

Recycling art; the
reuse of artistic
thought and theme in
auden, joyce, and
eliot...



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There is a long standing tradition within literature of art within the text holding symbolic meaning. Through either referring or depicting art the author is able to convey, and often consolidate, the ideas of the artist whom they are referring to. This may be to reinforce a thematic point (such as in W. H. Auden's 'Musée des Beaux Arts'), to fashion parallels between texts and thus create new narrative structures (like in James Joyce's Ulysses), or to consolidate the ideas of multiple artists of multiple genres into a single idiosyncratic text (such as in T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land'). But what is most interesting through the metafictional use of art within literature is the point that it makes about the finiteness of art, its limitations to produce new and original thought. When art is referenced in literature, a process of recycling thought is assured, and an awareness that there is no such thing as original artistic thought is reconfirmed.

'Musée des Beaux Arts' is a poem about paintings, referencing specific works of art, a common theme running through both the poem and the paintings: the constancy of human suffering. Concerning this theme Auden writes:

"About suffering they were never wrong,

The Old Masters: how well they understood

Its human position".[1]

He goes on to explore three paintings by the Flemish painter Pieter Brueghel the Younger, and his father Pieter Brueghel the Elder. In these paintings the artists highlight moments of tragedy and cruelty, all the while the world

continuing to exist and operate as if nothing out of place were happening. These paintings portray suffering as ordinary, not necessarily essential to human existence but an undeniable aspect of it. Suffering exists alongside the monotony of everyday life, which in turn views the suffering with what can best be described as ambivalence: “[suffering] takes place / While someone is else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along”. [Auden, Lines 3 - 4]

Auden does very little in this poem after those first three lines besides simply provide a synopsis of the scene in each painting; he makes no original points, no insight into the nature of suffering beyond what any individual can discern from studying the original artworks. What he does in the poem, instead, is provide a literary interpretation of the paintings, copy a visual image into a work of written, literary art. By doing so Auden indirectly highlights one of the inescapable pitfalls destined to befall the artist; it has all been done before. As Auden points out in the first three lines of the poem, the ‘ Old Masters’ understood suffering perfectly, wholly, its complexities and constancy. It is impossible for Auden to articulate the nature of suffering in any way clearer than how the ‘ Old Masters’ did before him, so instead he reiterates their point in a form of artistic recycling, changing the form but not the idea. Everything that has been said about suffering has already been said hundreds of times over, Auden simply shows that the ways in which suffering can be portrayed can be original. ‘ Musée des Beaux Arts’ shows how originality in artistic thought can now only exist in form and not content.

One of the most overt references to a piece of art within a separate literary text is James Joyce’s novel *Ulysses*, its title alone being a direct reference to <https://assignbuster.com/recycling-art-the-reuse-of-artistic-thought-and-theme-in-auden-joyce-and-eliot/>

Homer's epic poem, the *Odyssey*. Much like Auden, Joyce could be seen to have recycled theme through a change of form, to look at a text that serves as a cornerstone of the Western canon and recreate it for his own time. As Michael Palencia-Roth writes: "A myth from a modern perspective: were Ulysses reducible to a formula, which it is not, this would be it." [2] Once again, the ideas and stories of the past are reused and presented anew by the artists of the present. But, as Palencia-Roth writes, Ulysses is too vast and all-encompassing a text to be reducible to a formula, a single interpretation; it is simply too big to be nothing more than a rehashing of a mythic poem.

If he is not just simply reinterpreting the same thematic points as Homer, then why does Joyce refer to the *Odyssey* so dependently? Much like Auden did with the Brueghel paintings, Joyce puts a spin on the work of Homer through an introduction of contemporary methods, more specifically the stream of consciousness style championed by Joyce and his modernist contemporaries. Joyce fleshes out the *Odyssey* as a psychological drama, while simultaneously consolidating the action of the poem from ten years into the span of twenty-four hours. As an example of how Joyce fleshed out the action of Homer's work, Odysseus's interaction with the Phaeacians and the Princess Nausicaa is Book 5 in Homer's text, while in Joyce's it is Chapter 13. [3] Joyce expands the journey of Odysseus into the experience of an ordinary man on an ordinary day, but keeping to similar themes through an intense tracking of internal thought. The Nausicaa section of Odysseus's journey deals with themes of fidelity, love, and commitment, while Chapter 13 of *Ulysses* gives an ironic reproduction of these themes.

