

INTERTEXTUALITY IN THE PROCESS OF STORY INTERPRETATION

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Abstract:

Intertextuality is the generally accepted term denoting the interconnectedness and interrelatedness of texts. The new text is thus viewed as part of the vast network of texts influencing one another. The present article aims at revealing how contextual meanings influence the process of text interpretation.

Rezumat:

Prin natura sa textul trimite la alte texte sugerînd ceva. Astfel, în interiorul său se produce o interacțiune textuală. Conceptul intertextualitate relevă caracteristica unui text de fi considerat drept parte componentă a unui ansamblu de texte deja existente ce contribuie la decodarea lui. În articolul de față, autoarea încearcă a demonstra felul în care intertextualitatea influențează procesul de interpretare a textului artistic.

*What has been will be again,
what has been done will be done again;
there is nothing new under the sun.*

Ecclesiastes 1:9-14

The term of intertextuality has been the apple of discord ever since it was coined in 1966 by Julia Kristeva, who introduced the hypothesis that every text is, in fact, an intertext formed out of the previously constructed texts and which constitutes the basis of the next one. The initial meaning of the term has undergone modification in time, yet, it has preserved the general idea of interconnectedness which exists among texts.

The term itself has an intertextual meaning as it echoes the concept of polyphony introduced by Mihail Bakhtin. In his opinion, polyphony reveals the existence of ‘a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses’¹ which stand over against the claims of the author. The Russian theorist dwelt upon the dialogical essence of speech which implies that speech is based on the interlocutors’ previous social, communicative experiences which help both encode and decode the intended message of the interlocutors’ utterances. Thus, the very speech by its nature is intertextual as it refers to the previously usages of language, it is a multi-voiced set of experiences which help create new texts.

Nowadays, the term of intertextuality is used not only in literary studies but also in other spheres of human communication, such as: film production, advertisements, political discourse, etc. It has turned into a global concept of interrelatedness of various texts (regardless of their forms) existing in the vast network of human creation. Graham Allen speaks about the usefulness of such a term which ‘foregrounds notions of relationality, interconnectedness and

¹ Bakhtin, 1999, p. 6

interdependence in modern cultural life'² thus enabling the participants of a speech act to get a better understanding of each other's message. At the same time, intertextuality reminds us once again that each text exists in relation to other texts.

The term is also supported by some [Adolphe Harber, Graham Allen, Umberto Eco] who share the conviction that 'intertextuality is and will remain a crucial element in the attempt to understand literature and culture'³. However, there are scholars who oppose the need for such a concept which in their opinion is 'at best a rhetorical flourish intended to impress, at worst [...] the signifier of an illogical position'⁴.

The divergence of opinions could be explained by the fact that the term of intertextuality is viewed in different ways. Some researchers refer to intertextuality as a 'technique of allusion'⁵, others consider it as 'part of the network of evaluative devices found in literary discourse, which works in complex ways to deepen the meaning of the text'⁶. All of them support the idea that a text does not exist in isolation, moreover it cannot be decoded in isolation from the vast network of texts from where, as a rule, it takes its origins and which help to get a better understanding of a text.

As a matter of fact, intertextuality is one of the seven standards of textuality whose absence implies that such a text loses its communicative character and, as a result, becomes a 'non-text'⁷. Intertextuality can be considered as a text universal.

As seen from above, there is not one accepted mainstream definition of intertextuality. In this article intertextuality is referred to as a unifying technique of text weaving by means of other texts in literary discourse. It is an attempt to analyze the plurality of distinct voices in the narration which interact with the reader's experience. The process of reading appears to be the process of text interaction. The writer encodes the message referring to both external and cultural sources which are inferred by the reader with the help of his literary and cultural background. Consequently, while decoding the author's text the reader creates his own which is both a reflection of the author's original text and his personal background.

Literary discourse offers a good example of intertextual relationships which exist within a literary text. Being regarded as a reciprocal dialogue between the writer and the reader, the literary text appears as an intentionally structured message full of connotative meanings aimed to

² Allen, 2000, p. 5

³ Allen, 2000, p. 7

⁴ Irwin, 2004, p. 228

⁵ Simpson, 2004, p. 21

⁶ Black, 2006, p. 49

⁷ Bell, 2000, p. 180

arouse a specific response. The reader reconstructs the message intended by the author and, at the same time, he contributes his own experience to this process. Thus, the original text is, in fact, an intertext which helps create the reader's text. This accounts for the various interpretations of a literary text as every reader brings up his own input. Only some part may coincide with what the author initially intended, the rest is, as a rule, inferred by the reader. The more competent the reader is the better he will understand the author's message. By a competent we imply the literary and cultural background which may help the reader decode the text. This knowledge is acquired through extensive reading and learning which form the reader's literary competence.

