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The Representation of Classic in Anne Carson's Poetry

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

فَتَعَالَى اللَّهُ الْمَلِكُ الْحَقُّ ۖ وَلَا تَعْجَلْ بِالْقُرْآنِ
مِنْ قَبْلِ أَنْ يَقْضَىٰ إِلَيْكَ وَحْيُهُ ۚ وَقُلْ رَبِّ
زِدْنِي عِلْمًا

صدق الله العلي العظيم

(طه: ١٤٤)

To the Candle of My life, My Mother.

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Abstract

The present study examines Anne Carson's classic elements in her poetry. This paper consists of two chapters. Chapter one sheds light on Anne Carson's life, and her career. Chapter two considers her use of the classic in her literary works, especially in her poetry. The conclusion sums up the findings of the study.

CHAPTER ONE

Anne Carson's Life and Career

1.1 Introduction

Anne Carson has some nerve. She treats poetry as a casual high-wire act, and knows how to get our attention. Poets tend to occupy the ultraviolet end of the literary spectrum, invisible and under-compensated. Carson is a radiant exception to the rule. Having won some \$700,000 in prizes, the 66-year-old writer is Canada's most richly rewarded poet, a status she has achieved by taking poetry out of bounds and into the wild¹.

Anne Carson has been teaching classical Greek literature at leading universities in Canada and the United States for the past twenty years. Carson has a day job teaching ancient Greek, and habitually weaves classic mythology into fiercely contemporary scenarios. It is a part of her life and personality that carries over into her poetry, the inspiration and background for her literary work, consisting of essays (*Eros the Bittersweet*, *The Economy of the Unlost*) and a mixture of essays and poetry (*Plainwater*; *Glass*, *Irony* and *God*). Any associations of classical scholarship with stuffiness are quickly dispelled by Anne Carson's talent for reviving the poetry and philosophy of the ancient Greeks and for making them part of our modern experience².

Carson, is "brilliant anti irrepressible." She is "Canada's most progressive poet in many decades. She is like a performance artist on paper, with that kind of adventurous chutzpah, as hyper as she is brilliant." She writes in a flourishing language that invites the reader to start decoding." When most critics speak about Carson's challenging

style and cryptic qualities, they are referring to the poet's tendency to mix classical allusions such as Greek epics with modern-day characters and situations. This is the poet's most widely known hallmark³.

1.2 Carson's Biography

Anne Carson is a contemporary [Canadian](#) poet, essayist, translator and professor of Classics. Carson was born in Toronto, Ontario on June 21, 1950. Carson is the daughter of a banker, her father worked for the Toronto Dominion Bank. During her childhood, the family moved about from bank to bank. Her mother was a housewife. Neither of her parents went to university. Her father had fought in the second world war and liked to read history books; her mother liked abbreviated versions of the classics sent by Reader's Digest. Carson grew up in a number of small Canadian towns like Stoney Creek, [Montreal](#), Port Hope, and Timmins. She got married and then divorced 1980. Because of this, some critics speculate that relationship poems like "New Rule," which was included in 2000's *Men in the Off Hours*, might have autobiographical significance. Today, Carson lives alone (has no children) in Ann Arbor, where she teaches classics and comparative literature at the University of Michigan⁴.

1.3 Carson's Education

In high school, a Latin instructor introduced Carson to the world and language of Ancient Greece and tutored her privately. Carson took Latin in high school because it was the alternative to typing. Her Latin teacher was also conversant in ancient Greek, so Carson took Greek lessons in her lunch hour. Carson believes that "Greek is one of those things that, when you do it, you realize it's the best experience in the world, there's no reason ever to stop. Enrolling at [St. Michael's](#)

[College](#) at the [University of Toronto](#), she left twice at the end of her first and second years. Carson, disconcerted by curricular constraints (particularly by a required course on [Milton](#)), retired to the world of graphic arts for a short time. She did eventually return to the University of Toronto where she completed her B.A. in 1974, her M.A. in 1975 and her Ph.D. in 1981. She also spent a year studying Greek metrics and Greek textual criticism at the [University of St Andrews](#). As such all of her degrees are in classics⁵.

