

WHAT IS “INTERTEXTUALITY”?

In a broad sense, intertextuality is the reference to or application of a literary, media, or social “text” within another literary, media, or social “text.” In literature, intertextuality is when a book refers to a second book by title, scene, character, or storyline, or when a book refers to a social “text” such as a media, social, or cultural story. This borrowing invites a *comparison* between your understanding of the text outside of the book, and its use inside of the book. Intertextuality asks us to think about *why* the author is choosing this particular literary or social text, *how* they are including the text in the book, and *to what effect* is the text re-imagined by the book, or the book shaped by the text.

Forms

1. Book in a Book

One form of intertextuality is a brief or prolonged reference to a literary text in a second literary text. For example, this reference might involve the author simply giving the title of another book, adopting a famous character name from another book, or revisiting a famous scene from another book. These brief references are meant to call attention to themselves as borrowing an outside text, and to how it is being applied and reworked in the primary book. Examples of longer intertextual references might include the adopting of an entire storyline from another book, or a lengthy scene from another book.

2. Other “Text” in a Book

A second form of intertextuality is a brief or prolonged reference to a media or social “text” in a literary text. For example, an author might reference a film, tv show, or song, or a well-known social “text” like the story of John F. Kennedy’s assassination or Rosa Parks’s bus ride. What makes intertextuality different from literature’s common mention of things in the media and society is that the “text” which the book references has a *narrative* quality. Therefore, we still have reference to a story within a book, even though the story is not a piece of literature.

Functions

1. Comparison

Intertextuality involves an implicit comparison by putting two “texts” together. When literature references another text, we are asked to draw from our knowledge of the text in its original form, and compare this to how it is being used, changed, or reframed by the primary book. Intertextuality functions on comparison and contrast of similarities and differences.

2. Dialogue

Intertextuality invites a conversational dialogue between two “texts.” Because both the primary book and its intertext are *narratives*, rather than static items or images, we can engage the full storyline that each contains to create a narrative conversation. Sometimes, the two narratives are very different and can therefore create competing dialogues about which is dominant, or most important.

3. Destabilization

Intertextuality can sometimes destabilize, or shake up our understanding of, the original text being referenced or a scene or idea in the primary book. The original text may be a “story” that most feel very familiar with, but its use or reframing by the primary book changes our feelings or reveals something new about this original story. Conversely, the book may be presenting a scene, character, or argument that we feel we are beginning to understand when it is disrupted and destabilized by entry of this intertext.

Effects

1. Transformation of the Primary Book

The first influence intertextuality can have is on a reader’s understanding of the primary book. This is a matter of evaluating effect on the book at hand. Why does the primary book choose this similar or dissimilar intertext, where is it used, how does it add to or change our understanding of the scene it is in, and how does it evoke important arguments the book is making overall?

2. Transformation of a Prior Text

Intertextuality can also influence our understanding of the original text, causing us to “reflexively” re-read, or reconsider, our understanding of the original text. Even if the outside text is not being reworded or rewritten in any way, by placing it in a new book, the outside text is reframed and therefore changed. Does the author explicitly or implicitly change the intertext from its original form and in what ways?

3. Reinterpretation of Both

Intertextuality can create a simultaneous re-reading of both the primary book and its intertext. This involves a back-and-forth re-reading of each text based on what their similarities and differences reveal about one another.