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The Immortal Conflict between History and Poetry in Selected English Modern Poems

A B S T R A C T

The conflict between history and poetry exists since the ancient times of Plato and Aristotle till later ages. Controversy accompanies such a conflict throughout the ages. Therefore, the present paper delves deep into how poetry reveals the truth of the historical events or the stories of the past. The present paper aims to examine the role of the poet as a historian, how the poets present these historical events truthfully, and how these poems preserve their literary identity. Two English poems are selected from the Modern Era (1900s-1940s), Thomas Hardy's "The Convergence of the Twain" in (1912) and Rudyard Kipling's "Mesopotamia" in (1917).

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الصراع الخالد بين التاريخ والشعر في قصائد إنجليزية حديثة مختارة

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الملخص

الصراع بين التاريخ والشعر موجود منذ العصور القديمة لأفلاطون وأرسطو وحتى العصور اللاحقة. و ان الجدل يصاحب مثل هذا الصراع على مر العصور. لذلك، يتعمق هذا البحث في كيفية كشف الشعر عن حقيقة الأحداث التاريخية أو قصص الماضي. يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة دور الشاعر كمؤرخ، وكيف يقدم الشعراء هذه الأحداث التاريخية بصدق، وكيف تحافظ هذه القصائد على هويتها الأدبية. تم اختيار قصيدتين إنجليزييتين من العصر الحديث (١٩٠٠-١٩٤٠)، قصيدة توماس هاردي "تقارب الأثنان" في (١٩١٢) و قصيدة روديارد كيبليينغ "بلاد ما بين النهرين" في (١٩١٧)

الكلمات المفتاحية: التاريخ، الحقيقة، الشعر، العصور الأدبية، الحقائق، العواطف

The Immortal Conflict between History and Poetry in Selected English Modern Poems

In early-centuries, it has been recorded that documents of knowledge are in the form of poetry. Such a record is used because of the special rhythm of poetry that makes the process of memorizing easier. One of these documents of knowledge is history or the way people at that times date their historical events. Therefore, a comparison between history and poetry always had been set from early times.

Literature is a reflection of societies and in many times it mirrors their historical events. Poets, as part of these societies, write in the form of poetry these historical events. In a way or another, the historiography of poetry is not that different from history. Historians record historical events, while poets rewrite and retell these historical events with an intention of presenting feelings, and expectations or prophecies.

The present paper is an interdisciplinary study of the interconnection between history and poetry in selected English poems from the Modern Era (1900s-1940s), Thomas Hardy's "The Convergence of the Twain" in (1912) and Rudyard Kipling's "Mesopotamia" in (1917) as representatives of this era. Through a detailed exploration and examination of the presented poems, the present paper shows how Hardy and Kipling can play the role of historians, how these poets present the historical events truthfully, and how these poems preserve their literary identity while presenting the historical matters.

In early centuries, the best means of remembering a story, oral history, or even law statements is poetry (epic poetry). Tina Marie says that many of the early ancient survived poems are a history of people of the past and recorded information of their culture, religion, and politics. According to Marie, the ancient works are in a poetic form to make the process of memorization easier (2013). As a result, a connection or a matter of comparison between history and poetry always has been set over centuries.

Concerning the truth of history and that of poetry, Dmitri Nikulin, in his book The Concept of History, regards history to be "similar" to art. For him, history narrates incidents of the bygone years. Such a process of narrating intends to "communicate the truth." Though there is no "intention" to deform anything, Nikulin argues that the " 'really' " of what occurred is certainly 'distorted.' This distortion due to the way the narratives "being (re)interpreted and (re)collected" (2017, p.37). While the truth of poetry lies in the power of poetry to represent life. Matthew Arnold tackles such a statement in his Study of Poetry. He argues that "in poetry, as in criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth." In doing such a "criticism," poetry expressing it in "excellent rather than inferior... true rather than untrue on half-true." According to Arnold, truth and "seriousness" are the important features to produce "best" poetry (2013, selected essays, the study of poetry).

Thomas Hardy's poem "The Convergence of the Twain" depicts and records the tragic fate of the Titanic, the luxurious and splendid ship of 1912. The poem portrays the human losses and the unjustified extravagance that sunk in the sea in less than three hours.

