



BUILDING INTERTEXTUALITY IN THE CLASSROOM: APPROACHING EDGAR  
ALLAN POE THROUGH LITERARY AND NON-LITERARY RESOURCES

Author: Julio Uribe Ugalde

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## Building intertextuality in the classroom: approaching Edgar Allan Poe through literary and non-literary resources

Julio Uribe Ugalde<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

Due to overexposure to technology, teaching literature to teenagers has become a pedagogical challenge in today's educational context. This article proposes a method to bridge the gap between readers and texts by using literary and non-literary resources as an approach to intertextuality<sup>2</sup>. This method will be explained by using American writer Edgar Allan Poe's works "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843) and "The Raven" (1845).

KEY WORDS: Intertextuality, Poe, Music, Television, Literature.

### RESUMEN

Debido a la sobreexposición tecnológica, la enseñanza de literatura al público adolescente se ha transformado en un desafío pedagógico en el contexto educativo actual. El artículo propone un método para acortar la brecha entre lector y texto mediante el uso de recursos literarios y no literarios que permitirían construir intertextualidad. Esta propuesta será explicada a través de las obras "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843) and "The Raven" (1845) del escritor Norteamericano Edgar Allan Poe.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Intertextualidad, Poe, Música, Televisión, Literatura

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1 Julio Uribe has a Bachelor's degree in English Pedagogy and a MA in Literature. Currently, he is conducting a PhD at the University of Melbourne, researching the role of music in the work of Chilean writer Pedro Lemebel. For this project the candidate has been awarded a Melbourne Research Scholarship.

2 Julia Kristeva coined the term "intertextuality" while reflecting on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. "She recognised that texts can only have meaning because they depend on other texts, both written and spoken" (Wilkie 130). On the other hand, Culler described the term as a "general discursive space in which meaning is made intelligible and possible" (Ibid), and "Barthes invented the term 'infinite intertextuality' to refer to the intertextual codes by which readers make sense of literary works" (Ibid. 131).

In my experience as a literature teacher of both school-aged students and undergraduate University students, I have realized that one of the main challenges of teaching literature is to have students analyze texts accurately<sup>1</sup>. If we use Bloom's Taxonomy to exemplify this, we may realize that the first two critical thinking skills "remembering" and "understanding" are achieved by the mere act of reading. However, when it comes the time to use the next two skills, "applying" and "analyzing", students tend to discuss the text itself, but struggle in order to find literary references that allow a deeper understanding. David Denvy states that one possible reason is that today's teenagers are reading less conventional literature than before due to their many activities and the excessive amount of time they spend in front of technological devices: "of course, these kids are very busy. School, homework, sports, jobs, clothes, parents, brothers, sisters, half brothers, half sisters, friendships, love affairs, hanging out, music, and most of all, screens compared with all of that, reading a book is a weak, petulant claimant on their time" (par. 4). In this scenario, it is expected that literature teachers counteract this lack of interest by presenting materials in "attractive, satisfying and stimulating" formats that help increase students' motivation to read (Gopalan et al. 3).

Economopolou and Tzina propose that teachers should promote the understanding of a text as a flexible entity to be approached on "the basis of its intertextual relations" (180). That being said, it is also pertinent to assert here that applying intertextual notions in literature classes would contribute to a meaningful reading experience, potentially making students feel knowledgeable and empowered (Ibíd. 185). Likewise, these authors state that one way intertextuality can be achieved is by "making web clusters to brainstorm a topic, or organize and demonstrate learning. The topic is written on the center circle and related words/topics are written on rays drawn out from the center circle" (Ibíd. 182). The goal, thus, is to elicit a connection between the text and students' personal concepts, ideas or experiences. However, considering the importance of diversity in today's classrooms, the question that arises is: How can teachers ensure that these types of activities are useful and significant for the understanding of the group of students as a whole?

The method outlined in this article suggests an approach to literature by offering learners

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<sup>1</sup> The context of reference is ESL students in Chile (intermediate and advanced levels) in both a private school (middle/high segments) and a public university.

varied literary and non-literary resources in order to build intertextuality before they encounter the studied text. This idea would not only facilitate the students understanding, but also enhance the practice of reading, making it a more interactive and significant experience (Cairney 506). The literary resources are comprised of texts in the same genre and style to the work(s) scrutinized and the non-literary resources are composed of audiovisual material, more specifically television and music. Finally, in order to exemplify the application of this method, I have selected three of Edgar Allan Poe's works as objects of study. The samples are "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843) and "The Raven" (1845).

