

Why “Jesenje večé” [“Autumn Evening”] is Not (Only) a Landscape Poem? The Problem of Categorisation

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Abstract

This paper presents the problem of poetry classification, on the basis of the poem “Jesenje večé” [“Autumn Evening”] written by Antun Gustav Matoš. The mentioned poem, in school readers, is referred to as an example of landscape poem although in the accompanying tasks it is demanded of pupils to identify the presence of the author himself in the poem and explain the symbolism. That is, it is expected from pupils to think, contemplate and read the text – in one word, reflexion is required, by which the landscape becomes only the textual indicator of something else. Hence, this paper presents the possibility of a different classification of the poem, focusing on its reflexive elements, indicating extratextuality, shift from landscape, but above all a need to understand the text, contrary to its classification into a category.

Key words: *classification; extratextuality; landscape poem; reflexive poem.*

Introduction

Anthological poem “Jesenje večé” [“Autumn Evening”] by Antun Gustav Matoš is always included in primary and secondary school readers as an example of a landscape poem. Categorisation, although unnecessary for understanding poetry, is present in the Croatian language syllabus and pupils are expected to know how to categorise lyric poems. According to the thematic classification of poetry, this poem is classified as a landscape poem because of the landscape motives with which the poem is imbued. Although landscape motives often carry symbolic meanings, as is the case in this poem, it appears that, when it comes to classification, the presence of the reflexive component is indeed neglected. As it will be shown, the problem arises because the poem categorisation is based on formulaic definitions that are limiting

what should be limitless – poetry. This paper will show how definitions often exclude understanding of poetry and how, in the case of a landscape poem, with their strict limitations, they are focused on the literal meaning of the landscape, neglecting its extratextual meaning whose decoding demands reflexion.

Methodology

Problem of Defining

This research was motivated by the readers used in primary and secondary school where the thematic poetry categorisation is problematic since it is based on individual features of poems, and does not look into poetry as a whole. So, the methods used to prove this claim will be based primarily on the textbook definitions of a landscape poem (and a reflexive poem consequently) in order to point out how formulaic definitions emphasize individual features of poetry, and not its understanding. Moreover, the paper will show that the authors themselves direct pupils to extratextuality, that is, to depart from sheer landscape motives.

Results

Even though the authors of the reader, in the accompanying tasks below the poem, advise pupils to think and read the poem to discover its meaning, “Jesenje večer” [“Autumn Evening”] is still categorised as a landscape poem because of its landscape features. Therefore, the definitions of a landscape poem in readers are based exactly on those features.

“Landscape poem is a sort of lyric poetry in which the main motive is scenery“ (Babić et al., 2013, p. 284).

“Landscape poem is a sort of lyric poetry in which the theme is scenery/landscape“ (Bežen & Jambrec, 2009, p. 261).

“Landscape poem is a sort of lyric poetry that describes (paints) nature“ (Rosandić, 2001, p. 60).

Although, for example, the poem “Pejzaž¹” [“Landscape”] by Vladimir Vidrić, based on the given definitions, could certainly be classified as a landscape poem,

¹ Vidrić's poem “Pejzaž I” [“Landscape I”], as opposed to Matoš's “Jesenje večer” [“Autumn Evening”], does not indicate the places in the text that imply reflexion; the focus is on the landscape and the experience of it, which the title itself suggests:

Vladimir Vidrić: Pejzaž I

U travi se žute cvjetovi
I zuje zlačane pčele,
Za sjenatim onim stablima
Krupni se oblaci bijele.

I nebo se plavi visoko
Kud nečujno laste plove; -
Pod brijegom iz crvenih krovova
Podnevno zvono zove.

A dalje iza tih krovova
Zlatno se polje stere
Valovito, mirno i spokojno -
I s huma se k humu vere...

in Matoš's poem "Jesenje več" ["Autumn Evening"], even though it is imbued with landscape motives, the landscape points to a discovery of implicit meanings. In the definitions above it has been pointed out that a landscape poem is based on scenery, or, more correctly, nature. However, if we look at another reader, *Čitanka za prvi razred gimnazije* [Reader for the first grade of grammar school], a problem arises.

"Landscape poetry describes or visualizes the scenery to a lesser extent. Most frequently it contains the experience of a poet, to which the landscape gives meaning" (Juričić et al., 2007, p. 38).

