

Reconstruction of Text Meaning in William Butler Yeats' Selected Poems A Literary Reading in Modern Historical Hermeneutics

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Abstract

This Paper studies the reconstruction of text meaning according to theories of modern historical hermeneutics. The development of these theories in this field of study will be discussed to show the major trends that can be used to analyze poetry and find its significant meaning. William Butler Yeats is truly prolific poet and writer; whose poetry is so rich with various levels of meaning. The paper will shed light upon the following poems 'Easter 1916' and 'Sailing to Byzantium' to highlight the various meanings construed through different levels of reading according to theories of modern historical hermeneutics.

Keywords: Hermeneutics, historicism, reader, Yeats, fusion of horizons.



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ملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة إعادة تركيب معنى النص وفقا لنظريات التأويلية (الهرمنطيقيا) التاريخية الحديثة. وسيسلط الضوء على تطور هذه النظريات واهم توجهاتها التي يمكن استخدامها في التحليل الشعري لإيجاد المعنى المقصود. يعتبر الشاعر الايرلندي وليم باتلر ييتس من الشعراء ذوي النتاجات الأدبية المتميزة والذي يتسم شعره بغناه بمستويات متعددة من المعنى. ستناقش الدراسة قصيدتيه عيد الفصح ١٩١٦ والابحار الى بيزنطة من خلال إعادة البنية النصية في ضوء نظريات الهرمنطيقيا التاريخية الحديثة .

الكلمات المفتاحية: الهرمنطيقيا، التاريخية، القاريء، ييتس، دمج الافاق.



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Hermeneutics and Historicism and their conceptual development

Hermeneutics refers to the theory and methodology of interpretation, particularly of texts. It originated in the context of interpreting religious scriptures, but over time, it has expanded to include interpretation in philosophy, law, literature, and social sciences. Hermeneutics addresses how we understand and make meaning of texts, symbols, and experiences, considering historical, cultural, and personal contexts. Key Aspects of Hermeneutics

1. Historical Roots: Hermeneutics began with the interpretation of sacred texts, particularly in Judaic, Christian, and Islamic traditions.

2. Philosophical Development: Thinkers like Friedrich Schleiermacher who Emphasized understanding the author's intent and the historical context of the text. Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, who argued that interpretation is rooted in human existence and our being-in-the-world. and Hans-Georg Gadamer expanded hermeneutics into a broader philosophical inquiry, as he introduced the concept of the fusion of horizons, where understanding arises from the interplay of the interpreter's perspective and the historical context of the text.

3. Applications: Beyond theology, hermeneutics is used in literary theory, psychoanalysis, anthropology, and legal studies to explore meaning-making processes. Hans-Georg Gadamer introduced the concept of the fusion of horizons, where understanding arises from the interplay of the interpreter's perspective and the historical context of the text (Palmer, 1969).



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Definitions by Scholars

Schleiermacher: Defined hermeneutics as the art of understanding both the part and the whole of a text in a dialectical relationship. While Gadamer: *In Truth and Method* (1960), described hermeneutics as a process where interpretation is influenced by the interpreter's preconceptions and the dialogic engagement with the text (Gadamer, 2004)

These theories are revolutionary in the interpretation of texts, there are two main philosophers in these theories, who establish a group of rules to read different texts, and set the general theory to resolve the problems of the understanding and interpretation. The development and transformation of hermeneutics concept through history is affected by three factors: mythology, religion and modernity.

Mythological meaning of hermeneutics

There are two main roots for this terminology. The first one "is derived from 'Hermes' the God of the ways, and he is messenger between the human beings and Zeus. He conveys his letters and his discourses to his people; he joins these two worlds, the heavenly world and earthly world" (Bunnin and Jiyuan, Yu 2004, 303). This root leads to the copula, which means the bridge that binds two levels the high and the low. Hermes is "associated with the function of transmuting what is beyond human understanding into a form that human intelligence can grasp" (Palmer 1980, 12). This copula is located within the reader's mind. Thus, the reader functions as a copula between the world of the texts and its author and the world of the reader and its experience.

The second root is based on the Greek language, that has two other words: '**hermeneuein**', which means "to interpret", and '**hermeneia**' which means interpretation. According to Palmer, who states it to be



the “tools which human understanding employs to grasp meaning and to convey it to others through bringing a thing or situation from unintelligibility to understanding” (Palmer 1980, 12). All these concepts are strongly associated with poetry. Plato described the poet and his state of inspiration or “rhapsody as hermeneus (the interpreter of God). In Plato’s Ion the hermeneus knows only what was said. He does not know what the truth is and he does not know whether truth lies in what was said by the gods” (T.M. Seeböhm 2004, 10).

