

“A strange dream upon the water”: Venice as inspiration for writers and reader-tourists

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Abstract

Water is an ambivalent topic to talk about, being a source of life and death, a symbol of reflection and transcendence. When one thinks of water, one is often reminded of Venice. Venice cannot be imagined without its waterways, which have gained it the name of “the floating city.” The unique character of this city shaped by water has turned it into a source of inspiration for numerous writers who have made Venice a setting in their works, contributing to the city becoming a popular destination for reader-tourists. Through a combination of close reading and secondary sources, this paper looks at the symbol of water as appearing in selected fiction related to Venice. It also tries to tackle how such literary representations have shaped the perceptions and the imagination of readers to the point of turning them into tourists going in search of their own experience of the floating city. The theoretical framework of this paper draws on Bachelard’s concept of water, Foucault’s concept of heterotopia and the reader-response theory.

Keywords

Venice • Literature • Readers • Tourism • Water • Ambivalence

1. Introduction

Among the motifs that literature borrows from life, that of water is probably the most recurring, reflective, and inexhaustible. While associations with water can

be literal, its literary imagery is particularly interesting to explore. A source of life, but also death, a reflection of the visible as well as a harbour for the invisible (the unconscious), an emblem of catharsis and rebirth, water is a powerful symbol in fiction. The symbolic associations of water add layers of meaning to the narrative in which it is used, which may in turn affect how a reader views the world.

Literature and water are connected in a variety of ways. First, by fluidity: like water, literature flows freely carrying multifarious messages. Water connects lands and carries people along with their thoughts and feelings from one place to another, as does literature. One can see one’s own reflection in water as well as in literature. Water may reflect, but it can also be reflected. Water may be shapeless, but it can also be (artistically) shaped.

There is a particular quality about water territories, a poetically dreamlike quality deriving from the fluidity of waterscapes, especially when captured in narrative form. The literary imagery created from waterscapes is most often vivid and memorable. In fiction, waterscapes seem to turn into a source of inspiration, a repository of emotions, and a shelter for memories. Literary Venice is the best example.

While water as a transparent natural element takes smell and colour from its surroundings, the water in Venice is tinted by the stories that flow in it. Even though water as a permeating natural element in Venice is the starting point in this paper, more than a material element, here it is seen as a metaphor and symbol, from the perspective of its literary rather than its literal meaning.

Despite waterscapes being a significant form of cultural legacy and a common image in literature,

they have not been explored in depth in relation to tourism. Through a combination of close reading and secondary sources, this paper looks at the symbol of water as appearing in selected fiction linked with Venice. It also tries to tackle how such literary representations have shaped the perceptions and the imagination of readers to the point of turning them into tourists going in search of their own experience of the floating city.

2. Venice, the floating city

Built on a group of 118 small islands veined by a maze of canals and linked by over 400 bridges (UNESCO), Venice cannot be imagined without its waterways which have gained it the name of the floating city. The bond of Venice with its water is so inextricable that every year on Ascension Day, the Doge would throw a ring in the water to celebrate the marriage of Venice to the Adriatic (Tanner, 1992: 35) making it both queen and lord of the Adriatic to mark its dominion.

Water in Venice has always been indispensable for the transportation of people and goods, but it is also to be credited with importing and exporting culture from place to place and time to time. The culture which emerged during the Renaissance would not have been possible and accessible to everyone without Venetian waterways. It is water that has carried Venice’s rich cultural legacy down to us today. (Kennedy).

The unique character of this city shaped by water has attracted visitors directly and indirectly (through representations in literature, travel writing, paintings and later also in photography). As French writer and philosopher Régis Debray once wrote, Venice has been “constructed more by writers than masons, more by painters than architects, more of words than of bricks” (quoted in Turoma 2001: 152). The city owes a lot of its tourism success to the way in which it has been described by various writers. Its waterscapes have had their share in such success.

2.1. Venice and its waters in world literature

References to literary Venice can be traced back to the 14th century. The earliest has been found in Sir John Mandeville’s *Travels* in which the city evokes a feeling of the exotic. However, it was during the Renaissance that it became particularly famous thanks to Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*. Venice was a main *topos* especially in English writing in the 19th century, and water was a key symbol and image (Tanner, 1992: 5).

The physical uniqueness of the city has lured so many writers and it has been captured, celebrated and memorialised in so many works that it would be a hard task indeed to come up with a comprehensive list of all of Venice’s appearances in literature, so, this paper limits itself to bringing a selection of a few literary representations of the liquid city’s image.

