

USING VISUAL ARTS TO ENHANCE ENGLISH POETRY COMPREHENSION FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE STUDENTS

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Abstract

Poetry as a genre of literature is required subject for students of English Language and Literature in Higher Education in general. However, compared to other genres such as drama and prose, poetry is often found as the most challenging subject to teach and to learn. Even though English poetry has been taught in many non-native countries for many years, traditional approach which is textual has dominated the teaching of poetry in classroom. Based on the experience and knowledge, the writers found that the problem of learning English poetry for foreign language students is due to its complex language and infamous interest amongst the students as well as the teachers. Therefore, the teaching of poetry should enliven the learning atmosphere and envision the figure of speech of the poem, which are commonly found to be difficult to be done by the students. According to D.H. Kehl, there is somehow interconnection between poetry and visual arts. Poetry and visual arts have almost the same characteristic in conveying arts. Poetry use verbal imagery while painting use visual imagery. Considering the existing connection of the two aspects, this library research study proposes the use of visual arts in order to enhance students' comprehension of poetry given in classroom.

Keywords: *poetry, poetry comprehension, visual arts.*

1. Introduction

“Seeing is a great deal more than believing these days” – Nicholas Mirzoeff
We now live in an era that is very familiar with picture; everywhere we go we can see the presence of picture or images even in the form of symbol or sign. Gunther Kress, a Professor of Semiotics and Education in Department of Culture, Communication and Media at Institute of Education of the University of London, and also the eminent author of *Multimodality* stated that actually “image has been a part of human culture longer than text” (2010). It tells us that human in their nature are much familiar with picture even in their very first civilization.

Nowadays, people experience the presence and influence of visual images in their everyday life even more. This fact somehow has happened globally for the presence of internet has made everything accessible and pictures come in handy to make communication more interactive. Photographs on newspaper and blackboard advertisement assure us about the idea and information that they want to offer. People even use image as self-representation on social network and media.

In addition to the fact it is used as the media representation in the realm of information technology and entertainment, picture is also used as media of teaching in education world. In the context of language learning, visual media has been used in Indonesia as a medium to teach since 1923. Since the using of visual media is to describe something abstract to something concrete and to conduct students' activities more effective (Sukiman, 2012, p.9). The media are used to introduce three basic concepts, firstly, the using of visual media teaching to present abstract argument to concrete one. Secondly, the importance of classification in used visual media types and the third is the integrations of visual media in curriculum.

In higher education (HE) level, English literature is compulsory subject for students of English education and literature major in ESL or even EFL countries, such as Indonesia. The study of English literature which is generally divided into poetry, prose, and drama, are usually given to the second and third year of college students. However, poetry is commonly found as the most challenging subject to teach and to learn amongst any other genres. This problem is commonly appeared amongst the students for the lack of interest and difficulty in comprehending the text.

In this short paper of library research, the writers attempt to describe the nature of relationships between poetry and visual arts from the viewpoint of several thinkers, mainly from D.H. Kehl, and to suggest some practical implications for literature lecturers and teachers in developing the teaching of poetry by using visual arts in the classroom. To a wider context, this study is to improve the interest and ability in learning poetry for HE students, especially for those who study literature in Indonesia and other countries where English serves as foreign language or second language.

2. The Problem in Teaching and Learning English Poetry for EFL/ESL Students

There are debates in deciding whether English literature is still essential to be given to the students of EFL/ESL. In fact, poetry is literature genre that is often marginalized in the English language classroom. Khatib (2012), in his research about new approach in teaching poetry wrote that according to Topping (1968) literature should be excluded from the ESL curriculum because of its structural complexity, lack of conformity to standard grammatical rules and remote cultural perspectives. Povey (1979, quoted in Khatib 2012), a vigorous advocate of teaching poetry in EFL situations, believe that instructors of poetry are somehow responsible for causing the negative attitude of students towards verse.

Despite the fact that the significant role of literature faded gradually as linguistics became the central point of language programs, the problem in teaching and learning poetry appears since it is commonly perceived that English poetry is too difficult to learn by the foreign students who have different culture context from the English countries. Some people say that poetry can only be appreciated by the members of community in which the literature is addressed to and emerged from. In other words, English literature can only be understood and appreciated by English people. Other difficulties also arise for the using of unfamiliar denotations, connotations, allusions and the change of words meaning by the using of repetition, ambiguity, paradoxes, and irony in poetry (Hoepfer, 1990, p. 82).