Landscape as the main motive and theme of the poem has assumed a supporting role, the one in which it facilitates the discovery of something else. The definition is really very unclear in determining what the experience of the poet refers to, and it also implies that the poet's experience has a meaning. It confirms what this paper aims to show – that landscape motives in the poem "Jesenje več" ["Autumn Evening"] really do have a descriptive role, but they describe the poet's experience of something else (life, society, world) – not (only) landscape. If the landscape, as the given definition says, gives meaning to the poet's experience, should we not ask ourselves then what kind of meaning is being evoked by the dark landscape of Matoš's poem? At that moment, when we start looking for the meaning – symbols and signs that will discover new spheres of the poem, we are entering reflexion and getting closer to the category of a reflexive poem.

In *Književnost 1* [Literature 1] it is said that landscape motives often have symbolic meanings (Matoš's poplar symbolizes greatness and loneliness, Cesarić's cloud – a lonely man, a creator who aspires to higher forms of life) (Rosandić, 2001), which makes the problem even deeper. Symbols carry "associative and suggestive component" (Filipović, 1965, p. 364), which alludes indirect, extratextual meaning that we discover by different textual indicators. So, if the proud poplar is a symbol, it has risen above the direct context of the landscape and has become something new – it gives a new meaning and demands reasoning. Since the authors of the above mentioned readers admit themselves that poplar does not refer to a sort of a tree but universal categories, it becomes clear that through that kind of interpretation "Jesenje več" ["Autumn Evening"] stops being a poem that, using the given definitions, paints nature and whose (only) theme is landscape. The poem is focused on a lone individual, which is not a rare occurrence with Matoš, since his landscape poems are often anthropocentric and his characters, lyrical subjects, are marked with human attitudes and interests (Kravar, 1996). Moreover, since Matoš is a pioneer of literary criticism in Croatian literature who sees in a poet "self-conscious and self-dependent Self that is ideally folded with its own intentions" (Vuković, 2012, p. 93), he is invisibly and powerfully present; his poems are his habitus. So, in the context of an autumn evening landscape or the landscape itself he could call for the reading of his own Self. That is certainly a departure from reading the text and focusing only on landscape.

However, the problem is that, based on the learned definitions, pupils are expected to sort the poems into specific categories, which can create uncertainties, as it will be shown later on. As a consequence, some will say, taking into account the learned definitions, that “Jesenje večer” [“Autumn Evening”] is a landscape poem, and others will, based on the discovery of its symbolism, defend its reflexive quality. What is obvious right from the start is the fact that the authors themselves, and consequently the pupils, do not have an agreement on what a landscape poem is – is it only a description of the landscape or the landscape has a function of describing something else?

Discussion

“Jesenje večer” [“Autumn Evening”] – a Landscape or a Reflexive Poem?

Analysing Matoš's poem “Jesenje večer” [“Autumn Evening”], no one can deny that it contains a description of scenery. However, it also contains landscape motives as symbols, signs that point to extratextual meaning. That is not uncommon for Matoš because words and pictures in his poetry “don't have a descriptive, but symbolic meaning” (Dorkin, 1974, p. 99), which is certainly an expression of Modernist poetry that “suggests more than speaks directly, points more than explains” (Solar, 1994, p. 188). That implicit, suggestive meaning is leading us to consider the other side – the definition of a reflexive poem.

“Reflexive poetry tends to carry complete reflexive experience of the world and life” (Solar, 1994, p. 183).

“Reflexive poem conveys cognitions about the world, life and the meaning of human existence” (Babić et al., 2013, p. 284).

“Reflexive poem is a sort of a poem in which the poet expresses his thoughts about different topics (poetry, poets, human existence, solitude, death, transiency)” (Rosandić, 2001, p. 80).

Almost exact definition is found in *Hrvatska čitanka 8* [Croatian Reader 8] (Bežen & Jambrec, 2009, p. 260), while *Čitanka za prvi razred gimnazije* [Reader for the first grade of grammar school] does not even contain the category of a reflexive poem. Moreover, it can neither be found in *Teorija književnosti* [The Theory of Literature] by Milivoj Solar in the thematic classification of poetry¹, where the author describes that kind of classification as “conditional and unspecific (...) with a small significance of theme in poetry” (Solar, 1994, p. 183). He emphasizes that classifications do not contribute to understanding poetry, which is the only thing that should be relevant, not its definitions or categorisation by any aspect, including the theme. Emil Staiger in his work *Temeljni pojmovi poetike* [Basic Concepts of Poetics] (1996) also points out that poetry classification is wrong and emphasizes that poetry is an atmosphere that needs to be

² Solar (1994), according to thematic classification, classifies poetry into love, patriotic, religious, landscape and social poetry, and reflexive poetry is mentioned within a common poetry classification to reflexive (contemplative) and emotional (sensitive) poetry, that he also contests and denies.

felt, not explained, because the poets create their poems out of inspiration. He considers the poem as something that needs to be felt as a unique and unrepeatable whole. Hence it is obvious that the classifications based on single features are problematic, and that the teaching process should be focused on understanding poetry. Matoš's poem, even though it is filled with landscape motives, does not speak (only) about the landscape, but certainly speaks about the problem (sufficiency) of categorisation.

