

On the Mechanisms of Characterization through Literary Allusion



Gayane Girunyan

Every encounter with a work of verbal art is a unique experience for the reader – a journey into a world of themes and plots inhabited by characters moulded out of and due to the author’s linguistic world and individuality. And just as (or perhaps because) people tend to share their experiences with others in either sense: having similar thoughts and feelings, or communicating them, the individual spaces of fictional worlds never stay isolated or closed to one another. This is so not only because texts ‘meet’ in an intertextual dialogue on the one hand, and in the reader’s horizon of understanding on the other¹, but also because at the points where the worlds of the two texts meet, new semantic complexes emerge which so to call extend both texts further in the reader’s response². Mechanisms of characterization are at the core of such complex contextual structures, and in them literary allusion, along with its power to refer to two texts and relate them, realizes its complex interpretative function consisting of two components³.

Firstly, the fact of alluding is indicative of the author’s reading of the alluded text. Secondly, allusion is realized provided the reader’s interpretative power is sufficient. The latter in its turn is dependent on the reader’s prior knowledge and creative effort⁴. To state it otherwise, balancing between the factual and imaginary, the text and their own associations, readers build up their interpretation, looking back for proof of validity of interpretation in the language of the texts: alluding and alluded⁵.

Alluding and alluded texts may share a number of aspects: themes, characters, language and stylistic devices proper. Especially in those cases when all these aspects are involved in intertextual relations simultaneously, the interpretative function of allusion is realized with full force, and therefore the reader’s ability to balance prior knowledge and freedom of interpretation becomes crucial.

An interesting example of the so-called intertextual dialogue – not to mention the hermeneutical dialogue between text and reader – in which the different aspects of the alluded text resonate in the alluding text is H. James’s “Master Eustace” (1871). And because not only the theme of Shakespeare’s “Hamlet” (and in one of the 3 cases discussed below “Twelfth Night”) but also the imagery and language are involved, complex mechanisms of characterization are at work here. The mechanisms of characterization are complex because James attempts remodelling, or using Tintner’s term – “appropriating” the source text (Tintner 1987).

The central theme of the story is the inevitably dramatic nature of relationships between mother and son, the collision being rooted in the conception of betrayal on the one hand, and the impossibility of reconciliation, on the other, because for the son, Eustace, his mother's decision to get married is comparable to betrayal and he is determined to take revenge. Moreover, the son has not only taken on the role of his mother's, Mrs. Garnyer's, judge but also attempts to punish her by suicide. The noise of the shot "kills" the mother.

The situation preceding the collision is the following. Mrs. Garnyer has been a widow for many years since her husband's death, having previously lived with him for 3 years of despair and frustration with his wasteful use of both: money and familial relationships. The son is ignorant of all this, as well as of the carefully concealed fact that his mother has regularly received letters from a friend, a Mr. Cope, who finally proposes marriage to her. The woman who has refrained from any leisure and pleasure in life, at last feels happy. The son, however, cannot accept the new situation even after the family mystery is disclosed to him: he is an illegitimate son and Mr. Cope is his real father.

As mentioned earlier, the story is set in Shakespearean dimension inasmuch as the protagonist compares himself to Hamlet, and by doing so characterizes both himself and the unavoidability of his inner tragedy, as he sees it.

"I knew that my mother only wanted a chance to forget me and console herself, as they say in France. Demonstrative mothers always do. I'm like Hamlet - I don't approve of mothers consoling themselves. Mr. Cope may be an excellent fellow - I've no doubt he is; but I do hope he will have made his visit by the time I get back. The house isn't large enough for both of us. You'll find me a bigger man than when I left home. I give you warning. I've got a roaring black moustache, and I'm proportionately fiercer." (p. 660)

James's story depicts a young man who has reached deadlock, having lost the sense of his self and the meaning of his life, which has been greatly filled with the mother's role. When that role is not fulfilled, Eustace faces emptiness.

Obviously, the simile *I'm like Hamlet* cannot be interpreted as indicative of similarity even if we can find a number of features common for both protagonists (the role of heir, love for the father, etc.). Indeed, in both cases the central theme is the individual's inner crisis. But as distinct from the Shakespearean prototype, whose tragic role is conditioned by dramatic developments: his father's murder, the mother's marriage to the murderer, his overwhelming sense of justice, etc., James's hero faces a crisis which is totally self-centered, a crisis which is in his system of values.

