

**Pastiche as a form of Revision and Recreation in
“Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams” by Kenneth Koch**

Balbir Singh

Ph.D. Scholar

Department of English
CUHP, Dharamshala.

Abstract

The present paper proposes the study of Kenneth Koch’s poem, “Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams” as a Pastiche of William Carlos Williams’s poem “This Is Just To Say”. The Paper presents how Kenneth Koch has made pastiche integral to his postmodern art by imitation. He imitates various elements of the poem and destabilizes the real meaning, and presents the distorted version of the real. He disrupts the originality of the poem and presents a new form of reality in the same manner. Kenneth Koch presents the same copy of the original writing by reconstructing the original. In the postmodern context, there is a shift in the abstract to material imagination, in Williams’ poem, which is also a focal point of the subject matter of Kenneth Koch’s writings. Kenneth Koch presents various themes in fragments in a single piece of work. So, this paper will primarily be centered on the use of pastiche as a form of revision, disruption, and recreation, to bring out the new perspective in the same way.

Key words: Pastiche, Imitation, Revision, Recreation, Imagination, Disruption.

Postmodern literature introduced and practiced various inventive tools of revision and recreation like intertextuality, parody, and pastiche, and widened the scopes to revisit, revise and recreate the previously published works. There can be any literary and artistic work in the repetitive, mixture, and continuation form of the past work. Pastiche is a predominant tool of revision, practiced in the postmodern literary arena by various authors to recreate the existing texts from a new point of view. It is not confined to the field of literature but also encapsulates many other fields of academia, like architecture, design, visual art, theatre, music, fashion, artistic practices, and painting. Thus, it is an interdisciplinary tool used in the mechanism of every discipline to glide towards new creations. “The word Pastiche comes first from the Italian word *Pasticcio*, which later becomes *pastiche* in French, and refers to a pie or pate with a mix of diverse ingredients” (Literary Devices). *Cambridge Online Dictionary* defines Pastiche as “a piece of art, music, literature, etc. that intentionally copies the style of someone else’s work or is intentionally in various styles, or the practice of making art in either of these ways.” So, pastiche always presents an example of eclecticism in art and produces new artistic work. It is always clubbed and combines a variety of elements from various sources. In the words of Sunil Kumar Sarker pastiche is, “...a jumble, a pot-pourri. In literary discourse, denotes a composition in which various elements (words, sentences, images, style, manner, ideas, etc.) from different sources (of earlier or contemporary writers) are patched up,...” (129). For Example John Fowles’

novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), is generally considered as “A pastiche of a historical romance, it juxtaposes the ethos of the Victorian characters living in 1867 with the ironic commentary of the author writing in 1967” (Britannica).

The meaning of the term pastiche stepped into the figurative arena, because, in addition to the original author of the work, it is also imitated by various authors, to copy its multiple elements to produce new work. Generally, the term ‘Pastiche’ refers to a work that intentionally imitates and incorporates varied elements of another artist’s work to compose a distorted version of the text. Under the pastiche, artists create an original piece of work composition but they deliberately follow the style, structure, tone, themes, or any other elements of another author’s creation. Numerous works of literature are cemented by Pastiche on the grounds of previously published works. This imitation is not genre-specific, rather imitates and includes all genres, to pave a way for new creative work. This paper will primarily remain centered around Kenneth Koch’s pastiche poem. He has used pastiche as a tool of revision and recreation in the poem, “Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams” to reiterate various elements of Williams’ poem.

Kenneth Koch published his first book *Thank You, and Other Poems* in 1962. This collection contains Koch’s most famous poem “Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams” which is the sincere imitation of William Carlos Williams’ 1934 poem “This Is Just To Say”. Kenneth Koch revisits the structure, style, tone, and somehow themes of the poem to create his poem. The word revision means to view again or revisit the previous works by keeping in mind the conventional meaning but at the same time come up with a quite different viewpoint that may be unique from the previous one. Recreation refers to creating a new and rectified meaning of the old text. Distorted and reformed meanings of the texts are provided through revision and recreation. So, Kenneth Koch’s poem “Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams” revisited William Carlos Williams’ poem “This Is Just to Say” and recreated out of it a new poem. Like Williams’ poem, he also presented very ordinary and simple incidents as the central themes of his poem.

Kenneth Koch emulates the source poem “This Is Just To Say” multifariously. He followed blatantly the outline structure of the source poem, but in contrast, he multiplied the single structure of Williams’ poem, and instead of one, he introduced four similar structures. Along with four structures, Koch also talks about four different themes which also creates a difference. On the one hand, Williams’ poem deals with only one incident of plum eating from an icebox, but in opposition to it, Koch introduced four stanzas with four different incidents in his poem. So, he, by and large, caught the outline structure, style, tone, and manner of the original but replaced the themes very cleverly.

