

Intertextuality and Self-Reflexivity: A Study of George Bowering's *Burning Water*

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Abstract

The present research paper aims to define the “self-reflexivity” and “intertextuality” as one of the features of the postmodern historical novel known as historiographic metafiction. Historiographic metafiction is a postmodern art form. The term was coined by Linda Hutcheon in her essay “Beginning to Theorize the Postmodern” in 1987 and further developed in her seminal study *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) to describe those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically lay claim to historical events and personages. Bowering's *Burning Water* is one of the best examples of Self-reflexivity and Intertextuality that underlines a prominent feature of Bowering's fiction as well as of his poetry. In *Burning Water* Bowering's handling of the subject is surrounded by his use of self-reflexivity and intertextuality. Thus, this paper aims at presenting how these features of historiographic metafiction display themselves in Bowering's *Burning Water*.

KEYWORDS: Historiographic metafiction, self-reflexivity, Intertextuality

INTRODUCTION:

Hutcheon contends that the postmodernist fiction is characterized by intense self-reflexivity and openly parodic intertextuality. Utilizing historical accounts as intertextual effects, the writers of postmodernist fiction distrust in history. Postmodern theory suggests a different view of history from that of nineteenth century. According to this kind of consideration, postmodernism has the special function to self-reflexivity and intertextuality. It questions history by employing its own narrative in order to reveal the holes in such perceived truth.

This use of self-reflexivity and intertextuality in postmodern literary works which results in the creation of historiographic metafiction. Bowering's *Burning Water* is one of the best examples of Self-reflexivity and Intertextuality that underlines a prominent feature of Bowering's fiction as well as of his poetry. Thus, this paper aims at presenting how the concepts belonging to historiographic metafiction display themselves in Bowering's *Burning Water*.

INTER-TEXTUALITY AND ITS PREMISES:

Elaborate commitment with previous and contemporary textual productions is characteristic of eighteenth-century literature: direct reference, quotation, indirect allusion, imitation, parody, travesty, and other forms of intertextuality are the marks of an expanding print culture, testing and expanding the boundaries of its textual forms.

The term intertextuality was coined by Julia Kristeva in the late 1960s to express the connection between texts: “Any text is considered as a mosaic of quotations.....The notion of intertextuality replaces that of inter-subjectivity.....”(Kristeva 1981, 66). The concept of intertextuality serves with the view that author is the sole source of the meanings of the text. By contrast, text regarded as inter-text is de-limited; it overlaps with an unlimited number of other texts whether or not this was intended by the author (Plett01991, 5). Inter-textual relations replace inter-subjective relations between author and reader as well as relations between language and world; all texts refer (only) to universe of texts.

In current critical practice there is no agreed definition of intertextuality (Allen 2000, 2). It is most frequently used as an umbrella term to include a text’s relation to (specific) other texts.

Inter-textuality links the idea of the boundary between history and fiction, and the challenge to history’s claim to provide access to an objective truth. All the texts have a particular relationship with the models, narrative structures and characters in part from previous texts. In this case, Roland Barthes’ definition of the intertexts is considerable. He quotes “the impossibility of living outside the infinite text” (1988:128). There are a few examples of literary works that unfolds the notions of inter-textuality. Pope’s *Dunciad* also engages intertextuality with contemporary criticism, notably that of Richard Bentley (1662-1742), whose scholarship is ridiculed as pedantic and farcical. Henry Fielding’s novel *Joseph Andrews* (1742) use inter-textual references to boost the symbolic standing of the rising genre novel, describing it as “comic epic in prose.”

INTERTEXTUALITY IN BURNING WATER:

Burning Water is significant for the number and scope of its intertexts which have a wide range of works that supply an overarching structure of the novel to those which provide a more local understanding of theme: Laurette Sejourne’s 1960 book *Burning Water*, Charles Olson’s *The Maximus Poems*, visionary poet William Blake, S.T. Coleridge’s “*The Rime of Ancient Mariner*” etc. All the main characters of the *Burning Water* try to expose the world of other texts. Bowering’s historical concern has some biographical sources. He got influenced by the lessons of the American

Bowering’s style of Vancouver’s understandings owes at least as much to imagination as to documented historical fact. “Imagination”, as opposed to “fancy”, is a central theme of the narrative and part of its intertextuality. The text engages the aesthetic theory of the late eighteenth- century romantic poets. The visionary poet William Blake plays a small but significant role, and there are allusions to Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “*Rime of the Ancient Mariner*”.

Bowering’s George Vancouver is a fanciful rather than an imaginative man who would rather be winning glory by engaging French ships in battle than painstakingly charting the Pacific coast in search of a waterway leading to the Great Lakes. Imagination is a quality of the elegant Spanish naval captain, Quadra, who seduces the puritanical Vancouver, and of Vancouver’s chief antagonist, the Scottish scientist Archibald

Menzies. Menzies joins the expedition to conduct botanical research and, to Vancouver's annoyance, serves as physician to the captain, whose health is failing rapidly.

Through the narrative, Vancouver and Menzies engage in a conflict between two fundamentally different approaches to life and knowledge. Menzies witnesses Vancouver's decline into madness and becomes an instrument in his death- a turn of events that suggests the superiority of the imaginative attitude to the fanciful.

