Building bridges between texts: From Intertextuality to intertextual reading and learning. Theoretical challenges and classroom resources

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Abstract

Intertextuality is one of the most commonly used terms in contemporary literary theory. According to Kristeva, Barthes, Riffaterre, and other pioneers of the field, every text has its meaning only in relation to other texts; texts as viewed by modern literary theory are lacking in any kind of independent meaning. The act of reading plunges us into a web of textual relations, a network of other texts.

Intertextuality is a crucial element not only in the attempt to understand literature in general but also in our attempt as educators to enhance our students' literary reading by locating it into a motivated and meaningful classroom context. According to contemporary didactics, teachers should offer to their pupils the opportunity to understand that a literary text is not an autonomous entity and it could be considered more thoroughly in the basis of its intertextual relations.

This paper offers some insight into what may be possible for directions in bringing texts together. We illustrate ways in which pupils can effectively read literary texts in parallel, compare them and gather its intertextual links and connections. By doing this, children, can increase their critical thinking and robust their interpretive ability. Using evidence for literary theory we offer examples of teaching resources and good instructional practices.

Key words: Intertextuality, interpretation, textual web, comparative reading, Modern Greek poetry, literature teaching.

Introduction

Intertextuality is not only one of the most commonly used terms in contemporary literary theory; it is also a crucial element in the attempt to understand literature and culture in general. According to the theories of intertextuality, works of literature, after all, are built from systems, codes and traditions established by previous works of literature. Texts as viewed by modern literary theory are lacking in any kind of independent meaning. They are what theorists now called intertextual. The act of reading plunges the reader into a web of textual relations, a network of other texts. To interpret a text, to discover its potential meanings is to trace those relations. Reading becomes a process of moving between texts. Meaning becomes something that exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates (see Allen, 2000 as well as Worton and Still, 1990, for an excellent outline of the history of intertextuality). According to Roland Barthes literary meaning can never be stabilized by the reader, since the literary work's intertextual nature always leads reader on to new textual relations. As Barthes (1977: 159) reminds us, the very word 'text' is, if we remember its original meanings, «a tissue, a woven fabric»: «We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning […] but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture...» (Barthes, 1977: 46).

As highlighted by Worton and Still (1990: 1-5), we should look at the notion of intertextuality in its two axes. First, the concept is based on the idea that the text does not function as a hermetically closed and self-sufficient system as far as its author himself as a reader, consciously or unconsciously draws upon his readings as part of the writing act. The second axe of intertextuality approaches the text from the point of view of its reader who during the act of reading establishes links between the text he is reading and other texts he has read in the past. It is obvious that such links enrich the text and open it.

Intertextual reading in the classroom

Intertextuality is not only a ubiquitous term in contemporary literary criticism; it is also a crucial element in our attempt as teachers to enhance our student's responding to literature as well as their critical skills in reading and interpreting certain literary works. In the present paper we illustrate ways in which students can effectively read literary texts in parallel, compare them on the basis of its intertextual links and connections. We are going to limit ourselves to some illustrative cases of intertextuality available for students in a secondary classroom. By doing this kind of text-to text reading, students develop a fuller and more articulate awareness of literature and they can also expand their literary uptake through detailed critical analysis.

The intertextual text-to text reading suggests that interpretation depends on how a text fits within the larger body of literature (Wolf, 2004: 28-31). L.M. Rosenblatt (1994) explained "sometimes we find ourselves comparing the potentialities of this text […] sometimes with the whole body of literature" (Rosenblatt, 1994: 152). This particular kind of text-to-text criticism depends on comparisons of texts by the same or by different authors, in the same genre, using similar conceits or stylistic devices, etc. According to Hartman and Hartman (2003, cited by Wolf, 2004: 31), literary texts can be arranged in several ways:

- **Companion texts** that intended by the author to be read together as a collection. E.g. the twenty four poems which constitute the poetic composition of *Mythistorema* by George Seferis.
- **Complementary texts** that explore various aspects of a topic or theme. E.g. the following poems of the two Greek poets, namely C.P.Cavafy and G.Seferis, that explore as we shall see the vast theme of the symbolic journey.
- **Synoptic texts** that allow the reader to select a single kernel story, an idea or an easily recognizable plot pattern and read across the various adaptations, versions, and variations of it. We should notice here that literary pieces of an archetypal quality, such as fairy tales, myths, legends, etc., could be considered as "synoptic" texts of which individual tales merely present different aspects. This kind of texts and stories has a universal appeal and they usually lend themselves to an enormous amount of storytelling. For example, some of the most celebrated stories in the world, such as the Homer's *Odyssey* or J.R.R.Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* are easily recognizable to us as a Quest (see, Booker, 2004: 69 and forward). The theme has inspired innumerable stories of all kind right up to many popular modern examples in literature and media[59].
- **Disruptive texts** that present conflicting or alternative perspectives on the same topic or theme. E.g. the famous novel by Jean Rhys *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) can be considered as a diversion or even a subversion of the initial novel of Charlotte Brondë *Jane Eyre* (1847).
- **Rereading texts** that generate rereading and they are prolific in revisions and reinterpretations. The teacher can simply invite students to reread and revisit the same text.