Cf. *"Did she hope to keep it a secret? Did she hope to hide away her husband in a cupboard? Her husband! And I - I - I - what has she done with me? Where am I in this devil's game? Standing here crying like a school-boy for a cut finger - for the bitterest of disappointments! She has blighted my life - she has blasted my rights. She has insulted me - dishonored me. Am I a man to be made light of? Brought up as a flower and trampled as a weed!"* (p. 662)

Eustace has an exaggerated sense of his self. His notion of betrayal, manhood,

honour and dignity is obviously disproportionate to his life experience. So is the importance that he places on his demands against his understanding of complexities of life. Or, quoting the text, just as the existence of a “roaring black moustache” could be reliable proof of manhood. Hence, the simile *I'm like Hamlet*, which foregrounds Eustace's egotism, could be understood as merged with another stylistic device – irony.

With reference to this, one observation seems interesting. Even in itself, the context of James's story allows of some reservation on the reader's part. Namely, even in the hypothetical situation of absence of prior knowledge about Shakespeare's play and its protagonist, the reader would hardly fail to observe James's ironic attitude towards Eustace and his childish view on grown-up matters. However, irony is in the intertextual dimension and can be interpreted as such when the alluded and alluding texts are compared. It is also worth mentioning that the effect of irony in intertextual unfolding is enhanced with the use of such stylistic means as gradation and repetition by James, which are characteristic of Hamlet's and Ghost's speech too. Remembering the previous example, I could also name the following to mention but a few.

Eustace: “You see an **angry man, an outraged man, but a man, mind you. He means to act as one**”. (p. 663)

“**To ride - ride - ride myself cool!**” he cried. “**There is nothing so hot as my rage!**” (p. 663)

“**I knew it was coming. Mr. Cope - Mr. Cope - always Mr. Cope. It poisoned my journey - it poisoned my pleasure - it poisoned Italy**”.

“**At the seaside, hey? Enjoying the breezes - splashing in the surf - picking up shells. It's idyllic, it's ideal - great heavens, it's fabulous, it's monstrous!**” (p. 663)

Hamlet: **O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain.** (I. IV.)

I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious. (II. I.)

Ghost: **Thou incestuous, murderous, damned Dane.**

Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother's hand

Of life, of crown, of queen, at once dispatched.

Cut off even in the blossom of my sin,

Unhouse'd, disappointed, unaneled.

Oh, horrible! Oh, horrible! Most horrible! (I. V.)

Thus, despite the fact that Eustace's statement that he is like Hamlet does not stand the test of truthfulness (and hence the logical component of irony), and despite the significant distance between the central characters, the mechanism of characterization employed by James could be defined as direct because the two protagonists are placed side by side, one being portrayed through the traits of the other.

A different model underlies indirect characterization, when hinting at an analogy between two characters, the author of the alluding text actually provides a basis for an extension of meaning due to parallels between another pair, or due to a possibility of shift in referring to another object of characterization. Such an example is the following passage:

Three private tutors came and went successively. They fell in love, categorically, with Mrs. Garnyer. Their love indeed she might have put up with; but unhappily, unlike Viola, they told their love - by letter - with an offer of their respective hands. Their letters were

different, but to Mrs. Garnyer their hands were all alike, and alike distasteful. (p.646)

The passage, on the whole, is meant to describe Mrs. Garnyer, who rejected every proposal of marriage made by her son's private tutors. However, by means of the allusive name *Viola* the author characterizes the tutors' efforts to win the lady's heart. At first sight the simile merely reveals contrast: *but unhappily, unlike Viola, they told their love - by letter - with an offer of their respective hands*. But a closer examination opens up interesting perspectives on the simile.

Why are the suitor-tutors compared to *Viola* especially? If only because she did not express her feelings to Orsino, how logical is it to compare them to a young lady in love?

In fact, the interpretation can take another turn as the reference is to *Viola's* double role in "Twelfth Night", and the reader perceives her both as herself and as *Cesario*, Duke Orsino's servant delegated to open his master's feelings to *Olivia*. In this case the comparison is logical and could be paraphrased into *unlike Cesario* as it is based on the notion of *expressing one's feelings through a mediator* – hence the preposition *unlike*.

On the other hand, *Viola-Cesario* does not speak of himself but Orsino's feelings, and the two parties involved in the relationship through the go-between are Orsino and *Olivia*. And despite the mentioning of *Viola's* name, the prototype is Orsino. It is Orsino that, unlike the tutors, needs an intermediary to propose. Therefore, it can be said that James indirectly characterizes the gentlemen who were in love with Mrs. Garnyer as Orsinos, who however did not need a go-between, and Mrs. Garnyer – as *Olivia*. One could consider it as hidden antonomasia as well.