The opening lines of both poems are very similar in tone and confessing the mistake. Williams’ poem opens as, “I have eaten/ the plums/ that were in /the icebox....” and Kenneth Koch also opens up his poem in a similar confessing tone and manner, “I chopped down the house that you were saving...”. Therefore, the variations and similarities between the two poems are not many more but are slight. Both poets are talking about the destruction of things, one is talking about consuming plums that were preserved in the icebox, perhaps for some purpose, another is talking about the scraping down of the house. Williams further in his middle part of the poem said, “and which, “you were probably /saving /for breakfast” and Koch also extends his

poem by claiming, “that you had been saving to live in next summer.” Now again both poets are disclosing the fact that why those things were preserved, it seems that despite knowing the fact and reason very well behind the conservation of plums on the one hand and house, on the other, they dissolve them. Without taking care of the future, they enjoyed the present moment. Somehow, focusing on the notion that one should live in the present moment and enjoy pleasantly without worrying about an unpredictable future. Once again Koch has imitated very astonishingly the pattern of Williams’ poem. In the end, Williams says, “Forgive me /they were delicious/ so sweet /and so cold”. Now the poet is apologizing for his action of eating preserved plums and showing also the allurements of taste and remembering the quality of plums as they were delicious, cold, and sweet. Koch also apologizes for his action of chopping down the house. He continues to follow the last lines’ words tone also by saying, “I am sorry, but it was morning, and I had nothing to do and its wooden beams were so inviting”. Therefore, in the same manner, Koch is also giving reason behind the act he did. On the one hand, the temptation is the reason for consumption, and Koch on the other hand gives the reason of boredom to chop down the house. So he imitates very meticulously and cleverly the entire poem and puts its component elements very cleverly with some variations.

Pastiche always introduced the example of Intertextuality. The term intertextuality was coined and propounded by Julia Kristeva. It is an “Interdependence of literary texts, the interdependence of any one literary text with all those that have gone before it,” and further she also claimed that “a literary text is not an isolated phenomenon but is made up of a mosaic of quotations, and that any text is the ‘absorption and transformation of another’” (Cuddon 367). Therefore, every new text involved the relics of previously published literature and, “...things cannot be understood in isolation” (Barry 38). So, Kenneth Koch also follows the suit very meticulously. His poem is the outcome of Williams’ poem. The tone, manner, and style of the poem clarify the dependence of Kenneth Koch on Williams’ poem. The poem imitates the theme of destruction but same time applied some variations to it. In the title of the poem he also mentioned the name of the source poems’ poet. Because pastiche works are always derivative and have a rare opportunity to turn individually into a famous work. As J. A. Cuddon also says that “An elaborative form of pastiche is a sustained work (say, a novel) written mostly or entirely in the style and manner of another writer” (517). The manner and tone of Koch’s poem are very similar to Williams’ poem. Both started with confessing the action, unveiling the reason, and finally followed by informal apologies. Koch has also written his pastiche poem in an epistolary form like the form and manner William Carlos Williams has used in the poem “This Is Just To Say”. So, it is also an epistolary poem. This form of poetry was propounded by Horace during the Roman Empire and was also practiced by neo-classical writer Alexander Pope and romantic Byron as well. It is also continuous in use in contemporary poetry as well.

While talking about the structure of the poem Kenneth Koch has divided his poem into four stanzas and introduced four different themes but similar to the source poem. But the only difference between the two poems structures is Williams has broken his poem into three stanzas containing four lines each, discussing only a single incident of plums eating. On the other hand, Koch introduced four vibrant incidents in four different stanzas. But, the manner expression of words and themes are the same in both poems. The nature of imitation remains serious and it praises the original work as well as pays homage to it. It celebrates the original work. Pastiche

remains as an inherent device in plenty of works in literature because text always alludes to an original piece of work and relies on multiple elements and sources of literature for its imitations so, it is always derivative. Moreover, it turn into the source of tribute to the departed author and also extended the series of dead authors. A very famous example of this sort of tribute is Sherlock Holmes books, which are continuous, in production despite original author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle is not available to write further.

