

# An Analysis of Peter Berry's Poetic Text Research from the Perspective of Context with Symbolism

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## Abstract

Based on the theory of symbolic criticism, this paper evaluates Peter Barry's analysis of the Irish poem Edward Hopper: *Early Sunday Morning*, 1939. It explores the symbolic meaning of context and further confirms the necessity to establish a connection between text and context. Combined with the background of the neutrality of Ireland in World War II, this paper discusses the importance of reading poetry in combination with context, in order to provide a certain value reference for future poetry research. At the same time, this paper also puts forward some suggestions for poetry teaching in universities, aiming at helping college students understand poetry better.

## Keywords

Symbolism; poetry; context; Ireland; context teaching.

## 1. Introduction

Poetry is different from other literary genres such as vernacular, with fewer words and more white space, and its language features are the most full. To understand a poem accurately and properly, it is not enough just to read the words and understand the words. There is complexity among the elements and levels of poetry text, which form a whole and thus generate the meaning of poetry text.<sup>[1]</sup> In the past five years, the study of poetic texts has become an important topic in literary research. However, in the past, most of the textual research on poetry was in translation, and the field of poetry research from the perspective of context was rather cold. At the same time, the study on the interpretation of Irish poetry and its national identity, combined with the text and context, the connotation of poetry needs to be continued.

## 2. The influence of Ireland's Neutrality in World War II on Its Poetry

With an area of about 70,000 square kilometers and a population of less than 5 million, Ireland is not a large country, but in terms of cultural exports, it is a unicorn-level country. During the Second World War, Ireland, unlike other members of the Commonwealth, was reluctant to fight for the British Empire because the country had brought only misery to itself for centuries. In February 1939, it was announced that "Ireland will not take part in any war in Europe", and Ireland remained neutral throughout World War II and later the Cold War. In the face of many conflicts, in the face of many doubts and puzzlement, contemporary Irish poets did not retreat, but bravely went ahead and keenly explored the roots of fate and conflict.<sup>[2]</sup> Therefore, nationality will be reflected everywhere in the text of Irish works, and most of them are related to national identity, which to some extent continues the Irish nationalism that Yeats wants to express. For example, in Patrick Kavanagh's *To the Man After the Harrow*, the whole text seems to be a dialogue with the farmer, but it is actually the author's cry and advice to the entire Irish people. The conviction conveyed throughout the text is serious and firm, and the article uses three sentences beginning with "Forget" to repeatedly emphasize the value and effectiveness of the neutral position.

### 3. Comments on Edward Hopper:Early Sunday Morning,1939

#### 3.1. Peter Berry's Comments on Edward Hopper:Early Sunday Morning,1939

*Edward Hopper:Early Sunday Morning,1939* is a remarkable poem written by the Northern Irish poet *Ciaran Carson*. The poem is his literary description of *Sunday Morning*, an oil painting by Edward Hopper. *Sunday Morning*, a neorealist cityscape, was voted the most popular painting by AT&T subscribers in 1971. The picture is empty, just an early morning street scene: empty streets and similar shops, the morning sun shining on the buildings and streets. Carson's deceptively simple words depict the unique landscape of a corner of the morning street scene, but the essence is profound.

This painting was painted in 1930, and when we think of "1930", it is natural to insert this historical context of the global Depression of the 1930s, especially since the row of shops looks decidedly run-down and unprosperous, and at least one appears to have been abandoned. But Carson added the date "1939" to the poem's title, and by 1939, the Great Depression was over and war was about to break out in Europe. The outer sun casts long shadows in the picture, and Carson's poem interprets these shadows as the background of the picture, representing the coming war. The war took place in 1939 and in due course had threatened, and even disturbed, the peace and quiet of these scenes. Carson's interpretation of the painting is made clear in the poem's final stanza, "drawn before the War."

Even though Peter Berry thinks this explanation of the shadows seems to make no sense, for Carson, this typical 1930s street scene has gathered a prewar sense of nostalgia and regret. Peter believes that Carson's inclusion of the date "1939" in the title and the use of the phrase "before the war" indicate that Carson viewed and interpreted the painting solely as an Irishman. 1939 was not the beginning of the war for most Irish people, as the Republic of Ireland remained neutral throughout the war. Peter Berry also stressed: the meaning of context is extended to the poem just like the shadow in the picture, and there must be some linguistic "trigger" in the poem itself. In this poem, "drawn before the War" is such trigger factor, so that readers can understand the poem in the context of the Second World War. Instead of a global depression. Without this date, we would be immersed in the tranquility of the painting, which is all the more intense because of painting a scene of the city, but at the same time pointing out that it is a Sunday morning, and therefore especially feeling the absence of the usual hustle and bustle of these places. (The effect is similar to Wordsworth's sonnet "*Westminster Bridge*"). This further emphasizes the importance of context, and different contexts will bring readers different reading feelings, thoughts and emotions.

#### 3.2. Analysis of Peter Berry's Comments

##### 3.2.1. Strengthen the Relationship: Text and Context

In Peter's interpretation of this poem, he repeatedly emphasized "trigger", that is, the so-called "trigger factor", emphasizing that the connection between text and context must be established when reading poetry. When we read prose, we scan the page word by word, leaving only the boundary areas needed for the printing and binding process. But poetry is different, its layout only occupies a relatively small area in the center of the page, and the rest is only done with a lot of white space, which seems to give readers a lot of space for reading development emotionally, and can not only be limited to the text. We cannot generically apply the open concept of social or historical context to poetry. The poem itself must "imply" (equivalent to the "trigger" mentioned above) the purported context, so that the context in question may be regarded as the "deep" context of the poem.