Religious Hermeneutics

This meaning binds reader’s function, when he deals with any religious text. So, this term appears in the theological field specifically with the religious text. This means that hermeneutics appears as term “concerned more narrowly with interpreting any sacred texts” (Audi, Robert 1999, 377). There is a critical necessity for religious exegesis of the holy text and this could be solved through hermeneutics as a tactic for interpretation.

This tactic was most in demand for the interpretation of religious texts. By definition, religious inspiration is unprecedented: the deity is not bound by the laws of this world. However, the unavoidable constriction of divine purpose to human expression in order to become comprehensible allows for endless interpretation, as these original constraints change with the times. In the Christian tradition, criteria of relevance have been continually and controversially updated from the Church fathers to the German (Hamilton 2003, 43- 44).



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Hermeneutics is so essential to find the spiritual truth. "In Christian theology hermeneutics is the finding interpretation of the spiritual truth in the Bible. This is an important quest, so that the truth of the Gospels for instance, may be interpreted and reinterpreted from generation to generation and thus made relevant in different eras" (Cuddon 1999, 376).

The interpreter's understanding is disciplined by specific rules which are limited to four types of meaning: "the literal meaning, the moral meaning, the eschatological meaning, and the allegorical meaning. This understanding is derived from Augustine" (Closson, online).

Hermeneutics and Modernity

In modern time, there is a revolution in human minds, thus "the term acquired a much broader significance in its historical development and finally became a philosophical position in twentieth-century German philosophy" (Audi, 1999, p: 377). The German produced two schools that are competing with each other. The first school follows "Dilthey and sees interpretation as a method for the historical and human sciences, while the second follows Heidegger and sees it as an ontological event, an interaction between interpreter and text that is part of the history of what is understood" (Audi, 1999, p: 377).

Historic Hermeneutics

Dilthey's ideas and Heidegger, as well as Schleiermacher have established theories of modern historical hermeneutics, because the historicism is interdisciplinary with the hermeneutical field. Moreover, they have conducted their own approach to meaning and revolted against the scientific models and knowledge. The historicism can be defined as "a philosophical doctrine originating in the

methodological and epistemological presuppositions of critical historiography. The advocates of historicism are reacting against positivist ideals of science and knowledge. They rejected scientific models of knowledge, and replaced them with historical ones" (Audi 1999, 386).

Friedrich Schleiermacher's theory (1768 - 1843)

In this theory (the Objective Historical Reconstruction of Text), Schleiermacher paves the way to move hermeneutics to a wide spectrum. He wants to change the hermeneutics to "science of understanding, he moves from the specific theology field to the general fields. He believes that he can establish science of understanding. Schleiermacher shares a desire to give theology a respected position in the modern academy" (Howard Thomas Albert, 2000, p: 53). Schleiermacher believes that the grammatical side represents the objective level in the text analysis, because the language is the copula that joins the author and his readers. This level makes the process of reconstruction of meaning, but the reconstruction needs the subjective level.

According to Schleiermacher the reconstruction of text meaning depends on understanding the author's grammatical and psychological life. Thus, interpretation is achieved through "the re-experiencing of the mental processes of the author's text. It is the reverse of composition, for it starts with the fixed and finished expression and goes back to the mental life from which it arose." (Palmar1980, 86).

The process of understanding the text meaning moves forward and backward through two levels: the level of the word and the level of the sentence. So, understanding the meaning of an "individual word occurs in reference to the whole; and reciprocally, the meaning of the sentence as a whole is dependent on the meaning of individual words.



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By dialectical interaction between the whole and the part, each gives the other meaning; understanding is circular, then" (Palmer, 1980, p: 87).

This circle is inevitable because it involves interpretation of the part and its influence on the whole and vice versa "The circularity of the interpretation of each part is dependent on the interpretation of the whole. But interpretation is circular in a stronger sense: if every interpretation is itself based on interpretation, then the circle of interpretation, even if it is not vicious, cannot be escaped" (Audi, Robert 1999, 378).

Wilhelm Dilthey (1833 - 1911) introduced his theory (the meaning as reconstruction of the lived experience) to culminate Schleiermacher's theory and lead hermeneutics to the unconscious creation. That he involves so many aspects to have a comprehensive interpretation of the text and its author. Dilthey believes that the meaning "extends from the style of life and the forms of social intercourse to the system of purposes which society has created for itself and to custom, law, state, religion, art, science and philosophy. For even the work of genius represents ideas, feelings and ideals commonly held in an age and environment" (Dilthey 1976, 221).

