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E. D. Hirsch's Conception of Meaning VS Significance A Critical Study of Selected English Poems

**Instr. Khalid Qais Abed
University of Anbar / College of
Education for Humanities**

&

**Asst. Instr. Mushtaq Abdulhaleem
Mohammed
Al-Iraqia University / College of Arts**

Abstract

As an American educator, academic literary critic, and professor emeritus of education and humanities at the University of Virginia, Eric Donald Hirsch Jr., (1928) distinguishes between meaning and significance in literary texts, particularly poems, proposing that readers should distinguish between the levels of meanings carried by the lines of any poem. The present paper sheds light on Hirsch's critical efforts and achievements in this respect to help the students of English literature read, study and appreciate any literary text academically and critically rather than personally. This research paper also explicates the supposition that knowledge is relative and it has resulted in the intellectual sanction against dogmatic skepticism. Hirsch calls this "cognitive atheism" which is based on the idea that every reader sees the literary work from his own perspective. Thus, the meaning is stored in the author's mind and is put in his literary work. What is behind the text/object is the reader's vital concern. His task is based on the given literary approaches as tools of analysis. On this basis, Hirsch rejects the personal bases of appreciating the literary text. He tackles it in his notable book entitled *The Aims of Interpretation* (1976). The prominence of Hirsch lies in his remarkable efforts in the coinage of concepts and principles which have been considered as instrumental in shaping the literary theory. At last, this paper is an attempt to apply Hirsch's views and techniques to analyze two poems: William Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper" (1807) and Philip Larkin's "At Grass" (1950). Selecting such poems is not only due to their significance in English literature, in general, but also in the curriculum of departments of English literature to the third-year and fourth-year students respectively, in particular.

Keywords: Eric Donald Hirsch, *The Aims of Interpretation*, significance, meaning, appreciation, interpretation, William Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper," Philip Larkin's "At Grass"

1. Introduction

The intrinsic interest of contemporary critics is the way of analyzing the literary text in general and the poetic work in particular, taking into consideration the many pre-given intentions of the author and the possible perspectives from which that analysis is supposed to be more critical and logical. Professor and critic Eric Donald Hirsch Jr. renders a new attempt to reconsider the approaches of literary criticism. He adopts the idea that meaning is fixed as given by the author, but significance is changeable and related to readers and to the age in which it is read and appreciated. Thus, Hirsch's main aim is to solve the problem of the relationship between two main concepts: criticism and interpretation and how to distinguish between them. For him, textual meaning is fixed while interpretation changes from one generation to another, so subjective criticism is not possible because an interpretation of a specific text today may not be acceptable for a former generation. In this respect, Hirsch, in his "Objective Interpretation," gives multiple definitions of textual meaning and claims that

This permanent meaning is, and can be, nothing than the author's meaning. There have been of course several other definitions of textual meaning: what the author's contemporaries would ideally have construed, what the ideal present-day reader construes, what the norms of language permit the text to mean, what the best critics conceive to be the best meaning, and so on. In support of these other candidates, various aesthetic and psychological objections have been aimed at the author: first, his meaning, being conditioned by history and culture, is too confined and simple, second, it remains, in any case, inaccessible to us because we live in another age, or because his mental processes are private.⁽¹⁾

The above quote sums up the definition of textual meaning, the factors, and the circumstances surrounding it. Hirsch elucidates the justifications behind the reliability of textual meaning as surrounded by history and culture. He also mentions that it is written in an era entirely different from the previous and next ones. In this sense, the literary significance refers to any critical appreciation that is not fixed and not restricted by the above historical and cultural factors and circumstances.

