation in a literary work. It is intended to discover the dialectical process between ideology and text as an imaginary resolution—which Jameson later referred to as a *utopia* that contains expectations for the cultural symptoms behind it—and finally knowing the position of the text as a *narrative apparatus*.

METHOD

The approach of this study is grounded theory since this exploration travels from the empirical sphere to the theoretical-based field by framing a set of ideas in a theory based on data scrutiny. The data are in the form of statements of quotations taken from referential books, relevant articles or journals. The data collection technique is documentation since this study is a sort of library research. The first stage is holistically and heuristically reading. The second stage is collecting of quotes. The third stage is organizing the raw data into well-prepared data. The technique of analysis is thematic analysis since this typical analysis provides a space to work with patterns of data and it ends up in sub-themes of the concepts. The stages are from familiarization, coding the data to classify, defining themes, and analysis (see Age, 2014; Craver, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Gregar, 2016; Ishtiaq, 2019; Kenny & Fourie, 2014; Ramalho et al., 2015; Weyant, 2022).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

a. Dialectics of Ideology and Utopia

Jameson highly emphasized the importance of reading works with double hermeneutics: negative and positive hermeneutics. Negative hermeneutics sees the text as an ideology (in a pejorative sense). Positive hermeneutics sees text as a subversive force arising from the utopian impulses that create a society in which the ideals of Marxism are a *classless* society.

Proper practice of Marxist ideological analysis must decipher the utopian impulses of ideological cultural texts. This instrumental analysis is coordinated with a collective or communal cultural reading where functional methods for describing cultural texts are articulated with anticipatory methods (Bilgrami, 2019). In other words, in Jameson's perspective, ideology, and utopia emerge simultaneously through double hermeneutics, in which the text appears as the embodiment of utopian impulses. It is reactionist excretion to the dominant ideology and on the contrary, the dominant ideology itself is understood as a *superstructure* reacting to the forces of resistance offered through literary works.

Jameson understood utopia as the *image* of the ultimate collective life of an attained *Utopian* or *classless* society (Ritzer & Goodman, 2006). Utopia is a representation of an ideal condition, in Marxism, the ideal is being a *classless* society. In other words, Jameson pursues a utopian world that transcends existing conflict in existing false realities. A pursuit of a utopian realm can lead us to transcend instrumental institutional *conflicts*. It seems absurd but it reminds us of Lacanian subject who gets trapped in the absence of the *Other*; it is neither desire of ideality nor the subject's unfulfillment, but it is the fantasy that drives the subject's pursuit (see Crane,

2009; Hook & Neill, 2008; Jameson, 1977; Rogers & Zevnik, 2017). Further, utopian represents an alteration of radical vigor into idle wish-fulfillments and illusive satisfactions. It is a sort of practical thinking which everywhere stands as evidence of the power of the system to renovate its mirror image. The Utopian idea, on the contrary, sustains the leeway's of a world qualitatively (see Culler & Jameson, 1974; Pakulski, 2009).

What Jameson referred to is that the utopian world has no reference to the totality of the subject's freedom, but rather, at the very least, a diversion from the pseudo-expectations offered by ideology with its various illusions that never encounter the subject's expectations. Thus, utopia is like a stimulation of the subject to get out of the shadow of the totality of the ideology itself rather than trapping the subject more in ideology. This is what Jameson later emphasized by his analogies, that the subject no longer chained by the restrictions of a sort of *tyrannical* social structure, blossoming into a neurotic, compulsive, obsessive, paranoid, and schizophrenic subject whom our society considers madness, but, in a universe of true freedom, it sets up *human nature* itself (Jameson, 1996; Osborne, 1992; Pizer, 1993). This affirmation *stamps* Jameson as a Postmodern Marxist for placing more emphasis on the authoritative freedom of the subject individually, relatively, and of course, plurality.

Further, Jameson also found that society has now experienced neurosis, or false anxiety and fear; it is not because of utopian ideas, but rather the context in which those ideas can be freely distributed and discussed. This causes concern when these ideal consequences are interpreted as superficial things, where both freedom and equality are well thought-out the standard of an ideal life. This is what Jameson focuses on

where literary works, such as utopian ones; it needs to be deconstructed through the process of interpretations through the level of content to form to reveal the latent meaning behind all ethical and political forms of a literary text.

Because process and procedure of understanding is the core of utopian meaning which is expected as an effort to dismantle and discover the potentials of the utopia itself. The potential is in the form of the ability of ideology to spread into mass culture, no matter how much criticism is thrown against it. Thus, the interpretation of utopias can be said to be a process of interpreting ideal concepts themselves that have the potential to hide possibilities that could be only repetitions or oppressions of the dominant system.

The utopia appears through interpretations which in his analysis by Jameson are conceived through three horizons of reading—as an ideal form of achievement. In the first stage, elements of utopia can be found in the text's rejection of social contradictions so that the text finds imaginary solutions. At the horizon of the second stage, referring to the analysis of ideologue on the text, the latent meaning is found as a form of the essence of the ideal itself at the level of unconsciousness of the text. On the third horizon, utopia appears as what is believed to be an early society of history, in which society emerged from the collapse of the system of capitalism, and was born on a new history; an advanced capitalism.