If we look at the definitions of a reflexive poem, Matoš's proud poplar is indeed a human category, which is confirmed in comparison to the word *samac* (lone individual) that can signify neither animal nor herbal, but human kind. Human characteristics also appear in motives of *pride* and *whisper of life*, where it becomes clear that in the last strophe something else is being discovered, something universal, which is reflected in the symbolism of landscape, but which also transcends it. Zoran Kravar confirms that by writing it Matoš assigned universal proportions (Kravar, 1996) to the autumn landscape comparing a poplar to a lone individual, by which we move from the landscape (descriptive) poem and enter the sphere of reflexion.

In *Čitanka za prvi razred gimnazije* [Reader for the first grade of grammar school], below the poem, it is stated that "the poet painfully longs for a meaningful life" (Juričić et al., 2007, p. 40), by which the authors not only admit that the poet is present in the poem, but also that he is looking for the meaning of life, which coincides with the definitions of a reflexive poem. The same can be found in *Kocka vedrine 7* [The Cube of Brightness 7] which, in the section *Razmišljam o temi i prosuđujem* [I am thinking about the theme and contemplating], asks pupils: "Why does the artist feel lonely?" (Motik et al., 2014, p. 11). Once again they are admitting the presence of the artist (poet) in the poem and directing pupils to think about (reflect on) the cause of loneliness in order to discover the theme of the poem. Therefore, the theme is yet to be discovered by looking into the motive of an artist/lonely person that is, obviously, signified as the key motive. The presence of an author as a secluded individual in poems is nothing new. It originated in the Romantic concept of originality that "grows from the need of the poet to seclude himself from society" (...) (Vuković, 2012, p. 30), which can certainly be evoked by the motive of poplar as a lone individual.

Moreover, in *Književnost 1* [Literature 1] it is stated that "Matoš connects the spiritual landscape (the soul) and physical landscape (the nature)" and that "through the motives of nature he expresses his feelings" (Rosandić, 2001, p. 60). So, the landscape motives are connecting parts of the poem, but they still serve a purpose of discovering, emphasizing and culmination of something else - a motive that powers everything and by which everything stands in opposition to the poplar tree. *Književnost 3* [Literature 3], by the same author, states that the poet's presence is expressed in experiencing the landscape, and asks of pupils to interpret the world of the lyrical subject (Rosandić, 1996). Not only is it again confirmed that a human individual (to be precise - the poet) is present in the poem, but also that the landscape is a picture of the world, a symbol of the world, which evokes, again, extratextual meaning.

To conclude, the readers admit: a) that an artist (individual) is present in the poem and b) that the poem points to thinking, reflection and discovering extratextuality. Hence, do they not admit, even involuntarily, that the theme of "Jesenje večer" ["Autumn Evening"] is not the landscape? By their own definitions then, it is not a landscape poem.

Zoran Kravar, who refers to the given poem as 'landscapish', claims that the scenery (in concordance with Romantic poetry) is symbolic, semanticised and perceived as a "remembrance of human soul and destiny (...) scenery as a mirror of human soulfulness" (Kravar, 1996, pp. 46, 48). That is, the scenery is a sign of something beyond the text itself which coincides with understanding the landscape motives as symbols (signs). However, the problem is that with that kind of textual indicators we enter other spheres of reality – those beyond the text itself – that point to the poet's thoughts and cognitions. Vlatko Pavletić believes that the poem exudes "cosmic pain and senselessness" (Rosandić, 1996, p. 251) pointing again to its reflexive, not landscape elements.

Since Modernist poets, including Matoš, were often faced with criticism and disapproval from their environment, discussions about poetry or art in general within the poetic text were common and generally an accepted theme of that period (Pavličić, 2001). Within the poem "Jesenje večer" ["Autumn Evening"] one could certainly read and talk about an artist whom society does not understand. This highlights its originality and individuality, and that is the idea of an artist in the period of Modernism. Also, Modernist poetry requires certain concentration and close cooperation of readers and poets (Solar, 1994). So in "Jesenje večer" ["Autumn Evening"] readers could associate the proud poplar with the poet as a singled out individual who, with its *dry leaves* (songs on paper or inaudible words), is whispering about life inside the dark society. By doing so the poet "makes himself present with the figure of voice" (Vuković, 2012, p. 95), because "the voice, whatever it says, is communicating the uniqueness of the one who transmits it" (Cavarero, 2005, p. 24). Thereby, it repeats the motive of isolation associated with the poet.