Generally, intertextuality is retrospectively oriented as it echoes the already existing or presupposed text(s) but it creates a refreshed vision as it is part of a new ideational context to which it is subordinated. However, the reader evokes texts not meant by the author (they may not have been created at the time). This implies that texts certainly interact with each other and that the dialogue existing between them is an on-going process open to new interpretations.

Intertextuality is realized in several ways in a literary text. Valentina Şmatova states that 'the search for intertextuality must go in different directions'⁸ and delineates eight possible ways:

- the generic direction;
- stylistic devices as the underlying force of intertextuality;
- combination of visual and linguistic texts;
- translation intertextuality;
- parody intertextuality;
- incorporation intertextuality;
- many-voiced narration;
- global intertextuality.

The directions considered in this article are: the generic direction, stylistic devices and many-voiced narration, as we consider these are the three directions realized in W. S. Maugham's short story 'A Friend in Need'.

The very appurtenance of a literary text to a concrete genre is a reference to already existing texts whose structural form it follows. For example, a short story becomes one when it is shaped and narrated according to the accepted standards required by the genre it belongs to. The

⁸ Şmatova, 2004, p. 103

American writer, Edgar Allan Poe advocated for conciseness and rigorous selection of the figures of speech while creating a literary text. He claimed that “If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression – for, if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and everything like totality is at once destroyed”⁹. This basic rule of conciseness in short stories is still respected which, in its turn, is an indirect reference to Allan Edgar Poe’s statement as well. W. S. Maugham’s short story *A Friend In Need* is a case of intertextuality within the genre of short story as it is thematically structured according to its length limitations.

The title of the short story is an intertext that connects the short story to the text of the proverb: ‘A friend in need is a friend indeed’. Its manifest allusion to this well-known proverb arouses certain expectations on the part of the reader who assumes that the story is going to deal with friendship. Having initially a positive meaning, the syntagm ‘a friend in need’ inclines the reader to hear the story of true friends who help each other in hard times. The survey conducted on second-year students from English Philology Department showed that 90% thought that the short story is going to reveal a case of true friendship, of friends helping each other when one of them is in trouble.

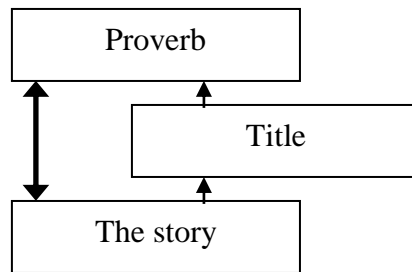
The rest of the students were familiar with some of W. S. Maugham’s works and said that the story, most probably, will deal with something which is opposed to friendship. This is the case of the competent reader who would perceive the ironic tinge in the title and would have different expectations from the reader who has not read any of the author’s works. Thus, the dialogue between the works of the same author form intratextuality which helps decode the author’s message more exactly.

The short story ‘A Friend in Need’ reveals the dark side of the human nature where the notion of friendship is distorted. It alludes to the proverb but due to its ironic twist it distorts its initial positive meaning, putting the texts in antonymic relation with the original meaning of the proverb: Sense of the Story vs. Sense of the Proverb.

The author does not include the whole saying but only its first part, the second is deduced before and after reading the entire story. In the first case it is the expression of the proverb, whereas in the second, it is the expression of the story itself which denies what was stated in the original text and results in: a friend in need is not a friend indeed.

The schematized interconnectedness between the original text and the short story may be represented as follows:

⁹ Poe, 2004, p. 743



The relation between the story and the proverb is distorted as there is no explicit narration about friends helping each other. It implies that they are opposed to each other. This becomes clear only after reading the short story. Whereas, in the process of reading, the short story through its title makes a direct reference to the text of the proverb and its original meaning.

Initially the short story was entitled ‘The Man Who Wouldn’t Hurt a Fly’, which also echoes the idiomatic expression: ‘wouldn’t harm / hurt a fly’ meaning that such a person is incapable of doing harm and is always kind.

In addition to intertextual relation (i.e. the allusion to the idiomatic expression), there is also an intratextual one as the expression is used in the story itself when the author describes the main character as the one who ‘could not bear to hurt a fly’. Just like in the previous case the true ironic meaning of the phrase is understood only after reading the short story.

The story ‘A Friend in Need’ is a polyphonic narration by different voices. From the very first paragraph, W. S. Maugham uses different pronouns such as: ‘I’, ‘we’, ‘they’ and ‘you’. The first person personal pronoun is the narrator, the author’s mouthpiece. He bridges the gap which might exist between him and his reader with the help of the inclusive pronoun ‘we’, making the reader contribute his own experience to the narration: ‘I suppose it is on the face that for the most part we judge the persons we meet’.

