College-English Poetry Teaching with the Perspective of Reception Aesthetics

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Abstract. College-English poetry teaching is one of the important parts of English teaching in Chinese colleges from which Chinese students benefit in language learning, different cultural knowledge, the ability of cross-culture communication as well as their aesthetical consciousness. The theory of reception aesthetics focuses on the role of readers during the process of reading and its main notions like the horizon of expectations, gaps and blanks and aesthetic distance play a vital theoretical role in the innovation of college-English poetry teaching in college class. The application of the theory in poetry teaching alters the traditional role of teacher, student and textbook in class. It also improves Chinese college students’ English learning and enhances the quality of English poetry teaching in China’s college classes.

Introduction
Since Chinese educational departments gradually realized and emphasized the importance of English as a tool as well as a carrier of culture for learning and communicating, Chinese college students, from their elementary school to high school, have been learning English diligently for years. As a result, when they enter into college English learning, some with good English ask for advanced English learning such as literature appreciation or other English learning forms for cross-culture communication. In order to meet the needs of these college students, Chinese educational department has issued the latest document, the Guide of College English Teaching, in 2016 to provide China’s universities with a direction for college English teaching. According to the Guide, “college English courses, which posses the nature of tool and humanity, is an important part of education of humanity in China’s tertiary education. In terms of the nature of humanity, one of the vital tasks for college English courses is to offer cross-culture education for students. Since language is not only the vehicle of a certain culture, but it itself is an important part of the culture. Therefore, Chinese college-English teaching is to meet Chinese college students’ needs of communicating and learning advanced sciences and technologies from foreign countries. Meanwhile, English as a communicating tool, Chinese college students’ learning and mastering of it is to understand foreign societies and cultures, to strengthen the comprehension of different cultures, to cultivate the awareness of differences between Chinese cultures and foreign ones and to cultivate their ability of cross-culture communication. [1]”

Under these circumstances, English poetical courses in colleges have become an important way of humanity education and a necessary access for Chinese college students to learn and understand foreign cultures. However, compared with other subjects’ teaching methods, traditional English poetical teaching methods in China’s colleges are still featured by the teachers’ dominant explanation of the studied poems and students’ listening to their teachers’ lecturing. In this way, students have little thinking and understanding of the work so that students benefit little from their own reading and comprehension of the poem. Besides, the traditional test-oriented teaching approaches can hardly enable students to meet the requirements of the society. Consequently, the outdated teaching modes should be reformed and the teaching should aim at stimulating the students’ interest in English learning and developing their automatic learning capability. Fortunately, the theory of reception aesthetics provides teachers with a new approach and concept of teaching,
which reverses the role of teachers and students in class and dramatically improves the quality of teaching effects and students’ learning of English. Originally, the theory is a methodology adopted by literature criticism and claims that literary text is an evocative structure filled with indeterminacy and gaps. According to this methodology, the reader is regarded as an active as well as an indispensable participant who concretizes those indeterminacy and gaps in the process of his individual reading. The main concepts of the reception theory offer a new guiding principle to reform the invariably teacher-dominated class situation in China, and enable students to possess more opportunities to be involved in English poetical class.

Main Concepts of Reception Aesthetics

With the hermeneutics and phenomenology, the Constance School in Germany produced reception aesthetics in the 1960s. As a new form of literary criticism, Reception aesthetics is represented by the work of Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser. Because of this theory, literary studies have switched focus from the author or text to the reader, who is thought as an inseparable factor in the aesthetic significance of literary works as well as a vital role in actualizing the meaning of the text.

According to Jauss’s reception theory, “historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of the addressees because the reader’s comprehension of text decides the aesthetic value of a work. [2]” He points out two key concepts about the reader’s reception: horizon of expectations and aesthetic distance. Holub has defined that the horizon of expectations refers to “a structure of expectations or…a mind-set that a hypothetical individual might bring to any text. [3]” That is to say a notion of a reader’s previous understanding before the reader’s beginning to read. Based on this horizon, the reader can carry on an aesthetic dialogue with the literary text to comprehend and achieve a fusion of horizons. The reader’s horizon, which fluctuates from time to time, confirms a way of literary appreciation as well as the reader’s concentrations and attitudes while reading. Therefore, the readers’ textual interpretation is inevitably subjective and selective. Two types of the horizon can be further identified: narrow literary expectations and broader life expectations. The former is developed from the reader’s previous aesthetic experiences involving literary structures, styles and genres, whereas the latter is formed by the reader’s socio-cultural assumptions and individual lived experiences [4]. It is obvious that the readers’ horizon of expectation is much influenced and structured by his/her surrounding environment and context. Jauss has ever given the definition of aesthetic distance as the “disparity between the given horizon of expectations and the appearance of a new work. [2]” If the distance is too large, the work may appear too overwhelming. The difficulty, then, is much more likely to emerge as the reader finds it hard to fuse his/her horizon with the work. As a result, he/she might find it unattainable and express distaste for it. If the distance is too small, boredom emerges, and the reader may lose interest even though the fusion of horizons is easy to achieve. In order for a literary work to be successfully received by the reader, it should adequately surpass his/her horizon and enrich the readers’ knowledge and life experiences [5].