It is very required for students of English literature to distinguish between the given textual meaning and the literary significance in order to

produce a noteworthy critical analysis of the text they study. Hirsch, then, defines meaning as a term referring “to the whole verbal meaning of a text, and significance to textual meaning in relation to a larger contribution of the cultural and historical aspects in the text, i.e., another mind, another era, a wider subject matter. In other words, the significance is textual meaning as related to some context, indeed any context, beyond itself.”⁽²⁾ The students’ attention should be directed to the significance to open new horizons of analysis through its context behind the text itself. Indeed, many students of English literature still do not recognize what is the major difference between analyzing and summarizing on the one hand and what is the importance of each in the literary writing, on the other. Hirsch’s conception aims at showing the meaning of the author in terms of interaction between the author’s consciousness and the medium (the language) employed to express that meaning.⁽³⁾ The constant meaning of the author is something given and defended even when the literary significance is being engaged by readers and students. Without such a meaning, not any knowledge of interpretation is possible nor any other levels of knowledge in many humanistic disciplines based on textual interpretation would be fruitful.⁽⁴⁾ By enabling the students of literature to relate their analysis of the literary work to the age in which they live, professors of literature will enable their students to be more confident in writing a succinct literary analysis as they tackle what is behind the text. That is to say, tracing the literary significance rather than the pre-given textual meaning which is found in the author’s consciousness.

Moreover, Hirsch handles the dialectic of the literary study whether the literary work can be studied as an entity written in the past or as a speaking object of today.⁽⁵⁾ If the text is appreciated on the basis of the time in which it is written, the students will get detached from appreciating it with reference to their own age. In this case, the speaking voice is more reliable than the author’s intention because the latter is liable to the many changes, mental, psychological and even circumstantial. The students’ task, according to Hirsch, should be based on a limited portion of the author’s intention and then move out of that intention to grasp their own inquiry due to their age and surrounding. On this basis, Hirsch agrees with the reader-response approach in criticism in that they share a concern for the reader as the literary interpretation, or significance according to Hirsch, is

established when a reader and a text interact. The advocate that succinct literary study must consider both the reader and the text not a text in isolation.⁽⁶⁾ The student as a reader of a literary work should know this axiom that any mature interpretation is incomplete unless s/he takes part in it by being given complete credence to respond to it. The author's intended meaning is found in her/his mind and is referred to in the text. It cannot be put aside or tackled as a subsidiary component of the text at all. It represents the core from which readers move to interpret it and get the intended meaning despite the time of reading if the text is written in an era different from the current one. So, the inquired meaning for the students of English literature remains inaccessible until the theme and purpose of the text are captured by the readers or students.⁽⁷⁾

2. "The Solitary Reaper"

As one of the most notable poems written during the Romantic Era, William Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper" (1807) represents a keystone in Romantic Poetry in general and in Wordsworth's oeuvre in particular. In "The Solitary Reaper," Wordsworth expresses various themes like beauty, the power of imagination, nature, music, limit of language, and memory. Through simple words, deep meanings are carried to show the significance of the whole poem. What distinguishes "The Solitary Reaper" as a ballad, is what John Stuart Mill famously suggested—with Wordsworth in mind—that lyrical poetry was not heard but rather overheard: "eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*. Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener."⁽⁸⁾ In this ballad which is a narrative folksong, the solitary traveler overheard the solitary reaper whose song inspires his consciousness to be overheard by the solitary reader. So, the traveler "is careful not to alert her to the fact that she has an audience."⁽⁹⁾ In line seventeen, for example, the traveler asks: "Will no one tell me what she sings?" The question could be directed to himself since there is no one else except for the solitary reaper or it "presupposes a social world and, moreover, a world divided between English-speakers and Gaelic speakers."⁽¹⁰⁾ In both cases, the answer was a kind of hypothesis. The traveler's reaction towards the reaper's song proves that "poetry emerging not only as a potentially communicative act but as an information processing system."⁽¹¹⁾ It also leads to meditation. Through

“The Solitary Reaper,” Wordsworth urges his readers mediate his experience. Wordsworth’s poetic function is carried when he “posits his singer as addresser, her singing as channel, himself as inadvertent addressee; her song, the “message”[...]is ostentatiously obscured. Immediacy[...]would seem always to be far off.”⁽¹²⁾