#### WHY EDGAR ALLAN POE?

In some cases, using Poe stories as an example to build intertextuality in the classroom may be a questionable pedagogical decision due to the explicit and descriptive content of his work<sup>2</sup>. The following paragraphs attempt to provide an answer to the question that entitles this section.

Michele Lansberg states that children/young adults' literature is expected to expand horizons and instill in students "a sense of the wonderful complexity in life" (qtd. in Lesnik-Oberstein 16), which implies that stories for young learners should be realistic, and also inspire them to become inquisitive. Thus, literary material for children and young readers should be seen as a source of satisfaction that derives from identification and participation, and an expansion of their own experience; in other words, an opportunity for catharsis, self-knowledge and identification (Cohen 31). To ensure a complete pedagogical process, teachers should be capable of eliciting this link.

Poe's literary production falls within the category of YAL (Young Adults' Literature) because of the aforementioned concepts and because it falls within Glazer and Williams' series of formal characteristics as requisites for good books: "well-structured plots, rich settings, well-developed characters, important themes, artistic styles and bold and imaginative language" (qtd. in Lesnik-Oberstein 22). Proof of this is the way that both stories "The Tell-Tale heart" and "The Fall of the House of Usher" are written. In them, readers come across emotionally charged plots,

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<sup>2</sup> Personally, I do not consider this a questionable pedagogical decision; however, I have witnessed this debate among some school colleagues. In one opportunity, I recall the conflict was whether or not a specific student with mental health issues might possibly imitate the actions of Poe's characters. This topic was even discussed with the school counseling team, deciding that such student would carry out a separate literary project, where eventual health risks were minimized.

descriptive settings, characters that are presented with virtues and flaws and narrations that, although challenging for some ESL learners, can be understood without major difficulties with teacher scaffolding. Van de Pol defines scaffolding as “support that is contingent, faded, and aimed at the transfer of responsibility for a task of learning” (617), suggesting that teachers should provide students with the tools necessary to process information during their independent working time in order to “make connections between the new information and their existing knowledge” (Ibíd.).

As we can see, literature and more specifically Poe’s literature fosters learning in several ways, not only in terms of style, but also in terms of content. While his work offers the possibility to conduct conventional types of literary analyses, it also allows for connections that go beyond the text in order to elicit a social type of learning, oriented toward the participation of students in social communities (Cairney 7). This moment of reflection can be reached when the analysis of a text has been conducted in a significant way, giving the student the opportunity to not only analyze the formal aspects of the text, but also the intertextual connections they can make within their own cultural background. Christine Wilkie calls this type of intertextuality “texts of quotation”, understood as those “which quote or allude to other literary or non-literary works” (132). The exposure to “other media such as film, television animations, and video, means increasingly, that they are likely to encounter these media adaptations [...] before they encounter the written text” (Ibíd. 133). This type of content falls within the category of “learning objects”, described as multimodal texts (audio, images, text and animation) used to support learning (Wiley 7). “Learning objects” not only benefit the experience of reading as they offer opportunities for “meaning making, but also allow for students’ participation, interaction and engagement” (Freebody and Muspratt 9). In conclusion, media should no longer be seen as an obstacle for the experience of literature; on the contrary, literature teachers are expected to also include non-literary texts in their classes so as to generate connections that enable familiarity between both, texts and students. Finally, it is important to note that literary resources, similar in genre and style to the analyzed texts, should also be included in this plan. This makes the approach of building intertextuality a holistic one that comprises texts of diverse origins. The next section introduces some material that, following this

approach, can be used in the classroom as an introduction to Poe's work. This material is divided in two sections, literary resources and non-literary resources, the latter being categorized as "music" and "television".

#### LITERARY AND NON-LITERARY RESOURCES TO BUILD INTERTEXTUALITY: APPROACHING POE'S WORK

##### Literary texts

Before reading Poe's work, it would be useful to introduce Roald Dahl's *Lamb to the Slaughter* (1953) and Donald Barthelme's *The School* (1976). A comparative study would provide an ideal opportunity for intertextual analysis, approaching "death" as a central theme. In *Lamb to the Slaughter*, Dahl introduces the life of Mary Maloney, an ordinary woman who is married to a police officer. When her husband comes home from work he tells her that he has decided to leave her. Unable to accept this, Mary decides to kill him with a leg of lamb. After she murders him, she leaves the house and goes to a grocery store where she buys food to prepare supper for her husband, which shows both her coldness and wit to set up an alibi. When the police arrive, seeing her act normally, they do not suspect her as the murderer.