[59] According to Booker in his fascinating and vastly referenced book (2004) there are only seven "basic plots" or archetypal themes in the world which recur throughout every kind of storytelling from ancient myths and folk tales via the great works of literature to the popular movies and soap operas of today. These seven basic plots are: "Overcoming the monster", "From Rags to Riches", "The Quest", "Voyage and Return", "Comedy", "Tragedy" and "Rebirth".

As far as students adopt this intertextual and comparative stance in the classroom, they can be focused on comparisons and contrasts between texts in order to reiterate and emphasize their potential links. They can also investigate the vast array of potential connections among written as well as media texts (such as pictures, music etc.). As we indicated before literary texts can be connected as complementary texts (assembled to explore various aspects of a topic) or as conflicting texts that present alternative perspectives on the same topic.

According to Barthes, the very idea of the text, and thus of intertextuality, depends on the figure of web. The figure of spider web reminds us not only the World Wide Web but also the web-like diagrams used in classroom as tools for learning (Tompkins, [2]2004: 20-23). Students can implement the notion of intertextuality in the classroom by making web clusters to brainstorm a topic, or organize and demonstrate their learning. The topic is written on the center circle and related words/topics are written on rays drawn out from the center circle.

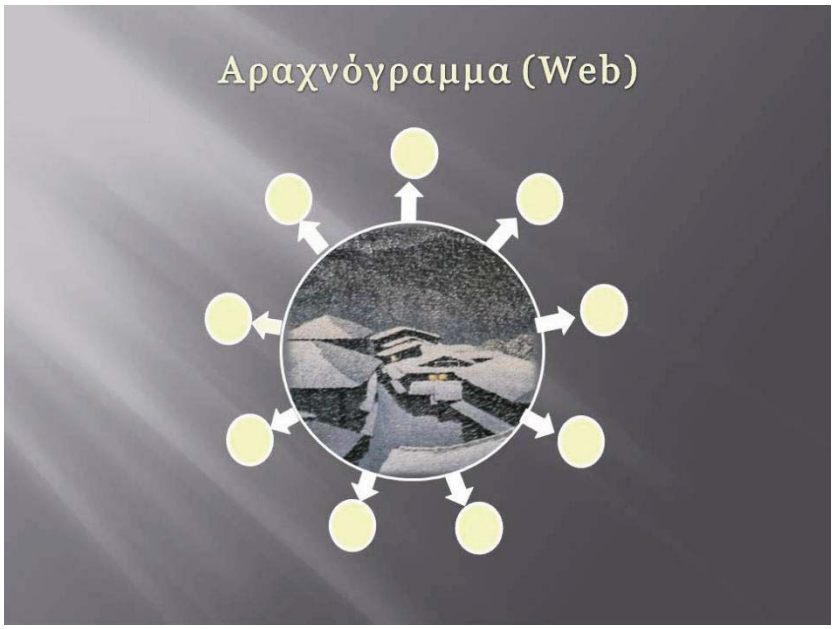

Fig. I Web cluster

We are going to illustrate the above theoretical challenges by using two examples drawn from Modernist Greek poetry, namely the legendary «Ithaka» (1911) of C.P.Cavafy and the poem number 12 from the *Mythistorema* (1935) poetic sequence by the Nobel laureate poet, George Seferis. These two poems establish a very intriguing intertextual-dialogic relationship as far as both of them convey and extend in a quite antithetical manner the symbolism of the journey and its various associations with human life. As representative exponents of modernist aesthetics and key figures of Modernism in Greece, the two poets, make extensive use of intertextual strategies as far as their poetry depend on significant intertextual influences and borrowings. Their poems are engaged in complex transformations of their intertexts, transformations made all the more necessary by their desire for novelty and radical innovation. As a result, they foreground the active role of the reader, in a way that earlier texts do not.

C.P.Cavafy's «Ithaka» is considered the "backbone" of Cavafy's work – the poet is referred to by many critics as 'the poet of Ithaka'. The poem works on two levels: on the most immediate, Cavafy

emphasizes experience and celebrates the journey from harbor to harbor; on the more general level, one can read the poem as a condensed expression of Cavafy's view of the world. He declares that the final destination of the journey is not important; what is important is that the journey should be full of joy, adventure and delights. He implies that personal experience is of great importance and that life is its own justification.

