'See and Learn': Intertextuality in the Teaching of Poetry

Saumya Sharma

Introduction

Although much research has been done on how to teach poetry, yet tutors at the school and/or college level broadly resort to the following methods: focussing on the meaning of the text, its inherent theme and symbolism; providing a general paraphrase for the verses; elaborating on the figures of speech employed by the poet and the imagery they evoke; the stanza form and rhyme scheme; and detailing the background of the poet and his times. Instructors are fearful about teaching poetry, which is often considered an ineffectual exercise (Linaberger, 2004). This is because interest in the reading and writing of poetry is synonymous with literary high culture (Benton, 1984),which demands a niche audience to appreciate and interpret it. Moreover, although the words "creative art", "imagination" and "vividness" are associated with poetry, there seems to be a discrepancy in the actual practice of its teaching, as the emphasis is mainly on conveying the meaning of the poem rather than teaching its appreciation to the learners. Likewise, owing to its special syntax and their explanations, the teaching of poetry can more often than not become a mere mechanical, meaning-decoding exercise. In my paper, I will attempt to revive imaginative interest in poetry teaching by arguing in favour of the use of visual art in teaching poems, as a supplementary pedagogical practice to the already established ones. I will support this claim through the analysis of Tennysons' poem "The Lotus Eaters" and the study of a painting depicting the poem.

Intertextuality

The term intertextuality has gone through multiple revisions in the hands of different theorists. It was initially used by Julia Kristeva (1986) based on Mikhail Bakhtin's (1986/1994) and Valentin N. Volosinov's (1994) views on language, particularly dialogicality. Bakhtin explored the interrelatedness between different texts. According to him, each text echoes its predecessors and contemporaries, making speech two-sided or dialogic. He added that words are reciprocal, relying on the speaker and hearer to make meaning. "Each and every word expresses the 'one' in relation to the 'other' (1994, p. 58), more so the printed word that reflects, responds, affirms and negates the other." This, according to Bakhtin, gave rise to the phenomenon of verbal communication that is fundamentally dialogic and intertextual, as each text contains traces of other texts in a broad and specific sense. Roland Barthes (1981), extended the meaning of intertextuality further by drawing a distinction between text and work. He asserted that work is the finished product held in the hand, while text is the force of writing- a "fabric of the words which make up the work" (1981, p. 32) that contains voices and utterances of other texts. Thus text is essentially dependent on language and can be likened to a vast repository of meanings that is decoded by the reader. The meanings are not stable, but are deferred in the Derridean sense (1970/1989), so that more words are required to explain the meaning. Hence, the process of reading and

drawing meanings from the text is given importance as the reader meaningfully interprets the text. Intertextuality, therefore, is no longer just interrelatedness of texts but included its active comprehension by the reader.

This concept was further modified by the taxonomy given by Gerard Genette (1997), who discusses five types of intertextuality, one of which is relevant for our understanding, namely, hypertextuality. Hypertextuality essentially means texts that refer to other/earlier texts that can be treated as a source text. For example, Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* thematically and structurally draws from Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* so much so that the former will not make sense without the latter. Similarly, the source text for James Joyce' *Ulysses* is Homer's epic *Odyssey*. A moot point here is that intertextuality refers not just to previous or successive versions of a written text, but also to its adaptation in other media such as comics, films, songs, television programmes, video games and cartoons, where each version is a text and an intertext of the other, and the reader is also the viewer and the consumer.

A modern day example of understanding the process of intertextual reading is the written tales of Sherlock Holmes and its television and film adaptations. To understand the character of Holmes and the thematic setting, one needs to investigate not just the printed word but also Holmes' portrayal by British actors Jeremy Brett (closer to the original text) and Benedict Cumberbatch, who portrays a modern avatar of Holmes. The drastic difference in Holmes' depiction by the two actors might provide clues not just for a better reading of the stories (their plot, structure and themes) but also about the changing tastes of the audience, renewed interest in Holmes as a figure of popular culture and the state of postmodern, contemporary societies. Intertextual readings about texts, thus informs each text, enhancing the interpretative

process of the readers/viewers and their knowledge of different media.