The chapter sees Leopold Bloom, Joyce's stand-in for Odysseus, masturbating on a public beach and lusting after a young woman, despite his married status. While Odysseus's devotion to his wife, Penelope, is undeniable and drives much of the story of the *Odyssey*, Joyce's commitment is complicated, his sexuality is entirely modern:

“ His hands and face were working and a tremor went over her. She leaned back far to look up where fireworks were and she caught her knee in her hands so as not to fall back looking up and there was no-one to see only him and her when she revealed all her graceful beautifully shaped legs like that, supply soft and delicately rounded, and she seemed to hear the panting of his heart, his horse breathing, because she knew about the passion of men like that, hotblooded”. [Joyce, pp. 355]

There is no commitment between Bloom and the girl who he lusts and masturbates over, Gerty MacDowell, it is rather pure passion and sex. Though passion and sex are not exactly core themes to the *Odyssey*, Joyce presents them as ironic twists on the original thematic focal points of Homer's text. Joyce subverts the overt thematic points to make a comment on love and commitment, Bloom's love and commitment to his wife, Molly, existing much in the same way that it does between Odysseus and Penelope, but is merely complication by the issues and realities of Twentieth Century life. Much like in ' *Musée des Beaux Arts*', the theme and artistic thoughts between the modern work (Joyce) and the referenced work (Homer) are the same, but it is the presentation of that thought that differs, that is renewed.

One of Joyce's equally important contemporaries was the poet T. S. Eliot, whose poem 'The Waste Land' is now considered as a text essential to the Western literary canon. Much like in 'Musée des Beaux Arts' and Ulysses, 'The Wasteland' incorporates thematic ideas that have existed in literature and art at large for centuries, but presents them in a wholly original form. The variety of influences, of borrowed ideas and duplicated thoughts, creates an idiosyncratic poem with an eccentric structure and style, or as Jacob Korg notes: "Many of its peculiarities have been attributed to the various influences operating upon Eliot".^[4] Perhaps in 'The Waste Lnd' the artistic references are more diverse and eclectic than in the previously mentioned texts, Eliot referring to opera, poetry, paintings, and drama to name but a few mediums, all references feeding into the thematic arc that runs through the poem concerning loneliness and alienation.

Eliot references the composer Richard Wagner's opera *Tristun und Isolde*, for instance: "Frisch weht der Wind / Der Heimat zu / Mein Irisch Kind / Wo weilest du?"^[5] This translates to "Fresh blows the wind to the homeland - my Irish child, where do you tarry?" and is part of a lament a sailor gives to a girl he has left. The sense of abandonment reiterates the loneliness that runs through the poem at large, the words of Wagner's opera echoing the isolation that seeps from Eliot's desolate language:

"Son of man,

You cannot say, or guess, for you know only

A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,

And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,

And the dry stone no sound of water." [Eliot, Lines 20 - 24]

The loneliness that stems from the desolate imagery is itself reiterated by references to other works that thematically bring attention to the solitude of man in extreme environments. Eliot references Dante Alighieri's poem *Inferno* [Eliot, Lines 62 - 63], as well as John Milton's *Paradise Lost* [Eliot, Line 98]. Loneliness, desolation, isolation; these are themes that are integral to a thorough understanding of 'The Waste Land', but Eliot does not make points about these themes that have never been made before. Wagner touched on loneliness in his opera through the guise of the sailors lost love, Dante produced intense desolation by portraying an expansive and unwavering vision of hell, while Milton's Lucifer is often seen as epitomizing loneliness and isolation. Eliot, much like Auden and Joyce, places importance on reenergizing theme, modernizing it by introducing it to new styles, structures, and forms.

By referencing art, writers often inadvertently bring attention to the finiteness of artistic thought; or, if that is too extreme, then at the very least the difficulty in coming up with a totally original thematic idea. All three writers, Auden, Joyce, and Eliot, attempt to combat this difficulty through different approaches; Auden through depicting painting through language; Joyce through providing an ironically mythic twist on a literary classic; and Eliot through using a plethora of references to create a poem whose theme is based in multiple resources. The fact that these writers recycle thematic ideas is not a criticism however, but rather it is their innovation through

style, structure, and form that is worth commendation. The limitations that stem from the difficulties of original thought pushed these writers to innovate, to try new and difficult methods. The fact that they are able to present ideas that are centuries old (millennia in the case of Joyce) in a new and refreshing way showcases their skill and talent, and makes them worthy of praise. Their innovative techniques highlight the fact that in literature it is often the case that it is not what you say that matters, but rather how you say it.

Works Cited

[1] W. H. Auden, ' Musée des Beaux Arts', in The Broadview Anthology of British Literature Volume Six; the Twentieth Century and Beyond, ed. By Don LePan, (Ontario; Broadview Press, 2006), Lines 1 - 4

[2] Michael Palencia-Roth, Myth and the Modern Novel, (New York; Garland Publishing Inc, 1987), pp. 189.

[3] James Joyce, " Ulysses", in The Broadview Anthology of British Literature Volume Six; the Twentieth Century and Beyond, ed. By Don LePan, (Ontario; Broadview Press, 2006), pp. 343

[4] Jacob Korg, ' Modern Art Techniques in The Wasteland', in A Collection of Critical Essays on " The Waste Land", ed. By Jay Martin, (New Jersey; Prentice-Hall Inc, 1968), pp. 87

[5] T. S. Eliot, ' The Waste Land', in The Broadview Anthology of British Literature Volume Six; the Twentieth Century and Beyond, ed. By Don LePan, (Ontario; Broadview Press, 2006), pp. 452

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