From this, what can be drawn is the rapport among the unconscious, the utopia, and the reality that is beyond the consciousness of the subject that is only recorded through the subject's mode of interpretation. The interpretation here is a pivot of what is happening in the social world, as some groups discuss peace,

democracy and so on, they are caught up in a maelstrom of meanings that they understand communally, despite the subjectivity present.

This subjectivity is also the horizon towards the utopian valley of what was intended by Jameson, so that the subject is not constrained by the totality of values as well as the limits of what ideology provides. In this context, literature becomes winged, because on the one hand it offers a horizon but on the other hand literature is biased into a *factory* that reproduces the ideological meanings that have been resisted.

b. Triadic Horizon Interpretation

Jameson has a popular and famous slogan, *always historicize!* It refers to a *symbolic act*. A symbolic act cannot be found through meaning at the surface level alone. Literature and its works are a *symptom* in which political unconsciousness nails in it. To dig it out, it needs deep exploration through layered interpretations to touch the latent meaning of the text. Jameson then provides three logical frameworks for analyzing literary texts to obtain latent meaning through interpretations made of texts concerning the historical and socio-economic texts behind them. The three horizons of the reading are the political, social, and production horizons.

1) Horizon of Political Reading

On the first horizon, the political horizon, the text is understood as an individual text. However, in contrast to the intrinsic view, the text is interpreted as a *symbolic act*, that is, as a symbolic resolution of social contradictions. The basic principle of analysis or interpretation on this horizon is on individual narrative, in which the formal structure of the individual is seen as an imaginary resolution to a real contradiction (Roberts, 2000).

In this first stage, the text is understood as an imaginary resolution of the author of social contradictions as a result of the interpretation of his life experiences. This type of interpretation is then understood as the result of a process of *rewriting*, that is, the rewriting of literary texts in various ways against historical or ideological *subtexts*.

As for *subtext*, socio-historical contradictions are expressed and exist only as an *absent cause* that cannot be directly conceptualized by the text. The *subtext*, according to Jameson, does not immediately exist; it is neither some commonsense external reality, nor even the conventional narratives of history, but rather (re)constructing the fact (Jameson, 2020b). In other words, the subtext presents as a dynamic of processed facts, obscuring them, revolutionizing them into a stalemate that offers meaning in its search, not a general idea agreed upon by society.

2) Social Reading Horizon

On the second horizon, the text is understood as *ideologeme*. *Ideologeme* according to Jameson is the smallest unit of ideology that can be understood from collective and antagonistic discourses between social classes (Jameson, 2020b).

Social contradictions at this stage emerge as inevitable contradictions between two opposition groups. The text is no longer seen as a solution, but more broadly, it exists as a space (discourse) in which the two groups compete with each other in real terms, where the discourse of the dominant group reacts to the lower-class forms of resistance to it.

Furthermore, Jameson describes ideologeme as a sort of amphibious formation, having essential structural characteristics that could have been described as possibly manifesting

themselves as a sort of *pseudo idea*—conceptions or belief systems, abstract values, an opinion or presupposition—or as a narrative proto, a kind of class fantasy that is central to the collective character that constitutes classes in opposition (Jameson, 2020b). This *ideologeme* can then be understood as a force in which the text shows its subversive power, while at the same time the dominant ideology reacts to it.

Jameson then asserts where the conflict between these two antagonistic classes itself is at the level of discourse. He asserts that in writing, authors express text. Thus, the text is grasped as a symbolic manifestation in an essentially polemic and strategic ideological confrontation between the classes (Jameson, 2020b). It is understood that the text is no longer merely a form of a real struggle of oppressed resistance to the dominant. The text is better understood as a discourse that becomes a site in which two discourses contradict each other in terms of content and at the same time are intertwined with each other (Jameson, 2020b). Thus, for Jameson, the existence of a tug-of-war here at once leads us to a latent meaning in which possible traces of repression perpetrated by dominant ideology—or in this context capitalism—can be found.

In this logical sense, the text is no longer understood as an individual text, but has been reconstructed in the form of a collective discourse, in which the social order becomes to widen our understanding of the text as a cultural object. Total unity is present in the text unconscious (they are part of the latent form of the text), in which literature, willy-nilly, refers back to and embodies the social and economic reality from which it was created (Escudero, 2020; Frosh, 2020; Roberts, 2000).

The utopian impulses are no longer understood as individual imaginary

reso-lutions of class contradictions. Utopia emerges as an *ideal* fantasy formed through self-desire that is the desire of—in psychoanalytic terms—the *Other*. As Jameson pointed out that one of the human passions is proved by being utopian in character.

