

The Teaching of Contemporary American Literature at the Pictorial Turn

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ABSTRACT

Professor W.J.T. Mitchell announced that we are at the pictorial turn, which can be reflected in our daily life and the humanities field. The fields of contemporary American literature and literary criticism have been affected by such a visual turn. In the face of the change, it is necessary to integrate a visual perspective in the teaching of contemporary American literature. The essay will discuss the pictorial turn in contemporary American literature and explain how to carry out literature teaching with the case analysis of the appreciation of a contemporary American novel called *In Country* in class, expecting that it will help teachers form a new teaching perspective in China. A new perspective will bring a new understanding of a literary text and such a reading might cause a turn in literary criticism. Thus, the article is expected to provide teachers a new way to study American Literature.

Keywords: *Teaching; American Literature; visual turn; In Country*

attention to exploring the visual aspects in literature in literary class.

1. INTRODUCTION

W.J.T. Mitchell announced that we are at the pictorial turn. Our life is overwhelmed by pictures which can be seen on our phones, our computers, TVs, advertisements and so on. Such a visual turn makes us tend to pay attention to pictures. Our daily life and aesthetic activities are heavily affected by the pictorial turn. For example, we tend to spend most of our leisure life surfing on the Internet and seeing a movie. When we are buying things, we tend to be attracted by some appealing pictures in advertisements and on the Internet. In the field of contemporary American literature, we can also see the influence. The appreciation of a piece of literary work is mainly a visual process where we turn words into visual images and we are immersed in them. That is because reading is a process we use our eyes to read words and our mind tends to turn these words into visual images. Reading a piece of contemporary American literary work is indeed a turning-word-into-picture process. Thus, a visual perspective and reading is necessary to help enhance our understanding of contemporary American literary works. In this essay, I will discuss the pictorial turn in contemporary American literature, summarize W.J.T. Mitchell's picture theory and have a case analysis of teaching a piece of American literary work from the perspective of a picture theory, expecting to provide teachers and scholars a new perspective in the teaching and appreciation of contemporary American literature at the pictorial turn. The visual aspect exists in literary reading and criticism but it has never been attached to such great importance as there is a spatial, visual, or pictorial turn in American literary criticism. There is a high need to pay

2. THE PICTORIAL TURN IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

With the invention of the first camera at the end of the 19th century and its popularization in the twentieth century, people are gradually entering a pictorial age. They use cameras to record their life and make some videos. Then, with the popularization of films, TVs, computers, pictures are being produced every day. We are actually immersed in a pictorial world. Such a pictorial turn is also reflected in the literary creation of writers in the twentieth century. Reading literary works is like a process of turning words into images and then living in such an imagined world. Writers in the twentieth century who are influenced by the pictorial turn tend to add some visual elements in their literary creation like Eudora Welty, Vladimir Nabokov, Bobbie Ann Mason. The visual effect in their works is reflected in readers' reading. These writers use natural medium like windows to lead readers into characters' world, adopt cinematic skills in organizing the plot and integrate rich ekphrastic descriptions in their novels. For example, in Eudora Welty's short story "June Recital", the male protagonist who is bed-ridden tries to get out of his own world by seeing the neighbour's life through the window of his bedroom. "In the side of the house were six windows, two upstairs and four down, and back of the chimney a small stair window shaped like a keyhole"[1] [275-276]. Through the window, he sees the hostess' activities and Virgie's date with her boy friend. The window is a natural frame through which he sees another world. To some extent, the window frame is like a TV or

film screen where one person can see another world. Mason is a 20th century writer and her literary works are also filled with some visual elements. The description of photos and the plot in sitcom or movies become the inner narrative clue in her literary work. Readers who live through the 1980s to now will be surprised to find that there are so many familiar sitcom plot or film names and characters in her novel. Readers are led from the world created by the novel to the film directed by another director. Of course, the use of visual perspective and visual tools in literary works are diverse in different works. It is necessary to find out the role that visual elements play in contemporary American literary works. A visual theory will help critics find a new perspective in understanding a piece of literary works. Then, W.J.T. Mitchell's picture theory will be introduced so as to provide a mature framework to carry out the appreciation of a piece of literary work.