On the other hand, Iser, another advocate of reception aesthetic, sets a high priority to the reader’s vital part in the actualizing of textual meaning. He holds that a literary work only offers a schematic structure rather than a determined meaning. Except for some textual perspectives, the structure also consists of numerous gaps and blanks that the reader can fill and actualize by his/her reading process. The reader, as an active and creative recipient, is urged or forced by the indeterminacy and vacancy of the text. Therefore, he/she will fill the textual omissions with substances, make a definite uncertainty and finally actualize the meaning and aesthetic value of the work. The process of blank/gap-filling is usually regarded as concretization and is founded by the reader’s personal experiences and preconceptions, that is to say, the horizon of expectations. So it is subjective and imaginative. [6]

In order to give a clearer explanation of the effective interaction between text and reader, Iser proposes a new concept of the implied reader, a hypothetical figure the author sets to his/her literary work. The concept contains “both the pre-structuring of the potential meaning by the text and the
reader’s actualization of the potential through the reading process to integrate the reader’s presence and participation.” [7] To reach a successful literary communication, the author needs to take the reader into account in the text through pre-arranging different textual perspectives, which enables the reader to both interpret the text completely and appreciate its aesthetic value contently. These different perspectives, such as the narrator, characters and plot, are not directly connected to one another and each of them is usually emerged as a fragment. So the reader are usually encouraged or compelled to exert his/her imagination and creativity by the blanks/gaps within and between the differing perspectives. Meanwhile, the reader also actively concretizes what is unexpressed to integrate all textual opinions. This concretization is limited and confined to the textual perspectives and circumscribed by the potential meaning of the literary text. [6]

Reception Aesthetics Applied in Poetry Teaching

In the light of the reception aesthetics, “the study of literary has been dramatically reformed which is initially embodied by the transformation from the objectivity study of literature to the subjectivity study.[8]” As a result, teachers will focus more on students’ subjectivity, reading process and improving their horizon of expectation while poetical teaching. At the same time, the teachers also pain much attention to the features of poetical teaching in terms of poetic contents and forms, such as the appreciation of poetical rhythm, wording, imagery and artistic conception and its artistic notions and aesthetic values.

In the first circumstance, while we mention the students’ subjectivity in reading, it means that in class teachers ought to encourage students to actively develop their own subjective initiative to sense and experience the beauty of the literary works, instead of following the teachers’ comprehension and interpretation of the poem. In this way, it will dramatically reverse the role of teachers and students in China’s traditional college class and put students at the center of teaching. For example, in poetry class, the teacher just gives the general idea of the poem and read the poem less while the students should read aloud or even chant the poem over and over again in order to perceive the beauty of poetical rhythm and rhyme. As Chinese ancient scholar Zhu Xi put it, “After reading the poem for forty or fifty times, so the reader can refer to the notes of poem, and then the reader should read the poem again for many times so as to naturally master the meaning of the poem, which is the right way for a reader to understand and appreciate the poem properly. [9]” Through the reading and chanting of the poem with their emotion repeatedly, the students not only can sense the meaning of the poem, but also can connect his mind to the poet’s so as to perceive the beauty of imagery and artistic conception existing in the work. In this way, students are able to comprehend and actualize the aesthetic value of the poem. Except for that, the teacher will leave some thinking space for the students to inspire their imagination for their understanding of the work while processing a poem in class. As the theory of reception aesthetics puts it that there are many gaps and blanks in a literary work that allows readers to fill them and actualize their meaning. For example, in the poem of “Sudden Light”, written by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, “I have been here before, /But when or how I cannot tell: /I know the grass beyond the door, /The sweet, keen smell, /The sighing sound, the lights around the shore. /You have been mine before, ---/How long ago I may not know: /But just when that swallow’s soar/Your neck turned so, --- I knew it all of yore. /Has this been thus before? /And shall not thus time’s eddying flight’/Still with our lives our love restore/In death’s despite, /And day and night yield one delight once more?” When the teacher introduces the poem to his students, he or she may direct the students to imagine and decide the meaning of words in lines like “when”, “how” and “who”, which the poet recalled in the poem. With the participation of students to interpret the poem, both the teacher and the students are able to enlarge their vision of the poem as well as their perceptions of poet’s artistic world, through which the students will arouse their interests of poetical appreciation and English learning.