According to Lacan, language that constitutes the entire Symbolic realm, is the only way that the Self can enter into cultural reality; language is a filter for the Self—or what Jameson called *biological namelessness*—so that it can be understood by others, for it to come *into existence*. This is where the text appears as cynicism. Literature has been distorted in such a way that it later appears as a collective text that unconsciously is a form of fulfillment of symbolic desires manifested in individual desires at the *level* we discuss on the first reading horizon (la Berge, 2021; Von Boeckmann, 1998).

3) Horizon Reading Production Mode

On the third horizon, the text is rendered in the mode of production that gave birth to it. In this phase, Jameson named the text as the *ideology of form*, that is, the *symbolic messages* transmitted to us by the coexistence of various sign systems that are traces and anticipations of the modes of production (Jameson, 2020b). From there, an author's critique becomes an issue that comes to the fore here. Jameson exemplifies through his analysis of the novels by Balzac, in which the past life of the Balzac family has been reconstructed in such a way as a form of a familial story in his works that ultimately mediates the larger issue, namely the contradiction that occurs between the revolutionary forces of the people and the feudal class. The thing that needs to be emphasized in this analysis is that, however, *parental* functions here are understood as social

codes or symbolic positions of individual texts.

The fulfillment of individual desires through utopian impulses in literary texts, formed through the historical setting of the personal life of its author, appears at once as a symbolic representation. Utopia appears as the fulfillment of the author's desires as part of a collective society. Because of the existence of a form of historical continuity—capitalism continues as a continuation of the domination of capitalism—it will still always leave anxiety in the collective subject (in this case the author). Thus, on this last horizon of interpretation, it will be analyzed how the modes of production manifested in the text cannot be separated from the history of the author's subject. At the same time, the text will always be associated with the social history in which the author created it.

A literary work is said to be a manifestation of an author, both as part of a particular social society, and as an individual who has his uniqueness. It can also be said that a poem, prose, drama, or film is a forum for an author to reflect on and criticize certain social conditions such as social class issues, racism, ethnicity, religion, gender injustice, etc. We can mention some great French authors such as Flaubert, Balzac, Émile Zola in which their works such as *Madame Bovary*, *La Comédie Humaine*, the anthology *Les Rougon-Macquart*, and so on. They are considered as representations of a certain social situation of France in a particular decade as well as an attempt to break a stereotype of social order which is considered lame and dilapidated.

In Indonesia itself, we can see the works of great authors such as Pramoedya Ananda Toer with his realist works criticizing the *New Order* of a regime. Today, we know Andrea Hirata

who was able to raise the picture of class inequality in Belitung society in the past as well as criticism of the dilapidation of the education system in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

Jameson with his theoretical studies explains that the reading of the text and its analysis can decipher sociopolitical meanings that can be accessed through the stages of political discipline. At the first stage, the horizon of political reading, the literary text may show its attempted resistance to social contradictions. In the second stage of interpretation, which is then referred to as the social reading horizon, the *ideologeme* in the form of demoralization of society is targeted more deeply where there are found forms of submission to these social values. Through the targeting of *ideologeme*, it is found that the ambiguous attitude that the text raises through the forms of deviation to the ambivalent attitude shown by the subject, which then indicates the dominance of the ideology that controls the utopian vision of the text. Thus, at this stage it is found that the text has been distorted in such a way by the dominant ideology that is precisely present as a utopia of the ideal life. The dominant ideology appears in the ambivalent attitudes shown by the central figure and other figures in literary works as an attempt at the repression of the dominant ideology located at the level of unconsciousness of the text. In the latter horizon of interpretation, namely the reading of the mode of production, it is found that literary texts can be present as a form of criticism of the social conditions of society today. Through the analysis of the form (*genre*) of the novel, it is found that the past conditions raised as a setting in the story give rise to the literary text as a utopian manifestation,

in which utopia is present as a form of escape from the anxieties to the reality that existed in the time in which the literary text was created. This is where literary texts can present themselves as a *daydream/wish-fulfillment* for the subject. Again, the text shows the *wish-fulfillment* of the subject—in this case the author—but as a collective subject, where the subject has experienced subjectivity to the Real one. The bourgeoisie presents as an ideal fantasy of life, in which the subject (author) desires it. The text seems to be problematic with the tug-of-war between ideology and utopia. But in the end, the text dismantles the practice of dominant ideology in which the author is precisely the subject of cynicism caught up in the values of that dominant ideology. It can be seen through the modes of production of the dominant ideology that are still present in the unconsciousness of the subject or author, through the codes of resistance that appear in his text. This is where the unconscious politics of a text, text performs its role as an *ideological apparatus* that helps perpetuate dominant power through a collective desire that has distorted utopian values of dictated society. Or, literary texts that maintain imaginary solutions, which will always carry the political content of the individual, such as the freedom of the subject, the determination of attitudes towards the social problems faced, and so on. However, on the other hand, the dominant ideology still plays its role in always maintaining its *status quo*, where the subject will still be stuck on the values of the dominant ideology. The utopia has ultimately been distorted by the ideological dominance of capitalism through the fantasies of established social life. Meanwhile, the excesses of the dominant ideology continue and also

show their dominance at the level of the author's unconsciousness.

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