3. W.J.T. MITCHELL'S PICTURE THEORY

W.J.T. Mitchell is a professor at the University of Chicago. He finds that we are at the pictorial turn. Such a conclusion has actually described the world we are living in right now. The key points of his picture theory can be summarized as follows.

First, pictures and image are different. Image transcends pictures and pictures are material while image can appear in different materials. For example, the image of the dragon in China is abstract and the dragon does not even exist at all. However, it could appear in different places. It could appear in the clothes of emperors and the building of the imperial palace as a symbol of nobility and authority; second, there are meta-pictures which "might be capable of reflection on themselves, capable of providing a second-order discourse that tells us—or at least shows us—something about pictures" [2][38]. Metapicture reminds people of metafiction. The two have one thing in common, that is, they have the ability to tell their own stories or we can say that they are smart. That means pictures are not passive. Once being seen, metapictures have their own logic and meaning. Seers are led into their world. Third, pictures have love and life and can even make you do something. Sometimes, pictures do not only exist on the aesthetic level. They have the ability to make people do something. For example, the pictures in a skincare advertisement will tempt female audiences to buy the skincare product if they identify with the message conveyed by the advertisement. Fourth, W.J.T. Mitchell thinks that there are three aspects of ekphrasis from the perspective of psychology: ekphrastic indifference, ekphrastic hope and ekphrastic fear [3][695-719] which are the three stages that readers experience when reading a vividly described novel. The concept has vividly and accurately defined the process where readers deal with the relationship between word and image and how the two play a role on readers. Readers remain their indifferent attitude

when reading a text that has strong visual quality and effect. Then, as they enter the world organized by the writer. They finally hope that the world he or she describes is true. However, when they find the world the writer describes is close to real, they will have a feeling of fear. Such kind of experience depends on the writer's ability in literary description as well as readers' strong imagination and deep empathy. It can be said that Mitchell's picture theory provides a quite useful theoretical tool to see the relationship between word and image. To Mitchell, his theory is not theoretical but tries to picturize theory. Considering the pictorial turn in literary creation and literary criticism, it is necessary to integrate visual perspective in the appreciation and teaching of literature, especially contemporary American literature. Then, the essay will try to use the case analysis of appreciating Bobbie Ann Mason's novel *In Country* to show how to integrate Mitchell's picture theory in the teaching of appreciating a piece of literary work, expecting that it can not only provide a new theory for teachers in literature appreciation but also help them form a new understanding of the pictures in literature.

4. THE CASE ANALYSIS OF TEACHING THE APPRECIATION OF *IN COUNTRY* ACCORDING TO MITCHELL'S PICTURE THEORY

The twentieth-century witnessed the turn of the pictorial turn. The visual culture has dominated people's life and their aesthetic experience is also visualized. Writers who live in such an age are also influenced by the visual turn. Therefore, when there are some cross-media literary texts. There is a need to combine the text and related theories to help students gain a more diverse perspective in understanding a literary text. Taking the analysis of Bobbie Ann Mason's novel *In Country* for example, the novel has many ekphrastic descriptions. Mason shows a strong interest in popular culture like popular sitcoms, popular songs and films. The life of her contemporaries and her is surrounded by these popular entertainment forms. As a young writer in the 1980s, she enjoys integrating these elements in her literary creation. Thus, we can find a lot of visual descriptions in her novels. By and by, her observation style is visualized. Such a writing style is not separated from the visual turn in the twentieth century. If we just ignore it, we will miss the key to understanding her novels.