It is necessary to give attention to the motive of *whisper* as a voice of the lyrical subject. He is a true lyrical voice, "numb, 'stuck in throat,' and what it is actually echoing is emptiness" (...) (Žižek, 2005, p. 88). The same author attributes hypnotic power to that voice that loses its meaning in endless repetition, where the only thing that remains of that voice is its sluggish presence (2002). That is concurrent to the voice of the proud poplar - a whisper, and to the context in which it is located. That is, in Matoš's poem precisely the lack of voice fullness echoes, so that it remains only a whisper in the world compared to the emptiness of the universe, where poetry became his medium. The voice also wants to get into the reader and become his voice causing him to accept or reject his darkness (Vuković, 2012). That shows that the poetry and the reader are connected by textual mechanisms and not formal categories.

Kravar (1996) recognizes human reality within the poem, as well as the isolated

position of the subject, and points out that the theme of the landscape is never reduced to its bare literality. He does point to symbolic implications of the landscape motives, but also emphasizes that the ambiguity of the landscape cannot reliably be decoded (Kravar, 1996). Repeatedly, there is the recognition that landscape bears allegorical meaning or speaks about something other than the literal meaning. If, therefore, the landscape of autumn evening does not actually picture the scenery, but this image is transferred to a new, extratextual sphere, then we must think and reason about the theme. The landscape then becomes only the means of discovering the basic motive of the poem. That is, the poem is not powered by the landscape, but by the individual as its antithesis.

The human dimension also appears in the motive of human restlessness, where anthropocentricity and focus on feelings, the inner state of man, are recurring features and are painted by the unrest of the landscape. Once again the man is *the trigger* that initiates the idea of something beyond the poem, and the landscape becomes only a prelude to the discovery of its meaning. The theory that the poem "Jesenje več" ["Autumn Evening"] is closer to the category of reflexive poem could also be confirmed by the definition in *Leksikon hrvatskoga jezika i književnosti* [Lexicon of Croatian language and literature] that defines reflexive poetry as "poetry of internal mental reflections and subtle feelings" (Samardžija & Selak, 2001, p. 614), which deepens the definition gap between these two types of lyric poems. In fact, if we just take a look at this definition, "Jesenje več" ["Autumn Evening"] certainly could be a reflexive poem - it contains internal reflection and feelings (about loneliness, isolation). This hypothesis is supported by the definition from *Rječnik stranih riječi* [The Dictionary of Foreign Words] where the reflexive poetry is defined as "contemplative poetry, one in which the poet unites feelings and thinking" (Anić, Klaić, & Domović, 1999, p. 1217). Therefore, if the authors of the readers have recognized that the poem is imbued with a sense of loneliness, which is associated with contemplating life, why are they still classifying it only as a landscape poem?

The aim of this paper is not to deny the presence of landscape motives in this poem, but to point out that they are still semanticised, or have a function of expressing another reality –the one about the position of the lone individual. Poetic images truly depict landscape of an autumn evening, but if the role of the landscape is to express something else, refer the reader to search for and read the signs and indications, then the poem does not really speak about the landscape, but through the landscape it speaks about something else - about an individual. That is precisely the essence of reflection where the "focus of attention shifted from the original object to the single entity" (Filipović, 1965, p. 346). That is particularly evident in this poem, where the focus from the moribund landscape points to and culminates in a live individual. Although, we should ask ourselves if the proud poplar has not actually been the object of the poem from the start.

Also, the motive of still life is common among the Modernist poets to paint their understanding of reality, and with a large number of poets, "the reality is made only

from social relations, while the material reality is not included” (...), that is, “the only true reality of these poets is the reality of art” (Pavličić, 2001, p. 21) as the one that is opposed to actuality. It is precisely this contrasting art that could be detected in Matoš’s poem as the antithesis to the other, human-social reality - the dark, lean, gloomy and restless.

“Jesenje več” [“Autumn Evening”] as an Allegory

By such reading we could come up with a theory that “Jesenje več” [“Autumn Evening”] is an allegory because it speaks of something else, which is not foreign to Matoš if we remember that in the poems “Pri Svetom Kralju, 1909.” [“By the Holy King, 1909”], and “Gospa Marija” [“Lady Mary”] he used allegories (the images of women, mothers) to meaningfully enrich his own topics (Kravar, 1996). Dark and dreary landscape resembles the antithesis of *death - life* that, with countless symbols, extends from the very title until the last verse. That puts “Jesenje več” [“Autumn Evening”] again into the category of a reflexive poem, which is “closely watching the fundamental existential questions like the meaning of life and attitude towards death” (Vuković, 2012, p. 71).

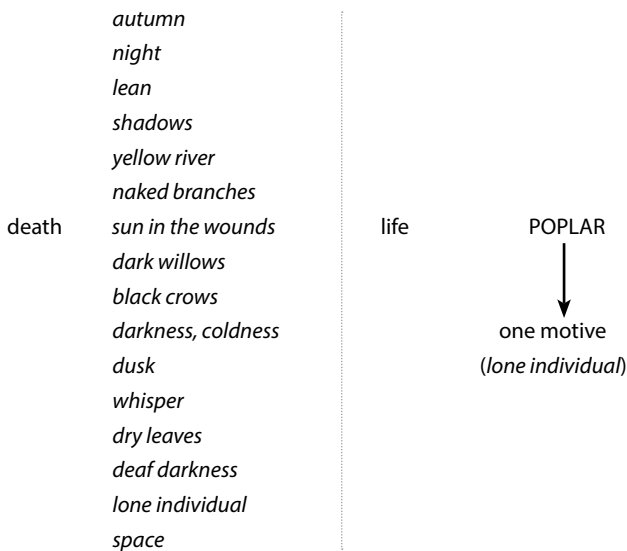


Figure 1. Description of reading focused on a possible antithesis of death and life.

Landscape in which everything is dying and losing its beauty by allegorical description can be associated with the world from the perspective and experience of the poet. Landscape of an autumn evening, with its gloominess and numbness, can evoke a lonely position of the excluded individual whose voice is a whisper, words dry leaves, and life a darkness within which the lofty clouds are lowered to the ground, and the sun is in the wounds. That kind of interpretation, where the reader is referred to

searching clues and signs in search of their meaning and which is based on thinking or observation, certainly requires reflexion. By that the poem again becomes closer to the category of reflexive poem.

Conclusion

The problem of classification is, as shown, that lyric poems are not mathematical formulas from which definitions are derived. They can be classified according to similar guidelines in the corresponding category, but this greatly limits poetry, which is an unlimited source of thoughts and feelings. As seen in the example of Matoš's poem, categorization is problematic precisely because it defines it as a landscape poem. By that signifier, its entirety is put down to individuality - landscape, thereby neglecting its implicativity and suggestiveness. The key, therefore, is the question: Does the poem "Jesenje več" ["Autumn Evening"] describe the landscape or a position of an individual? To say that it only speaks about the landscape is certainly incorrect because within it the human categories can be recognised. That stands as antithesis to what is being evoked and symbolized by the landscape of an autumn evening. Therefore, if the poem contains allegory and gives indirect meaning, we are moving away from the category of a landscape poem whose topic and main motive is landscape which paints nature, because it, in fact, implicitly paints something else. Matoš's poem does not speak (only) about the landscape, nor can we safely say that it is the main motive. It is problematic, therefore, to categorize the given poem as an example or a model of a landscape poem, and ask pupils to discover the symbolic meaning in it, while recognizing that in order to detect what is hidden, reflection is needed. However, a bigger problem is that it is expected from pupils to know how to classify lyric poems focusing on their individual features, and not its reading. With such superficiality and literality poetry truly becomes a category, which is wrong from the very start.

So, is "Jesenje več" ["Autumn Evening"] a landscape or a reflexive poem? For understanding poetry that is completely irrelevant.

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Zašto *Jesenje veče* nije (samo) pejzažna pjesma? Problematika kategorizacije

Sažetak

*Ovaj će rad prikazati problematičnost kategorizacije lirskih pjesama na temelju pjesme Antuna Gustava Matoša *Jesenje veče*. Navedena se pjesma u udžbenicima navodi kao primjer pejzažne pjesme iako se u popratnim zadacima od učenika zahtijeva da unutar nje pronađu pjesnika (umjetnika) i objasne simboliku. Odnosno, od učenika se zahtijeva razmišljanje, rasuđivanje i iščitavanje – jednom riječju zahtijeva se refleksija, čime pejzaž zapravo postaje samo tekstualni pokazatelj nečega drugog. Stoga će rad prikazati mogućnost drugačije kategorizacije navedene pjesme i usmjeriti se na njezine misaone (refleksivne) elemente. Time će se ukazati na izvantekstualnost, odmak od pejzaža, no prije svega na potrebu razumijevanja teksta, nasuprot njegovu svrstavanju u kategorije.*

Ključne riječi: definicije; izvantekstualnost; misaona pjesma; pejzažna pjesma.