The imagination/ fancy debate is also carried on in the comical dialogue between two Indian fishermen. The first Indian is a fanciful young man, who aspires to be an artist.

SELF-REFLEXIVITY AND ITS PREMISES:

Literary works that deal with history in a postmodern way combine the concern with history with the self- reflexivity of the narration, its self-awareness as a piece of fiction, thus rethinking and reworking the past acknowledged gives that historicity can only be genuine today if it is aware of its own provisional condition.

Self-reflexivity in the postmodern novel is itself a metaphor for the ontological questioning, discussion, and anxiety of the present age. By drawing attention to its being an artifact, postmodern fiction self-consciously opens the relationship between "reality" and fiction to question. This means that it is a self- reflexive, a reflection on itself- a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity.

Coiling upon itself, moving forwards and backwards, the postmodern novel questions the novel as a genre in form and content. In such works the reader's attention is drawn not to what is narrated but to how it is narrated. Plot is only a part of intertextuality, the process of narration matters more than the content. Hutcheon contends that the postmodernist fiction is characterized by intense self-reflexivity and overtly parodic intertextuality. Utilizing historical accounts as intertextual effects, the writers of postmodernist fiction distrust in history.

Self-reflexivity is a literary device through which a piece of writing draws attention to its manner of composition. The most favorable genre to allow for its use seems to be the novel. At the same time as the author unravels the story, she tells you about her choices, dilemmas, timing, and organization of the material among other things.

Although it is generally claimed that self-reflexivity is typical of postmodern literature, there is consensus that it dates back to the 18th century and that it can be found in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, a nine-volume novel published between 1759 and 1766. Clear contemporary examples of this device are found in Brooke Lenz's *John Fowles: Visionary and Voyeur* and in Martin Amis' *London Fields*. The author is letting the reader into his mindset as he writes. Yet that this is his actual mindset is not necessarily true, since we are talking of a literary device. In his introduction to *The Magus*, Fowles warns us that he will cheat on us, and that we need to distinguish between truth and lies.

Another aspect of self-reflexivity appears in works that include self-reference. In *Don Quixote*, Cervantes mentioned one of his previous books, just as in painting many artists portrayed themselves as anonymous characters inside large compositions.

SELF-REFLEXIVITY IN BURNING WATER:

Self-reflexivity is a prominent feature of Bowering's fiction as well as his poetry. The novel is surrounded in number of narrative shifts between George Vancouver and Quadra, Menzies and first Indian to second Indian. Through these shifts the characters discuss various themes and issues.

The effect of these narrative shifts is to highlight the fictionality of the stories, to emphasize that they are made up, and that their relationship to reality and truth is highly problematic.

Burning Water opens with a prologue in which Bowering addresses the reader directly, describing his long-standing interest in the explorer George Vancouver. By coincidence, the writer shares the name "George" with the eighteenth-century British naval captain, who also shared the name with his king, George III, the monarch who sent Vancouver in search of the Northwest Passage. Bowering insists on the reader's complicity in the construction of the narrative of *Burning Water*. "We cannot tell a story that leaves us outside, and when I say we, I include you.... We are making a story, after all, as we always have been standing and speaking together to make up a history, a real historical fiction." Although much of the content of the novel is derived from historical documents, Bowering never allows readers to forget this is a fiction.

Bowering provides ample evidence about the novel's being self-reflexive nature. As he calls it a 'reflexive novel' that reveals its making alongside its telling. At the end of the opening chapter we get introduced to the author, who is staying in Trieste, Italy.

"IN TRIESTE, IT WAS RAINING most of the time, and he would bump other umbrellas with his own on his way down to the piazza, where he would look out at the fog that had drifted in across the northern end of the Adriatic. It was his idea, crazed in all likelihood, that if he was going to write a book about that other coast as it was two hundred years ago, he would be advised to move away in space too." (p.9)

Prior to his discovery of postmodernist literary theory Bowering had attempted to write realistic novels:

All the confusion made him think about the good old days, when the realist novelist just had to describe the setting and introduce into it the main characters. (p.14)

Moreover, in seventeenth chapter we come across the reference of formation of novel.

War may make men go round the world, but love makes the world go round. Actually, any novelist, any man of imagination could have told him (George Vancouver) that commerce was the moving power behind both. (p.61)

Burning Water is full of deliberate anachronism, bad jokes, and concealed quotations from other writers (“The Sea,’ said Menzies... in mid ocean, is also a garden”). These elements operate in the novel as one form of intertextuality, the general condition of all texts as existing in relation to other texts, and also as a travesty. Bowering acknowledges this through the technique of travesty.

CONCLUSION:

Text analysis shows that the novel develops its narration on firm grounding of inter-textuality and self- reflexivity. The notion of inter-textuality and self- reflexivity brings narrative complications of the multiple voice/ point of view, and narrative shifts. The inter-textual references of William Blake’s Vision and Coleridge’s Imagination and Fancy dominates the almost conversation of main characters of the novel. The deep study of these two features of Historiographic Metafiction widens our knowledge and view about novels being multi- layered in its theme and meaning.

Burning Water reveals both reading and writing practices and processes of Bowering. George Bowering, thus, is a hybrid entity, both reader and author, and his novels are a combination of inter-texts and personal, cultural and reading experiences and memories

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