

## ЗАРУБЕЖНАЯ ЛИТЕРАТУРА

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### THE POETICS OF EKPHRASIS IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH FICTION

Ekphrasis is traditionally defined as a detailed verbal description of an image, primarily visual (paintings, photographs, sculptures, handicrafts, etc.). Ekphrasis is a unique literary device in constructing and developing a literary work, bringing out the crucial point of the narrative and achieving extraordinary literary effects which the author intends.

Ekphrasis has evolved into a genre-defining feature of literature. Historically, since ancient Greece, Rome or China, men of letters have got command of ekphrasis in their works, creating numerous dynamic combinations of texts and art works, which is referred to as an outstanding demonstration of intermediality in literature. Ekphrasis is a rhetorical device, or a figure of rhetoric, and it is used mainly in poems. However, in contemporary fiction, ekphrasis has found new ground to flourish in, taking up multiple diverse ekphrastic textual forms. There are numerous quality ekphrastic writings in contemporary British fiction, combining literature with different works of art in the poetics of texts.

Poetics is defined by various academic resources as the theory of structure, form, and discourse within literature, and, in particular, within poetry. Aristotle's *Poetics*, written in about 330 BC, dwells on the art of literature. In it, Aristotle focuses on the principles of poetry and drama, outlining what makes effective storytelling and structuring plays and stories to be more meaningful and engaging. Aristotle also outlined six main elements that should be present in any artistic work in order to make it successful: plot/structure, characterization, diction/style, spectacle, song, and thought provoking ideas.

As an analogy, the poetics of ekphrasis can be defined as the mode in which ekphrasis is employed to achieve the best effects of the writer's work. The poetics of ekphrasis, we may suggest following Aristotle, includes four basic elements: plot/structure, characterization, diction/style, and thought provoking ideas. To study the poetics of ekphrasis means to systematically analyze the textual representations of ekphrasis, to give a comprehensive account of an ekphrastic structure, form, and discourse, to theorize the functions, features, and effects of ekphrasis.

The poetics of ekphrasis in the research sphere of contemporary British fiction is typical in illustrating the aesthetic, artistic, literary, and practical properties of ekphrasis. Thus, ekphrasis in contemporary British fiction is worth researching against the background of contemporaneity and new rhetorical media.

According to Aristotle, plot is the most important element of a story or drama – it is what ties all of the components together and allows us to follow the narrative. In contemporary British fiction we may find examples where ekphrasis also involves a plot, with plot elements: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. For example, in the novel *The Girl with a Pearl Earring*

(1999) by T. Chevalier, the story is inspired by one of the paintings by Vermeer, a 17<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch painter. The whole book is dedicated to depicting the painting in a verbal form, recreating the background of the character in the painting, telling her life story, showing the fictitious process of creating this painting, which in general constitutes a huge part of ekphrasis. Ekphrasis is structured in a form of narrating a complete story of the painting in the novel, which is a unique and creative case in contemporary British literature. Another case of ekphrasis expressed with a plot, *Luncheon of the Boating Party* (2007) by Susan Vreeland, provides a vivid exploration of one of Renoir's most acclaimed paintings, narrated by Renoir himself and seven of his captivating models, delving into their lives, loves and conversations.

There are also other cases of ekphrases not containing a plot, with only a specific scene extracted from the plot, or merely a detailed or plain and simple description of some art works, which are more commonly used in most ekphrastic literary fictions. For example, in the novel *The Doll Factory* (2019) by E. Macneal, a painting named "The Imprisonment of Guigemar's Queen" plays an important role in constructing the plot of the novel. "The Queen, she, stands in the cell, her face half in profile, one hand by her side and the other reaching out to the dove which flies past the barred window." Ekphrasis in this book doesn't contain a plot, but only a static description of the scene in the painting, namely that the queen is imprisoned, longing for rescue, the details of her posture, her profile, and the surrounding background, all of which convey a strong emphasis on the characters' development and assist in creating an intricate plot of the novel.

Characterization is another poetic function of ekphrasis. In some cases, paintings, sculptures, handicraft described in a literary work feature some characters in an abstract way, therefore ekphrasis serves as a potent device of characterization. In *The Doll Factory*, the antagonist Silas creates stuffed mice baubles: "They are almost all dressed in skirts and corsets and bonnets". As a murderer with complicated psychological condition such as paranoid delusion, Silas is a fervent artist of gruesome but unique animal and insects specimens, dressing them up as those who he has strong emotional connection with, mostly hatred. "The beady face was Flick's, clay-dusted, dented by her father's fist." This ekphrasis characterizes Flick, admired by Silas, later killed by him, as a beautiful young girl, a lower class working woman in pottery, and a victim of violent abuse. Those specimens also reflect Silas's desire for love and connection, and his distorted personality.

According to Aristotle's *Poetics*, diction and style refer to the use of language in order to convey meanings. Ekphrasis with proper wording, metaphors and other poetic devices can enhance the literary value of a work. We can take an example from *The Doll Factory*: "She wears a gold coronet in her hair. A Queen...He notes the bars of the cell, her expression of longing. And the bird that flutters past...Each feather is so perfectly rendered..." In his observation and narration, Silas used words "Queen, longing, perfectly rendered," which shows his admiration for the woman in the painting. The grim bars of the cell and the longing expression of the Queen is a strong contrast, creating a dramatic conflict, which contributes

to a profound effect of ekphrasis. “He peers closer at the Queen’s face, sees a hint of a brush-stroke on her cheek, the daub of light in her eye, the inside of her mouth a lurid, unnatural green. Close up, the painting reveals itself as nothing more than a feint. It is a trick...” In this excerpt, the words “daub, lurid, feint, trick” are used to highlight the dramatic shift of perception in Silas towards the figure in the painting. His attitudes towards the painting have changed from appreciation to resentment and hostility.

Thought-provoking ideas are spurred by the unexpected insight revealed in the book by using ekphrasis, prompting readers to think more deeply about the story. For example, in the novel *The Photograph* (2003) by Penelope Lively, an important fictitious art work of painting is described, scattered in several chapters, from different angles, in different stages of the story, featuring the protagonist Kath, in order to characterize the psychological development of the main characters, unveiling the intertwined relationship between them, creating suspense in the plot, accomplishing an impeccable detective-style story. In *The Photograph*, the portrait of Kath leads her husband Glyn to looking back on his life, his marriage, and his understanding of his wife, because a secret life of Kath is revealed to him, and he discovers Kath as a strange woman whom he has never intended to know more. The sentiments of shock, regret, confusion and relief are evoked by his encounter with the portrait. Ekphrasis of the portrait is mainly represented through the description and observation of Glyn, which contributes to ironic and dramatic shifts of beliefs and provokes further thoughts in the beholders of the artwork.

In conclusion, ekphrasis ranges from ancient rhetorical exercises in description through art criticism to poetry and fiction. Ekphrasis still finds further development in contemporary British fiction, with diversities in its forms and structures. The poetics of ekphrasis includes four fundamental elements: plot/structure, characterization, diction/style, and thought provoking ideas. The elements interact within the literary work, serving as an integral whole to realize intermediality between text and art. It is the differences displayed in elements of ekphrastic poetics in ekphrastic literary works that set works apart. The poetics of ekphrasis offers distinctive approaches to research its nature, explore the functional and ideological potential of ekphrasis and its effect on the readers.