«Ithaka»
As you set out for Ithaka
hope the voyage is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery.
Laistrygonians and Cyclops,
angry Poseidon –don't be afraid of them:
you'll never find things like that on your way
as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,
as long as a rare excitement
stirs your spirit and your body.
Laistrygonians and Cyclops,
wild Poseidon –you won't encounter them
unless you bring them along inside your soul,
unless your soul sets them up in front of you.

Hope the voyage is a long one.
May there be many a summer morning when,
with what pleasure, what joy,
you come into harbors seen for the first time;
may you stop at Phoenician trading stations
to buy fine things,
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
sensual perfume of every kind–
as many sensual perfumes as you can;
and may you visit many Egyptian cities
to gather stores of knowledge from their scholars.

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you are destined for.
But do not hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so you are old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you have gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.

Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.
Without her you would not have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you will have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.

Translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard

«Ithaka» is an intertextual poem itself. Among other possible sources besides Homer's *Odyssey* are preeminently Petronius («Exortatio ad Ulysseum») (Malanos, 1957: 129-131) and Tennyson («Ulysses»). Kimon Friar refers to «Ithaka» as the «perfect complement» to Tennyson's «Ulysses» (Friar, 1973: 25). The Alexandrian poet advises the modern Odysseus to hope for a long voyage full of wonderful adventures. The protagonist travels from one place to another; Ithaka provides the motive

for the lovely voyage. Cavafy undermines the whole essence of Odysseus' heroic struggle in Homer by suggesting that modern man in his journey will not find monsters on his way unless his imagination creates them. He refers to the Cyclops and Laistrygonians as psychological fears suppressing man's instincts (Capri-Karka, 1982: 58).

Students are encouraged to discuss various aspects of poem's anthropological vision: In what ways Cavafy's «Ithaka» is a reversal of the Homeric journey? Would you attribute more intellectual motives to the marvelous journey of life? Would you agree with the poet that the journey not the destination is what constitutes our reward? What is the role of sensuality and voluptuousness in the poem?

George Seferis' *Mythistorema*, n. 12

The poetry of George Seferis is permeated by Homeric but also by Cavafian references and allusions. Several of Seferis' personae are modern versions of Odysseus or weak Elpenor and their companions who are struggling to return home. In most of the twenty-four poems of *Mythistorema* (1935), the journey, literal and symbolic, is indeed presented as an endless voyage, an aimless voyage, that means an endless wandering through an almost wasteland. When reading this poem students address the despair of the unfinished journey. In *Mythistorema* Seferis interweaves several ancient myths, such as the myth of the dead god Adonis, the myth of the Argonauts, the Odyssey and the Iliad, etc., in order to connect the ancient myth with a sense of a modern tragedy. The contemporary element of the poem concerns the history of modern Creece and the national despair that followed the Asia Minor disaster with the expatriation of Greeks from the ancient land of Ionia in 1922.

12

Bottle in the sea

Three rocks, a few burnt pines, a lone chapel
and further above
the same landscape repeated starts again:
three rocks in the shape of a gateway, rusted,
a few burnt pines, black and yellow,
and a square hut buried in whitewash;
and still further above, many times over,
the same landscape recurs level after level
to the horizon, to the twilit sky.

Here we moored the ship to splice the broken oars,
to drink water and to sleep.
The sea that embittered us is deep and unexplored
and unfolds a boundless calm.
Here among the pebbles we found a coin
and threw dice for it.
The youngest won it and disappeared.

We put to sea again with our broken oars.

Translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard

Poem 12 portrays a typical wasteland; a landscape where, among rusted rocks and houses buried in whitewash, life is stifled and sterile, the symbolic voyage does not end to Homeric *nostos* (the Greek word means return to home) as far as it is fragmented and endless. The fragmentary quality of the journey is symbolized by the broken oars of the travelers –Odysseus' companions. The broken oars convey a feeling of discouragement and pessimism about the end of the journey. The depression of the unfinished journey is reflected also in the land. The landscape builds up a certain psychological climate. In trying to interpret the last part of the poem students should have in mind two intertextual references. The first is that the youngest of Odysseus' companions was Elpenor; the second is the ancient Greek custom of putting in the mouths of corpses when they were buried a coin with which they were supposed to pay their fare for the ferry to Hades. Thus it seems that this cryptic passage of the poem contains a paradox: for Elpenor, winning the dice game was equivalent to losing his life.