A professor of the classics, with background in [classical languages](#), comparative literature, [anthropology](#), history, and commercial art, Carson blends ideas and themes from many fields in her writing. She frequently references, modernizes, and translates [Ancient Greek literature](#). She has published twenty books as of 2016, most of which blend the forms of poetry, essay, prose, criticism, translation, dramatic dialogue, fiction, and non-fiction⁶.

1.4 Carson's Awards

Her erudite, unconventional, yet highly relatable brand of writing has led her to win a variety of awards. She was twice a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. That is to say, she was a 1998 [Guggenheim Fellow](#), and in 2000 she was awarded a [MacArthur Fellowship](#). She has also won a [Lannan Literary Award](#). In addition to that, in 2001 she received the T.S. Eliot Prize for Poetry – the first woman to do so. Moreover, she won the Pushcart Prize, the Griffin Poetry Prize, and the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize . She was also the Anna-Maria Kellen Fellow at the American Academy in Berlin, Germany⁷.

Carson was an Anna-Maria Kellen Fellow at the [American Academy in Berlin](#), Germany, for Fall 2007. The Classic Stage Company, a New York-based theatre company, produced three of Carson's translations: [Aeschylus' Agamemnon](#); [Sophocles' Electra](#); and [Euripides' Orestes](#) (as An Oresteia), in repertory, in the 2008/2009 season. She is Distinguished Poet-in-Residence at [New York University](#) and was a judge for the 2010 [Griffin Poetry Prize](#). She also participated in the [Bush Theatre's](#) project [Sixty Six Books](#) (October 2011), for which she had written a piece entitled Jude: The Goat at Midnight based upon the [Epistle of Jude](#) from the [King James Bible](#). Once every year, Carson and her husband, Robert Currie, teach a class called Egocircus about the art of collaboration at [New York University](#). On November 16, 2012, Carson received an [honorary degree](#) from the [University of Toronto](#). Carson delivered a series of "short talks", or short-format poems on various subjects, as the address to the Ph.D. graduating class of 2012. Carson was the Director of Graduate Studies in Classics at McGill University and taught at Princeton University from 1980-1987. She has also taught classical languages and literature at Emory University, California College of the Arts, the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Michigan. She currently teaches in New York University's creative writing program⁸.

1.5 Carson's Works

Carson admitted that at heart she considers herself a visual, not verbal, artist. Originally she wanted to be an artist, and her first book of poetry, *Short Talks* (1992), began life as "a bunch of drawings which I put titles on, and then the titles got longer and longer" until the drawings disappeared. Her ideas still tend to come to her in shapes first and her poetry is very visual - she arranges it in crazy shapes on

the page. Her books are like collages, a combination of memoir, poetry, dissertation and drama, held together each time by an overriding theme. Although she has always been reluctant to call herself a poet, Carson has been writing some heretic form of poetry almost all her life. Her work is insistent and groundbreaking, a blend of genres and styles that for years failed to attract notice. In the late eighties, a few literary magazines in the United States began to publish her work. Canadian venues were considerably less welcoming, and it was not until Carson was forty-two that a small Canadian publisher, Brick Books, published her first book of poems, *Short Talks*⁹.

By the mid-nineties, Carson was no longer trying to find publishers; rather, publishers were clamoring to find her. In short order, three collections of poems and essays appeared—*Plainwater: Essays and Poetry* (1995); *Glass, Irony and God* (1995); *Men in the Off Hours* (2000)—as well as a verse novel, *Autobiography of Red* (1998), which seamlessly blends Greek myth, homosexuality, and small-town Ontario life. Two ostensibly academic books followed: *Economy of the Unlost* and her translation of Sappho's poetry, *If Not, Winter*, both in 2002¹⁰.