So, Kenneth Koch recreates his poem out of Williams's poem and imitated the form, style, tone, structure, and pattern of the source poem. Although the subject matter he introduced is slightly different, tackle it down with the same technique as Williams did. He incorporates many elements of the original poem and produces a distorted version of the original. Kenneth Koch's poem is a serious imitation of Williams' poem. One would find very easily the pieces of evidence of serious incidents and elements in the whole poem. There is a series of inappropriate behaviors and incidents present in the poem and followed by apologies. Chopping down a house, destroying beautiful flowers, giving another's money to someone, and breaking someone's leg is the major incident in the poem. Which also paved the way to a dilemmatic situation whether it is a serious subject matter or jocular? But, incidents throughout the poem are not funny at all rather they are serious behaviors. Chopping down a house, destroying beautiful flowers, giving away money that is not yours, and breaking someone's leg cannot be mocking incidents. So, it is a serious and sincere imitation of Williams Carlos Williams' poem. In addition to serious imitation in pastiche poems, the tone of the poem can be humorous, not critical. As pastiche always celebrates rather than making fun or mocking an earlier work of art. Here consists of four repetitive structures in each stanza with four separate incidents and creates a solid poem altogether.

So, it is quite satisfactory that pastiche can be used as a device, technique, tool, to analyze and study the previous works of art as a source for new creative works. it is also certain that pastiche can be embedded in any literary, musical, and artistic work in multiple forms and ways. It can be perceived easily as a word, a sentence, as well as a complete paragraph and passage in any work. J.A. Cuddon rightly proclaimed, that pastiche is, "a patchwork of words, sentences or complete passages from various authors or one author. It is, therefore, a kind of imitation" (517). It ought to imitate multiple sources as well as sometimes a single author's work. Here in this research paper a single work, a pastiche poem, is the source of creation.

When we talk about contemporary literary movements like modernism and postmodernism, one cannot remain static to a unipolar behavior and point of view. Because these movements are not any fixed periods in literature rather they are perspectives. This represents the time-based distinction that is always slippery and temporal. There can be many interpretations of any single entity of literature. William Carlos Williams's poem, "This Is Just To Say" also falls under this contemporary literary arena and can be interpreted and explained through multiple perspectives. The poem is anti-conventional in style and loaded with multiple interpretations. Every event and incident is accountable in the contemporary literary world and can be the subject matter for any literary work. William Carlos Williams was a doctor by profession and wrote his poetry mostly at the night. So, he has first-hand and close observation of the people from varied classes and portrays them through his writings. In his works, there are inbuilt themes and imaginations like the voice of the marginalized people, the use of stream of consciousness

technique, and many times there are guilt and self-congratulated themes. So, Kenneth Koch also followed the suit and inherited multiple elements from him and similarly presented serious and ubiquitous themes, but produced a unique and distorted version of Williams's poem. Pastiche is also an integral part of postmodern literary art and Koch has applied it throughout his poem. One can uncover this element by studying and scrutinizing his poem meticulously. It destabilizes the real meaning of the subject and prepared a distorted version of the real work. Williams' poem itself is the distorted version of a real incident, which means a neo-real, so, Kenneth Koch's poem is the distortion of distortion.

In the summative remarks, it can be said that both poems are grafted very meticulously to each other with the technique of pastiche. William Carlos Williams and Kenneth Koch were members of the modern imagist literary movement. They wrote poetry in succinct, symbolic language and were also very economical in words. Kenneth Koch's poem "Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams" introduced many traits of modern as well as postmodern literary art. The poem is very economical in words and hardly followed any traditional form of poetry writing. In spite of its economy of words, every word is extremely loaded with multiple meanings and imagery. A simple note of an apology can be also interpreted through various points of view. On the one hand, it seems that there is a person on receiving hand to whom this note is written, but at the same time no particular person is mentioned, so it is also a universal note as well. Fragmentation is also one of the prominent features of postmodernism. Koch also presents his poem in fragments and introduced the four variations in themes. Every stanza followed the theme, pattern, structure, and tone of the original poem very minutely and started with action and ended in informal apologies. The use of pastiche by Kenneth Koch portrays the simple and ordinary incidents in the manner of Williams' poem but also germinates a space for his imaginative and creative art to produce his first-hand work.

Works Cited

- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory*. Viva Books, 2010.
- Britannica, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*,
www.britannica.com/topic/The-French-Lieutenants-Woman. Accessed 04 February 2022.
- Cuddon, J.A. *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. Penguin Books, 2013.
- Koch, Kenneth. "Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams." *Poetry Foundation*, 2005, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57326/variations-on-a-theme-by-william-carlos-williams. Accessed: 10 February 2022.
- Pastiche, *Cambridge Online Dictionary*,
dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/pastiche. Accessed: 12 February 2022.
- Pastiche. *Literary Devices*,
literarydevices.com/pastiche/. Accessed: 15 February 2020.
- Sarker, Sunil Kumar. *A Dictionary of Novel*. Atlantic, 2010.
- Williams, Carlos William. "This Is Just To Say." *Poetry Foundation*, 1909-1939,
www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56159/this-is-just-to-say. Accessed: 10 February 2022.