This study examines both theoretically and empirically how well the theories of Norman Holland, David Bleich, Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish can explain readers’ interpretations of literary texts. The theoretical analysis concentrates on their views on language from the point of view of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. This analysis shows that many of the assumptions related to language in these theories are problematic. The empirical data show that readers often form very similar interpretations. Thus the study challenges the common assumption that literary interpretations tend to be idiosyncratic.

The empirical data consists of freely worded written answers to questions on three short stories. The interpretations were made by 27 Finnish university students. Some of the questions addressed issues that were discussed in large parts of the texts, some referred to issues that were mentioned only in passing or implied. The short stories were "The Witch à la Mode" by D. H. Lawrence, "Rain in the Heart" by Peter Taylor and "The Hitchhiking Game" by Milan Kundera.

According to Fish, readers create both the formal features of a text and their interpretation of it according to an interpretive strategy. People who agree form an interpretive community. However, a typical answer usually contains ideas repeated by several readers as well as observations not mentioned by anyone else. Therefore it is very difficult to determine which readers belong to the same interpretive community. Moreover, readers with opposing opinions often seem to pay attention to the same textual features and even acknowledge the possibility of an opposing interpretation; therefore they do not seem to create the formal features of the text in different ways.

Iser suggests that an interpretation emerges from the interaction between the text and the reader when the reader determines the implications of the text and in this way fills the “gaps” in the text. Iser believes that the text guides the reader, but as he also believes that meaning is on a level beyond words, he cannot explain how the text directs the reader. The similarity in the interpretations and the fact that the agreement is strongest when related to issues that are discussed broadly in the text do, however, support his assumption that readers are guided by the text.

In Bleich’s view, all interpretations have personal motives and each person has an idiosyncratic language system. The situation where a person learns a word determines the most important meaning it has for that person. In order to uncover the personal etymologies of words, Bleich asks his readers to associate freely on the basis of a text and note down all the personal memories and feelings that the reading experience evokes. Bleich’s theory of the idiosyncratic language system seems to rely on a misconceived notion of the role that ostensive definitions have in language use. The readers’ responses show that spontaneous associations to personal life seem to colour the readers’ interpretations, but such instances are rather rare.

According to Holland, an interpretation reflects the reader’s identity theme. Language use is regulated by shared rules, but everyone follows the rules in his or her own way. Words mean different things to different people. The problem with this view is that if there is any basis for language use, it seems to be the shared way of following linguistic rules.

Wittgenstein suggests that our understanding of words is related to the shared ways of using words and our understanding of human behaviour. This view seems to give better grounds for understanding similarity and differences in literary interpretations than the theories of Holland, Bleich, Fish and Iser.