Carson has gained both critical accolades and a wide readership over the course of her “unclassifiable” publishing career. In addition to her many highly-regarded translations of classical writers such as Sappho and Euripides, and her triptych rendering of *An Oresteia* (2009), she has published poems, essays, libretti, prose criticism, and verse novels that often cross genres. Known for her supreme erudition—she is called as “one of the great pasticheurs”—her poetry can also be heart-breaking and she regularly writes on love, desire, sexual longing and despair. Always an ambitious poet whatever her topic or genre¹¹.

Reviewers have praised the range of Carson's verse, consistently describing her poetry as inventive, visionary, and highly unique. Scholars often discuss the influence of her academic history; Roger Gilbert has noted, "unlike many academic poets she deploys her scholarly voice as a dramatic instrument whose expressive power lies partly in its fragility." Since bursting onto the international poetry scene in 1987 with her long poem "*Kinds of Water*," Carson has published numerous books of poetry, including *Float ; Red Doc*; *The Beauty of the Husband: A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangos* (winner of the T.S. Eliot Prize for Poetry); *Autobiography of Red* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1998); and *Short Talks*¹².

Anne Carson, author of approximately sixteen books of poetry, essays, and translation. Carson's books are notable both for their originality and their relative (sometimes paradoxical) approachability. Carson draws on her classics background to blend contemporary narratives with ancient myths, or to radically modernize ancient Greek writers by translating them without regard for anachronism (a character in her translation of Sophocles' *Antigone* has a powerboat, for example). She has been praised for her deft, deeply informed, often humorous characterizations of desire and unrequited love. And as she breaks the rules of chronology, she also breaks the rules of genre, writing poetry that resembles prose, essays that resemble poetry, and operettas that resemble short plays by Samuel Beckett.

Notes

- ¹ Brian D. Johnson. "Anne Carson has a nervy new Collection of Poetry: Canada's most richly rewarded poet proves her worth." (2016): 1.
<http://www.macleans.ca/uncategorized/anne-carson-has-a-nervy-new-collection-of-poetry/>

- ² [Sherry](#) Simon. "Translating Montreal: Episodes in the Life of a Divided City". *Journal of British Studies*. (2006): 242.

- ³ Gale Cengage. *A Study Guide for Anne Carson's "New Rule"*. (New York New York University press , 2016): 23.

4. Ibid.

- ⁵Wen C. Fong. "How to Understand Chinese Painting." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*. (2012): 92.

- ⁶ Immanuel Kant. *Critique of Judgment*. (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2005): 78.

- ⁷ Will, Aitken. "Anne Carson, The Art of Poetry No. 88". *Studies in Canadian Literature* (2004) : 1

- ⁸ Wen C. Fong. "How to Understand Chinese Painting." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*. (2012): 92

- ⁹ Smaro Kamboureli. *Trans. Can. Lit: Resituating the Study of Canadian Literature*. (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2007), 61.

10. Will, Aitken. "Anne Carson, The Art of Poetry No. 88". *Studies in Canadian Literature* (2004) : 2

¹¹. Gale Cengage. *A Study Guide for Anne Carson's "New Rule"*. (New York New York University press , 2016): 24.

¹². Ibid

¹³. Helen, Guri . "Latches of Being: A User's Guide to Anne Carson". (2015): 3 ://hazlitt.net/poetry/latches-being-users-guide-anne-carson.

CHAPTER TWO

The Use Classics in Carson's Literature

2.1. Introduction

Anne Carson's work treats Classical subjects in what has been called a postmodern fashion. Carson's genre-averse approach to writing mixes [poetry](#) with [essay](#), [literary criticism](#), and other forms of prose, and her style is at once quirky, inventive, and [erudite](#). Anne Carson, a writer described by Michael Ondaatje as "the most exciting poet writing in English today." and literary form, in her poetry Carson try to juxtapose classical and modern traditions. Her poetry, prose or essays are also deeply influenced by history, literature and art. She blends the sources, ideas and themes from all her fields of expertise and thus often produces hybrid works that make her peculiarity in today's literary scene¹.

