

**TEXTUS MUNDI: INTERTEXTUAL MEMORY IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S "MY  
LAST DUCHESS"**

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**Abstract**

*In Margaret Atwood's short story "My Last Duchess" appeared first in the collection Moral Disorder (2006), the homodiegetic narrator Nell along with other pupils was taught the famous Victorian English poem "My Last Duchess" by a teacher nicknamed Miss Bessie in a school classroom. The lessons on Browning's poem had a profound impact on the life and thoughts of the narrator, and the story recounts the change that she went through during and after her schooldays. The narrative is all about the narrator's teenage memory as school student and it could not be transformed into a story without the reference to that Victorian poem. Therefore, intertextuality becomes part and parcel of the 'memory of the text', as well as the 'memory in the text'. As for the 'memory of the text', any reference to Browning's hypotext brings to the fore how the intertextuality itself forms an external memory space in which Atwood's hypertext communicates with a Victorian poem and through it to a fictional episode from the Renaissance Italy. As regards the 'memory in the text', Atwood's hypertext functions as the external memory storage for the narrator's memories and helps structure diverse reflections to the act of reading from the perspectives of Nell's gendered consciousness. In this paper, I shall seek to foreground the creative synergy between Browning's poem and Atwood's short story in terms of intertextual memory. Attempts will be made to discuss how Atwood's literary memory of a pre-existing text and Nell's living response to the poem operate in at once similar and syncretic ways.*

**Keywords:** memory; intertextuality; hypotext; hypertext; creative synergy etc.

Reinterpretation, re-vision, rereading, rewriting, and reproduction of canonical texts is a very common trend popular with the female writers who started their writing careers after World War II. Margaret Atwood (1939- ), one among the admirable practitioners of postmodern fiction, often uses the methods associated with rewriting for her creative oeuvre, and in her short story “My Last Duchess” we see her collaborating with a famous Victorian poem of selfsame title to rewrite it for contemporary readers. In this paper, I propose to explore the collaborative attitude of Atwood with Robert Browning, a Victorian English poet, using the theories of intertextuality. I will also try to discuss how the memory of reading a canonical poem by Browning shapes not only the attitude of Atwood here in the story, but also of her protagonist Nell while deciding upon her future career. Attempts will also be made to show how the collaboration facilitates Atwood with a creative power that is synergical in nature.

Intertextuality, as conceptualized by Julia Kristeva in the 1960s when literary theory reached its peak of popularity, is believed to be modelled after the Saussurean linguistic system and Bakhtinian dialogism. The theory emphasizes the fact that any text “cannot exist as a hermetic or self-sufficient whole, and so does not function as a closed system” (Worton & Still, 1990, 1). This is because of two primary factors. Firstly, before being the creator of any text, the writer is an avid reader and because of her/ his reading habit, the artistic productions are ought to be full of “references, quotations and influences of every kind” (Worton & Still, 1990, 1). Secondly, since “a text is available only through some process of reading” (Worton & Still, 1990, 1), the text under discussion is affected and determined by all the earlier texts that are brought to the fore consciously/ unconsciously by the reader at the time of reading. Therefore, hypotext(s) or source text(s) as intertext(s) pass into any hypertext or newly created text through two separate types of intertextuality, either with the author or with the reader, and both these two types include memories, stated or unstated, of earlier texts. Thus the notion of intertextuality completely dwells upon memory; as intertexts are fetched by the author/ creator and the reader by way of conscious anamnesis, remembrance and identification. So an attempt to find out intertextual relation in its most comprehensible sense is an act of remembering where literature remembers itself. The memory of any text is none but its intertextuality. Intertextual memories are frequently invoked, and in the words of

Canadian theorist Linda Hutcheon, if the reader possesses some working knowledge of the adapted text, every reading ought to be “an ongoing dialogical process” (Hutcheon, 2006, 21) between the source s/he knows already and the one being read. Margaret Atwood’s “My Last Duchess” is a perfect specimen of what the French theorist Gérard Genette writes in his work *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* as the intertextual “relationship of copresence between two texts or among several texts” (Genette, 1997, 1-2), Browning’s poem “My Last Duchess” being what Michael Riffaterre would call, more specifically, in turn, its compulsory intertext. Riffaterre, who considers literariness and intertextuality in the same bracket, questions for two types of intertextuality: optional and compulsory. According to him whereas *aleatory* or optional intertextuality “allows the reader to read a text through the prism of all and any familiar texts” (Worton & Still, 1990, 1) and *obligatory* or compulsory intertextuality “demands that the reader take account of a hypogrammatic origin” (Worton & Still, 1990, 1).