Building bridges between Cavafy's «Ithaka» and Seferis' poem of *Mythistorema* sequence

The two poems establish a relationship of "determinate" (Allen: 130) intertextuality which involves instances where an inter-text clearly stands behind a text. Students gain deeper insight into the vast symbolism of the journey and its association with life if they read together and comparatively the two poems finding similarities but also differences between them. Both poets employ Homeric references but also both of them undermine, each in his own unique way, the comforting and wish-filling notion of **nostos** as the end of the voyage in life. What might possibly be the meaning of this denial of **nostos** in the context of our era?

The plurality of texts generates a plurality of meanings and perspectives available for the reader. By reading texts intertextually and comparatively students have more opportunities to extend their reading abilities and be engaged in rich and powerful readings of literature. They can also be encouraged to start 'grand conversations' (Tompkins, ^{2}2004: 39-40) about the texts they encounter in the classroom in order to find affinities or differences among them, to explore interpretations and reflect on their feelings as they become interwoven with the textual web. Reading and reflecting on different, even distant and disparate literary texts, students come to realize that literature empowers us in being who we are and makes possible for us to think of being more than we are. Literature is a unique way of understanding the human condition in its entirety. It provides us with various views, insights and perceptions into life, helping us to envision how better can be the world.

We are going to close our paper by giving another example of bringing different texts together and engaging students to make meaning through reading texts comparatively. This particular example of teaching resources is based on the inspiring idea of making a teaching tool-kit by bringing together literature pieces in an unexpected way. The featured "texts", namely a poem, a story and a musical composition, are in a relationship of 'aleatory' intertextuality (Allen: 130). The latter involve instances in which many potential inter-texts can be found for a specific text. According to this proposal, the marvelous symbolist poem of Kostis Palamas «The blood» (a poem full of alliterations, verbal rhymes and repetitions) is combined not only with the illustrated by Angela Barrett classic tale of Paul Gallico *The Snow Goose* (first edition 1941, Hutchinson 2007) but also with a piece of music, namely the soundtrack of the movie *Les Peuple Migrateur* by Bruno Coulais (2001). All the above texts (or media-texts) are inspired by the unfettered beauty of wild ducks or geese (such as widgeon, mallard, shovellers, etc.) and their habitual journey at each winter's beginning in order to find food and sanctuary.

Pupils can participate in grand conversations to talk about the featured texts and then they can be involved in projects, write in their own reading logs and use the writing process as they create reports, stories or poems inspired by the featured texts, illustration and music as well.

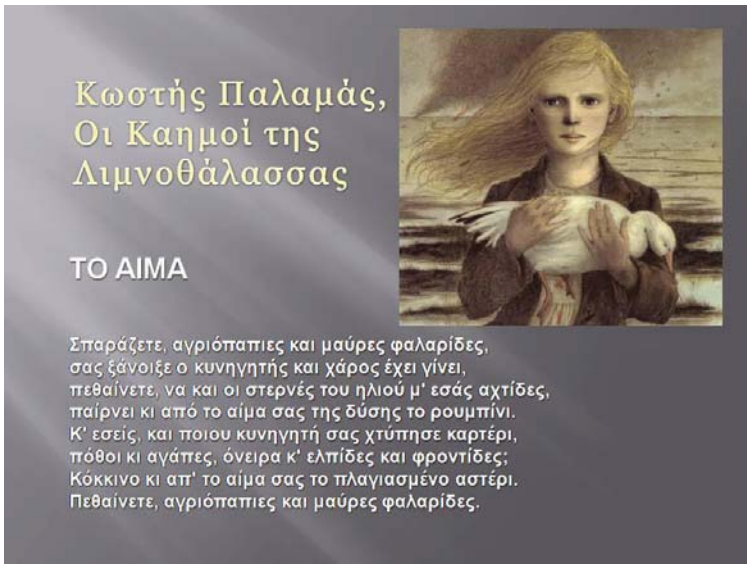

Fig. II Kostis Palamas, «The Blood»

Fig. III Paul Gallico, *The Snow Goose*, illustrated by Angela Barrett, Hutchinson 2007 [1941].

Conclusion

The teacher must be familiar with the wide range of literary texts available in order to make wise choices in bringing together intertextually related pieces. As teachers are aware of the ideas their selection patterns convey they become more reflective about the literary texts they choose for classroom use. As teachers and teachers' educators we should always have on mind that the successful implementation of all literary activities in which students are involved depend on teachers' attitude and enthusiasm they show for literature and learning. The more they stimulate students'

curiosity and motivation the more effective they become as they create a classroom climate that nurtures and respects all students.

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