During the process of teaching students how to appreciate the novel *In Country*, it is necessary first to have a close reading of the novel. The novel is about how the female protagonist Sam tries to find the way to enter the traumatic Vietnam war trauma of her Dad and her uncle Emmett and helps her uncle to recover from the traumatic war experience. Then, the students will find out that there are many visual elements in the novel, including the vivid descriptions of the scene and the ekphrastic description of posters, photos and a sitcom. Therefore, it is necessary for

the teacher to inform students that these things can tell stories and pay attention to the function of these visual clues. For example, photos are the artistic product that connects the past to the present and can build a dialogue between the two. There are three descriptions in the novel about the photos of Mason's father Dwayne. If the teacher can find the logic between these photos, they will find that these photos record the growth of Dwayne from a boy to a man who wants to protect his family and his country[4][85]. Through the photos, readers can see the increasing masculinity in her Dad. Besides, the appearance of Uncle Sam poster also has rich meanings. The poster of Uncle Sam has some political meaning itself. When it is used in the novel, its significance is magnified. The index finger of Uncle Sam points out at Sam who is riding a bicycle along the poster. The gesture seems to convey the message that " I want you to serve the country" . It seems that the female protagonist has been interpellated by the poster. She, like her father, is called upon. His father responded to Uncle Sam's calling and went to Vietnam. The female protagonist is influenced by the poster and she also points out at the poster as a response. Besides the photos and the poster, another visual medium-the sitcom is also an important visual clue. The sitcom *M.S.A.H* provides Sam the experience of facing the death of someone she cares about. Before Sam was born, her father died in the Vietnam war. She actually did not see her father. However, she still cares about her father. It is through watching the sitcom and being affected by the death of the male actor that she feels for the first time the death of one person she cares about. The photos, the poster and the sitcom are useful visual clues that promote the plot of the novel. Mason is a writer who is immersed in the visual culture of the 1980s. All of these visual clues are very common in her era. If we ignore these visual details, we will not understand how Mason tries to put the female protagonist on the way to the depth of the traumatic history. Since it is hard for the people who are traumatized to tell about their own trauma, the second-generation trauma witness has the responsibility to reveal it. During the process of helping students to appreciate the novel, the teacher can ask students to close their eyes and then the teacher reads out the details of the ekphrasis so as to help students turn the words into images in their mind. This is an effective way to lead students into the world the writers try to construct. Students will be led to enter the visual world as the teacher reads out visual details. Besides, the teacher can also download the poster of Uncle Sam so as to show them what the poster really is like through presenting the poster to students. The teacher can introduce the background of the poster and tell them how the poster was a product of WWI and then became the combination of individual choice and national interest, thus embodying rich political meanings. The teacher can also download the sitcom of *M.A.S.H* to show students the war scene mentioned in the novel so as to help students enter the visual world described by the writer. Actually, these materials are easy to find and can be useful tools for the teacher to help students understand the visual clues in the novel and find a new way to appreciate the novel. It can be

said that such a teaching method is a visual and verbal combination, which is determined by the text in the novel as well as the visual culture at that time. Third, the teacher can ask students how they understand the novel with and without these visual tools and perspective. It should be mentioned that the concept and history of ekphrasis should be introduced to students first so as to make them know the relationship between verbal representation and visual representation. Sometimes, pictures can tell some things. The vividness of pictures and the story behind them seem to have their own life. After they are seen, they gain a second life. In the novel *In Country*, the visual details are not unimportant details but take on the function of bridging the past and the present and conveying their own stories. Of course, without the eyes of readers and their imagination, these visual images cannot exist and cannot play an important role. Therefore, readers' participation and strong imagination are very important in the appreciation of the novel. Through such a way of teaching, we can see not only the teacher but students are actively motivated to enter the literary world and appreciate the visual world created by the writer. Such teaching has a high degree of participation, so has the novel itself.

Of course, the visual clues in the novel are not limited to photos, the poster and the sitcom. There is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the country scenery in Vietnam and so on. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is the final destination of Sam, Emmett, and Sam's grandmother and the place where Emmett gains identification that cannot be gained in the county Hopewell and finally determines to say goodbye to the past and live a new life. The country scenery in the novel arouses Sam's imagination of the Southeast Asian country- Vietnam.