In 1912, the world witnesses the Titanic launch in the Atlantic Ocean, one of the greatest man's creations. Great expectations are made for this grandest ship, starting from its makers and their bragging to its passengers. In a way or another, this ship is seen as a challenge for

its creators. So, the sinking of the tremendous ship is a painful disaster. The losses are great as the greatness of the effort of its builders and the expectations of its owners. Unfortunately, hundreds of passengers lost their lives in this tragic accident.

The Titanic is well known for being luxurious. As Marshall Everett records, it takes up “many millions of dollars-many months” in order to build it completely. According to its makers it is supposed to be “unsinkable.” The Titanic is “the biggest boat that ever had been in the world.” It is provided with the “utmost stretch of construction, the furthest achievement in efficiency, the bewildering embodiment of an immense multitude of luxuries for which only the richest of the earth could pay.” Everett describes the ship with “Steel hull and mast, whirling shaft and throbbing engine-heart” (2013, pp.11, 12).

The extravagance of the ship is hard to be imagined. As Everett notes, it is “beyond criticism.” The ship is provided with “salons, reading and lounging rooms, palm courts, Turkish baths, a gymnasium, a swimming pool, a ballroom and billiard hall.” Furthermore, the ship makes its first voyage with many richest people on its abroad (2013, p.20).

The Titanic hits with an iceberg in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, and this causes its disastrous drowning. Everett narrates that the “the titan of the nature and the *Titanic* of mechanical construction” are met in the middle of the ocean. The iceberg rips the “ship’s side,” and uncovers “her boilers” to the cold water which makes “their explosion.” As a result, the lives of “2,340” people are at risk (2013, pp.19, 20).

Finally, the luxurious ship reaches its fate deep in the ocean. Lawrence Beesley says that this trip is “never completed.” After the smashing by an iceberg, the ship sinks “two hours and a half later.” Beesley records that “815” of the ship passengers with “688” of the “crew” are sunk (2012, p.9).

The previous historians give a detailed review about the drowning grandest ship, and the English poet Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) does so in poetry. “The Convergence of the Twain” is written in the same year of the accident. Hardy’s poem is untraditional elegy. The poem epigraph or the subtitle “(*Lines on the loss of the "Titanic"*)” suggests the historical incident the poem talks about.

Hardy starts his poem by recording the final station the Titanic rests in:

In a solitude of the sea

Deep from human vanity,

And the Pride of Life that planned her, stilly couches she. (ll. 1-3)

In these lines, the poet describes the “solitude” of the Titanic in the “Deep” Atlantic Ocean after all the crowd and the popularity that surrounded it over the world for months. Ironically, Hardy records that “she” “stilly” without motion far from its rich passengers “vanity” and its builder “pride.” The great ship which is meant for far sailing is now an unmoving wreck (1914, p.9).

The poet describes with details the luxurious wreck of the Titanic:

Steel chambers, late the pyres
Of her salamandrine fires,

Cold currents thrid, and turn to rhythmic tidal lyres. (ll. 4-6)

Hardy documents the final situation of the “steel chambers” and “pyres” of the great ship. The poet portrays with contrast that these parts of the Titanic are now full with “cold currents” of water after their making to be full with “salamandrine fires” (1914, p.9).

Hardy ironically records the fate of the priceless expensive collectables of the rich passengers:

Jewels in joy designed
To ravish the sensuous mind

Lie lightless, all their sparkles bleared and black and blind. (ll. 10-12)

These “jewels” which are meant to “ravish” the human “mind” and satisfy his pride are now settled down without “sparkles” in the “lightless” bottom of the ocean. Hardy here is similar to any other historian who witnesses this tragedy or hears about it. It is easily to conclude the detailed images of this fancy wreck (1914, p.10).