With its focus on the expression of feelings, highlighting of the sublime and beauty of nature, most often, the image of Venice is romantic, especially in the works of 19th century writers¹. For Lord Byron, the city

Looks a sea Cybele, fresh from ocean,
Rising with her tiara of proud towers
At airy distance, with majestic motion,
A ruler of the waters and their powers.
And such she was; her daughters had their
dowers
From spoils of nations, and the exhaustless
East
Poured in her lap all gems in sparkling show-
ers.
In purple was she robed, and of her feast
Monarchs partook, and deemed their dignity
increased. (*CH* 1980: Canto IV)

P. B. Shelley’s Venice appears as a deity rising from the sea:

Beneath is spread like a green sea
The waveless plain of Lombardy,
Bounded by the vaporous air,
Islanded by cities fair;
Underneath Day’s azure eyes
Ocean’s nursling, Venice lies,
A peopled labyrinth of walls,
Amphitrite’s destin’d halls,
Which her hoary sire now paves
With his blue and beaming waves (1875, lines
51-60)

The aquatic image of Venice is also captured in Samuel Rogers’ poetry as “a glorious City in the Sea” whose “narrow streets [are] ebbing and flowing” while “the salt sea-weed clings to the marble of her palaces.” (1840: 49). The dream-like element of the city on water cannot escape Rogers’ description:

And from the land we went,

¹ The focus is on the imagery of water rather than literary movements. The approach is thematic.

As to a floating City – steering in,
And gliding up her streets as in a dream...
(1840: 50)

Venice as a fairy, dream-like place has also been portrayed by Byron:

I saw from out the wave her structures rise
As from the stroke of the enchanter’s wand.
She to me was a fairy city of the heart
Rising like water columns from the sea
Of joy and sojourn and of wealth the mart.
(*CH* 1980, Canto IV)

The city is also a dream for Charles Dickens, or rather, it is a “strange dream upon the water” (*Pictures from Italy*, 1998: 85). The surreal atmosphere of the city is also described in *Little Dorrit*:

In this crowning unreality, where all the streets were paved with water, and where the deathlike stillness of the days and nights was broken by no sound but the softened ringing of church-bells, the rippling of the current, and the cry of the gondoliers turning the corners of the flowing streets, Little Dorrit ... sat down to muse. (Dickens, 2012: 461)

Venice’s magical, otherworldly feel is also beautifully captured by symbolist Arthur Symons (2003: 64):

Water and marble and that silentness
Which is not broken by a wheel or hoof
A city like a water-lily, less
Seen than reflected, palace wall and roof.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1800: 143) also evokes the waters of Venice:

White swan of cities, slumbering in thy nest
So wonderfully built among the reeds
Of the lagoon, that fences thee and feeds.

For Joseph Brodsky (1992), water in Venice is the image of time: “[E]very New Year’s Eve, in somewhat pagan fashion, I try to find myself near water, preferably near a sea or an ocean, to watch the emergence of a new helping, a new cupful of time from it.” (1992: 43) But it is also an image of self:

I felt I’d stepped into my own self-portrait in the cold air... The backdrop was all in dark silhouettes of church cupolas and rooftops: a bridge arching over a body of water’s black curve, both ends

of which were clipped off by infinity. At night, infinity in foreign realms arrives with the last lamppost, and here it was twenty meters away. It was very quiet. (1992: 7)

This way, Venice, the city that “stands ankle-deep in water” (1992: 92), suspended between reality and imagination, becomes the space for recreating oneself, in a new, more fluid shape.

“What the moon saw” (1866: 415), one of Hans Christian Andersen’s lesser-known tales, is the story of the moon travelling through the world and coming back to tell what she has seen to a young artist lacking in inspiration. One of the sights is Venice as a floating city and a fairy tale:

Whenever the jetty fountains splash into the marble basins, they seem to me to be telling the story of the floating city. Yes, the spouting water may tell of her, the waves of the sea may sing of her fame! On the surface of the ocean a mist often rests, and that is her widow’s veil. The bridegroom of the sea is dead, his palace and his city are his mausoleum! Dost thou know this city? She has never heard the rolling of wheels or the hoof-tread of horses in her streets, through which the fish swim, while the black gondola glides spectrally over the green water. I will show you the place, continued the Moon, the largest square in it, and you will fancy yourself transported into the city of a fairy tale.