Dilthey assumes in historical exegesis the author to be an object of reconstruction. Such a "reconstruction may well be of significance in the interpretation of the texts written by the author, just as the texts written by the author can be of significance for the reconstruction of the biography of the author" (Seeböhm, T.M. 2004, 61). The human experience is so important in finding new meaning, because human beings "have a real access to the connectedness of their lives through their inner experience. This connectedness is non-hypothetical and can be directly understood as meaningful" (Makkreel 2015, 75).

William Butler Yeats as an Object of Reconstruction

The Irish poet W. B. Yeats is a visionary poet who is known for his ostensibly remarkable realm of signification. He has been influenced severely by the negative aspects of the past. Significantly the protracted struggle between England and Ireland casts its painful shadows on his childhood. "The young poet's pain was only too real. It arose from his keen perception of the fractured state both of the world around him and of his own inner being, a perception that made life appear incoherent and therefore empty of meaning and value" (Holdeman 2005, 1). The poet's reaction to his sad situation is crystalized through art. "He devoted his art to the never ending effort to forge his fragmented self and surroundings into unity, with outcomes by turns triumphant and failed, admirable and problematic" (Holdeman 2005, 1).

His poetry is highly charged with codes of ethic and traditions that reflect the human agony. Consequently, "the poem is confined within the vacuum of its own self-determined formal conditions. It can issue orders, promote one particular moral or ethical position above others, or enable its perpetrator to complain about his own existential condition or that which he shares with the rest of humanity" (Bradford 2005, 97).

For Yeats unity and wholeness of the literary work should be inseparable with the magical qualities of its signification. As he perceived them to be: "for him, there was a tantalizing similarity between the aesthetic wholeness created by a poem and the harmonizing supernatural powers of a magical spell. Poems used symbols to evoke mysterious forces that promised to fit life's broken fragments into a deeper hidden unity" (Holdeman 2005, 4).

Yeats' Easter 1916 provides the reader with a profound symbols and expression that could lead to different exegeses. As the poem



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moves on it unravels new meaning. The first part conveys the poet's meeting with his countrymen at the close of the day with active faces. The "close of day" signifies the beginning of night which is a literal signification, the deeper meaning here signifies the end of life, or it inaugurates a new life through revolution. The Irish Uprising is a turning point in the Irish history.

I have met them at close of day

Coming with
vivid faces from
counter or desk
among grey
Eighteenth-
century
houses.

I have passed with a
nod of the head
Or polite meaningless words,
Or have lingered awhile and said
Polite meaningless words,
And thought before I had done
Of a mocking tale or a gibe
To please a companion
Around the fire at the club,
Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn:
All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born. (L -1-16)

The poet's gathering with his friends takes place at night "Around the fire at the club," the circle of companions encompasses the fire which encompasses the attendants. The expression literally signifies

people sitting round the fire, but the meaning is affected by the parts that endow layers of meaning. The expression "Around the fire" has a tradition of rituals either of mysticism or paganism. Historically speaking, the fire is a symbol of revolution. When Prometheus revolts against Zeus and brings fire back to earth. The fire here is a token of inspiration, thus it inspired the Irish people to consider their situation.

The two-dimensional aspects of the fire are the light and the heat. They are inseparable and circular and encountered inevitably. The poet and his companions realize that their freedom is in conformity with fire, to get light one must have heat, to have freedom there should be revolution and sacrifice. Passing through the circle of hermeneutics, the word fire empowers the meaning of the whole sentence and renders it a newly created signification.

The last line of the first part "A terrible beauty is born" reveals a various literary structure. The poet employs the „oxymoron“ in his poem Easter 1916 through the association of opposite terms in a single expression. The literal meaning is quiet misleading, because the poet joins negative with positive expression to create a new meaning. The reading is an indication to the birth of beauty with frightening visage.

Tracing the parts leads to the whole, and consequently a new signification will be generated. The signified is the free Irish and the signifier is the terrible beauty. So, Freedom cannot be obtained without struggle. "A terrible beauty is born" becomes a refrain for 'Easter 1916', it develops a new meaning in every parts. It is repeated three times within the poem. Yeats applies the fusion of horizons, where understanding arises from the interplay of the interpreter's perspective and the historical context of the text.

