

# 'the secret life of books' by stephen edgar essay sample

Literature



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This five stanza poem is steeped in the extended personification of the books as articulate individuals. The title, *The Secret Life of Books* suggests there is something hidden below the superficial purposes (covers) of the books, that there is a hidden agenda that we don't know about, as is also suggested in line 11 and 12 (stanza 2).

The ambiguity of the poem stems from the themes of the poem which regard the power of books and language and, in a metafictional sense, the poem draws attention to itself as a text questioning other texts.

Through the use of personification, Edgar opens up the avenue of ambiguous interpretation, because it is not clear whether the books actively exercise a determined power over their readers or whether the writers of the books have crafted powerful language. Indeed the authors of these books are never mentioned. Edgar presents the books as a separate species which control (direct) us. The "absurdity" is of course that ironically, we write and read the books thus controlling each other.

The theme of the power of the books is posed immediately in line 1 by alluding to "they" as having "stratagems". This creates the image of distance between the books and the readers and also portrays them as orchestrators of some destiny. This is juxtaposed with the paradox that the books cannot move. Edgar presents books as inanimate yet articulate and goes on to liken them to individuals. This is a strange simile since it raises the issue of sickness but also creates the image of a mind imprisoned within a frozen body. Within the immovable exterior there lies an active mind.

Again the image is ambiguous. We can perceive the books as physical

(enclosures or) entrapments of minds, or philosophically speaking, as minds trapped within the inadequacies of language and yet further, we can see books truly as the mind of the author caught and stilled between two covers. By offering such palimpsest, Edgar also draws attention to the richness and potential that language possesses.

The first stanza ends by mentioning that books "turned the world ... by the twisting of hearts", suggesting that language and books have the power to manipulate passions and present the world (from and with) in a variety of perceptions, a concept that is related to presenting different (angles or) layers of meaning. We are presented with negative and positive uses of language; manipulation in terms of propaganda perhaps and also the beauty of creating emotions through language.

In stanza two Edgar asks the reader a rhetorical question regarding the purpose and technique of a literary message and in doing so draws attention to his own purpose. On one level he is asking the reader to question the purpose of the book and how the message is conveyed, perhaps as a warning regarding being manipulated by a book or perhaps simply asking an unanswerable question about the purpose of books as a concept of communication. Perhaps the elusive message or purpose is what causes him to mention the suspicion of a "conspiracy" in line 12. As for Edgar, his own message is ambiguous. He appears to be exploring his themes with very little rhyme structure, with some technical literary language presented in a poetic style. The only rigidity in the poem is its six lines per stanza.

Edgar continues to describe the “habitat” of books such as the “library” where lots of books live together or a “sun room” where a solitary dog-eared thriller lies. This extends the personification metaphor and also draws attention to the purpose of the books and suggests that their identity can be hinted at by their surroundings, perhaps suggesting that the library is the home of the intellectual book and the sun room is the home of the “trashy novel”, created specifically to thrill.

In terms of the structure, the second stanza ends on an incomplete sentence, willing the reader to read on and, aside from the fact that this is an English exam, the author has, in his form and creation of the poem compelled you to finish the sentence, thereby demonstrating the power of construction and technique. The author crafts a book to contain a motive to read on, as in the thriller, which uses suspense, as mentioned in line 10.

Stanza three regards (explores/reflects on) the interpretation of the books controlling the reader with a predestined plan to (entice or) force one to read. This relates back to stanza one's “stratagems.” Posing the philosophical concept of determinism in line 15 not only identifies the poem as concerned with concepts beyond the simple layers of literary meaning but identifies that a sophisticated level of understanding is required to access this part of the poem. Yet the books exert no power without a reader.

By addressing the reader (directly and) informally as “you” in line 14 the (close) proximity of author and reader is established especially when juxtaposed with “they”, the books. Absurdly (?? clarify) the author has only managed to create this intimacy through a technique of literature. Edgar

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continues to draw our attention metafictionally to the power of language / books but this time I feel that he has given a glimpse of the power behind the book, the orchestrator of the language, the author himself (or a cosmic force?).

The stanza continues to create a reality by using the imperative " look", forcing the reader to imagine the situation and again unifying the author and the reader. The " blurb" is described as implicating other (? The text within) texts, suggesting a network of literature which is inescapable and yet the truth of that suggestion is also inescapable. It suggests that books evolve from one another and so they would appear to, but stanza five explains further how the books influence the reader by " writing them" and from that I infer that by this influence, other books are conceived (to/books give birth/raise us/ imprint on us).

To return to stanza four, the ambiguous language arises again as Edgar describes how the paragraph " calls" for an atlas or gazetteer. This could be interpreted as an " audible" request or simply as an impersonal requirement. The arbitrary example of " that poem" (line 20) establishes further intimacy with the reader by assuming knowledge of " that poem" as if by its very characteristics, it is a distinctive genre alone. The natural imagery of " dead leaf's skeleton" creates images of sparse, ungenerous use of language in a poem and yet the " skeleton" suggests to use a framework on which to flesh out my own personal interpretation. The reappearance of metafiction made me think of a poem that " that poem" called " Study No X" by Chinua Achebe

which offer similar proliferation of meaning but explores further the possibilities of interpretation.

“Coaxes your lexicon” implies drawing out of the reader their own command of language, which is always personal and unique, like that of the “script” formed between the intimate relations of lovers. This sexual analogy or simile demonstrates how intimately we engage with language and how it is a tacit engagement in the mind and heart rather than just a spoken exchange of language. This seems to me juxtaposed with the exchange of physical love. The script created at conception is equally special and unique.

These concepts of being created, affected and altered by language are clearly linked to line 25 in stanza 5 where Edgar states, “In the end they have written you.” This reminds me of Roland Barthes’ literary theories of the “readerly” and “writerly” texts where he suggests that a reader is either left to write in their own interpretation because the author has provided various possible interpretations or is not. In which case the author has explicitly stated and described everything. In this case the concept is inverted and the book is described as “writing” the reader or creating, moulding a response from the reader. It is true in a sense that we do acquire language and concepts of the world from books.

The stanza continues to describe books as “intruding” suggesting both an infringement on a mind and heart and also an internal, intrusive engagement. The books are working on you, deep inside rather than just engaging you superficially. The recurrence of the books described by Edgar as telling “accounts” of the world suggests that these are held accountable

as witnesses to the world past or present. These witnesses become part of us as we absorb and read them yet we, the readers are described as “ caught between quotation marks.” This suggests that our language becomes borrowed and not our own yet this is only if we perceive being “ caught” to mean bound, “ trapped” and “ restricted.” If we interpret “ caught” to mean “ saved” it can be inferred that our own inarticulate feelings can be voiced by those more eloquent. In this way books, through their silent language enable us to express ourselves.

In my opinion the final stanza's final line is the most ambiguous of all. Edgar's use of the word “ allusion” (and not illusion) would suggest to me that the heart's beat is symbolic of passion and that it is an allusion to something inexpressible. The heartbeat or symbol alludes to something deeper than language and that perhaps cannot be expressed in words, thereby demonstrating a full circle. Edgar began by addressing themes on the power of language, but ends on the limitations.