Such a teaching of the appreciation of American Literature is the result of considering the specific historical background of the 20th century and the writer's own visual consciousness. The visual clues are not just limited to the above mentioned ones. More are waiting to be found and we can find that Mason leaves many clues for readers and critics to follow and find out the underlying relationship between them. Then, they will find that the seemingly unimportant clues are intentional design of the writer. Mason's intentional design in the novel is very natural. With so many visual clues, it can be said that Bobbie Ann Mason's novel *In Country* is an example in point that can explain how to analyze literary works and pay attention to the minor but important details in a novel. The visual turn in our daily life has formed our heavy reliance on visual media. Reading seems to be threatened in the pictorial turn since people tend to watch movies or TV. All of these make the reading of the novel from a visual perspective a very good way to understand the novel. It can be said that literary analysis from the visual perspective is a way to respond to the pictorial turn and a good way to analyze the influence of visual culture on literary creation.

5. CONCLUSION

The essay has discussed the general situation of the pictorial turn. In the pictorial turn, people's daily life and aesthetic experience have been visualized. Such a change has affected the literary creation of contemporary American writers. Knowing such a background is of great importance to the understanding of the literary characteristics of writers of the 20th century and how visual medium and visual culture affect writers' creation. The pictorial turn is also an obvious turn in literary criticism. Seeing is a process that is comparatively related to readers' reading and imagination. Reading starts from seeing the words in a book and turning verbal representation into visual one. Reading contemporary American novels is also a process where readers turn words into images. Such a visually aesthetic experience is enhanced as writers use some visual medium in writing. In literary class, a visual perspective is an important one that is worth teachers' attention. W.J.T. Mitchell's picture theory is an accurate response to the pictorial turn. With the help of his theory, we can gain a better understanding of the visual world we live in and the visual world that is created by writers who live in a visual world. Mitchell's theory can be a response to the visual world of the 20th century and the 21st century and can help us see clearly how our world and our life really are. Social reality has a strong influence over literary creation and literary creation responds to the world. Contemporary American writers tend to shape a visual world with their imagination of the world they live in. In contemporary American Literature class, it is necessary to help students gain a visual perspective in appreciating contemporary literary works. Teachers can adopt the method of enhancing students' visual reading experience by making them close their eyes and listen to the vivid description or helping them explore the visual clues that a writer leaves in a novel. Of course, the visual perspective is only one of the ways to appreciate a contemporary American novel. More ways can be proposed to enrich our understanding of a piece of literary work. However, we cannot doubt that it is a useful theory that can provide a creative perspective in understanding American contemporary literature. In real teaching practice, putting the theory into use requires both the teacher and students to use their imagination to enter the visual world created by the writer. In a word, the present visual turn is not only an obvious phenomenon in the world but also affects literary creation and literary appreciation. Teachers

in literature teaching, especially in contemporary American literature, should pay attention to the visual clues in literature and explore how they affect writers' creation. Of course, the visual perspective is not the only way to appreciate a literary text so we cannot be limited by such a theoretical perspective. More perspectives can be adopted and different perspectives can be integrated into a unity. For example, we can build a bridge between seeing and other senses, visual theory and thing theory and so on. However, visual perspective is the most direct and it is closely related to readers' reading. Helping students pay attention to visual clues in contemporary literary works is a good way to help them understand the underlying meanings of them. Therefore, teachers who teach students how to appreciate a literary text should pay attention to the verbal representation of the visual representation in literary works. Besides, they should pay attention to the use of different visual media. Such a teaching is different from the traditional one. The teaching method is diversified and can form a more creative teaching effect. Besides, the imagination process is included in teaching. Imagining is not only a process students experience when reading a novel but a process they have in analysis. Literary works are the product of the times and respond to them in an imaginative way. Grasping the living style and cultural turn can help us know better the production background of a piece of literary work. The adoption of the visual perspective is a response to the times and the literary characteristics of contemporary literary works.

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