The collaboration is meant to agree on the fact that people can look different from the way they really are, which is an allusion to the well-known proverbial expression: appearances can be deceiving. It also reminds the reader not to ‘judge a book by its cover’. When asked what idiom the first paragraph alludes to 60% of the students pointed to the second variant. Yet, chronologically it is impossible as the story was written in 1925, whereas the idiom ‘don’t judge a book by its cover’ was first recorded only 1929 in an American speech and was popularized in the 60s. This proves the hypothesis that all texts are interconnected and that text formation is an on-going processing of linguistic and personal occurrences which are reactualized in everyday speech.

In order to seal the ties of the above-mentioned collaboration, W. S. Maugham introduces three alien voices rendered through the plural form of the third person personal pronoun. In this way, he creates a circle of trust consisting of him and his reader where the others are the intruders, but with whose help he succeeds in voicing other texts. For example, in the first case ‘they’ stands for the authors of novels who fail to render the self-contradicting nature of the human beings making their characters ‘all of a piece’. It is the classic hero – villain distribution, which is non-existent in real life.

In the second example, ‘they’ is referred to the authors of ‘books on logic’ who try to explain everything within the framework of a logical formula and reject any trace of illogical behaviour in people. Finally, ‘they’ is used for the people who ‘tell me that their first impressions of a person are always right’. At the same time, W. S. Maugham avoids imposing his assertions on his reader. He ends the first paragraph with: ‘For my own part I find that the longer I know people the more they puzzle me: my oldest friends are just those of whom I can say that I don’t know the first thing about them’. However, this seemingly modest conclusion evokes Socrates’ well-known statement: ‘I know that I know nothing’.

As the narration unveils, a new character is introduced whose death made the author reflect upon how misleading appearances can be. The character of Edward Hyde Burton is depicted an ‘all-of-a-piece’ type of men, at least, this is the way he looked: ‘Here if ever was a man all of a piece. He was a tiny little fellow, not much more than five feet four in height, and very slender, with white hair, a red face much wrinkled, and blue eyes’. His appearance bespoke a very kind nature: ‘His voice was gentle; you could not imagine that he could possibly raise it in anger; his smile was benign.’ All his features indicate that he is a positive character, one who ‘could not bear to hurt a fly’.

The author insists on portraying Edward Hyde Burton’s distinguished features in order to prove that people are wrong when they judge a person’s appearance and not his essence. He goes on by telling us: ‘Here was a man who attracted you because you felt in him a real love for his fellows’. This sentence reflects the Biblical Golden Rule ‘love thy neighbor as thyself’ and the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The character of Edward Hyde Burton is also the type of the self-made man: ‘He was a rich man and he had made every penny himself’. Thus, the author builds the figure of a man who worked hard to pave his way from ‘rags to riches’. Consequently the reader is free to recall any person in history who rose from poverty to prosperity as, for example, Benjamin Franklin did. However, the contemporary reader would rather think of Bill Gates instead. The conducted survey once again showed that the majority of students (75%) decoded the text with the help of

modern texts. This means that different texts interact in the reader's mind while decoding the new text.

In the third paragraph W. S. Maugham introduces the exclusive 'we', which comprises the narrator and the main character. Nonetheless, the author does not want to lose his reader's presence in the story, that is why he uses the pronoun 'you' directly engaging the reader to contribute his own experience to the story. This is supposed to help decode its message.

The narration goes on with a completely new narrative structure where 'I' the narrator, the author's mouthpiece, gives the floor to the other first-person narrator, Edward Hyde Burton. The appearance of this self-contradicting voice is aimed at revealing how a 'friend' in need makes fun of his desperate 'neighbour'. This distinct voice has its own truth and appears as a mediator between similar types of characters and the narrative web of the story. It helps create the effect of verisimilitude.

It is interesting to point out that a secondary character, Turner, mentioned by accident in the conversation, makes Edward Hyde Burton tell his rather 'funny story'. Turner's presence can be viewed as an intertext, that is, the knowledge the participants share about this character allows them to picture another person, Lenny Burton. Both of them are the prototypes of the dissipated character whose life is ruined because of excessive gambling and idleness. And it is namely this image that Edward Hyde Burton has in mind when he exclaims: 'They generally do' referring to the pitiful situation a gambler gets into. The plural form of the third person pronoun includes all the people whom the main character considers as failures. In judging so he makes use of the previously created image of 'little tin gods' who waste their life aimlessly and who are not to be bothered with when they are in trouble.

However, Edward Hyde Burton treats such people as a necessary evil, as a kind of entertainment, to be more specific. It is great to spend his free time in their company, but not to have business with them. Once they lose their enjoyment function they lose their right to live. In order to prove this idea the author interferes with the narration with the help of his first narrator who testifies to how graceful Edward Hyde Burton could be when losing his money at bridge. He bases his assertion on the several occasions when they happened to play bridge together.