Nevertheless, Frederik in her book *English Poetry: An Introduction to Indonesian Students* (1988) stated that the best way to learning foreign language is actually through exploring their culture, since culture is reflected through the use of language as well (Kramsch,

1998, p. 3). She also finds that the material or subject matter of literature is actually something very general, such as ‘man’s fate’, or ‘human life’. It means that literature basically deals with human activity or human experience. Undoubtedly, some of human activities could be peculiar or universal. For example, poetry with theme of love and nature is mostly relevant with human experience anywhere in the world. “Thus, literature is a vital record of what men have seen in life. Literature is fundamentally an expression of life through the medium of language.” (Frederik, 1988, p.4). According to Wellek and Warren (1956) literature represents ‘life’ and ‘life’ is, in large measure, a social reality, even though the natural world and inner subjective world of individual have also been objects of literary imitation (p.94).

The problem in learning English poetry is not only identified in Indonesia’s universities but in other country where English serves as second language or foreign language. Hirvela and Boyle (1988) quoted in Khatib 2012 report that only 6% of the Hong Kong Chinese students who were involved in the survey favoured poetry more than other literary genres and 73% of them found poetry the most difficult and intimidating literary form. It is found that the problems in learning poetry for ESL/EFL students are due to its complex language and infamous interest for the students as well as for the teachers (Frederik 1988; Hughes 2012; Alwahaibi 2012).

Moreover, the problem of learning poetry is also common in the countries where English serves as the main or native language¹. Hence, the writers found that the focal problem in learning poetry is not mainly caused by the culture differences but simply in realizing and visualizing the images of poetry or the figures of speech. It is important to see poetry in its total framework at first since in order to understand poetry content, one must imagine or visualize the figure of speeches that occur in a poem.

3. The Connection of Poetry and Visual Arts

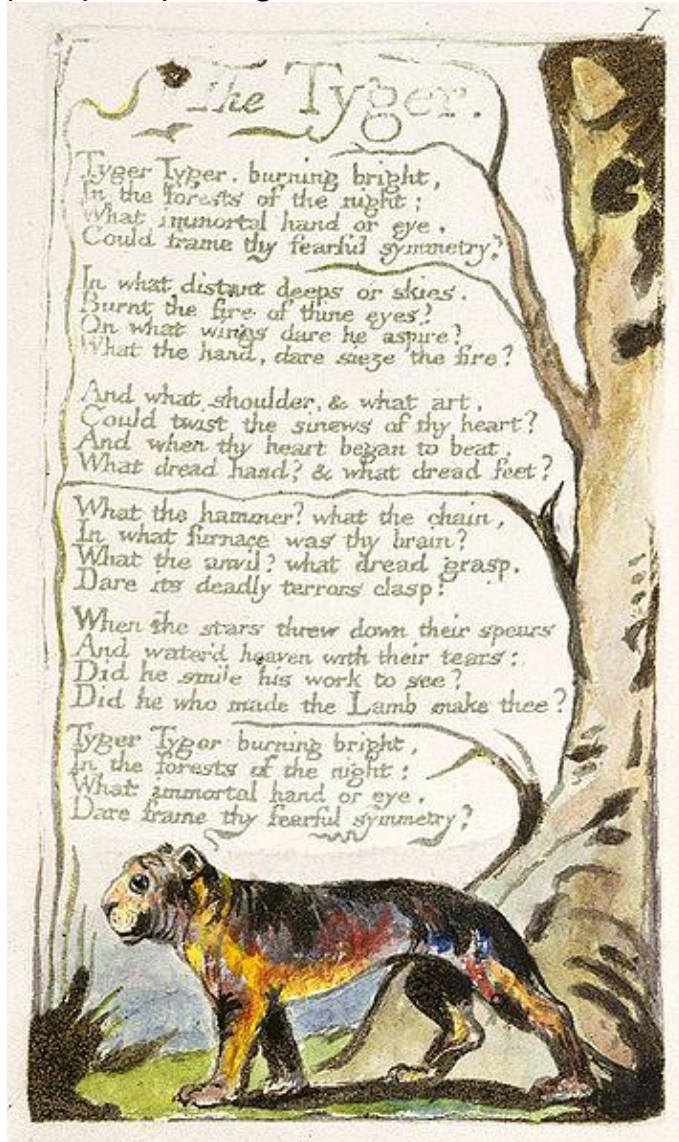
It is a well-known phrase that a picture says a thousand words and a poem paints a thousand pictures. Every visual art speaks something about the characteristics of particular existence, while in the other hand; a poem is a verbal art that contains figures of speech that needs to be visualized in mind.

