

A Post-postmodern Reading of Lotte Kramer's 'Ice'

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There was a time we were all New Critics or Marxist critics, but that was long ago. Some of us are still New Critics and some of us are still Marxist critics, but there has occurred in the postmodern era a fragmentation of approaches to literature, and now, some of us might describe ourselves as New Historicists or deconstructionists, feminist critics, or by any label in a long list of possible critical stances. The central question for me seems to me to be what I have learned about text and poetics and their relations in the period we call postmodernism and where we go from here in literary studies and the teaching of literature. The simple answer is that we must choose what we want literature to be and to do. Text, for me, has come to mean anything we can enframe and intuit as meaningful. Poetics means for me the ways we have of understanding that meaningfulness. I would like to describe my own present post-postmodern praxis in the teaching of literature using the short lyric poem 'Ice' by the contemporary British poet Lotte Kramer.

Summer heat
And a splinter of ice
On my childhood tongue.

That watery chip
My reward as I clung
To the apron-strings

Of the woman carrying
Crystal slabs
To feed our fridge

In two zinc buckets
On sun-blinded cobbles
From the end of the street.

My response to this poem cannot be what it might once have been, not only because I and the world I know have changed, but because of the new awarenesses that postmodernism has presented to me. My ideas about what a poem is and what it does have changed, although the central questions that we would put to any work of literature seem to me to remain what is it and what does it do.

We can't put aside or behind us any of our new awarenesses of text and poetics and their relations, and each will in some way be helpful to us, but we need to choose what is more and less important for us. When it comes to choosing, I think we might do well to attend to these reassuring words of Helen Vendler in an essay entitled 'What We Have Loved':

The best argument for a critical position is the serenity with which it is practiced, not the defensiveness that it exhibits. If we remember our common love of our texts, we can afford to be hospitable to critical difference and serene in our own affinities. (Vendler 1981: 20)

Of the place of eclecticism in the classroom, Helen Vendler has said, in the same essay, that

‘it is certainly more instructive to our students to find teachers coming at literature from many vantage points than to be subjected to a single vision; and the most useful critical truth a student can learn is that a piece of literature yields different insights depending on the question put to it.’ (Vendler 1981:20)

Similarly, the greater the variety of kinds of critical responses our students can make will enrich what they do and what we do collectively as a class.

The structuralist would add much to our understanding of the poem in his attention to its pattern, system, and structure. He might point to the tying up of the poem in the end-rhyme of the first and concluding lines and in the coming to the end of the journey from one end of the street to the other, and to how its preponderance of noun phrases and use of only three verbs have the effect of freezing it in time like a snapshot. He might point out that the first stanza might almost stand alone in its haiku-like quality. But he might lose sight of the individuality of the text. He would cancel out the author, since for him the text is a function of a system, not an individual. He would erase the reader and history itself. I can acknowledge that I don’t need to know who the author is to value the poem. But what a huge difference it makes to me to discover that Lotte Kramer was one of those children who was sent to England before the outbreak of the war and who survived the Holocaust there while all her family perished. It’s a difference that I wouldn’t want to give up. Sharing the imaginative experiences of others sometimes ties us to one another even more intimately than does the sharing of what we might call “real” experiences.

The poststructuralist would reveal to me the unstableness of the text and of all that it would signify, and that to me is in keeping with my understanding that everything in the universe is in a constant state of flux. Our selves and others and the world we inhabit are all something we are constantly remaking and playing on our “blue guitar”.

Truth in literature remains of crucial importance for me, and I, too, must take issue with the negative stance toward truth in both structuralism and poststructuralism. Truth, always an imaginative truth, is intuitively clear to me in ‘Ice’ in the way it’s clear to me in a composition of Bach or of Gustav Mahler, in a painting by Rubens or Kandinsky, or in a dance by Balanchine or Martha Graham. Such a subjective recognition of what we would call imaginative truth is as essential to me as it is to have intuitive criteria for judging what is beautiful or good, no matter how philosophically problematic it is to arrive at our own individual definitions of these concepts.

With regard to the death of the author, postmodernist criticism generally disdains what I and many others would consider to be a common-sense view of the authorial “I”, and some attempt to separate the “empirical” author from the “voice” that addresses us in the poem, but only to our loss. It is in communication with another human being far more than in communion with nature or our own solitude that we grow, and that, it seems to me, is the first purpose of literature—that we be augmented or enhanced by it—that we grow through it.