This way of interpretation is proved by similar episodes in the story and the play. *Olivia* asks *Viola* to pass her refusal to the duke and not to mention his name:

"O, by your leave, I pray you, - / I bade you never speak again of him".

Mrs. Garnyer too does nearly the same demanding of her son's nurse:

"I wouldn't speak to them for the world. My dear, you must do it."

Hence, it is possible to conclude that the comparison of the characters reveals more similarity than difference despite the preposition *unlike*.

And finally, a third variety of characterization, more complex in nature, can be singled out, one which involves shared features at the level of plot, overall meaning of both texts, i.e. on a larger scale than just a reference in one episode.

In particular, with a direct and overt comparison of the protagonists, it is natural to expect common features between Mrs. Garnyer and Queen Gertrude too: at least because *Eustace* attributes such to his mother. As in the previous examples, the interpretive response on the reader's part is activated due to both similar episodes (e.g. the marriage of the mothers and the intolerance displayed by the sons), as well as shared language, i.e. through allusive words and concepts (modesty, grace, shame, betrayal.etc.). One example will suffice to illustrate the point.

On hearing *Hamlet's* words of reproach, Queen Gertrude responds:

These words like daggers enter in mine ears;

No more, sweet Hamlet! ... No more.

and further in the scene:

O Hamlet, thou has cleft my heart in twain. (III. IV.)

In a similar episode, hurt by her son's disapproval, Mrs. Garnyer takes Eustace's words as a blow:

"He curses me - he denies me!" she cried. "He has killed me!" (p. 665)

In this passage organized as ascending gradation based on syntagmatic repetition, the third component *"He has killed me!"* is the climax, the tense form of the verb being changed too – *the blow has been received*. It is also the third component of the gradation that provides for the figurative extension of meaning.

As for the second statement *O Hamlet, thou has cleft my heart in twain*, it is transformed into: *"My heart's broken; it will never serve again"*.

The two images based on the concept *split*, or *break* the heart are closely comparable. However, in the context of James's story, along with the figurative meaning, literal meaning is present too – Mrs. Garnyer's heart has suffered physically, which causes her death.

Obviously, in the reader's interpretative response Eustace is not totally identified with Hamlet, despite the title 'master' attached to his name. Nor is Mrs. Garnyer with Queen Gertrude. Moreover, in the context of James's story her character bears reference to another prototype too. Namely, parallels can be noticed between Mrs. Garnyer and the Ghost of Hamlet's Father.

Thus, in her son's absence, after he has left for Europe, Mrs. Garnyer is described as follows:

His mother wandered about like a churchyard ghost keeping watch near a buried treasure. (p. 654)

One possible way of looking at the passage and the simile: *like a churchyard ghost keeping watch near a buried treasure* is that the woman's loneliness and meditative state are portrayed through the conception that ghosts guard treasures buried in the earth, or by means of a generalized image of a ghost reluctant to leave the earth and earthly life, wandering around as a non-existent creature. This is a possible interpretation if the reader relies on his or her linguistic competence.

Nevertheless, if we proceed from prior knowledge, the description is reminiscent of the episode, in which turning to the Ghost, Horatio demands:

*O, speak!
Or if thou hast uphoarded in thy life
Extorted treasure in the womb of the earth,
For which, they say, you spirits oft walk in death. (I. I.)*

Thus in the intertextual perspective a second way of interpretation seems possible, and the "character" of the ghost is rendered quite concrete. We know why the tragic ghost visits his son, Hamlet, and what is keeping him on the earth: he demands that his son should revenge for the blameworthy deed. For the Ghost of Hamlet's Father the means relating him to life is Hamlet, though as a ghost he is not an existent entity, and as the Ghost of Hamlet's Father he is a character.

Certainly one pertinent question to ask is what Mrs. Garnyer and the Ghost of

Hamlet's Father have in common. From the passage, as well as from the overall context it is clear that for Mrs. Garnyer, her son and the relationships with him constitute the meaning of her life, her link with this world. Being a mother is her role in life, and when that role is not realized in the son's absence, she turns into a ghost, a shadow. And just as the "literary" Ghost takes hold of life through Hamlet, Mrs. Garnyer does through Eustace. Otherwise the rest of her self, besides being Eustace's mother, is like a ghost of a being, a secondary thing. And that secondary part is her being a woman, a role which is suppressed, or non-existent. And it is not surprising that when the woman awakens in her, the balance "mother + ghost of a woman", having been replaced by "mother + woman" is distorted and leads to tragedy. In these relations between mother and son the only possible combination is the first one.

For this understanding of Mrs. Garnyer's character both the plot and the language of the play provide grounds. Interestingly, the notion of half- or hybrid role can be found in the play too.

