Contemporary Literary Reading: A Must for English Education—
Carol Ann Duffy’s Poetry as an Example

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Abstract. The importance of literary reading for English education has long been widely recognized. With the development of society and academic research, the function of contemporary literary reading is highlighted. Like Carol Ann Duffy’s poetry, having inherited the valuable skills of artistic creation from literary canon, contemporary poems directly represent contemporary social problems and values of contemporary people, bringing to readers a thorough picture of the society and up-to-date use of traditional poetic art, which can help students acquire cultural knowledge, improve language proficiency, find pleasure in literary appreciation, and get moral lessons at the same time, thus achieving the aims of English education: to be good at cross-cultural communication and be individuals of integrity.

Introduction

July 7-10, 2017 witnessed the National Conference of Foreign Literature Association of China held in Shanghai, in which over 270 participants exchanged ideas on re-assessing foreign literary canon and contemporary citizen education. It’s commonly accepted that literary canon cover human history, reflect cultural development, and represent individual and ethnical thoughts and imaginations. These elements make them valuable reading materials for English education, because only through reading, can learners realize and absorb the merits of the historical inheritance of literary canon so as to be able to make use of them to take part in the modern cross cultural communication.

With the development of the society, contemporary literary works graduated into literary canon with their direct reflection of the modern society and the creative use of traditional literary writing art, as argued by Prof. Chen Zhongyi from China Social Science Institute and Prof. Liu Jianjun from Northeast Normal University[1]. The present Poet Laureate in Great Britain, Carol Ann Duffy, and her works are just a good example for this.

Can Contemporary Poetry Turn Canonized?

The answer to the above question is “YES”. Take Carol Ann Duffy (1955-) as an example. She was appointed the Poet Laureate in 2009 in Britain, and some of her poems were selected in GCSE and A-level syllabuses, which shows her acceptance by the royal family and the society in Britain. And recent publications of Chinese versions of her poetry show that her poetry has gained acceptance in China. This does not take place all of a sudden.

Acceptance of Duffy’s Poetry Before 2009

Duffy began publishing books, reading her poetry and teaching poetry after graduation with a Bachelor’s Degree in Philosophy in 1977. During the years 1988-1989, she was a poetry critic for The Guardian and an editor for a poetry magazine, Ambit. She began lecturing in poetry at Manchester Metropolitan University since 1996, and is the creative director of the Writing School. Before she’s entitled Poet Laureate, her poetry collections have won many prizes, eg. Standing Female Nude (1985), with the Scottish Arts Council Award; Selling Manhattan (1987), with Somerset Maugham Award; The Other Country (1990); Mean Time (1993), with the Whitbread Poetry Award and the
Recognition of Carol Ann Duffy as one of the most influential poets in Britain can also be found in some literary works. For example, a few of her poems were selected in The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry in 1982[3]. Ten years or more later, Carol Ann Duffy is said to not only have influenced a whole generation of poets writing or beginning to write in the 1980s, but also have brought an eclectic range of influences to bear on the contemporary poetry scene. Her contribution is also considered as a reflection of the beginning of a change.[4] She’s included as a poet of the period of 1980-2000, in which British poetry has developed to postmodernism and the women’s movement has come to the third wave, in A History of Twentieth Century British Women’s Poetry by Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle.[5] She’s also mentioned as “well-known and well-liked” in an article from Encyclopedia Britannica.[6]

Popularity of Duffy’s Poetry as the Poet Laureate

After the appointment of the Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy became more popular. She’s invited to write poetry in some national events. And she volunteered to write poetry or edit some books of poetry for certain purposes. Her poems were uploaded to the internet immediately after they were written, and sometimes with her own reading. For example, she wrote about the MP expenses, to mark the deaths of British soldiers who fought in WWI, to celebrate Christmas, to call for world peace and protection of the environment, to popularize the Olympic Spirit, to show concern for the LGBTQ people, to celebrate the wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton, to celebrate the 60th anniversary of Queen Elizabeth II’s coronation. All these poems can be found on the internet immediately after they are written, together with the video or audio clips sometimes, which helps with the popularity of Carol Ann Duffy because of public attention to these events.

Carol Ann Duffy’s poetry gradually catch attention from Chinese readers as scholars did researches on her works and translators put them into Chinese. Before 2009, only 2 scholars put a few of her poems into Chinese. 2010 saw the Chinese version of her poem collection Rapture in Taiwan. At the same time, some scholars and translators tried their hands at the translation of her poems into Chinese and got them published in journals and magazines. 2017 saw the publication of 4 books of her poetry collection translated in mainland China, namely A Collection of Love Poems by Carol Ann Duffy [7]by Hunan Wenyi Publishing House and The World’s Wife [8]by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, The Bee and Rapture by Guangxi Normal University Press. All these show the popularity and acceptance of Carol Ann Duffy’s poetry in China, and the fact that Carol Ann Duffy’s poetry is being canonized.

What Can Students Get by Reading Contemporary Poetry?

Reading contemporary literary poetry can help students get familiar with the culture of English-speaking society, master the art of the English language, enjoy the pleasure of aesthetic appreciation of literary art, and get moral education at the same time.