On the other hand, Barthelme's story *The School* analyses death from a different perspective. Edgar, the narrator, is a teacher who reflects upon the enigmatic presence of death in his class. Several types of death have taken place that year, for example the death of plants (orange trees), school animals (snakes, gerbils, white mice, a salamander, a tropical fish and a puppy)<sup>3</sup>, a few students (Matthew, Tony and Kim, the refugee student) and some students' parents and grandparents. In summary, children have been repeatedly faced with death, which has created the idea that the school is cursed.

In order to prompt an intertextual analysis between these stories and Poe's "The Tale Heart", teachers could open a discussion about the implications of death in our lives. This presents as a pedagogical opportunity to bring along a topic that, after sex, is considered the "last taboo" (Chadwick et al. qtd. in Dixie 198). In this regard, Dennis Dixie proposes that talking about death

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3 In this story both the narrator and the puppy are named Edgar. This intertextual coincidence could possibly allude to Poe.

in the classroom “might be positive in that it might cause students to appreciate their lives more” (Ibíd.), especially considering that after experiencing someone’s death, “children and adolescents often do not have the adequate opportunities to grieve” (Ibíd.).

Below are some fragments from the aforementioned texts that could be used in order to approach death as a central topic of discussion. They are organized in the same order as the were presented:

When she walked across the room she couldn't feel her feet touching the floor. She couldn't feel anything at all- except a slight nausea and a desire to vomit. Everything was automatic now down the steps to the cellar, the light switch, the deep freeze, the hand inside the cabinet taking hold of the first object it met. She lifted it out, and looked at it. It was wrapped in paper, so she took off the paper and looked at it again. A leg of lamb (Dahl 2).

One day, we had a discussion in class. They asked me, where did they go? The trees, the salamander, the tropical fish, Edgar, the poppas and mommas, Matthew and Tony, where did they go? And I said, I don't know, I don't know. And they said, who knows? and I said, nobody knows. And they said, is death that which gives meaning to life? (Barthelme 2).

You should have seen how wisely I proceeded --with what caution --with what foresight-- with what dissimulation I went to work! I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him (Poe 303).

The lives of Mary, Edgar and his class, or the unnamed narrator of Poe's story can present an opportunity for both, teachers and students to analyze death as well as its possible causes and consequences. Likewise, to take students to the next step in Bloom's taxonomy, which is “evaluation”, several questions can be prompted. For example, Could we forgive the murderer of someone we love? What can we learn from the experience of death? Should a murderer with mental health issues be imprisoned or treated? In summary, reading one or both stories by Dahl and Barthelme before “The Tell-Tale Heart” would give students the idea that this type of literature is familiar to them and teachers, at the same time, would help to build intertextuality.

Non-Literary texts: Television

Two specific episodes of two popular animated series: *The Simpsons* and *SpongeBob Square Pants* are ideal to approach the reading of “The Tell-Tale Heart”. The episode “Lisa’s rival” (Season 6, episode 2) of *The Simpsons* was partially created based on the aforementioned Poe story. Allison, a new student, has come to Lisa’s class and has become her academic rival. The class needs to prepare a diorama based on a literary piece, so Lisa finds inspiration in Charles Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*, meanwhile her new classmate, chooses Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart”. Bart intervenes and helps Lisa sabotage Allison’s presentation by burying the original work under the floorboards and replacing it with a cow’s heart. With regret, Lisa decides to tell the truth and confesses the deed toward the end of the presentation.

On the other hand, the episode “Squeaky boots” (Season 1, episode 17) in *SpongeBob SquarePants* portrays an excited SpongeBob, after receiving a pair of cheap rubber fishing boots from Mr. Krabs in exchange for his paycheck. The boots make an annoying squeaky sound that soon bothers Mr. Krabs and makes him regret the offer. In despair, Mr. Krabs hides the boots underneath the restaurant floorboards, but then realizes that he can still hear the squeaky sound now ringing in his head. Driven to madness, Mr. Krabs confesses the *deed*.

In both episodes we can find conceptual references to Poe’s story, but it is in the climax when they become more direct and literal. In the original story, the unnamed narrator screams the word “villains” which marks the moment of his confession: “‘Villains!’ I shrieked, ‘dissemble no more! I admit the deed! --tear up the planks! here, here! --It is the beating of his hideous heart!’” (Poe 306). In “Lisa’s rival” the word “villains” is replaced by the exclamation “aahhh!” whereas in “Squeaky Boots” it is replaced by the expressions “stop it!” and “I did it!” On the other hand, the words “deed”, “beating” and “hideous”, used by the unnamed narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart”, are literally repeated by both characters, as shown below:

Aahhhh! It’s the beating of that hideous heart! (“Lisa’s Rival” 00:20:00-10)



Stop it! Stop it! Oh, can't you hear it? Yes I did it! I did it! I took the boots. They are here, under the floorboards!. It's the squeaking of the hideous boots! I am sorry, but I can't take the infernal squakin' no more!... The deed is done! ("Squeaky Boots" 00:08:10-47)

As Christine Wilkie suggests, it is possible to assume that teenagers have been exposed to audiovisual sources like these. If that is not the case, teachers could screen this material before reading, as a way of introducing the text. Then, when the literary piece is finally reached, students will be able to identify vocabulary, plots, characters and settings, among other features that will contribute to achieve a better understanding of the text studied. Such activities are indeed suitable for intertextuality building in the classroom.