More than the description of the Titanic, Hardy the poet describes the iceberg which is the other side of the accident:

Prepared a sinister mate
For her — so gaily great —
A Shape of Ice, for the time far and dissociate
And as the smart ship grew
In stature, grace, and hue,

In shadowy silent distance grew the Iceberg too. (ll. 19-24)

The poet portrays the iceberg as a “dissociate” “shape of Ice” which is “so gaily great” like the great Titanic. Here, the poet presents the history of this accident in a special unique way. He shows the tragic accident as if it is a predetermined meeting. Even when the poet records this history in such an untraditional way of recording yet the idea is very clear with enough details (1914, p.10).

Far from the historical value of the poem, a notable literary value is also found which proves that the poem does not ignore the literary identity in order to tackle history. Hardy presents the historical matter in the poem in an unexpected treatment. With a satirical style the poem gives a vivid contrast between the materialistic arrogant man and the ability of nature. The reader may expect this poem to be a traditional elegy of this disaster but Hardy surprises the reader, there is no compassion with this loss in the poem. He shows a contrast between the images of the ship on its launching and its position deep in the ocean.

Hardy enriches the poem with a remarkable usage of literary devices. Juxtaposition is used to show the “steel chambers” and “pyres” are full with “cold currents” rather than “salamandrine fires.” The “mirrors” (l. 7) which supposed to be used by the “opulent” (l. 8) passengers at the end it is used by a “grotesque” “sea-worm” (l. 9). Furthermore, the “jewels” that are not in their familiar places but down in the ocean (1914, p.9).

The poem is high in irony, moreover, with personification. Hardy says:

Dim moon-eyed fishes near

Gaze at the gilded gear

And query: “What does this vaingloriousness down here?” ... (ll. 13-15)

This is a super image of irony in the poem. In most of the poem, Hardy describes with irony what is supposed this great ship to be and what the ship is really ended with. Consequently, the poet wants to portray the dissimilarity between man and nature and what it would be if man takes nature for granted. The poet personifies the ship, treats it as a person with “she” and “her” (1914, p.9).

The poet treats nature and its elements as equal to man and his creations. He does this right from the title “The Convergence of the Twain.” Two equal entities are getting close to each other with nostalgic-like style of narrating. This treatment gives the poem its unique literary value. He gives equal focus for the two sides. They are symbols for the human arrogance and the power of nature.

Rudyard Kipling’s poem “Mesopotamia” tackles the siege of Kut-al-Amara and the historical defeat of the British forces by the forces of the Ottoman Empire in 1916 in Iraq. The poem captures the misery that the British troops experience during such a siege.

After the joining of Turkey to the World War I, Britain hurries to defend its interest in Iraq. Tony Jaques records that “7 December 1915–29 April 1916” is a period of different clashes between Turkey and Britain in “Mesopotamia,” and the siege of Kut-al-Amara happens through this time (2007, p.554). Jaques records:

Anglo-Indian General Charles Townshend rashly determined to hold Kut-al-Amara against siege by Turkish General Nur-ud-Din and Colmar von de Goltz. When relief efforts failed at Sheik Sa’ad, Wadi, Hanna, Dujaila and Sannaiyat, Townshend surrendered 10,000 men. About 4,000 of them died in captivity (p.554).

A blockade is imposed on the British army in the area of Kut-al-Amara and historians give a description of the blockade situation. Adrian Gilbert says that during the British moving forward, the British army suffers from “short of supplies.” As a result, the British army backs off to “Kut-al-Amara, only to be surrounded by the Turks.” After “a long and desperate siege...Townshend’s men” find themselves obliged to capitulate “on April 29, 1916” (2000, p. 644).

Some historians regard this surrender as a black memory in the British history. In response to this blockade Edward J. Erickson notes that “between Yorktown in 1781 and Singapore in 1942, the largest capitulation of British troops occurred at Kut Al Amara in Mesopotamia in 1916.” Erickson states that the British capitulation “to an Ottoman Army” is a degrading end and this because of Britain’s obsession with the “tradition of successfully withstanding sieges” (2007, p.61).

The report that is made for this surrender comes shocking. Erickson states that “the report of the Mesopotamia Commission appeared in 1917 as a result of the humiliating surrender of Major General Townshend at Kut Al Amara in 1916.” This statement proves that the responsible for this loss is “factors internal to the imperial military system, including errors in command, administration, logistics, and the condition of training and equipment within the Indian Army.” Furthermore, there is no reference to “the Ottoman Army” as being responsible for such a loss (2007, p.2).