Intertextuality is a definitive characteristic of many contemporary fictional writings. Reinterpretation and reproduction of European classics in an appropriative text are one of the ethical issues of postmodern writing. Many writers belonging to the post-World War II period have been appropriating and rewriting the canon and the narrative constructions of those writers depend extensively on canonical scaffolding. One such writer is Margaret Atwood who is primarily known for reusing “the old, great stories, modifying and usually subverting them, hiding their traces in order to reveal contemporary landscapes, characters, and problems” (Wilson, 1993, xi). A voracious reader of literature and an alumnus of Radcliffe College, an all-female liberal arts institution of Harvard University, Atwood began her writing career in the 1960s with poems. She left Harvard in the midway of her doctoral studies without completing the dissertation on the English metaphysical romance in 1964 and accepted a teaching position in the University of British Columbia’s English department. After leaving Harvard, Atwood took temporary teaching positions in different Canadian higher education institutions before completely committing herself to writing. Soon she extended her interest from poetry to fiction, and it is for fictional prose her fame as a writer primarily rests. Though Atwood deals with critical issues from a diverse range of sources, critics across the globe generally agree to the fact that the fictional works of the litterateur are

full of signs of second-wave feminism. Sharon Rose Wilson, an early and renowned critic of the works of Margaret Atwood, wrote in 1993 that throughout her career the artist “has used numerous intertexts or texts within texts; frame narratives echo inner narratives’ images, motifs, themes, characterization, structures, and even plots” (Wilson, 1993, 4) to reflect self-consciously on those former source texts. The critic further wrote that Atwood often makes re-vision or parody of the ‘truth’ as documented in some great stories or literary works by attributing a realist contemporary setting like an urban Toronto or London, for according to the feminist writer Adrienne Rich re-vision for a female artist is “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction ... it is an act of survival” (Rich, 1972, 18). The collection of eleven short stories by Margaret Atwood *Moral Disorder* was first published in 2006 by McClelland and Stewart in Canada and eventually in the following year by London-based Virago Press, a house dedicated to women’s writing. The title “Moral Disorder” is not Atwood’s own creation, but adopted from an unfinished and never completed novel of the same name attempted by her partner the acclaimed Canadian novelist Graeme Gibson (1934-2019). This book is a collection of some interconnected stories concerning the fate of a troubled and disturbed fate of a middle class Canadian family. The stories here are loosely connected and they are, often cited by critics, based on the fictional autobiography of Atwood herself. All the stories, except the last one, include a single homodiegetic narrator Nell and present events and incidents of her life from her own perspective. In one particular story, namely “My Last Duchess” that appears as the fourth in the book, we get Nell as a student in a public school from a middle class family and, like Atwood herself, an avid reader as well as admirer of literature. The main narrative draws its sustenance from Nell’s understanding of the lessons on famous English poet Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess” by a teacher nicknamed here as Miss Bessie.

One of the famous English poets of the Victorian era Robert Browning (1812-1889) is primarily known to the readers of English poetry for experiments with dramatic monologue and for incorporating unusual poetic persona in his poems. His poem and a successful dramatic monologue “My Last Duchess” (1842) depicts a fictional episode from Renaissance Italy. In the poem, we see Browning celebrating the patriarchal worldview of a duke who is presumably the Duke Alfonso of the northern Italian Province of Ferrara and a staunch

supporter of a male dominated society. In the poem we see the Duke accompanying the representative of the household of a prospective fresh missus on a tour to explore his art collection. His collection includes a painting of her last wife painted by Frà Pandolf where she appears as jovial and cheerful. Upon raising the curtain from this painting, the Duke declares that he made necessary arrangements to stop that jovial appearance of his last wife. In an interview, when asked about the Duke's command to stop the smile, Browning himself replied that the Duke either put her to death or make arrangements to shut her in a convent for a caged life. The poem depicts the duchess as a mere commodity who is not given any identity through naming and portrait of whom may be demonstrated for some valuable goods or objects. The composition is all about a dumb passive female who is too weak to claim her rights. Atwood gave this poem a contemporary setting in a different genre of course by not altering its structure. The poem appears in the story as the 'poem' by Browning, but what alters is its interpretation as understood by the narrator Nell. The story ends with Nell the narrator's decision to separate herself from her relationship with her boyfriend Bill who "replaced my last boyfriend, who'd replaced the one before that. The process of replacement was delicate – it called for diplomacy, and nuance ... but at a certain stage had to be done" (Atwood, 2014, 69). Bill is presented here as a very rational fellow possessing a prospect in science and having no interest in literature. He considers reading literary works would bring no reward. The reason for the break up is not the duke-like attitude of Bill, but rather the difference in opinion regarding the interpretation of the poem. Whereas Bill directly blames the Duke for his role behind the disappearance of the Duchess, Nell signals towards something else. She dislikes the dumb bunny nature of "a nice normal girl with a sick jerk for a husband" (Atwood, 2014, 82). Rather at one point, Nell identifies herself with the poem's murderous duke: "better to be the ruthless one, moving decisively forward and eliminating the potentially suffocating alternatives" (Truax, 2006). We see her lamenting for the incorporations of the Duchess-like heroines in the school curriculum:

Tess was evidently another of those unlucky pushovers, like the Last Duchess, and like Ophelia – we'd studied *Hamlet* earlier. These girls are all similar. They were too trusting, they found themselves in the hands of the wrong men, they weren't up to things, they let themselves drift. They smiled too much. They were too eager to

please. Then they got bumped off, one way or another. Nobody gave them any help.  
(Atwood, 2014, 84)

The lamentation grows further when Nell considers that reading *Duchess* and likes of her may not be an inspiration for a teenage girl like her and the reading experience will always keep the female readers halted within the space assigned to them by the patriarchal society. She begins at one point to believe that perhaps Bill is right; reading literary text of this kind is none but a waste of time. She blames the curriculum committee for not incorporating texts with the strong independent heroine.

In the story we see Nell taking some serious inspiration from the life of her English teacher Miss Bessie. The teacher is introduced in the story as someone with good legs and beautiful shoes that are “softly gleaming”. The suits that she wears

“had an elegance the other could not match. Her blouses were not cheesy, ... her brooches looked as if their semi-precious stones were real... Her hair wasn’t grey but silver, and expertly waved; her cheekbones were prominent, her jaw firm, her eyes piercing; her nose, discreetly powdered, was *aquiline*, a word we had learned from her.” (Atwood, 2014, 59)

Atwood conveys here an admiring tone; the physical outlook establishes Miss Bessie as an exalted, intelligent, and impressive character. The story is set somewhere in the 1950s. The Second World War had just concluded, and the second sex started to undertake on men’s professions. The English teacher’s appearance, with suits and brooches, demonstrates her contribution in a specialized field. The motivation possessed by Miss Bessie is described by the narrator as similar to the school’s reputation and her own, and the lady always aspires for maximum marks from her pupils. Once again, all these portray her as a respectable professional with a higher belief in her skill of teaching and guiding students. As a philosopher and guide, Miss Bessie maintains a nurturing task, something that has got feminine features. She may also probably be seen as a replacement of the figure of the mother for Nell, who is missed by our narrator at home. In addition to the best taste of fashion and manner, and a fascinating appearance, this extends her charm further as a free and independent lady from the perspective of a teenage young girl. Atwood’s portrayal of the teacher is unique and symbolic; for Miss Bessie not only sketched as a character but also as

an entity, an idea in a physical form. She is presented as an ideal for the woman Nell is searching and expecting in books; an ideal for the growing girls of that generation. At one point Nell is describing her as “an elderly child, crinkled at the corners as if she were suppressing a joke or a quaint of wisdom” (Atwood, 2014, 85). The metaphor latent here implies that perhaps she is trying to teach Nell something, but unfortunately, it does not contain any set of solid ideas. The story ends with Nell standing alone in the path of her life. In the last few pages, we see Miss Bessie’s presence in Nell’s imagination only guiding her invisibly to proceed through the dark tunnel all alone. The ending hints at Nell’s acceptance of a life without any companion or any ‘boyfriend’ making Bill her last boyfriend.

Atwood is often clubbed together with other female writers like Joyce Carol Oates, Angela Carter, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Michèle Roberts whose writings are influenced greatly by different aspects of second-wave feminism. Though Atwood never labelled herself as a feminist, issues like reproductive rights, increased equality for women, self-reliance, etc. occur so often in her works. This present story is also no exception. To portray a narrator who wants to become all on her own to find things out, we see Atwood remembering her reading as a student of literature of a canonical poem by Browning typically known as work with a strong patriarchal message. The poem serves here as an intertext to create a *textus mundi* or a well-structured world of words for Atwood. The memory of the hypotext (the poem by Browning) not only provides Atwood an opportunity to appropriate it by assigning newness for contemporary readers, the memory of the poem also facilitates the readers to judge the hypertext as against a fictional story from Renaissance Italy. The memory space that exists between the hypotext and the hypertext is always created out of the single text because of its reference to some other texts. This extratextual memory space, which is also intertextual, connects every text, and that every text transforms the structure of this memory space as it always writes itself into it. As regards the memory in the text, we see the narrator recalling her memory of reading a text in a literature class with a teacher and its impact on her life and worldview. Thereby it creates in the story an intratextual memory space which at the same time is extratextual–intertextual memory. Therefore, it is difficult to separate the memory in the text and the memory of the text as the narrator’s intratextual memory based on the extratextual references. To understand Atwood’s story with most of its

significations, readers must take into account its hypogrammatic origin, something that brings to the fore the propositional structure of any text.

In conclusion, we may say that Atwood's "My Last Duchess" is a highly intertextual text where we see the author's conscious appropriation of a widely known source text and willing collaboration with a canonical poet. The collaboration results in a synergetic force that allows Atwood to write back to the canon and establish an alternative interpretation. The story is indeed a work of intertextual remembering or memory that works for both the author and narrator in similar as well as syncretic ways.

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