On the other hand, since the theory of reception aesthetics holds that while reading, readers’ reception of literary work is essential. Therefore, it is a vital task for the teacher to meet students’ needs and emphasize their acception process of a work. Obviously, students in English poetical class not only want to learn English language, but they also try to appreciate the beauty of a poem,
that is the rhythm, rhyme, wording, imagery and artistical conception in a poem. For instance, students can enjoy different rhythm like monometer: “Thus I / Pass by / and die / As one / Unknown / And gone / I’m made / A shade / And laid / I’th’grave / There have / my cave / Where tell / I dwell / Farewell”, or trimester like: “The only news I know / Is bulletins all day / From Immortality / the only shows I see, / tomorrow and Today, / Perchance Eternity …”, or the most common rhythm like Pentameter: “In the hex / ammeter / rises the / fountain’s / silvery / column, / In the pen / tameter / aye / falling in / melody / back.” Except for the rhythm, students can also enjoy the beauty of rhyme in a poem, for example, the single rhyme: “He clasps the crag with crooked hands; / Close to the sun in lonely lands, / Ring’d with the azure world, he stands. / The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls; / He watches from his mountain walls, / And like a thunderbolt he falls.” In the first stanza, three words as hands, lands and stands form the single rhyme, as well as the words crawls, walls and falls in the second stanza. Another example for the rhyme like double rhyme: “The cock is crowing, / The stream is flowing, / The small birds twitter, / The lake doth glitter.” In this stanza, the crowing and flowing form a double rhyme, as well as the words twitter and glitter. There are also some other rhymes like perfect rhyme, triple rhyme, imperfect rhyme and consonance etc.

Additionally, some English poems contain plentiful western cultural elements that really interest many Chinese students and enrich their vision of western culture. What is more, “the western culture is mainly embodied by her spiritual culture that is the Christian culture, which regards human beings as the combination of spirit and body. [10]” The English poetry, as a result, is enriched by Christian stories. For example, The Second Coming, written by William Butler Yeats, enables students to know one of the stories of Bible: “Surely some revelation is at hand; / Surely the Second Coming is at hand. / The Second Coming! Hardly are those4 words out / When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi …” According to the Holy Book, the Bible, the title of this poem, The Second Coming, means Jesus Christ will reborn and come back to the world to host the last judgment in doomsday and bring the Gospel in a new era. In fact, since Christianity is the main religion in western world, the stories from its Holy Book are usually quoted to express poet’s thoughts in poetic creation. In addition to this, some ancient Greek culture also can be found in English poems. For instance, in Matthew Arnold’s work, Dover Beach, the poet mentioned Sophocles: “Sophocles long ago / Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought / Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow / Of human misery; we / Find also in the sound a thought, / Hearing it by this distant northern sea.” Actually, Sophocles is one of three great tragedy poets in Greek. The themes of his tragedies mainly concerned about the disaster, pain and death. The stanza quoted above comes from his famous work, Antigone. Apparently, through the study of cultural elements in English poems, students will enrich their knowledge of western culture and history, which in turn will strengthen the students’ ability of cross-culture communication.