Analyzing a poem has to begin with its title so as to tackle its main concerns. The title comprises two main words: “Solitary” reflects its main theme which is loneliness and “Reaper” refers to a foreign girl “Highland Lass.” These two words could also be interpreted as a direct reference to the solitary situation of the poet and the reaper. A reaper whose language is incomprehensible at least to the poet, yet he was interested in her voice which was sorrowful and melancholic due to loneliness. As Werner puts it: “Her song flows from the natural human impulse to sing to the rhythm of work.”⁽¹³⁾ Being a romantic poet, Wordsworth sees her natural voice as a facet of natural world. Although the nature of the reaper’s song cannot be defined neither by the poet nor by readers, it is suggested that “it might deal with heroic events far away and long ago,” and “it may also as well be a “humble lay” that treats of the ordinary day”⁽¹⁴⁾: “Or is it some more humble lay,/ Familiar matter of to-day” (lines 21-22).

The opening stanza in the poem describes the reaper’s isolation which is repeatedly emphasized by words like: “solitary,” “single,” “by herself,” “alone.” The poet is directly addressing readers and drawing their attention insistently to the solitary girl by using words like: “Behold her,” “Stop here,” “Listen.” At first glance, Wordsworth’s style suggests his “longstanding interest in pathetic subjects and their focalization.”⁽¹⁵⁾ Similarly, there is an expressive and subjective quality in the same stanza in which the reaper sings “a melancholy strain” (lines 6). So, the elegiac tone is an inescapable, quiet and meditative heightened by words like “Stop here, or gently pass!” (line 4). The tone is connected with the process of reaping which marks an end to the season of growth.

Through writing about humble, rustic and innocent subjects, Wordsworth clarifies his intention to communicate stronger and simpler. Accordingly, messages of simplicity and innocence are carried through the reaper’s song which is “uncontrived, expressing directly the natural melody of the passages and patterns of human experience.”⁽¹⁶⁾ Occurrence or a chance meeting plays an important role through Wordsworth’s poem. It

relates a meeting through the Scottish highlands of a valley of a traveler who has seen and stopped for a while to enjoy the reaper's beauty, the song' melody and the dialect's greatness. The poet "neither invents its words nor specifies meanings for his own effects. He permits its strains to linger in all the ambiguity and singularity of their own reality."⁽¹⁷⁾

Significantly, in the girl's figure and voice, readers can find "the essential elements of human existence—work, art, war, and common round of domestic life. As a creature of ritual, the reaper's transient instant, according to Kroeber, can personify the continuum of human existence earth." Her song, indeed, has "no ending." Hence, both Wordsworth and his readers bear within their hearts that "melancholy strain" which "overflows" this "Vale profound."⁽¹⁸⁾ The poem achieves universality through the full development of the particular to make general or even by employing "comparisons with other lands and times and seasons" to universalize the significance of his poem and its remarkable themes. Wordsworth compares the Highland girl's song to a nightingale singing to travelers on Arabian sands and to a cuckoo whose song is "Breaking the silence of the seas / Among the farthest Hebrides" (lines 15-16). By doing so, the poet expands on "his range of applicability spatially" and makes "a temporal extension as well."⁽¹⁹⁾

In addition to fluctuating between sea and land, the poet sheds light on Autumn when the reaper reaps, and Spring when the birds sing. He begins questioning about the meaning of the girl's lyric or even its origin after a declarative mode: "Will no one tell me what she sings?" (line 17). By asking such a question Wordsworth indicates that the traveler "might be blocked from the content of its meaning by linguistic and vernacular boundaries[...]but he is also seduced by the sub-textual sounds and rhythms of its tune and the way in which the reaper embodies the song's refrain."⁽²⁰⁾ In other words, the significance of the song is shown not through its words, but through its sound in comparison with sounds of reaping, birds, and wind.

The charm of the song made "readers feel temporarily separated from their surroundings, the meaning of the poem and the consolation of nature, and are thus liberated to reawaken into a vitalized condition of sensual awareness." For Wordsworth, the best way to understand the song is by imagination, "a breaking-in of consciousness that allows him to sense

and feel the reaper's" "natural sorrow, loss, or pain" (line 23). Likewise, what is significant to Wordsworth "is the habitual emotion embedded in her repeated lyric, one that teaches him to hear feeling."⁽²¹⁾

Thus, the poet reaches back into the time of prehistory when he uncertainly answers the questions; the first possibility is introduced by the provisional word "Perhaps:" "Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow / For old, unhappy, far-off things, / And battles long ago" (lines 18-20). The answers suggested are only tentative. Given as an alternate possibilities. Such a universality deepens the meaning and explores its significance through contemplating, wondering and entertaining spontaneously. It is probable that the traveler is "blocked from the content of its meaning by linguistic and vernacular boundaries [...] but he is also seduced by the sub-textual sounds and rhythms of its tune and the way in which the reaper embodies the song's refrain."⁽²²⁾ In the poem, the traveler who passes from "perception literal scene to a reverie of surmise and possibility" meditates his position by starting with the hypothetical word "Or": "Or is it some more humble lay, / Familiar matter of to-day?" (lines 21-22). The subsequent question seems at first "to act as weight that favors the song's being of the "Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain, / That has been, again?" (lines 23-24), but later on it asserts "the suggestion that human life, whether long ago or in the present, is fundamentally the same."⁽²³⁾

The last stanza shows a sense of everlastingness, an unbroken range induced in the whole poem: "Whate'er the theme the Maiden sang / As if her song could have no ending" (lines 25-26). Consequently, the poet refuses to claim any assumed possibility, asserting only what he can verify concerning the song. Hence, the motion of the girl's "work is unceasingly rhythmical as she swings her sickle and then stoops to bind the cut grain." Not only did the traveler's eyes stay fixed on the "single glimpse of the solitary reaper first" but also "prompting him then to meditate inwardly upon it. Perhaps more penetratingly, the sound of a melancholy strain haunts his hearing, leaving a lasting echo in inward consciousness."⁽²⁴⁾

It is noteworthy to mention that the poem includes a lot of contrasts expressed via the paradoxical nature of its song. As the title refers to a solitary reaper who does her job a lone, readers may notice nothing about her personally. However, they imagine the poet accompanies her at least from a distance. Despite the fact that the poem "in substance is sad," it

“does not produce sadness” in the poet’s mind nor in the readers’. The song which is so electrifying that it overpoweringly moves Wordsworth and graciously makes his emotions at rest. Likewise,

The song itself is a human entity, made as a work of art is made, but yet Wordsworth sees it as profoundly natural, as the song of a bird is natural. Yet again, the song is a product of the girl’s solitariness, but it suggests to the poet the glamour and warmth of “Arabian sands” (line 12).⁽²⁵⁾

Meditation or meditative mode followed by Wordsworth from the very beginning of “The Solitary Reaper” until its end is embodied by the impact of the song which sung by a solitary girl whose beauty is not praised in comparison with her song itself. Even though the dialect of the girl is not understood, it is mixed with the sound of the sickle while reaping and what is around like grass or the movement of the air which add musical impact and harmony. Similarly, the girl does not stop singing, “for the song is not only an accompaniment to her work but in some way is linked to the hard, unremitting nature of her lot. The girl, the reaping and her song are fused in the poet’s contemplation.” What makes the traveler astonished is the quality of its music and “the beauty of the song in which the girl and her work are transfigured.”⁽²⁶⁾ Line like “The music in my heart I bore” brings about many mixed and recollected feelings of sorrow and joy, “hinting that her song is burdensome to him as a reminder both of a broken rural economy, and also of the pressure he feels to understand the world through the imagination.” Surprisingly, Wordsworth, according to Mason, “transforms this pain into joy by suggesting that self-dependence, solitude and repeated reflection give way to an emotional maturity from which warm communal feeling emerges.”⁽²⁷⁾

In conclusion, Wordsworth’s “The Solitary Reaper” is a lyrical ballad which defines the significance of aesthetic delight. What distinguishes this poem is its song’s incomprehensible words which ultimately refer to contemplating the reaper and her song. Being drawn in different perspectives to the reaper, the traveler was contemplating what he considered to be true art, and this poem is surely the best vindication of the human importance of such singing.

3. “At Grass”

Furthermore, another unique example is Philip Larkin’s “At Grass” (1950). The content of the poem is simple to relate. It is a landscape of two retired racehorses at grass whose identity is unspecified to the reader or the student. As a pastoral, “At Grass” portrays the horses as anonymous after spending a long time in galloping and fame. Now after the passage of time and the imminence of the ageing process, they are anonymous as referred to ‘they’ and ‘them’. Through the use of such words, Larkin further adds to the sense of insignificance. The insignificance of life is emphasized by these words which are indirect and general. The poem is written in January 1950 the month after Larkin lost his novelistic ambitions.⁽²⁸⁾

If the student focuses only on that attractive landscape, he will keep appreciating the poem at surface, concluding such themes as a sense of peacefulness and contentment that the poet speculates and cannot find them in the urban and chaotic society or even in human life.⁽²⁹⁾ The literary significance in Hirsch’s terminology is essentially concerned with what is behind the meaning of the poem. It represents the tool by which the student can dig deeply to find the poet’s intrinsic purpose behind writing the poem. It establishes the fresh area of creativity for the students so as to find something from nothing so far as the poem is concerned.

By employing the literary significance, such noteworthy critical appraisal can be concluded. A. Alvarez remarks that

In his memory [Larkin] recalls the time fifteen years ago when the seahorses were famous [...] Now in their retirement, the horses have retreated from their former world and can gallop for no other motive than the sheer joy of it. Having relinquished their former world, they have relinquished with their identities. They share an anonymous solitude; wherein wants Larkin sought an isolated oblivion, these horses have found a kind of oblivion in their anonymity and absence of memory.⁽³⁰⁾

In contemporary poetry, the poet’s intention lies behind what is being written rather than the pre-given implications of the text. Poetic style is characterized by symbolism and allusiveness. To enable the student to write succinct critical appreciation far from summarizing the content of the

poem, Hirsch recommends that it is required to drag his attention to the significance as a stage behind meaning.

Correspondingly, the student is encouraged to explore the deep meaning of the title of the poem, "At Grass." It reveals one of the most important themes in it: ageing. The title connotes leisure time, or even retirement since it refers to horses as old race horses which are put out to grass once their racing days are over. Philip Larkin begins "At Grass" with the sight of two old and far-away horses in a field: "The eye can hardly pick them out" (line 1). Such a scene implies that these horses insignificant or they are no longer important. They now shelter in the "cold shade" and are disturbed by wind and flies: "From the cold shade they shelter in, / Till wind distresses tail and main" (Lines 2-3). These lines are so meaningful that they tell what the poem is all about. "Their effect," according to Hassan "depends upon the landscape they evoke which is presented to the reader as an actual place. They offer an image composed of two retired race-horses set against a twofold background; partly existing and partly inferred."⁽³¹⁾

Still, the two horses were once very popular racehorses. Symbolically speaking, such neglected old horses could be compared to old parents or people who are most of the time neglected by their children or acquaintances. Larkin wrote "At Grass," to present the retired horses as "elegiac symbols," as Booth puts it. Also, the distance between them and the poet is something ambiguous: "They are, strangely, 'sheltering' from warmth and light, effaced, physically fading from view as their fame recedes."⁽³²⁾

Apparently, one of the horses eats grass and moves around while the other keeps looking as an 'anonymous' being: "Then one crops grass, and moves about / – The other seeming to look on – / And stands anonymous again"(lines 4-6). Significantly, the look of the other horse is not an ordinary one since this horse's world is not a human's: "The animal only 'seems' to look on, in a parody of the race spectators of previous days. It is not only the eye which can hardly 'pick them out'; it is also the mind."⁽³³⁾ The word "anonymous" implies multiple meanings: a person without identity or with dementia. Not only that but also unpractical and completely ignored at last. So , the first stanza which combines the past and the present, expresses "the passage of time [which] is depicted by the present

condition of the horses: they are so changed by time and so inactive. . . . They incarnate a misty truth of their past as they stand as a reminder of that past.”⁽³⁴⁾

The second stanza shows that these horses were capable of passing through large distances “fifteen years ago.” Their exploits were enough “To fable them: faint afternoon”(line 9) or make them legends. “Yet fifteen years ago, perhaps Two dozen distances sufficed To fable them” (lines 7-8) clearly illustrate two vital concepts: time and space. Through verbs like “surficed” and “fable,” Larkin makes “the horses out across a breadth of time rather than space” then he summarizes their racing careers by “Two dozen Poetic Histories distances.” By doing so, Larkin presents racing signification as “a focus for other echoing connotations of distance.” Therefore, the distance can be seen in two different but related ways: the poet is at a distance from the horses, in space, and the horses are at a distance from their former racing careers, in time.⁽³⁵⁾ There were “Cups and Stakes” given to the horses whose names were engraved “inlay” in time. Their golden age is shown in the summers, “classic Junes,” which were the happy moments when the horses won races against all odds.

The third stanza shapes the poet’s imagination which reinvents the scene of a race-meeting. The horses were decorated with “Silks at the start: against the sky” (line 13). Their identity based on ranking or “Numbers and parasols: outside” (line 14). The word “parasol” refers to the horses being protected from sun or sun-shaded, unlike their present situation. The trophy horses were responsible for “squadron of cars” and conspicuous “columns’ on the newspaper: “Squadrons of empty cars, and heat / And littered grass : then the long cry / Hanging unhushed till it subside / to stop-press columns on the street” (lines 15-18). Symbolically speaking, the above lines express the horses’ omnipresent victory. Stylistically, “the shorter phrases (marked by the colons) indicating a quickening excitement. The final, longer phrase ending stanza three beautifully creates a gradually sinking movement imitative of the “long cry” of the race result...”⁽³⁶⁾ All in all, the lines create a moment of suspense which is continued through the expressive words.

The fourth stanza, the poet asks a rhetorical question concerning the horses: “Do memories plague their ears like flies?” in order to liken memories to flies. Indeed, like memories, flies which are the most

annoying and distracting insects, stubbornly refuse to be dispersed. In this sense, Larkin suggests that

[People] succumb to memories like a disease (in the metaphor of “plague”) and he manages to make the abstract notion of “memories” vividly concrete and tangible in the simile with “flies,” which are themselves literally present around the horses’ heads.⁽³⁷⁾

Consequently, the horses enjoy their “memories” and nostalgia as much as they enjoy the state of oblivion. The present situation of the horses is full of glorious memories of their past.

“They [horses] shake their heads” (line 20) to clear the flies. By doing so, their movement seems to function as a response to Larkin’s rhetorical question: “they are disturbed by flies, but it is he who is disturbed by memories. For now that their time is past, they are content to stand in the “unmolesting meadows,” unmolesting, that is, because they are not plagued by memories.”⁽³⁸⁾ The repetition of the word “summer” is important since it reminds readers of youth and good times which are lost or stolen over the years. The action-packed years conditioned by wide memories are part of the past: “The starting-gates, the crowd and cries –” (line 22). What in due course remains are the “unmolesting meadows,” as the only continuous companion to the horses.

The poem offers a wholesome attitude to life in all its stages. “It presents two contrary states of life — a past of fame and a present of anonymity, the past of involvement in the social life and the present of withdrawal from its pressures. It also juxtaposes two opposite psychic states — one filled with “memories” and the other possessed by an intense awareness of the present.”⁽³⁹⁾ Nevertheless, the poem is a withdrawal from life which is attractively eminent in the old racehorses’ freedom from the constraints of their careers. Consequently, “the horses have been reconciled to something even more compelling than the strident demands of community.” Affirming their true identity in the peaceful solitude of “All but the unmolesting meadows”(line 23) clarified by “Almanacked, their names live...” (line 24).⁽⁴⁰⁾

The last stanza in which lines like: “Have slipped their names, and stand at ease, / Or gallop for what must be joy, And not a field glass sees them home, / Or curious stop-watch prophesies,” (lines 25-28) suggest that

the names of the horses are less mortal than the horses themselves for the poet tactfully and ironically let readers expect the implicit meaning of words which are not mentioned. In other words, their names live; they Die:

At last 'they' can be themselves, as horses, having 'slipped' not only their bridles but also their human names. The field in which they now gallop for 'what must be joy', is more secure than the 'home' to which they were previously 'seen' by race goers.⁽⁴¹⁾

Now, they are anonymous and memory-ridden: "[T]hey [h]ave slipped their names, and stand at ease / Or gallop for what must be joy" (25-26). As a result, "their time is now their own, and so is their will, freed from the vision of the "fieldglass" or the duress of the "stop-watch," they can now exercise their own sweet will."⁽⁴²⁾ Thus, the poem suggests a "profound admiration for human lives well-lived and safely over." Simultaneously, it is undeniable that the shadow of death in "Only the groom, and the groom's boy, / With bridles in the evening come" which hangs over the horses in the poem "prevents Larkin from attaining a wholly positive vision of life in the poem."⁽⁴³⁾

In Tom Paulin's opinion, the poem has significantly shown the importance of the horses as two heroes come home after winning a battle efficiently. In this sense, the horses, to him, are "emblems of the heroic," "heroic ancestors – famous generals" and they are "observed almost by a sniper's eye. " He concludes that "Only the grooms, and the groom's boy / With bridles in the evening come (29-30) confirm "the last vestiges of traditional hierarchy."⁽⁴⁴⁾

Although "At Grass" deals with two horses, it is far from a poem on animals. Through two horses, Larkin presents the relationship between the horses and the human world: "The horses are irreducible: neither allegories of history, nor victims of human perversity."⁽⁴⁵⁾ Hence, students interpret "At Grass" as an embodiment of freedom for it shows "Larkin's capacity to celebrate the joy of freedom, of withdrawal from one's social self at a humbler, more mundane and more concrete level."⁽⁴⁶⁾ Despite the fact that the whole poem is about "the inevitability of the horses' fate, As they are taken back to the stables, it is as if, as with all men, they are submitting to death."⁽⁴⁷⁾

“At Grass” is highly significant in shaping Larkin’s approach to life. It is believed that the poem “celebrates withdrawal from the insistent pressures of contemporary life, rather than urging us to confront them.” From a sociological point of view, it is appealing to be “a post-imperial poem, one that nostalgically mourns the loss of England’s past imperial glory.”⁽⁴⁸⁾ In this respect, Blake Morrison observes: “The reason for its popularity is surely that, by allowing the horses to symbolise loss of power, Larkin manages to tap nostalgia for a past “glory that was England”: it is a poem of post-imperial tristesse.”⁽⁴⁹⁾ Also, the poem is seen from idealist’s perspective by which a speaker is “noticing the horses in this way suggests regret that man cannot be like them. The poem reminds us how hopelessly unlike the horses we are.”⁽⁵⁰⁾

In conclusion, the poem deals with Larkin’s familiar themes of identity, time, memory, and life and death. In this poem, one finds a peacefulness and a contentment in the old horses that s/he cannot find in human life. At the moment, in their retirement, the horses have withdrawn from their previous world and can gallop for no other motive than the pure joy. These horses have set up a sort of oblivion in their anonymity. They currently live in a present which is incessant, and at the same time they are not overwhelmed by the future or memories of the past. They live in a harmony with nature, thus they live amicably by having surrendered personality, memory, expectation. Dissimilar to man they have no figments, laments, fears, questions, despite the fact that the night might draw its definitive close.

4. Conclusion

Through his emphasis on meaning and significance, the distinction between them, the difference between appreciation and interpretation, Hirsch, as an effective literary critic, suggests that students of literature, specifically poetry, have to explore what is behind the text, beyond the lines, what is invisible, rather than read it on the surface and summarize it. Hirsch urges through his theories students to reject the personal judgment, instead, he objectively provokes students to analyze the text psychologically, sociologically, and linguistically.

William Wordsworth’s “The Solitary Reaper,” for instance, is simply about a Scottish girl who reaps and sings in a beautiful way, but

incomprehensible to the traveler who meets her by chance to express his attraction to her without saying a word to her. Apparently, such a summary is satisfactory to students, but it is definitely not to their professors since it misses a lot of significance carried by the poet in terms of selecting a title or using specific words, images, symbols, or even other literary devices. In reality, the poet expresses multiple concepts to be cared about such as the emphasis of aesthetic reasons of the girl and nature, the importance of sound and voice rather than the words of the song, and contemplating cultural clash. The pastoral elements are so clear that they show contrasts of happiness and sadness, work and leisure, seasons, birds, land and sea.

Furthermore, Philip Larkin's "At Grass" is about two horses which are unknown after a long time of victory and fame. It is about the change in the state of two horses. The poet shifts in time when prosperity, fame, and winning are present to show that these horses lost their better life to an old age one. In fact, it is about comparisons between the past and the present, a time of victory and retirement and fame and negligence, life and death, and remembrance and oblivion. The horses are seen as human beings, elegiac symbols of war as well as victims of exploitation.

At last, the explored concepts, themes and hidden meanings cannot be figured out unless depending on Hirsch's approach and views in literary criticism. Summarizing is not a critical appreciation which should follow different perspectives: political, sociological, psychological, environmental, linguistic, and so on. In a nutshell, meaning to Hirsch is a matter of consciousness, while significance to him is application, although it is part of meaning.

Teachers of poetry need to deal with the intended meaning of the poem in addition the highlight on the construed grammar of a sentence or the comprehended meaning of a word. Yet, these are not serious misinterpretations of the poem in comparison with those dependent on a fundamental misconception of the idea of the poem. Indeed, every interpretation should revolve in this sense. The teacher's reading which is really better than the students' has to convey more knowledge to the poem. It is the experience of the teacher's good reading which should be shared imparted to his/her students, but not to permit their ignorance to lead them into mistake, nor requesting that they find inside the poem what must be found outside of it.

Notes and Bibliography:

- (1) Hirsch "Objective Interpretation," 75.
- (2) Hirsch, *The Aims of Interpretation*, 49.
- (3) Tatar, 75.
- (4) Hirsch, *The Aims of Interpretation*, 1.
- (5) Tatar, 50.
- (6) Bressler, 80.
- (7) Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 149.
- (8) Mill, 56.
- (9) Newman 78.
- (10) Ibid, 79.
- (11) Langan, 246.
- (12) Ibid.
- (13) Wrener, 110.
- (14) Ibid., 111.
- (15) Mcsweeney, 284.
- (16) Werner, 112.
- (17) Ibid., 114.
- (18) Kroeber, 206.
- (19) Werner, 115.
- (20) Mason, 85.
- (21) Ibid.
- (22) Ibid.
- (23) Werner, 123.
- (24) Ibid, 119.
- (25) Finch, 93.
- (26) Ibid., 94-95.
- (27) Mason, 85.
- (28) Booth, (Introduction), Xxiii.
- (29) Swarbrick, 37.
- (30) Ibid., 38-9.
- (31) Hassan, 23.
- (32) Booth, (Plight), 119.
- (33) Ibid., 120.
- (34) Hassan, 23.
- (35) Booth, (Plight), 120.
- (36) Swarbrick, 38.
- (37) Ibid., 15.
- (38) Ibid., 38.
- (39) Chatterjee, 158.
- (40) Spurr, 59-60.
- (41) Booth, (Plight), 120.
- (42) Swarbrick, 39.
- (43) Chatterjee, 160.
- (44) qtd in Booth, (Plight), 121.
- (45) Booth, (Plight), 122.
- (46) Chatterjee, 155.
- (47) qtd in Regan, 37.
- (48) Chatterjee, 157.
- (49) Morrison, 82.
- (50) qtd in Regan, 70.

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