Intertextuality and Art

Literature and art are both creative processes and visual depictions of literature are not uncommon, as can be seen in the paintings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti or William Waterhouse. These paintings usually depict a crucial scene from the literary text that the painter thinks is significant from the point of view of the plot or the characters. An image, like words, arrests time in a frame but it is more impactful and has greater chances of rousing the learner's interest in the topic. Images (monochromic/coloured) drawn in school textbooks, generally have an explanatory or denotative function with reference to the given printed matter. However, intertextuality in teaching is not a simple or direct relationship between images and information, as given in textbooks. It is an intersection of varied strands (philosophical, historical, artistic, literary, cultural, etc.) interpreting the texts, their production, social background and reception. In fact, visual intertexts of literature can magnify or ignore certain aspects of the text by provoking a dialogue on "why", "how", "when" and "what", thereby acting as a rich interpretative process and a useful pedagogical exercise. Research indicates that intertextuality is not a common process, yet the use of visual arts can increase the "linguistic and cultural proficiency" of students. This was demonstrated by Ortuño (1994, p. 500), who used Spanish paintings from sixteenth century onwards to teach language. A similar approach was employed by Knapp (2012) to teach German and to enhance the students' knowledge of literary movements of Romanticism, Expressionism, etc., thereby developing their literary competence. Jester (2003) also employed visuals arts as a medium for analysing literary works, especially poetry. She taught

English vocabulary and writing skills to her students through paintings, drawings and the creation of storyboards.

Unlike studies that focus on language and literature, Jones (2007) examined the interrelation between art and literary genres especially realism, to understand the similarities, influences and motivations behind the two creations. In the same vein, I would like to propose the use of paintings based on literary works to teach those works. I believe that both the literary text and the painting are intertexts, and their combined analysis would help the learner to better comprehend the printed text. However, an intertextual reading is not a simple and comparative analysis of the texts, since a story and its painting are different in size and structure. For instance, a poem is longer in length whereas the painting shows a particular scene/s from it; it does not cover the entire text. Therefore, while comparing the two, the focus should be on the following:

1. The words from the text that highlight the painting, i.e. the lexical pictures created by the author through figures of speech and/ or literal descriptions that talk about the style, context, setting, characters and themes of the work;

2. The use of colour in both creations;

3. The philosophical and sociocultural backgrounds of the two works, by engaging in a discussion about their conceptual interconnectedness and reception;

4. The ways in which the newer text transforms or conforms to the older text and the reasons for such changes;

5. The various interpretations that can be derived from both the texts by the readers/ viewers, to critically and productively appreciate them.

Due to space constraints, it is not possible to engage in a detailed discussion of each of these points, however, I will attempt to provide an intertextual reading of Alfred Lord Tennyson's 'The Lotus Eaters' (henceforth, TLE) and its painting by Robert S. Duncanson (1861), largely focusing on the parallels between the two.

Robert Duncanson: The Land of the Lotus Eaters, 1861.

An Intertextual Analysis

Tennyson is known for his word paintings-the use of words that conjure pictures. Word paintings, according to Benjamin are produced by "the imagination" and by "certain tricks of light and colour which produce the desired effect on the eye of the beholder (1931, p. 355). Stylistically, these word paintings consist of metaphors and similes, and noun phrases that contain colour and sensory adjectives and adverbs. Some examples from TLE (1969/1987, p. 469) that are instances of figurative language include:

1. "wavering lights, showery drops" (noun phrases with adjectives)

2. "dark faces, rosy flame" (noun phrases with colour adjectives)

Although the painting by Duncanson shares some commonalities with the poem, it is different in some ways. While highlighting these, I will provide pointers for further discussion on the topic. Tennyson's poem begins with a description of the Lotus Eaters landing on the shores of the island, fatigued from travelling (indicated by the use of the word "courage" by the protagonist Ulysses).