Yeats employs a group of symbols and signifiers in 'Easter 1916', he addresses a clever reader through these symbols:



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Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer and winter seem
Enchanted to a stone
To trouble the living stream.
The horse that comes from the road.
The rider, the birds that range
From cloud to tumbling cloud,
Minute by minute they change;
A shadow of cloud on the stream
Changes minute by minute; (L ,41- 50)

He describes the Irish hearts as brave and strong, through the passing of time they reflect the same valor. The expression „Through summer and winter“ here signifies birth and death. The stone is a symbol of fortitude and certitude. It cannot be changed. The poet indicates that the Irish people have strong and petrified hearts that would encounter death without moment of hesitation. Once again the poet uses expressions with a double reading, he refers to the stream as a signifier for the river, but the signified is the life rather than the river. Yeats affirms the moments of action, when the Irish patriots confront the British in their Easter Uprising.

The horse, the rider, the birds and the clouds are also entangled in binary meaning. For, „the horse“ stands for the Irish power which is harnessed by „the rider“ the Irish will. „The birds“ signify the Irish dreams and ambitions of freedom through their conflict with „the clouds“ (the British occupation).

Yeats, like other modern poets, has a gloomy image of civilization, and human aggravating crises. So, “In their skepticism about civilization, modernists such as W. B. Yeats turned toward myth and the unconscious”



(Boucquey 2005, 815). „Sailing to Byzantium“ is a good example for Yeats“ desire to rectify the world. In this poem he delves into history to give moral and ethical lesson to the humanity.

The poem consists of two readings; the literal reading will lead the reader astray, and historicism hermeneutics reading will lead him to truth.

That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees
— Those dying generations—at their song (L, 1-3)

The surface reading of these lines makes the reader develop a negative attitude about the Irish youth. „The old men“ is the locus of the sentence. It seems that old men are rejected and ignored by the young generation. Yeats criticized the moral disintegration of the Irish society because they show no respect and honor for the old people. Yeats cannot be ambivalent person to criticize his own people in such a cruel way. There must be other reading that leads to real exegesis. First we need to know the 'old men' before proceeding with meaning reconstruction.

The reader should be acquainted with history and with the poet experiences to reach the signification. The old men are not the Irish, the signifier signifies the British. They consider themselves to be the old men and the masters of the world. Thus, the historic hermeneutic reading of the previous lines reveals the truth. Ireland is not a country for the British, and the Irish are young and free in their country while the English are old and dying.

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress, (L, 9-12)

Through these lines, Yeats defines the aged man as a weak creature (A tattered coat upon a stick). The reference here is to the



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scare crow, which has neither soul nor power. It has merely a human like shape.

And therefore, I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium. (L, 15-16)

The poet reaffirms his attitude against the British through the signifier 'Byzantium' which signifies 'the Roman Empire'. It was the eastern capital of the Roman Empire which controlled the world in the past. The English people were subjects to the Romans, who were the masters of world in the past times. So, history repeats itself. The poet conveys a message to the English people, that they should read history well, and they are not the masters of the world as they claim, because the wheel of life moves and turns invincibly. Consequently, the meaning reconstructed according to theories of modern historical hermeneutics requires an active reader, who can reach the targeted meaning.



Conclusion

Theories of historical hermeneutics are significant in the literary world. They are developed through long periods of time. They helped reconstructing the meaning of the text in objective way. Centralizing the language and history to be essential copula is the main task of these theories. They join the two levels of meaning: the implicit and the explicit through referential tactics. These theories are reader-oriented, because the reader is the center of interpretation.

William Butler Yeats" selected poems are employed to construct meaning according to the theories of historical hermeneutics. It is obvious that the poet moves from the general to the specific through his poems especially 'Easter 1916' and 'Sailing to Byzantium'. The constructed text meaning shifts the reader's attitudes towards reality, and consequently new meanings are created for the same root. Moreover, he uses the fusion of horizons, where understanding arises from the interplay of the interpreter's perspective and the historical context of the text to establish his intentional goal. In his poem 'Sailing to Byzantium' Yeats associates the history with culture and delves into the interpretive process, focusing on narrative, symbols and the autonomy of the text. Thus, the process of reconstructing the text meaning in modern historical hermeneutics is incorporated by Yeats to understand the text in its historical context and allocating its significance within contemporary frameworks. The agency of the well-read interpreter is a must to understand the meaning, because the modern hermeneutics builds on classical approaches by incorporating linguistic, cultural and sociopolitical analysis to decipher meaning.



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