#### Non-Literary texts: Music

In the field of music, most connections with Edgar Allan Poe can be related to Bob Dylan's songs. Probably, the main similarity is the fact that both artists suffered some kind of alienation. In the case of Dylan, one relevant moment was his controversial winning of the Nobel Prize for Literature. Some critics and writers, notably in Britain, refused to accept Dylan's songs as literature (Rollason 43). In the case of Poe, his validation in the high spheres of literature probably occurred in the late twentieth century. T.S. Elliot, for example, "was uneasy about his presence", and Harold Bloom has described his writing as "invariably atrocious" (qtd. in Rollason, *ibíd.*). The Poe-Dylan connection is quite broad and it certainly requires more specific attention<sup>4</sup>. For the purpose of this article, I have decided to refer to Bob Dylan only as an introduction to the connections between literature and music.

To build intertextuality in the classroom through music, two works by other musicians that could be used are *Trova de Edgardo* by Silvio Rodríguez, and *Usher Waltz* composed by Nikita Koshkin. In *Trova de Edgardo* Rodríguez narrates his brief encounter with a bird, which has reminded him of Edgar Allan Poe: "Hoy, a mi puerta un pájaro trinó, pero abrí y una sombra se echó a volar". The bird, which alludes to the poem "The Raven" has brought along some memories that remind the singer of the similarities between the American writer and himself. Some of these are related

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<sup>4</sup> See Rollason's cited article for more information.

to the fate of an artist: humbleness, loneliness, nostalgia, and itinerancy, just like a “troubadour”. There is also a reference to one of Poe’s biographical aspects that has gained notoriety and even obsession when analyzing his plots; that is, his addiction to opium: “Hoy, recordé a Edgardo aquel señor, fumador de amapolas que era juglar”. This, according to “The Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore”, would be inaccurate, since it is the narrators of his stories the ones who consume opium and not necessarily the author himself. As a whole, the song *Trova de Edgardo* not only gives students the opportunity to approach “The Raven”, but also to learn about the author’s biography and reflect upon the fallacy that characters resemble their authors.

Another very different yet equally relevant piece of music is Nikita Koshkin’s *Usher Waltz*, a piece of classical music composed for a lead guitar. This melody, to be played by a virtuoso guitarist, resembles the narration of Poe’s story “The Fall of the House of Usher”. The guitar seems to speak as the musical piece progresses, possibly taking the narrator’s voice of the tale. This assertion can be demonstrated by the variable melody and rhythm of the musical composition, which suddenly intensifies (minute 2:30) as if marking the climax of the story, but eventually fades (minute 4:15), as if revealing the melancholic state of Roderick Usher for the loss of his sister Madeline. *Usher Waltz* is a musical piece inspired by one of Poe’s most remarkable works, which can be interpreted in several ways, thus giving options for teachers to foster creativity in students in terms of how to interpret it before and after they encounter the written text, or perhaps to apply scaffolding by giving them the opportunity to bring songs or works that they can associate with literature in order to elicit a more meaningful experience.

## CONCLUSION

In a context where teaching literature has become a significant challenge, one way of bridging the gap between teenagers and books is through the basis of intertextual relations. For that, it is necessary to understand that intertextuality is a varied concept and not only refers to literary, but also non-literary texts. An author that can be used as an example to apply the aforementioned approach of building intertextuality is Edgar Allan Poe, a writer whose work makes teenagers feel attracted to literature. Probably, the reason lies in the plots of his stories, the readers’ identification

with his characters' decision-making, the use of a challenging, but still engaging language or perhaps, in the several references to his work that can be found in the media and which make readers feel some kind of familiarity with his narrative. As we have seen, some of these multimodal media samples can be found in television and music. Teachers can use media as a contribution to the experience of reading and not as an obstacle. Certainly, some people in the most orthodox literary circles would argue against this statement; nevertheless, academics such as Wilkie, Economopoulou and Tzina, Cairney and Lesnik-Oberstein, among others, have demonstrated that this approach is valid. In sum, this article has presented a pragmatic alternative: "building intertextuality" as a possible and useful pedagogical method.

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