Intertextual critics analyze poetry as part of a dialogue with other texts. I think our encounter with this poem must be fuller when we set it within the poet’s entire corpus and when we discover associations between it and not only another poem or another work of literature necessarily, but with, let’s say, a film, a photograph, a musical composition,

a dance, a painting or a work of sculpture, or a work from whatever genre of text. The first association I make with this poem is of a painting on permanent exhibition at Terezín of a little boy who did not survive the Holocaust.

Deconstructionists, like the old New Critics, would maintain that the “voice” we hear in the poem is not that of the poet’s self but that of a persona, a purely textual entity. That’s true, but only in one of several senses of a concept of self. The fictional self, something we all possess, has its value as a tool for making our lives a becoming.

The New Historicist would draw attention to aspects of the historical context which are unspoken or only hinted at, like the tedium and the pleasure of living in an age without electric fridges. New Historicism tends to focus more on what the writer didn’t say than what she did say. It has a tendency to draw us so far from the work of literature that our classrooms or our writing become the occasion for asking questions to which we already know the answer, and which simply reaffirm whatever political or other kind of agenda we bring to it.

A feminist critic reading this poem might make much of the child’s being raised in a consciousness of the central place of domesticity in a woman’s life. He or she might point to the word *reward* as central to the poem, which it is, and suggest that the child’s life will be controlled by a system of rewards, perhaps for being a companion to someone. The word that receives the second strongest weight is *clung*. Perhaps the same critic will see the child growing up to believe that it is a woman’s destiny to cling to someone.

A New Critic would maintain an aesthetic distance that might cheat him of the immediacy of the encounter with the poem—to feel the summer heat, to taste the water on the tongue, to experience as fully as possible the sensualness of the poem, and to experience the emotions of the poem—to feel the love for the woman that the child feels, to know the feeling of clinging to her apron strings—to come as close as we can to making the poem our own—as close as we can to the feeling that we could have written the poem—or the short story, the novel, or the play, because it is only in that effort that we will discover that there is more in us than we had imagined and that we will grow in that discovery.

Reader-response theory would claim that there are as many ways of understanding the work as there are readers. That’s true, but there are more and less plausible and more and less valuable understandings, and here again we have to choose, and we have an obligation here to help our students make those discriminations, lest a democratic classroom become a setting for literary license.

The grammatologist would help us to appreciate the fluidity rather than the fixedness of the text and would caution us against assuming that this little poem carries some freight of meaning which it becomes our critical task to discover—the most common critical failing in so many of our students when we meet them for the first time.

The archetypal critic will rightly find a narrative pattern suggestive of some mythical pattern, character types, a theme, a motif traceable far back in myth and ritual and in depth psychology. Water is central to this poem, and water is always a powerful symbol in myth and the human psyche, evoking, as Seamus Heaney has suggested ‘the water-diviner, mysteriously gifted, in touch with deep, life-giving strata’ (Carey 2002). Life-giving—so apt in this poem.

The Freudian or psychoanalytical critic would examine speculative relationships between the poet and the poem and reduce the poem to a set of “symptoms.” The Lacanian would see the poem as a “symptom” of the writer. The “ego-psychologists” would urge us to examine our relation to the poem in terms of how we use the text to satisfy unconscious wishes, a reasonably safe assumption, as we the readers fuse our own identities with those of the characters, shaping each. The psychobiographical critic would search for the poet’s intentions and motives to find causes, stimuli, reasons, the background of inspiration—the relationship between the poet’s mind and personality and the poem she has written. Perhaps

here it is simply to relive a moment of peace and togetherness with a loved one before the parting and the transport. Perhaps it is to help in the healing of a wound.

The best response to this poem will be neither a reduction nor a tautology, although any plausible moral or intellectual paraphrase might be helpful as a step on the way to encountering it more fully. The poem has a meaning but it is not in the poem itself but in the meaning that the writing of the poem had for the writer and the meaning it has for us as it challenges us, surprises us, strikes us with its near perfection, reveals something we hadn't known or knew but hadn't recognized, and as it gives us pleasure and augments our lives. Our best response to the poem will be to its aesthetic power and that experienced as fully as possible—intellectually, imaginatively, emotionally, intuitively, sensually, and perhaps even physically. The best we can strive for for ourselves as readers and for our students is not an elucidation of the work of literature but an experience of it.

Works Cited

- Vendler, Helen (1981) 'What We Have Loved' Modern Language Association Presidential Address, 1981, *PMLA*: 344-50.
- Carey, John (2002) 'Stirred By Poetry's Fine Excess' *Times of London*, April 14, 2002.