Whatever she does, as a classicist, the past is always intensely present for Anne Carson. Even walking around her old campus, she says, "There are so many footprints on these streets, I'm surprised they're not really there." "Classics is kind of like a cult," Carson observes with the mysterious smile of an initiate. Those who seek it out consciously set themselves apart, joining a community where people learn not in order to change the world but to preserve it; where the chatter of contemporary trend-spotters fades beside the power and relevance of ancient voices².

For Anne Carson, Classical works possess a special significance in contemporary literary criticism. The Classics commonly signify the origins of Western literary culture. Despite the sense of cultural difference that emerges from what seems the "barbarism" of antiquity,

Classical texts nonetheless evoke both the philosophical origins of Western civilization and the fledgling *nomos* of contemporary aesthetics. The Classics suggest both a nostalgic origin and a primitive *other*. Such ambiguity provokes contradictory (or even competing) interpretive approaches. Carson affirms that the Classics portray distinctly contemporary concerns that are not merely aspects of etiological mythmaking. Carson contends that, in their ambiguity, Classical works contain the origins of contemporary thought; she finds the genesis of Modernist and Postmodernist aesthetics in the unstable correspondence between the “story” of the past and the “ruins” of the past – a correspondence that magnifies our contemporary concerns about textuality, historicity, and representation³.

In the words of Walter Benjamin, Carson observes that “every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (Benjamin 255). In Carson’s work, Classical texts perform in a number of special ways: first, as pure points of origin for contemporary thinking about the present; second, as exemplars of tentative, if not dubious, assertions about historicity; and third, as mutable ciphers of interpretation – the “scaffolding” for the imaginative reconstruction of a lost culture, lost values, and lost time itself⁴.

In her work, the Classics act as both a neutral site that hosts the competing values of cultural criticism, and as the originary expression of those same cultural values. In their dramatization of contemporary philosophical concerns, the Classics confront the epistemic authority of truth, history, and representation – confrontations that many critics consider hallmark characteristics of both Modernist and Postmodernist

literature. 21 Carson employs the Classics in her poetry and in her scholarship because many of the issues surrounding the relationship between discourse and knowledge remain central to the Western literary tradition⁵.

As the perpetual objects of literary criticism and the perpetual subjects of literary theory, Classical texts conform to the philosophical demands of each era. The cultural history of the Classics is simultaneously the cultural history of literary criticism. Despite being the hermeneutical target of so many various traditions, assumptions, and theories, the Classics nonetheless remain the most resilient examples of literary change, reflecting the transformation of literary values over time. Even so, Carson recognizes that Classical writers anticipate the contestations that Modernists and Postmodernists proffer to the truth-values of historiography, representation, identity, and even poetry. Such recognition not only informs the rationale for Carson's theoretical work in *Eros the Bittersweet*, but also influences her translations in *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*. Likewise, in *Economy of the Unlost: Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan*, Carson demonstrates how contemporary philosophical problems and contemporary aesthetic concerns originate in Classical thought. And in *NOX*, Carson shows how Classical aesthetics provide a salient form for contemplating personal loss⁶.

2.2 The Practical part: Analysis of Representation of the Classic in Carson's poetry

Since this study is about Carson's use of classic in her poetry, it is necessary to analyze a number of Carson's poems concerning her exploitation of classic in these poems. As such, this section is specified for this task. The researcher tries to show, in the analysis, how Carson bases her poetry on the classic and the influence of classic in her poems. Among the analyzed poems are the following:

2.2.1 Autobiography of Red

Autobiography of Red, a stunning work that is a poem, both an unconventional re-creation of an ancient Greek myth and a wholly original coming-of-age story set in the present. In *Autobiography of Red*, the poet Anne Carson explores a monster figure from antiquity, Geryon. In ancient renditions of the myth, Geryon possesses a herd of red cattle that spark jealousy in Herakles. As one of his labors, Herakles kills Geryon and steals the cattle. Carson takes up the myth from Stesichoros, preserved in the fragments bearing the name *Geryoneis*. *Autobiography of Red*, recasts the figure of Geryon in the modern day, tracing his life as a red, winged person from childhood forward. In Carson's book, Geryon and Herakles are lovers, and Herakles violates Geryon's heart. *Autobiography of Red's* original poetic form, invocations of sublimity, phenomenology, and melancholia, lend the text to a reading by way of queer theory⁷.