Thus, reflecting on the new situation after his father's death and mother's marriage, in answer to his *uncle-king's* address: "**My cousin Hamlet, and my son**", Prince Hamlet notices: "*A little more than kin, and less than kind*" (I. II.). A little later, playing insanity, Hamlet declares: "*You are welcome; but my **uncle-father** and **aunt-mother** are deceived.*" (II. II.)

It could also be added that Mrs. Garnyer's character bears reference to the Ghost's in the detail that her life too is interrupted, though indirectly, by a nearest relative.

To sum up, taking a variety of forms and ranging from overt references to reminiscent stylistic devices, literary allusion reveals its full interpretative potential when it serves for characterization.

Notes:

1. H.-G. Gadamer uses the term 'fusion of horizons' to denote the interaction between the horizons of text and reader involved in the hermeneutical dialogue (Gadamer 1988:360).
2. The semantic formations can be regarded as complex contextual structures, which cannot be limited to either alluding or alluded texts, inasmuch as they belong to the reader's horizon of understanding and accompany him/her throughout his/her life. Of interest in this respect is Freedman's statement which in fact confirms one of the crucial qualities of inter-textual relations – reciprocal influence of the texts on one another. Namely, discussing James's 'recasting' of the Hawthornean story ('The Blithedale Romance') in 'The Ambassadors', he emphasizes that "it is important to remember that for all Hawthorne does for James, James does a good deal to Hawthorne", and also that "James makes it impossible for us to read 'Blithedale' the same way again" (Freedman 1998:14,15).
3. The two established functions of allusion, i.e. to relate two texts (cf. Ben-Porat's term 'trope of relatedness') and to serve as a sign (cf. Perri's notion of 'allusive function' based on the quality of allusion to denote and connote), obviously do not fully disclose the true nature of the phenomenon. Indispensable to allusion's function is the reader's role, as the mechanisms observable in it are rendered

effective only due to the reader's response.

4. Developing the idea of a 'full-knowing' reader, Pucci, for example, considers such a reader an active and meaning-making one and who "assumes complete interpretive power over the allusive moment". On the other hand, however, according to Pucci, what the full-knowing reader arrives at is not necessarily the best interpretation. And the knowledge is defined as 'full' because "it recognizes its own limits, realizes that it is not last but only provisional" (Pucci 1998:43, 44).
5. The relation between two texts acquires a variety of metalinguistic representations. Wheeler, for example, gives preference to the terminological pair adoptive text/adopted text, Ben-Porat's choice is the dichotomy alluding/evoked, and Perri's allusive text/alluded text.

References:

1. Gadamer, G. G. (1988) *Istina i metod (Osnovi filosofskoi germeneytiki)*. Moscow: Progress.
2. Ben-Porat, Z. (1976) *The Poetics of Literary Allusion*, PTL: A Journal for Descriptive Poetics and Theory of Literature, 1.
3. Freedman, J. (1988) *Introduction// The Cambridge Companion to Henry James*, ed. by Jonathan Freedman, Camb. Univ. Press.
4. Perri, C. (1978) *On Alluding // Poetics 7*, North-Holland Publ. Co.
5. Pucci, J. (1998) *The Full-Knowing Reader. Allusion and the Power of the Reader in the Western Literary Tradition*. USA: Yale Univ. Press.
6. Tintner, A.R. (1987) *The Book World of Henry James: Appropriating the Classics*, Studies in Modern Literature, #82, A. Walton Litz General Series Edition, London: UMI Research Press.
7. Wheeler, M. (1979) *The Art of Allusion in Victorian Fiction*. London: The Macmillan Press.

Sources of Data:

1. James, Henry (1999) *Master Eustace (1871) // Complete Stories, 1864-1874*. The Library of America, USA.
2. Shakespeare, William (1998) *Hamlet // The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. Wordsworth Editions, GB.
3. Shakespeare, William (1998) *Twelfth Night // The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. Wordsworth Editions, GB.

Գրական անդրադարձը որպես կերպավորման միջոց

Լինելով միջտեքստային գոյաբանությամբ բարդ նշան, որը տեքստեր հարաբերակցելու և նշանակման գործառնությունների կողքին բնութագրելի է նաև մեկնողականով, գրական անդրադարձը ծառայում է որպես կերպավորման միջոց: Մասնավորապես, դիտարկված նյութի ուսումնասիրությունը թույլ է տալիս առանձնացնել գրական անդրադարձի միջոցով խթանվող բնութագրման երեք հիմնական տեսակներ՝ ուղղակի, անուղղակի և հիբրիդ կերպավորում: