

UNIVERSAL POE(TRY)? REACTING TO “ANNABEL LEE” IN ENGLISH, PORTUGUESE AND UKRAINIAN

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ABSTRACT: This study aims at verifying how readers from three different cultures react to a poem in English and translated to their mother tongues. To this end, Poe’s (185 [1849]) “Annabel Lee” was selected, and 495 participants from the United States, Brazil and Ukraine were involved in the research. The respondents were asked to read the poem in its original or translated version and mark their reactions in a semantic differential scale with 15 items. The findings indicate that the original version provoked quite different responses: North Americans were likely to focus on the text itself, Brazilians tended to react more emotionally, and Ukrainians’ response was unclear. As for the translated version, both Brazilians and Ukrainians shared the same reaction, focusing on emotion and appreciation. In terms of the comparison between reading the original and the translated text, Brazilians tended to have a more emotional response towards the poem in English, and Ukrainians’ reaction was similarly triggered by the original version. Results support the argument that tracing different national reading profiles may be possible and necessary for the understanding of literary reading.

1) Introduction

Since the advent of literary theory as a discipline in the early 20th century, poetry has never left literary scholars’ and linguists’ attention. Focus has been given to the function of its language

(MUKAROVSKY, 1977), the poetics of a single author (БЕЗРЕБРА, 2007), the cognitive peculiarities of poetry in a single country (БЄЛЄХОВА, 2002), imagery (FREEMAN, 2000), the methodological issues of translation (КОЛОМІЄЦЬ, 2004), and the problems of poetry teaching at schools and universities (FOX & MERRICK, 1987), to cite only a few. However, the hermeneutic approach, which holds that interpreting literary texts is based on intuitions and rhetoric, still remains dominant in many places. This is particularly true in the case of Ukraine, where most literary scholars rely on hermeneutics rather than on scientific research methodologies (СИВАЧЕНКО, 2006; ПРИГОДІЙ & ГОРЕНКО, 2006). They still hold the dualistic view that the so-called hard sciences and the Humanities inhabit two completely different worlds (for review and criticism, see VAN PEER, HAKEMULDER & ZYNGIER, 2007). From their perspective, the Humanities should keep to qualitative methods, rely on introspection and be grounded on the researcher's subjectivity, while quantitative methods should remain with the so-called hard sciences.

Here we hold that the methods used in the sciences may also be used in literary studies. More specifically, we observe empirically real readers' responses to a poem. This chapter is in line with the Empirical Study of Literature (SCHMIDT, 1980) which works towards what Snow (1993 [1959], p. 71) called the Third Culture, one in which a Humanities scholar should be conversant with scientific methods and contribute to knowledge by means of accumulating from past experiences and by refuting provisional theories rather than just seeking to reinvent the wheel with another 'new' interpretation.

To find out how real readers respond to texts in a more scientific way, we compare the reactions of North American, Brazilian and Ukrainian readers to two versions of the same poem: the original one in English and its translation to Portuguese and Ukrainian. The two research questions which guide the analysis are provided below.

- (a) How do real readers from different cultures respond to Poe's (1985 [1849]) "Annabel Lee" in its original and translated versions?
- (b) How do Brazilians and Ukrainians react to this poem in their respective mother tongues when compared to their reaction to the poem in English?

To this purpose, we first provide a review of the theoretical background on the Empirical Study of Literature as well as on reader response. Later, we detail the methodological procedures before presenting and discussing the results. Some conclusions are offered, followed by an indication of further developments for this topic.

2) Empirical Study of Literature

The Empirical Study of Literature (henceforth ESL) differs from a hermeneutic view as it works with what people do with literature rather than focusing on texts (ANDRINGA, 1994). It emphasizes meaning-making *processes* rather than the products of interpretation. To carry out empirical studies, analysts rely on methods used in Social Sciences (both qualitative and quantitative) in order to validate hypotheses. This perspective is not new. In fact, Jakobson (1995 [1973], p. 452) had already claimed that "an urgent need for interdisciplinary teamwork [should] be pursued diligently by savants of different branches", and this need has stimulated literary scholars and linguists of today to resort to methodology from other fields and look beyond textual patterns.

From an ESL perspective, LITERATURE¹ is a system in which four different agents act: the producer, the receiver, the mediator, and the post-processor (SCHMIDT, 1980). These roles may be performed, for instance, by the author, the reader, the publisher and the critic, respectively. Therefore, studying literature means

¹ Schmidt (1982) suggests the word is printed in capital letters so as to distinguish it from its conventional meaning.

investigating the actions these agents perform and also finding out how the system relates to other ones, such as ECONOMICS, RELIGION, EDUCATION, etc.

Therefore, this study does not focus on the meaning readers may derive of a poem, but rather how they react to them in terms of who they are. According to Dias (1996, p. 12), “the reader’s involvement as person implies that a response will reflect the reader’s cognitive style and his or her cultural and social norms, attitudes, and expectations”. This kind of approach is in line with reader-response theories developed in the seventies, as discussed in the following section.

3) Reader response and models

It is rather obvious to state that reading activities cannot exist without a reader. However, this does not seem to have been considered by scholars, who generally favor the study of what a text means without taking into account who reads it and how he or she does it. Reading literature must be an experience which becomes part of this person’s life. In a sense, when Iser (1987) argues that a text offers many spots of indeterminacy which have to be filled, he makes a claim for the active participation of the reader and his or her individuality in the construction of meaning. In this sense, readers play a central role in the reading process.

However, research in Literature has tended to avoid this view. Tompkins (1980) states that before the advent of reader response theories the author or the text itself used to be the focus of literary interest. The main interest relied on the authors’ lives, historical background for the work under analysis and/or the way language was used. This scenario led to the question still heard in some literature classes today: “what does this text mean?”. According to Fish (1980), this implies that there is a meaning that can be isolated and studied *per se*. The perspective here is that meaning “is no longer

an object, a thing-in-itself, but an *event*, something that *happens* to, and with the participation of, the reader” (FISH, 1980, p. 72). Reading is, in this sense, an experience which affects readers in some way. In Fish’s (1980, p. 83) words,

Literature is a kinetic art, but the physical form it assumes prevents us from seeing its essential nature, even though we so experience it. [...] Somehow when we put a book down, we forget that while we were reading, it was moving (pages turning, lines receding into the past) and forget too that we were moving with it.

Therefore, we believe that literature is a means whereby new emotions are experienced by the reader (FISH, 1980; ISER, 1987). Still, the first ground-breaking theories were still unable to look at the way the real individual reads. Actually, reader-response theories consider idealized conceptions of readers instead of exploring real ones. For instance, Fish’s (1980) “interpretive communities”; Iser’s (1975, 1987) “implied reader”; Riffaterre’s (1959, 1978) “superreader”; Eco’s (1981) “model reader” are all idealizations. Despite the different labels, all these ideal models share the abstraction. As always, exceptions existed, such as De Beaugrande’s (1987) “naive reader”, but they still had not made their mark. As Dolezel (1980, p. 181) puts it, “it has become customary in recent criticism to transfer responsibility for critical ‘readings’ to a mysterious, omnipresent and infinitely flexible ‘ideal’ reader”. The problem with the idealization is that it does not take into account aspects such as cultural background, social or economic status and literacy level, which have to be considered as they interfere in the reading (WEIMANN, 1975).

Lately, the focus in literary studies has shifted to considering the real reader (MIALL, 1988, 1996; ZYNGIER, 1999; KUIKEN, MIALL & SIKORA, 2004; MIALL, 2006). In the present study, we follow this perspective by checking how readers from different cultures react to a same poem.

4) Methodology

In order to compare the reactions of North American, Brazilian and Ukrainian readers, “Annabel Lee” by Edgar Allan Poe (1985 [1849]) was selected. The criteria included the fact that it is an anthologized work of art (MCMICHAEL, 1985) and can be easily found in many different university syllabi in the three countries where the study was carried out. We assumed that participants would not face any difficulty in reading the original version because of their level of proficiency in English. As regards its translations, for the Portuguese version we worked with the one by the well-known poet Fernando Pessoa; and for the Ukrainian text, by Victor Marach, a professional mathematician who has been translating poetry for years.

To carry out the experiment, participants were divided into five groups: North Americans reading the poem in the original (Group 1); Brazilians reading the poem in English (Group 2); Brazilians reading the translation in Portuguese (Group 3); Ukrainians reading the poem in English (Group 4); and Ukrainians reading the translation in their mother tongue (Group 5). Reactions were gauged by means of semantic differential scales where “respondents are asked to express their feelings toward an object by selecting a position on a scale of bipolar adjectives or phrases” (VAN PEER, HAKEMULDER & ZYNGIER, 2007, p. 128).

The first step in designing the scales was to collect the most recurrent adjectives Brazilian and Ukrainian respondents would use to describe the poem.² To this purpose, randomly chosen participants in both countries were asked to read “Annabel Lee” either in the original or in translation into their native language and come up with ten adjectives they would associate to the poem.

All in all, 60 questionnaires from both countries were collected (30 from each of the 2 countries): 20 in their mother tongue

² At this stage, the experiment did not involve North American respondents. This is why they were not included in this first step.

(Portuguese or Ukrainian) and 10 in English. In Brazil, this initial questionnaire was collected during a two-day conference on empirical studies. The respondents were mostly graduate students from different universities although some lecturers also completed the questionnaires. In Ukraine, the questionnaires were collected both from undergraduate and graduate students of Kyiv National Linguistic University during their classes and leisure activities. At this stage, gender and age of the participants were not taken into account.

All adjectives listed in Portuguese and Ukrainian were then translated into English, and the 15 most frequent were selected. Later, their opposites were added by the researchers. Figure 1 indicates the pairs of adjectives used in this research:

Adjectives selected	Opposites created
sad	happy
romantic	realistic
beautiful	ugly
melancholic	encouraging
nostalgic	not longing for the past
touching	hard-headed
interesting	boring
mysterious	clear
sincere	insincere
sensitive	insensitive
cold	warm
dreamy	down-to-earth
difficult	easy
long	short
repetitive	varied

Figure 1: Most frequent pair of adjectives

In order to arrive at a more general perspective on the variables included in the semantic differential scales, these adjectives were grouped under three semantic categories according to the types of reactions they were associated to. Three were labeled *text-focused* as

they dealt with the participants' opinions of the poem itself (*difficult/easy, long/short, repetitive/varied*). Another group related to how readers evaluated the poem, but not by means of looking at formal features. These were labeled *appraisal-oriented* and included *romantic/realistic, beautiful/ugly, interesting/boring, mysterious/clear, sincere/insincere* and *dreamy/down-to-earth*. The third group focused on the emotions raised after reading and was thus called *emotion-driven*, consisting of the opposites *sad/happy, melancholic/encouraging, nostalgic/not longing for the past, touching/hard-headed, sensitive/insensitive* and *cold/warm*.

After selecting the adjectives and their opposites, the final questionnaire was constructed. The layout was identical for all three countries (the United States, Brazil and Ukraine) and for the three languages involved (English, Portuguese and Ukrainian). In order to guarantee participants' interest and cooperation, a one-page questionnaire was designed so that answering it did not take more than 10 minutes.

The final questionnaire was similar to the first one in the sense that respondents were asked to read the poem and evaluate their reactions by checking the box which indicated the adjectives they would choose and their intensity. They also informed their age, gender, nationality and university. The participants were Humanities students at Concordia University, Portland, Oregon, at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro and at Kyiv National Linguistic University. The North American participants were undergraduate students majoring in English, History and the Humanities. In the Brazilian context, the questionnaires in English were only applied to undergraduates in their third or fourth year of their Portuguese/English major so as to make sure that they had enough command of English to understand the poem. The questionnaire in Portuguese, on the other hand, was answered by Portuguese/Literature, Portuguese/German and first-year Portuguese/English undergraduates. In Ukraine, the respondents were undergraduate and graduate students of Interpreters'/Translators' Department with English as a major or minor.

Most participants answered the questionnaires in their educational environment under the guidance of one of the

researchers. However, in the North American context, the questionnaire was administered as an e-mail survey. In all the three countries, the researchers made sure that participants were willing to participate so as to guarantee commitment and frankness.³

All in all, 495 questionnaires were collected, as follows:

- (a) 95 in English from the United States;
- (b) 100 in English from Brazil;
- (c) 100 in English from Ukraine;
- (d) 100 in Portuguese;
- (e) 100 in Ukrainian.

The data were then analyzed with the help of the computer program SPSS for Windows, version 15. The results were compared both (a) between Brazil, Ukraine and the United States and (b) within a country (the reactions to original and translated versions). Initially, Kolmogorov-Smirnov was run in order to check whether the data were normally distributed. As the result showed that this was not the case, a parametric test could not be used. Therefore, both Kruskal-Wallis and Mann-Whitney had to be used for comparisons where there were, respectively, three or two independent variables. The value of p was set at 0.05, as common practice in the Humanities for the identification of significant differences. The findings are reported in the next section.

5) Results

The initial part of the analysis aimed at answering the first research question by looking at how similarly or differently the participants from the different cultures under study reacted to both versions of “Annabel Lee” (POE, 1985 [1849]). When comparing North American, Brazilian and Ukrainian response to the poem in

³ However, some North American respondents complained that answering the questionnaire by e-mail did not fully preserve their identity, as they could be easily tracked by their e-mail addresses.

English, the result of Kruskal-Wallis indicated that eight out of the 15 variables selected for the study showed significant difference, as indicated in Table 1. The mean result, presented in the third column in the table below, should be interpreted in relation to five-point Likert scale. This means that a value which is lower than 2.5 indicates the response is closer to the first adjective of the pair while if it is higher, the reaction tends towards the second adjective of the pair. In other words, this column helps us see the national group which differs from the other two in each case. The national cluster which stands out in each of the variables has been italicized as well as its mean result.

Table 1: Reading original version compared

Pairs of adjectives	Nationality	Mean	Std. Error	<i>p</i>
Romantic – Realistic	N. American	15.952	.09448	.000
	<i>Brazilian</i>	<i>12.840</i>	.07705	
	Ukrainian	15.769	.08850	
Melancholic – Encouraging	N. American	22.976	.12188	.000
	<i>Brazilian</i>	<i>16.543</i>	.09648	
	Ukrainian	21.154	.10320	
Nostalgic – Not longing for the past	N. American	20.595	.11279	.009
	<i>Brazilian</i>	<i>16.914</i>	.09882	
	Ukrainian	20.256	.09478	
Interesting – Boring	N. American	20.119	.09947	.001
	Brazilian	21.111	.12298	
	<i>Ukrainian</i>	<i>25.641</i>	.12048	
Sensitive – Insensitive	N. American	18.452	.09655	.049
	<i>Brazilian</i>	<i>15.062</i>	.08448	
	Ukrainian	17.436	.08834	
Cold – Warm	N. American	34.286	.11890	.015
	<i>Brazilian</i>	<i>38.395</i>	.11174	
	Ukrainian	35.897	.11015	
Long – Short	<i>N. American</i>	<i>31.905</i>	.08206	.000
	Brazilian	28.395	.10162	
	Ukrainian	26.667	.09245	
Repetitive – Varied	<i>N. American</i>	<i>28.929</i>	.11736	.000
	Brazilian	24.938	.09801	
	Ukrainian	21.923	.10650	

Table 1 shows that the three national groups responded to the original version of “Annabel Lee” in English, to some extent, in different ways. Brazilians yielded a wider variety of responses when compared to North Americans and Ukrainians. All in all, five variables (out of eight) were significant in their case. They regarded the poem more romantic, more melancholic, more nostalgic, more sensitive and warmer. North Americans’ reaction to this same poem indicated that they considered it shorter and more varied. On the other hand, Ukrainians’ response only stood out in one variable, namely, interesting/boring. However, instead of adopting a clear-cut stance on the matter, Ukrainians seem to have yielded a somewhat neutral answer.

If the results presented above are interpreted by means of the labels which have been created to group the 15 variables, the differences between national groups become more noticeable. Brazilians adopted mainly an *emotion-driven* response (the only exception being one variable expressing appraisal), which means that they tended to see the poem and evaluate it in terms of the feelings they might have experienced while reading the text. The North American participants, however, seemed to focus on the *text* itself. Their response concerned specific and tangible features rather than any other personal stance. This could be linked to the fact that they were already familiar with the poem itself, which may have lessened the emotional impact of the reading experience. Ukrainians produced only one significant result in which they did not show a clear attitude. In spite of this, it seems that their reaction is guided by means of an *appreciation* of the poem (or lack of it).

Still working with nationalities as independent variables, Mann-Whitney was used when comparing the two groups which read the translated versions in their mother tongues (Brazilians reading in Portuguese and Ukrainians in Ukrainian). In this case, several significant differences were noticed, as indicated in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Reading translated versions

Pairs of adjectives	Nationality	Mean	Std. Error	<i>p</i>
Sad – Happy	Brazilian	21.463	.08869	.000
	Ukrainian	16.364	.06502	
Romantic – Realistic	Brazilian	13.780	.09605	.038
	Ukrainian	15.455	.08986	
Beautiful – Ugly	Brazilian	17.439	.11486	.035
	Ukrainian	20.114	.10659	
Melancholic – Encouraging	Brazilian	17.683	.09862	.002
	Ukrainian	21.591	.10460	
Nostalgic – Not longing for the past	Brazilian	17.439	.08643	.002
	Ukrainian	21.705	.10377	
Touching – Hard-headed	Brazilian	20.366	.09091	.002
	Ukrainian	17.841	.10022	
Mysterious – Clear	Brazilian	30.000	.14097	.049
	Ukrainian	27.273	.13593	
Sincere – Insincere	Brazilian	20.854	.10865	.000
	Ukrainian	16.477	.09703	
Cold – Warm	Brazilian	35.610	.11124	.045
	Ukrainian	32.273	.12801	
Dreamy – Down-to-Earth	Brazilian	17.439	.09314	.004
	Ukrainian	21.250	.10325	
Difficult – Easy	Brazilian	33.902	.11347	.000
	Ukrainian	26.932	.10643	

Different from Ukrainians, Brazilian readers considered the poem translated into their mother tongue as more romantic, more beautiful, more melancholic, more nostalgic, clearer, warmer, dreamier and easier. On the other hand, Ukrainians viewed the translated version of the poem as sadder, more touching, and more sincere.

In terms of the larger semantic labels, the responses also differed. On the one hand, Brazilians attributed four appraisal-oriented adjectives (*romantic*, *beautiful*, *clear* and *dreamy*), three emotion-driven ones (*melancholic*, *nostalgic* and *warm*) and one text-focused (*easy*) to the poem in Portuguese. On the other hand,

Ukrainians attributed two emotion-driven ones (*sad* and *touching*) and one appraisal-oriented adjective (*sincere*). In this case, both groups seem to follow a similar pattern here, adopting both an emotional and appraisal-oriented response to the poem in their mother tongues.

The second main part of the analysis aimed at carrying out a within-group comparison so as to check how Brazilians and Ukrainians responded to the poem both in English and in their mother tongues. The variables which show significant differences between these two versions of the poem for the Brazilian group are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Brazilians’ reactions to the original and translated versions

Pairs of adjectives	Language of the text	Mean	Std. Error	<i>p</i>
Sad – Happy	<i>Original</i>	17.778	.09129	.009
	Translated	21.463	.08869	
Touching - Hard-headed	<i>Original</i>	16.022	.08607	.002
	Translated	20.366	.09091	
Cold – Warm	<i>Original</i>	38.395	.11174	.020
	Translated	35.610	.11124	

The responses of the Brazilian participants who read the original version in English differed significantly in three of the 15 variables from those who read it in Portuguese. They evaluated the text as sadder, more touching and warmer. It seems that Brazilians were more sensitive to the original version as in none of the variables the stance was directed towards the translated poem into Portuguese. The fact that the Brazilian participants seemed to be more touched by the original version in English may be attributed either to the rejection of translation, to foregrounding, or to previous knowledge of the poem. If the first hypothesis turns out to be true, the negative reactions could have originated from the translator’s failure to match

the aesthetic quality of the original. In addition, the fact that the text in Portuguese was translated by a Portuguese (and not Brazilian) poet from the beginning of the last century may have distanced the readers, who thought the text was more difficult and this may have interfered with the pleasure of reading the text. If foregrounding is the case, reading in a foreign language could have triggered defamiliarization, which helped the Brazilian participants feel closer to the version in English. It may then be the case that a text in a foreign but accessible language makes the reading more foregrounded and evokes a more provocative defamiliarization process. Finally, a third hypothesis to explain the difference has to do with the Brazilian groups involved in the present study. While participants who read the poem in Portuguese were freshmen, those who read the original version were in their last two years at the university and may have already studied the poem formally before data collection took place.

The results of the same comparison as regards the Ukrainian participants are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Ukrainians' reaction to the original and translated versions

Pairs of adjectives	Language of the text	Mean	Std. Error	<i>p</i>
Sad – Happy	Original	19.487	.09638	.004
	<i>Translated</i>	<i>16.364</i>	.06502	
Sensitive – Insensitive	Original	17.436	.08834	.004
	<i>Translated</i>	<i>14.659</i>	.08992	
Cold – Warm	<i>Original</i>	<i>35.897</i>	.11015	.035
	Translated	32.273	.12801	
Difficult – Easy	<i>Original</i>	<i>32.949</i>	.10966	.000
	Translated	26.932	.10643	

This table shows that the translated version was considered sadder and more sensitive than the original version, both of which

indicate emotion. The group of Ukrainians who read the poem in the original, on the other hand, found it to be warmer and easier. Although they seemed to be more touched by the translated version, the original version was also regarded emotionally in terms of being warm. Perhaps the preference for sadder and more sensitive in relation to the translated poem could be attributed to the general 'sad' character of the Ukrainian poetry (folk songs, ballads, etc.) (ПОТЕБНЯ, 1914; САВЧЕНКО, 2001; КОРОТЯ-КОВАЛЬКА, 2009); however, this is still to be tested. The original version was also considered easier than the translated one. It is striking to see that Ukrainians found the text in English easier than the one written in their mother tongue, but similarly to the Brazilian participants, they could have been more in touch with the original text and, therefore, more used to it than to the translated version. We also have to consider the fact that most of the Ukrainian respondents were students of the Translators' Department who had been trained to work with translations and might have considered it a difficult and challenging educational task.

6) Conclusions

The results reported above point to the fact that different characteristics surface when collective responses are taken into account. They offer empirical data to prove that, to a certain extent, there are cultural implications in poetic reading. As the research has indicated, readers from diverse cultures respond differently to the same poem, which could be explained by a number of reasons: one's cultural background and national poetic traditions, the quality of translated texts, pre-knowledge of the poem and the educational background of respondents, or foregrounding of certain elements. All these provisional conclusions necessarily need more empirical verification.

What should be emphasized here is that there is an urgent need to contribute to the area of ESL. According to Miall (2006, p. 11),

“empirical studies of literary reading have not yet appeared over the horizon for most mainstream literary scholars.” Therefore, this situation will only change when the real reader is taken seriously into account. When focusing on what readers *do* with texts, researchers both reinforce their active role in this activity and assume that the moment of reading is wrought with aspects which are not in the text itself. In the present study, for instance, not only was the text itself responsible for the participants’ reaction, but also their personal beliefs and emotions entered the arena. This way more intercultural studies are needed to explain how national cultures may interfere in literary reading. Our results indicate that although the three groups read the same canonical poem they reacted differently, an assertion which is now based on empirical evidence collected from real readers.

For further research, this study should be replicated in other countries. It is also of utmost importance to conduct a similar experiment in which pre-knowledge of the poem is taken into account. Still it would be worthy of investigation whether readers’ reactions would differ if an unknown poem was used. From a more general perspective, the present investigation has shown that there is a brave new world to be explored in the field of literary studies.

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