Not only is Carson focusing on the same subject, but she also sticks to the same form; indeed, the poem is composed of seven sections: an essay

on the Greek poet Stesichoros, translated fragments of Stesichoros' *Geryoneis*, a lyric sequence based on the *Geryoneis*, a palinode, a mock interview and two appendices. Those seven sections recall the seven sections of the Greek nomos or lyric performance Stesichoros was famous for⁸.

2.2.2 Nox

Nox is one of Anne Carson's great poems. *Nox* is an elegy . Anne Carson wrote and created *Nox* after the death of her brother Michael. Carson create this poem to honor her brother who has passed away. The poem describes coming to terms with his loss through the lens of her translation of Poem 101 by Catullus “for his brother who died in the Troad.” An exploration of loss, of death and absence, in Anne Carson's always unique cross-genre style. Here, she uses a poem famous in Latin classes across the world, Catallus 101, in which Catallus grieves the death of this brother, as a mirror in which to reflect the loss of her own estranged brother--himself haunted by the death of his one true love - who killed himself 4 days short of a meeting they were going to have after a 20 year separation. The technique is presenting the Catallus poem being translated word by word--you can see all the various meanings of each word a translator must select among to assemble a poem in a new language. Like translating the scraps of her brother's correspondence and memories of him into the poem of this book. In *NOX*, Carson shows how Classical aesthetics provide a salient form for contemplating personal loss⁹.

Carson, in *Nox*, brings to bear her acumen in the classics, she tries to search through fragments to make meaning in the face of her brother's

death. In other words, She explores the subjects of , classic, language, etymology, history, and kinship in an attempt to understand her brother¹⁰.

Conclusion

It is concluded that Anne Carson is the most distinguished, original, successful adaption and reconfiguration of the classical models produced in the past generation. Anne Carson is characterized by her talent for talent for reviving the poetry and philosophy of the ancient Greeks and for making them part of our modern experience.

Carson affected by classic because she studies and teaches Classic. All of her degrees are in classics. She was a professor of the classics. Carson has a day job teaching ancient Greek, and habitually weaves classic mythology into fiercely contemporary scenarios. Carson bases her poems on the classic. That is, the analyzed poems show that Carson *takes* up the, characters, myths, themes and structures from the classic and represent in her poetry. The past is always intensely present for Anne Carson.

Notes

¹Sébastien Ducasse. "Metaphor as Self-Discovery in Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse*." *Journal of British studies*. (2007): 1-2

² Val Ross. "The past is always intensely present for poet, novelist and classicist Anne Carson". *Journal of Literature*. 2001.
(<http://magazine.utoronto.ca/feature/about-anne-carson-poetry/>).

³ Drew McDowell. *Symbolon: The Poetry of Anne Carson*." Master's thesis, UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY, 2015. 42-43.

⁴ Benjamin. *Theses on the Philosophy of History*." Trans. Harry Zohn. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. NY: Schocken, 1968. 255.

⁵ Drew McDowell. *Symbolon: The Poetry of Anne Carson*." Master's thesis, UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY, 2015. 45.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Bonnie Scott. *Gender of Modernism*. (Chicago and Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2007.): 71.

⁸ Sébastien Ducasse. "Metaphor as Self-Discovery in Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse*." *Journal of British studies*. (2007): 2

⁹ Wallace Stevens. *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*. (New York: Vintage, 1951). 53.

¹⁰ Robert Scholes and Clifford Wulfman. *Classic in the Magazines: An Introduction*. (New Haven: Yale UP, 2010.): 112.

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