Their time of arrival (afternoon) in a land "in which it seemed always afternoon" (1987, p. 468) conjures the image of dull sunlight; and the description of the waters as "the slender stream along the cliff to fall and pause and fall did seem" (1987, p. 469) connotes the wayward movement of a narrow water body. Duncanson's painting portrays this scene in the following manner: the use of a diffuse yellow colour denotes a land where it is always afternoon; the movement of a few swimmers reaching ashore where their companions are standing and the stream falling down like a short waterfall to form a river body. Thematically, reaching the island is the most significant scene in the poem for it provides the scaffolding for the activities of the Lotus Eaters; probably that is why it is the scene chosen by the painter. Furthermore, it is said that Duncanson's work was much appreciated by Tennyson, therefore, exploring the sociocultural contexts for the poem and the painting can also be part of the classroom discussion.

Tennyson employs bright colours to create his "effect": "the red West" where the sun sets, the "yellow down" of the hills, the "yellow sand" on which the mariners sat and the "rosy flame" of the sun accentuated against the "dark faces" of the mariners. The basic manifestations of nature are also vibrantly colourful: "amber light" of the sun, "creamy spray" of the rippling waters, the "purple hill" and the "emerald-colour'd water" (1987, pp. 469-476). Apart from this, the woods, hills, ivy creepers, poppy and amaranth flowers, all are endowed with natural colours so that the reader can automatically "see" them and the landscape such as "gleaming river seaward flow", "three mountain tops" (1987, p. 469), "here are cool mosses deep/And thro' the moss the ivies creep" (1987, p. 470). The painting, unlike the poem, employs excessive use of amber yellow and creamy white to highlight the general atmosphere of the place, the sameness of time and the foamy waterfall. In fact the diffuse glow of the sun (the yellowness) is dominant in the upper half of the canvas, making natural light one of the main motifs in the painting and the poem. From a pedagogical point of view, the depiction of the above-mentioned phrases on the canvas can be used to explain their meanings since children learn better when they "see" what is "written". Thus, instead of explaining the imagery of a poem, a common technique in a poetry class, the poem can be explained visually.

However, the painting does not use any other bright colours as the rest of the landscape is bordering on dark brown and green, which is a discrepancy in the visual intertext. A probable reason for this could be that the painter painted in accordance with the traditional colour scheme of dark shades and the tenets of line and perspective as prescribed by the authorities at the Salon in Paris and London at the time (Read, 1985). The African-American painter, although a contemporary of Tennyson, was probably a follower of the traditional aesthetic scheme because the use of dark colours depicts a general mood of melancholy and lethargy, ascribed to the Lotus Eaters. Such deviations between the texts can be viewed as the key to discussions on art in the Victorian age and the artistic background of both the poet and the artist. For instance, what techniques did the two artists use?; did they conform to the tradition of those times or were they iconoclastic?

Unlike the traditional topics of art of that period that mostly reproduced indoor-studio paintings (Read, 1985), Duncanson's painting depicts an outdoor landscape based on TLE, a poem describing nature and outdoor activities. Moreover, in both compositions, more lines and canvas space has been given to the rendition of the topography rather than to the mariners. However, a point of deviance is that the poem describes various aspects of the natural scenery of the island including the "woven copse" (1987, p. 469) of trees, whereas a major portion of the visual canvas has brown, rocky mountains on it

with just a few trees on either side. Lastly, the general mood of the poem (and even the canvas) is one of repose and quietude. This is brought forth in the comparison between the languidness of the air and the breathing of "one that hath a weary dream". The fall of water is like "downward smoke" (1987, pp. 468-469) and the act of resting of the mariners on amaranth beds can be compared to the resting of nature in the poem depicted through the wilted, downward bending of the tree leaves and the amber light. Such similarities, deviations and comparisons can be helpful in discussing how the newer text transforms or re-produces the original, and to what effect.

Conclusion

Though the painting does not denote all the portions of the poem, such as the angst of the Lotus Eaters and their activities, yet it is a mesmerising visual representation of thematically relevant aspects of the poem. This representation provides a base for textual, artistic and cultural discussion, thus empowering learners to rely not just on imagination but also on visuals to enliven the printed matter, thereby enabling them to enjoy poetry and comprehend its wider social and artistic contexts.

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Saumya Sharma is Assistant Professor, EFL University Lucknow Campus, Lucknow. She has a Ph.D. in the discourse analysis of drama.

saumyasharma2@gmail.com