Another case of intertextuality is represented by Edward Hyde Burton's detailed recounting of the conversation that took place between Lenny Burton and himself. The framing technique allows the author to construct a unified whole. Now it is Edward Hyde Burton who is the narrator and Lenny Burton – the failure; the former has the domineering role of a self-assured person while the latter has the weak voice of a desperate man. Their communicative behaviour is

typical of the types they represent: one is imposing and the other is accepting. It can be seen from the following table:

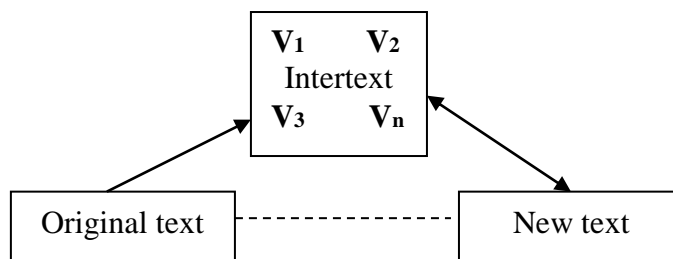
Edward Hyde Burton	Lenny Burton
<p>1. I couldn't help laughing.</p> <p>2. I've known too many men who were little tin gods at the universities to be impressed by it.</p> <p>3. I could hardly believe my ears; it seemed such an insane answer to give.</p> <p>4. Suddenly I had an idea</p> <p>5. I didn't say anything. I shrugged my shoulders.</p>	<p>He went rather pale.</p> <p>He hesitated.</p> <p>He hadn't a penny.</p> <p>He was down and out.</p> <p>If he couldn't get something to do he'd have to commit suicide.</p> <p>I can swim.</p> <p>He was rather taken aback.</p> <p>He looked at me for a moment and then he nodded.</p>

As seen, Lenny Burton does not speak much. Edward Hyde Burton gives him very little space in his narration and most of the time the character refers to his namesake as 'he'. It is only in extreme cases when he uses direct speech, namely when he wants to emphasize his interlocutor's desperation and ridiculousness. The main character seems to enjoy superior rights whereas the young man has fewer speaking rights here. His voice is weak; yet, it is distinct and helps the reader picture his deplorable situation better. At the same time, Edward Burton's domineering voice creates the image of a mischievous boss.

At the end of the short story the narrator's voice reappears to help the reader get to the core of Edward Hyde Burton's personality. With the help of an ironic twist the reader is to realize that from the very beginning the main character has condemned his namesake to death. It comes as a shock producing the effect of a blow. However, the reader cannot say that he did not exclude such an outcome as W. S. Maugham provided enough internal and external linguistic sources which were meant to make his reader activate them in the process of reading.

All these voices represent texts interacting with each other in the course of the narration and which help create the unity of the entire story. They direct the reader in the answer's direction so that he may decode the writer's intended message. At the end the literary text

appears to be an intertext which bridges the author's original text and the reader's newly (re)created text.



The original text represents the author's work who wanted to communicate something to his reader. Being part of a particular historical and social context his message would be influenced by it. On the opposite side, there is the new text (re)constructed by the reader who, in his turn, was influenced by his particular background. It is a communication between the two parties where the sender tries to influence in a particular way the receiver.

The literary work becomes an intertext formed of various voices, which are not only the characters' voices but also the writer's and the reader's. If the writer's voice may be sometimes very clear, then the reader's voice is formed of the reader's cultural and social background. The smaller the distance between the original and the new texts is the closer the reader is to decoding the author's intended message. This distance also explains the variety of interpretations one and the same text may have.

The effect a literary work produces on the reader is to make him decode the message by using other texts which might help get a better understanding of the message. Focusing on poetic effect, Robert Frost says: 'For me the initial delight is in the surprise of remembering something I didn't know I knew'¹⁰. That is how the feeling of having heard or felt something similar to the things narrated in the story is achieved.

When asked to analyze the story 'A Friend in Need', the second-year students had different opinions concerning the message of the story. Some of them vehemently condemned the main character, others found fault with Lenny Burton. They very often recalled personal experiences or examples of other literary texts which at first sight seemed unrelated to the short story. They used all the knowledge they possessed at the moment to understand the short story.

Thus, the plurality of distinct voices in the narration interacts with the reader's experience. This interaction is intrertextual as it connects everything: the author's message, the reader's understanding, the internal structure of the story, the explicit allusion to other texts. Intertextuality is more than a technique of allusion. It is an intricate process of

¹⁰ <http://www.leidykla.eu/fileadmin/Literatura/49-5/str6.pdf>, p. 67

interconnectedness that exists within and outside a communicative act which form a link in the cultural web of human creation.

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