Culture Study in Contemporary Poetry Reading

As shown in Carol Ann Duffy’s poetry, readers can get cultural knowledge about what is written in the poems, like national celebrations of World Wars, Christmas holidays, anniversary of the Queen’s coronation, marriage of the Prince, Olympic Culture, the present condition of environment protection and so on and so forth. As studies on Duffy’s poetry has shown her as being concerned with the life of marginalized people, including female, the old, the lower class, immigrated people, colored people and people hurt by society or during war time, etc., readers will get a thorough picture of Great Britain from the viewpoints of people from all walks of life.

Duffy is a critic of British consumerism and wrote about the consumption culture in Britain in her poetry. So, students can also learn about people’s value of consumption by reading her poems about
consumption culture. As Carol Ann Duffy live in the postmodern period and the third wave feminist movement, students will get to know the features and keynotes of postmodernism and feminism, which are important part of western culture and society.

Because Carol Ann Duffy is good at rewriting classical literary works, including those from Ancient Greek and Roman mythology, the Bible, and so on, students can widen their knowledge about western culture by reading those poems she has written. Take “Little Red Cap” [9] as an example. As this is a story told in different ways in different cultures, the teacher can remind students of the Greene Brother version, the French version, the Russian version, and Chinese version, and so on. The reading can be done in a comparative way so as to help students understand the cultural differences in different countries. And by reading some other poems, students can get to know more about the Bible, Ancient Greek and Roman mythology, and some important people and works throughout the world.

Language Learning in Contemporary Poetry Reading

Poetry, as the highest form of literature, shows the best use of language art. As in Duffy’s poetry, there are uses of metaphors, similes, paradox, irony, and some other examples of figures of speech. Students can not only enlarge their vocabulary by reading her poetry, but also get artistic appreciation of meters and rhymes in some of her poems, with understanding of those figures of speech.

Still take “The Little Red Cap” as an example. Because this story is told from the first person point of view, the teacher can help students distinguish the different functions of the first person narration and the third person point of view, and explain how the self-dependence of the little red cap is shown in Duffy’s poem. And an analysis of transitivity can be done to help with this as well. While reading this poem, students can find Duffy’s creative use of expressions like “at childhood’s end”, symbolic use of the “dove” for inspiration, “blood” for sex or energy, “the white bone of grandma” for the silence of women poets in British history of literature, etc.

Besides, students can do some writing practice based on the reading of contemporary literary works. They may write about their reflections on the works or try to do some rewriting of the works, or do their own creative writing by imitating the works they have finished reading. Younger students might find fun in list poems after reading Duffy’s list poems for children. And senior students might get interested in the use of parody after finishing reading Duffy’s “Little Red Cap” and other poems of this skill.

Artistic Appreciation of Different Poetic Forms

As Duffy makes use of poetic forms like sonnet, dramatic monologue, list poem and so on, reading her poetry can help students get familiar with these traditional forms of art and able to appreciate those poems with traditional form but modern themes. Take the poem “Rapture” [10] as an example. It is a sonnet. The teaching can begin with Shakespearian sonnet, which is usually about youth and love. With a detailed analysis of the traditional form of sonnet and that of Duffy’s poem, students will not only review what they have known about Shakespearian sonnet, but also try to analyze Duffy’s creative use of the poetic form in expressing lovesickness. Of course, “The Little Red Cap” can function in this as well. After the transitivity analysis, the teacher can show students the contrast between the traditional way and the new way of telling the story, explaining the art of parody as an important way of artistic creation in postmodern period.

As most of Carol Ann Duffy’s poetry are uploaded on the internet, students can enjoy her poem reading by listening to some audio clips or watch some video clips. And pictures drawn for her poems are more interesting sources of artistic appreciation. In this situation, the multimodal method can be adopted in teaching and analysis.

Moral Education in Contemporary Literary Reading

Literary reading is of ethical functions, as literary works are normally with some moral themes. Contemporary literary works teach moral lessons in a way contemporary people can accept, so it is a must in English education. Duffy described some evil women in The World’s Wife as a kind of
criticism. For example, in her poem “The Devil’s Wife”, she wrote about Myra Hindley (1942-2002), the female criminal in the famous “the Moors Murders”[11] that took place in England in 1965. Duffy described the whole process of the girl falling in love with the devil, named Ian Brady in real life, committing crimes with him, and finally ended up in prison, saying “what did I do to us all, to myself/ When I was the Devil’s wife?” This poem warns people to keep clear-headed when faced with “love”.

There are also poems that describe women that are upright models in The World’s Wife. Take the poem “Mrs. Lazarus” as an example, this lady “had grieved”, and “had wept for a night and a day/ over” her loss of her husband, and finally gather up enough courage to forget about the sadness, and live on. This is a lesson for those who have lost something in life to face the fact. And “Penelope”, the wife who is famous for her loyal waiting of her husband during his 20 year journey away from home, is described by Carol Ann Duffy as being able to find interest in sewing and make it a lifetime’s industry. Both Penelope and Mrs. Rip Van Winkle, who is described to have developed interest in traveling and painting during the 20 years of her husband’s sleep, teach women to be independent in life.

Summary
As shown in the above analysis, reading contemporary literature like Carol Ann Duffy’s poetry can not only bring students cultural knowledge about Britain and western world, but also provide them with chances to improve their language proficiency and to appreciate the poet’s creative use of the English language as well as the beauty of traditional poetic forms. Besides, contemporary literary works can teach readers moral lessons in a more vivid and more effective way than orthodox teaching. All these are important parts of English education, which will help develop students’ ability in cross-cultural communication in the future and educate them to become individuals of upright integrity.

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