To Emphasize and Update Students’ Horizon of Expectation

The notion of horizon of expectation is one of the key concepts of the theory of reception aesthetics which points out the reader’s directed expectation before his reading of text. As Zhu Liyuan puts it in his book, Reception Aesthetics, “during the reading process of a text, the reader’s original reading experiences, tastes, literacy and ideas will form a certain appreciating requirement or level for literary works. In a concrete reading experience, the horizon of expectation will be embodied by a potential aesthetical expectation. [11]” Indeed, there are two types of horizon of expectation—that is the literary horizon of expectation and the living horizon of expectation. The living horizon of expectation consists of many aspects like a reader’s social position, educational level, life experience, values and his temperament and personality etc. The literary horizon of expectation will indicate a reader’s literary attainment and his/her aesthetical values and interests. According to Zhu Liyuan, “during a reading process, a reader will evaluate and treat a literary work with different horizon of expectations. Consequently, the different readers will produce distinct understandings and evaluations of a work. What is more, the reader’s horizon of expectation decides his/her accepted contents and forms of a work, as well as his/her fundamental attitudes and standpoints for the work. [11]”
Since the horizon of expectation play such an important role in a reader’s reading process, teachers in poetry class should emphasize and investigate the students’ horizon of expectation before reading and studying a poem, which will dramatically influence the students’ understanding and acceptation of the work. At the same time, the students who choose the English poetry course should be equipped with at least the level of CET 4 and able to understand and appreciate some simple English poems. In order to narrow the gap between the students’ horizon of expectation and the work, the teacher may take the teaching methods and contents into account in poetical class in order to create proper aesthetical distance for his/her students so as to attain the best teaching effect. For instance, the poem, *She Walks in Beauty*: She walks in beauty, like the night / Of cloudless climes and starry skies; / And all that's best of dark and bright / Meet in her aspect and her eyes: / Thus mellowed to that tender light / Which heaven to gaudy day denies. / One shade the more, one ray the less, / Had half impaired the nameless grace / Which waves in every raven tress, / Or softly lightens o'er her face; / Where thoughts serenely sweet express / How pure, how dear their dwelling place./ And on that cheek, and o'er that brow, / So soft, so calm, yet eloquent, / The smiles that win, the tints that glow; / But tell of days in goodness spent, / A heart whose love is innocent! Written by George Gordon Byron, the poem is to describe the beauty of Lady Wilmot Horton who is met by the poet in a dancing party. Before the teacher would like to introduce the poem to the students, he/she can observe and update the students’ horizon of expectation for the work. The teacher may divide the students into different groups before class and ask each group, with relevant materials, to know something about the writer’s life history, writing style and aesthetical values etc. so as to better understand the poem. Meanwhile, the teacher can also ask students try to preview and appreciate the poem’s formal beauty like its rhythm, rhyme, wording, imagery etc. Put this poem as an example, the whole poem is an Iambic Tetrameter rhymed by “ab ab/ cd cd cd/ ef ef”. In the first line of the poem, the writer adopted the simile to describe the lady’s beauty like “the night of cloudless climes and starry skies” and Alliteration as “cloudless climes and starry skies”, which not only enable readers to perceive the poem’s rhythm sensation, but also can imagine its artistic conception as a woman walking in a cloudless night with starry skies. In this poem, some other methods of figure of speech are also adopted by the poet like metaphor or personification to show the lady’s beauty. The whole poem is just like an attractive picture which embodies the writer’s aesthetic values as the concordance of poem and painting. Obviously, the preview of the poem will integrate the students’ horizon of expectation and aesthetical distance for the work.

While studying the poem in class, each student group can make a presentation for their understanding and explanation of it and also can raise some questions they met in the poem for other students’ discussion. Meanwhile, the teacher will actively take part in the groups’ discussion and answer the students’ questions through which both the students and teacher can benefit their thoughts and exchanger their own ideas. After class, since the teacher has effectively joined the student’s’ class activities so that he/she has sufficiently known the students’ needs and horizon of expectation. In the light of this, the teacher can assign some appropriate tasks for the students to enrich their knowledge of the poem so as to enlarge or update the students’ horizon of expectation for their further learning and studying of poetry in class.

**Conclusion**

The theory of reception aesthetics has been hailed as one of the important means of literary criticism since the 70s or 80s of last century. It revolutionarily treats readers, writers and literary works equally and acknowledges readers’ subjective initiative to construct literary and social meaning of a text, which in turn indicates that readers are part of carriers of literary values. Not only can the theory be used as one form of reading methods, but its main concepts like the horizon of expectations, gaps and blanks and aesthetic distance can also be introduced into class for the innovation of English teaching. As a fact, the theory applied in class fundamentally reverses the role of teachers, students and texts, which transforms the teacher in traditional class as a presenter and interpreter of text into a designer and organizer of class activity, the students as the passive
receptors of text into initiative finders and users of the meaning of text, and texts as the static language materials into the dynamic language construction.

Consequently, the reverse of these relationships in class results in the fundamentally innovation of English poetry teaching. First of all, during the process of presentation and discussion of the poem studied in class, the students get more chances and opportunities to express their ideas and understandings of the poem in stead of the teacher’s domination in class. Except for better understand and enjoy the beauty of poem, the students’ English speaking, listening and even writing are able to be practiced and improved effectively by this way. Then, the active class activities can also attract students’ concentration and arouse their interests, which in turn enable students to participate in the discuss and think deeply about the work. What is more, the activities can deepen students’ appreciation of the studied poem and dramatically improve the teaching effect in class. Next, through all the students’ activities in class, the teacher is able to observe students’ expression and performances according to which the teacher may timely adjust the teaching contents or methods so as to meet the students’ needs. To summarize, the theory of reception aesthetics applied in English poetical class enables teachers to innovate their teaching notions, contents and methods and to improve poetical teaching effect to a great extent. On the other hand, through the new teaching concepts and methods, teachers will arouse students’ interests for English and encourage them to pay much more attention to English language and cultural learning.

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