As a matter of fact, the tradition of relating visual and verbal arts has dated back to the ancient era. Horace, a Greek philosopher in his book *Epistles* writes to his fellow “*ut pictura poesis*” which means, poetry is like a painting. These lines are often cited as the foundational text establishing a connection between visual and verbal arts (Corn, 2008): “Horace, in his *Epistles*, writes a verse letter to his friend Pisos, the opening lines of which develop the metaphor of painting as a means of criticizing arbitrary combinations of incompatible components in a poem. (This is the third letter of Book II of the *Epistles*.)”

In the past era of English literature, some English poets painted their own poems to emphasize the images of the poem. William Blake as one of the famous poets from Romantic Age is one of the poets who painted some of his own poems. Although he was unrecognized for his talents during his lifetime, Blake is now considered as a semifinal

¹“As I. A. Richards noted more than half a century ago in his seminal book *Practical Criticism* (1929), the chief problem faced by the student of poetry is “the difficulty of making out [the poem’s] plain sense” (Hoepfer 1990: 82).

figure in the history of poetry and visual arts. Below is one example of his mixing of poetry and painting from his second illuminated book of poems, *Songs of Experience*:



Picture 1: "The Tyger" by William Blake

Like a painter and any other artist, a poet also expresses his experience in the world along with his personal emotion and rational in making an artwork. Peacock M. (1999) in Hughes 2012 calls poetry "the screen-size art". Some poem talks its theme directly to the audience but some others should need to be recognized deeply through its images in order to get its meaning. This phenomenon, however, also happens to painting. Since an artwork is filled with human expression and emotion, the presence of visual image that represents the poem's imagery will be much useful in conveying the poem's meaning. However, humans' expression is best shown when we see it visually rather than we merely hear or read it textually.

Kehl (1978) states that any work of literature has visual characteristics because of the inherent power of words to evoke visual image, "to understand words, it seems to be natural and necessary for the mind to translate them into visual images; conversely, understanding visual images seems to be enhanced by "translation" into words" (p. 3). In other words, in the realm of literature, image is essentially resides in poetry, prose, and

drama. All that it takes to realize this is the imagination of the reader in relating the images to get the whole 'picture' or idea. In drama we can see the play performance visually, in prose we could have glimpse of picture that depicts certain scene in the story going on, while from poetry we get imagery words with a much comprised idea: "Images have always been important in poetry because they force us to become sensually involved in the experience of a poem. An image is generally recognized to be any particular arrangement of words which awakens a sensory response on the part of the reader." (Thompson, 1970)

4. Practical Implication

The question and doubt that will expectedly arise in using visual arts to teach poetry could be about the using of which picture to what poetry. Therefore, this section addresses the issue of how to select and to use particular visual arts in teaching poetry in classroom.

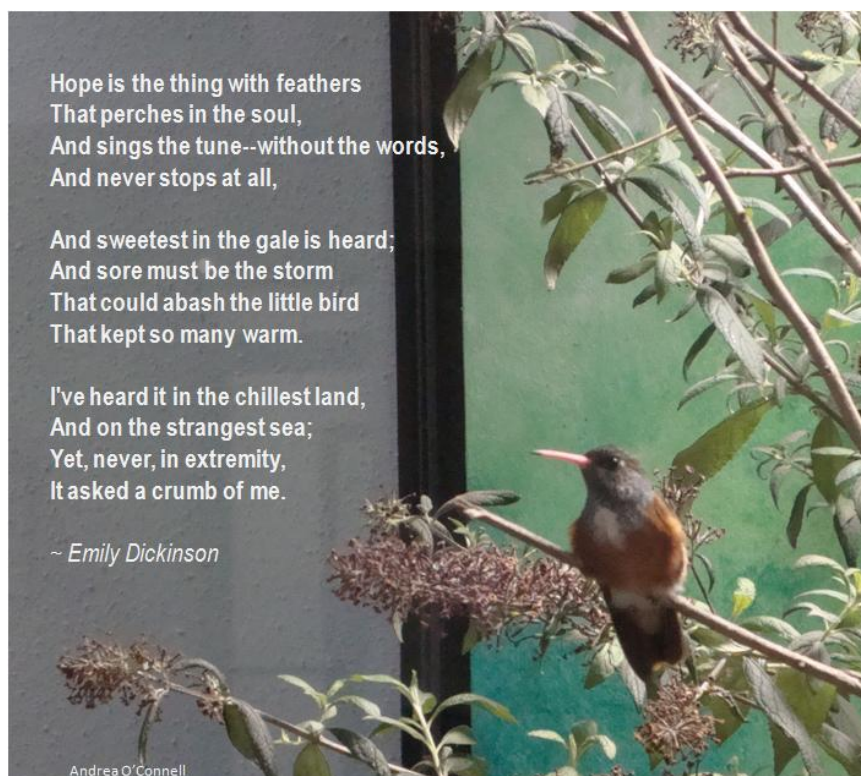
Unlike the past time, when the source of visual art was very limited to painting, nowadays we can find visual arts in the form of printed photograph and digital pictures. People can have infinite resource of images, including painting and photograph from the internet since every picture could be digitalized.