The English poet Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) historicizes this military failure in poetry similar to the presented historians who make such a record in history. His poem “Mesopotamia” is a response to such a loss which is written after the declaration of the 1917 report. Starting from the title itself, the poet records the name of the geographical area “Mesopotamia” (modern Iraq) where the siege happens. Moreover, the epigraph of the poem “1917” refers to the year when the report of this event appears.

Kipling describes the final situation of the British army men right from the beginning:

They shall not return to us, the resolute, the young,
The eager and whole-hearted whom we gave:
But the men who left them thriftily to die in their own dung,
Shall they come with years and honour to the grave? (ll. 1-4)

The poet historicizes these “young,” “eager,” and “whole-hearted” soldiers and the impossibility of their “return” to their country. Kipling is clear in naming who sacrifices those men. “The men” refers to the British army leaders like Townshend who risk the souls of those soldiers and leave them “thriftily to die” (1919, p.47).

Kipling refers to the army situation in the siege of Kut Al Amara, he says:

They shall not return to us, the strong men coldly slain
In sight of help denied from day to day:
But the men who edged their agonies and chid them in their pain,
Are they too strong and wise to put away? (ll. 5-8)

With a repetition to the loss of “the strong men,” the poet records how they “coldly slain.” The poet metaphorically mentions the long time “day to day” that those men endure with no “help,” trapped in Kut. The poet keeps asking for justice. Kipling, as a poet, is aware of this military failure just like other historians are (1919, p.47).

Through the poem, the poet attacks those who are responsible for the crime:

Our dead shall not return to us while Day and Night divide —
 Never while the bars of sunset hold.
 But the idle-minded overlings who quibbled while they died,
 Shall they thrust for high employments as of old? (ll. 9-12)

The poet repeats the mourn statement to show the losses magnitude. He refers to the “idle-minded” perpetrators of this indulgence who are “quibbled” while this massacre takes place. As it is presented through the poem the historical idea is clear, the poet announces both the victims and those who risk those victims with the mentioning of the geographical area and the historical time (1919, p.47).

Beside the historical content, the poem performs its literary role. It is a revolutionary poem; each quatrain of the poem consists of four lines. The first two lines discuss the victims’ situation and mourn their suffering. The second two lines ask for the penalty for those who sacrifice those men. Such a technique makes the poem a revolutionary one. Kipling keeps protesting for those souls. In doing so, he mobilizes the readers to do the same, and this is the poem purpose. “Shall we only threaten and be angry for an hour?” (l. 13) Kipling asks for their fate, “Do they call upon their debtors, and take counsel with their friends,/ To conform and re-establish each career?” (ll. 19-20) (1919, pp.47, 48).

Conclusions

The findings show that Hardy and Kipling are able to play the role of historians for multiple reasons. First, the two poets convey the same main historical details of history but with their own poetic style. It means that the poets reveal their own feelings and emotions or that of those who involved in the historical matters while reporting the historical events. Second, during making these poems the poets are direct, clear, and objective enough in referring to the historical matters. Third, through analyzing the two poems, the similarity is noticed between what has been presented by the two poets and that of the presented historians. Forth, in a way or another, Hardy and Kipling witness the historical events like any other witnesses; this makes the record of these historical events not limited to historians. Moreover, the presented poets write their poems in the same time of the historical occurrences; this can be regarded as the fifth reason. As a result, the poets take the role of the historians while playing their role as poets.

The analysis notes that the poets present the truth of the historical events and this is noticed in various ways. Through the analyzed poems, the poets record the same historical information and details. Hardy presents the poem with an epigraph that exposes the historical statement of the Titanic. Kipling introduces the poem with a title that refers to the location of the historical siege and an epigraph that refers to the year of its report.

The two poems preserve their literary identity while presenting the historical matters. Such a preservation is made through using the different literary techniques. Hardy uses a juxtaposition to reflect the historical situation in the poem with a super image of irony, and Kipling writes a revolutionary poem while portraying the historical matter. The poem style exposes two couplets for each quatrain; the first couplet presents the historical situation while the second protests the historical loss.

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