### 3.2.2. No Explicit Evaluation of Symbolism in Poetry

Carson makes repeated references to imagery in his poem, including: "clear blue sky, upper storey, soul, strip, shop, barber's pole, fire hydrant, sidewalk", but Peter does not explain what these images represent or serve in Carson's poem. In my opinion, every word in the poem is appropriate and intentional, and plays its unique role. For example, in this poem, the word soul should represent people, which is the embodiment of the symbolic technique of its image; At the same time, in the picture, we can clearly see two shadows cast by the fire hydrant and the barber shop sign, while another shadow in the picture disappears in the right side of the picture, although the poem does not explicitly point out, but it can be concluded that the shadow is from the rising sun in the east.

## 4. Importance of Contextual Reading

The concept of "context" was first proposed by British anthropologist B. Malinowski in 1923. He pointed out that context can be divided into "situational context" and "cultural context", or it can be said that "linguistic context" and "non-linguistic context", which requires readers to take these two aspects into account when reading. Context generally refers to a specific meaning expressed by text or discourse structure. Cultural context generally refers to various subjective and objective factors that a certain discourse structure relies on to produce meaning. This poem is Carson's subjective evaluation of Edward's works. As an artistic symbol, poetry text is not only restricted by the context within the language, but also inevitably influenced by the external context, so the relationship between poetry text and context is interdependent.<sup>[3]</sup>

### 4.1. Helpful for the Comprehension of the Text

In English, a word basically has many Chinese meanings, and this phenomenon of polysemy is very common. This creates a great dyslexia for readers. Therefore, in English argumentative text reading, readers are often faced with the problem of determining the meaning of key words in sentences. The general method is to observe its "neighbors", the above context or the phrase in which the keyword is located is called "reference frame".

### 4.2. Helpful for the Enrichment of Knowledge and Experience

In order to better understand poetry, it is necessary to consult a large number of relevant literature. It is essential to understand the causes of the Second World War, the reasons why Ireland became a neutral country, and the implications. On the surface, I read a poem, but in fact, I investigated the historical background and cultural factors behind the poem. In this way, the focus of reading shifts from the author's life, author's intention and historical environment outside the text to the meaning of the words and the structure of the poem inside the text, which helps to deeply reveal the rich meaning and aesthetic value of the poem itself.<sup>[5]</sup>

## 5. Implications of Contextual Reading for English Teaching

### 5.1. Attach Importance to Discourse Teaching

In recent years, discourse teaching has been placed in a more important and prominent position in English teaching. Practical English teaching is becoming more and more common. Discourse teaching can guide students to pay attention to language communication. In teaching, it is necessary to ensure that students apply what they have learned. However, whether it is high school students under quality education or college students in colleges and universities, learning English will only cope with the exam, and it will not be flexibly used in daily life, that is, we often say "dumb English".

In English reading questions, there are often questions similar to "explain the meaning of underlined words". Most students just choose an answer based on their vocabulary, and few

people will carefully read the sentence where the word is located and the context in which the sentence is located, so as to formulate an answer based on the context. This requires English teachers to teach English words in the text or specific discourse, so that students can establish the awareness of judging the meaning of words according to the context. At the same time, another advantage of vocabulary teaching combined with discourse is that on the basis of teaching the meaning of words, the usage of words can be clearly understood in the text.

## 5.2. Improve Teacher Requirements

Students generally have a weak English foundation and need to improve their contextual awareness, which requires English teachers to be specific and oriented when making teaching plans and writing teaching syllabuses. With students as the main body and from a suitable Angle, the semester planning is made in stages and layers to ensure that each student can gain something and improve after completing each learning stage. In addition to reading teaching and vocabulary teaching, grammar, listening and writing teaching should also be contextualized. Of course, due to individual differences in the development of students, teachers should adopt different teaching methods for students at different levels and stages in the planning process of lesson plans. For example, primary school students are younger and can not concentrate on reading textbooks for a long time, so they can play English music or English animation to carry out situational teaching. For another example, college English majors have a solid English foundation compared with other students due to their maturity and specialty. They can choose good English literature, English novels or English classic movies with good significance at home and abroad as the discourse materials, so that students can learn basic knowledge and get the sublimation of professional quality and cultural quality at the same time.

## 5.3. Enhance Cultural Awareness and Establish Cultural Self-Confidence

Under the background of globalization, China has always emphasized cultural self-confidence, and enhancing cultural awareness has been the need of the general trend. Cultural self-confidence is the key stage for our country to become prosperous and strong. This requires Chinese English learners not only to understand the culture and history of the countries where English is commonly spoken, but also to strengthen China's cultural awareness and enhance the knowledge of Chinese English. The new words such as *paper tiger*, *Three Represents*, *Chinese herbal medicine*, *one country*, *two systems* and so on are good examples.

## 6. Conclusion

From the above narration, it can be seen that: reading poetry needs to establish the connection between the text and the context, find some kind of "hint" from the text, find some kind of symbolic component, and understand the deep meaning of the text combined with the context. Of course, to find this kind of hint needs to be built on a solid cultural foundation, so it is particularly important for readers to improve the awareness of "close reading" when reading texts, and teachers should also cultivate students' close reading awareness when teaching reading.

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