As it has been presupposed earlier that the use of picture could help students to comprehend the content of poetry, teachers might be faced to the problem of selecting the appropriate picture for some poems that they are going to discuss with the students. This problem will considerably appear for in reality there will never be a perfect form of art in the case of representing reality. Kehl (1978) mentions in his book that "art always deals with the problem of reality" (p. 9), from this perception we can assume that even in art itself reality is never perfectly framed, whether in the form of painting, sculpture, or poetry for the artist perspective will always get involved in his/her works of art.

Aristotle also argues that art is mimetic which means that it is mirroring life; therefore, art is the imitation of life. For example, a tragedy is an imitation of an act that is serious and complete. However, since art is imitation, it never has the complete elements of reality "The work of art, although an illusion of reality, represents a heightened form of reality, a "true lie" (Kehl 1978: 10). Furthermore Kehl (1978) wrote, "Neither kind of art is, of course, identical to life. A painting of a chair is not the same as the chair..." (p. 2).

The principal works in the same way for selecting the 'right' picture for visualizing the selected poetry. Teachers might likely to choose the most suitable and accessible visual arts whether in form of picture, photograph or painting. The standard of choosing a suitable picture therefore, can be traced back to the elements of the particular poetry that is going to be discussed or analyzed. The poetry elements here refer to the 'visual' ones, which is the figures of speech. They can be found in the figurative languages of poetry, more precisely, the imagery that mostly dominates the major theme of the poem, for a special kind of imagery employed by poetry and painting alike is the metaphor which is derived from a Greek word meaning "vehicle," it transports us from the realm of one object into the realm of another" (Kehl 1978: 3, Panofsky 1982: 12). Nevertheless, any picture could be used to represent the reality depicted in poetry as long as the picture could serve as a suitable informing image for the relationship between poetry and the visual arts and considerably could trigger the imagination of the students.

In the following picture, the writers take an example to represent poetry by Emily Dickinson entitled "'Hope' is the thing with feathers -".



Picture II: Example of picture representing poem

From the picture above we could see that the artist blends the photo and poetry into one form to strengthen each other. The picture becomes the sign that comprises the main idea of the poetry. The picture needs to be explained and the poetry is more appealing when the picture appears. Although the poem entitled 'Hope', the artist put the picture of little bird since the strongest image appear in the poetry is 'feather' which giving sturdy characteristic and therefore, it strongly refers to bird. Moreover, the poetess herself reveals the identity of feather as little bird on the second stanza.

Many more activities on poetry can be developed by using picture. Students can be assigned to take or make their own picture to represent certain poetry. Furthermore, students could use picture as source for stimulation in writing poetry, the activity has been known as *ekhprasis*². Students might have different views in interpreting poetry, like common people enjoying painting, their interpretation depends on their experience of life for both are the works of art that demands to be experienced aesthetically (Panofsky 1982: 12). Even after the use of visual image students might still have different interpretation for the various experience and knowledge in poetry and in life: "The incorporation of both visual and verbal resources into a narrative text has the potential to extend the narrative repertoire and to provide greater differentiation and/or greater depth of experience depending on how well realized the text is as a whole." (Doloughan 2011: 26) However, by using visual images, students are guided to comprehend the

² *Ekhprasis* (also spelled "ecphrasis") is a direct transcription from the Greek *ek*, "out of," and *phrasis*, "speech" or "expression", is the tradition of writing poetry based on aesthetic experience of visual arts (Corn, 2008).

content of poetry without straying too far from the imagery given in the poem; the use of visual image could give way for students to embrace the total framework of poetry, to get its main idea, and to interpret it based on the actual imagery stated in the poetry.

5. Conclusion

Even though the writers are optimistic that the using of proper visual art to certain poetry can be a point of departure for the students to visualize their mental picture and enhance their ability and likeability in order to comprehending poetry, the writers are aware that this proposed media learning, using visual arts to teach poetry, is still debatable. The lack of sources for the finite standard in choosing the appropriate picture to poetry could raise doubt in educational society. However, as Kehl (1978) stated about the relationship between poetry and visual arts that “Although each can be appreciated individually and independently, they can provide mutual illumination when examined together. As sister arts they often yearn toward each other.” (p. 11) Nevertheless, further research is still needed to be conducted to strengthen this founding and the result of this library research needs to be applied and be examined in the real practice in classrooms.

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