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Literature and the Mutability of Language

The Story of English, the paperback counterpart to the 1986, Emmy-winning television series of the same name, begins by quoting Ralph Waldo Emerson: “The English language is the sea which receives tributaries from every region under heaven” (qtd. in Cran et al. 1). This insightful quote outlines the diverse array of historical and literary examples that *The Story of English* uses to display the fluidity of language. Ever since I received this Robert McCrum, William Cran, and Robert MacNeil book as a cherished present from my grandfather, I’ve been captivated by the relationship between literature and the mutability of language. Today, I have both my grandfather and the authors of *The Story of English* to thank for helping me to view literature with a new perspective. I now see literature as a major tributary to the ever-changing and innovative tides of the sea that is English.

Geoffrey Chaucer, the 14th century poet, has long been renowned for his contributions to a changing English. His ingenuity with language shows in *The Canterbury Tales*—a frame narrative of stories told by an eclectic group of pilgrims. Our “first founder and embellisher of our English” (qtd. in Cran et al. 80), as described by the printer William Caxton, has been recognized as symbolizing “the rebirth of English as a national language” (ibid). These praises were caused in part by Chaucer’s decision to use Middle English, rather than the more intellectually esteemed French. In the 14th century, this was groundbreaking. However, the use of Middle English isn’t the only innovation now associated with Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer also decided to have his pilgrims speak in everyday styles. Examples of his application of the vernacular include his French and Latin inspired diction, as well as the Pardoner’s use of a Southern dialect (one of the three Middle English dialects that were identified in Chaucer’s time). According to *The Story of English*, “Chaucer was alive to the energy and potential of everyday speech” (Cran et al. 81). His enthusiasm for language, demonstration of the vernacular, and transition to participating in the English literary tradition all attest to the considerable role Geoffrey Chaucer had in developing English.

It is difficult to understate the impact William Shakespeare’s innovations have had on the evolution of the English language. The Bard’s contributions to English are inescapable, and have been so since he began writing in the late 16th century. Bernard Levin, the British journalist, says it best:

If you cannot understand my argument and declare, “It’s all Greek to me,” you are quoting Shakespeare. If you claim to be more sinned against than sinning, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you recall your salad days, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you act more in sorrow than in anger, if your wish is father to the thought, if your lost property has vanished into thin air, you are quoting Shakespeare... (qtd in Cran et al. 99)

Levin then goes on to list dozens of other Shakespearean idioms. Have you ever heard of the expression “too much of a good thing”? Or perhaps there’s familiarity in “laughing stock”, teeth being “set on edge”, “foul play”, or “for goodness’ sake”. In addition to these phrases, Shakespeare coined a wide assortment of words. From *Macbeth*, the Bard’s linguistic innovation brought us “assassination”, “stealthy”, and “unsex”. From *Antony and Cleopatra*, we added to our dictionaries “demurring” and “jointing”. From *Hamlet*, we discovered “cadent”, “credent”, “befriend”, and “operant”. William Shakespeare’s plays are a remarkable example of an individual’s impact on language through literature.

Charles Dickens, the Victorian novelist who authored works such as *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, and *Great Expectations*, was another creator of literature that showed and influenced the changing of English. Like William Shakespeare, a myriad of words is thought to have been coined or popularized by Dickens. Representative neologisms include “flummox”, “gorm”, and “abuzz”. What’s more, Dickens also warrants a comparison to Geoffrey Chaucer for their shared usages of everyday speech and slang. A “spoffish” person is someone who’s busy and may be prone to acting rudely, as if you’re always in their way. A “gonoph” is a petty thief, the sort of person you’ve got to be suspicious of. “Lummy” is the equivalent of someone today using either of the ambiguous words “awesome” or “cool”. Charles Dickens shares with William Shakespeare and Geoffrey Chaucer the ability to invent new ways of expressing ideas in their works through the adaption of English.

It’s been said of *Moby-Dick* and its author, the American writer Herman Melville, “Few books are so filled with neologisms; it’s as if Melville were frustrated by language itself, and strove to burst out of its confines” (Hoare, “What Moby-Dick Means to Me”). Melville’s linguistic innovation and desire to adapt the English language to benefit his artistic expression epitomizes how literature can transform language. For Melville, and to some extent, for the previously mentioned writers, the Romanticist and generally artistic aim to experiment and use inventiveness to bypass constraints has been motivation to aid in the mutability of language. This is supported by the idea that Melville wanted his language “burst out of its confines”. Herman Melville’s search for originality and independence from rules that infringed upon his ability to express ideas and create art resulted in his literature’s role in contributing to the fluidity of the English language.

To skip ahead about a century, we might look to the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe to discuss his profound linguistic innovation in works such as *Things Fall Apart*. This book, which was originally published in English in 1958, is one of the most famous books surrounding the postcolonial era. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe sought to give Nigerians a realistic portrait of themselves, while simultaneously showing the rest of the world the truth about the aftermath of colonialism. In telling a more truthful account of history, as well as showing a realistic perspective of Igbo life, Chinua Achebe decided to weave Igbo words into his English narrative. He said of his resulting linguistic innovations: “I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings.” These ideas about the creation of a “new English” draw attention to the fluidity of language that Achebe’s writing has promoted.

From Geoffrey Chaucer to Chinua Achebe, each writer mentioned in this piece, and so many others, have created new variations of English because of their creativity and originality in using language. Each of these writers produced literature that broadened the boundaries of what the English language can be, by way of artistic talent and the desire to use literature to produce something new and valuable. Each of these writers helped to construct the history of English, a history I was inspired to investigate after reading the book *The Story of English*. Each of these writers, from Shakespeare to Achebe, has driven us to ponder the relationship between linguistic and literary ingenuity. And most of all, each of these writers is evidence that literature is a significant tributary to the awe-inspiring sea that is the English language.

Works Cited

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