However, aside from the romanticised image of Venice, the danger coming from its waters is also noted as in Byron’s “Ode to Venice”:

Oh Venice! Venice! when thy marble walls
Are level with the waters, there shall be
A cry of nations o’er thy sunken halls
A loud lament along the sweeping sea! (Byron, 1832: 181)

For Mary Shelley in *The last man*, Venice is “the widowed daughter of ocean” (1993: 319). In a similar vein, Byron calls her the “spouseless Adriatic [that] mourns her lord” (*CH*, Canto IV) both images referring to its loss of power as the Queen of the Adriatic.

While in most of the above-mentioned examples, water is what makes Venice both an enchanted and enchanting city, in Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*, water is a source of life and renewal as much as a source of death and decay. It provides inspiration for Gustav von Aschenbach who was struggling with writer’s block back home, but also brings his death from cholera. But water is also a symbol of transformation:

it washes off the discipline robe of the writer from Gustav, bringing to surface emotions he had been suppressing for long. Water makes his identity more fluid and flexible.

Contemplating the sea fills Gustav with calm. However, while the sea brings rest, the waters of the lagoon smell foul, symbolising decay. The canals are also stripped of their romantic veil: their waters are stagnant and carry disease, thus, death along with boats. The ambivalent nature of water in Venice is an epitome of the city's own duality: a place of light and shadows, letting oneself go and keeping control, a stage where the mind and the soul, reason and desire seem to be forever conflicting. The waters of the city are liberating as much as a death trap.

The wide diversity of the representations of water in literary Venice make it appear as a Foucault's heterotopia—the other space. It is the unlikeliness of living on water that adds to the particularity and heterotopic qualities of this place. Venice is controversial and disturbing as much as transformative; a space that is incompatible, otherworldly, a world within the world. As Foucault puts it, “Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias” ([1967], 1984: 3-4). As Foucault sees space as an agent, not just a neutral physical place, unlike a utopia, a heterotopia can bring together the imagined and real place by influencing the reader's perceptions of a narrative and its links with reality and turning him/her into a tourist, which is the focus of the next section.

3. From reader to tourist: Water in Venice and the power of literary imagery

What is it in the pages of a work that turns a reader into a tourist? According to the reader-response theory, the reader's experience of a literary text is crucial. This theory, which emerged in the 1960s, is associated with scholars such as Stanley Fish, Norman Holland, Wolfgang Iser, etc whose work addresses the reader, the reading process, and response to the text (Bennett 1995: 32). Tyson (2006) classifies their approaches into five groups.

In his affective stylistics approach, Fish believes that a text only gains meaning as long as there is a reader and that it is the act of reading which makes a text come to life. Fish extended his work through his Social Reader-Response theory in which he claims that an interpretation of a text is influenced

by the community to which a reader belongs and shares reading and interpretation strategies with. The Transactional Reader-Response theory employed by Louise Rosenblatt and Wolfgang Iser sees a transaction between the reader and the text: how a reader interprets the meaning of a text is influenced by their personal feelings and knowledge. David Bleich who created the Subjective Reader-Response theory compares written individual responses to a text to other individual interpretations to find continuity of meaning. Norman Holland, who is associated with the Psychological Reader-Response theory, emphasises a reader's motives as an influence on how they read.

There is also another version of the reader-response theory, the Reception Theory, which focuses on the reader's reception or interpretation in making meaning from a literary text. This means that a text is not received just passively by the reader, but that they interpret it based on their own cultural background and life experiences. This theory implies that the meaning of a text is not intrinsic, but it is rather created through a dialogue between the text and the reader. It is mainly associated with the work of Hans-Robert Jauss and Stuart Hall (Holub, 1984: xii-xiii). For Hall (1973), texts contain a variety of messages that are encoded (made) by their creators and then decoded (interpreted) by audiences.

Even though each of the above-mentioned scholars approached the theory specifically, yet, their beliefs and practices often overlap; what they share is the acknowledgement of the role of the reader as an agent in constructing the meaning of a text.

Some ideas in the reader-response theory can be extended from text to landscape. Duncan & Duncan (1988) argue that literary theories serve in the analysis of landscapes, as the concepts of textuality, intertextuality, and reader reception may hold significance for those who think landscapes can be read as literary texts. They add that, like texts, landscapes can be seen as “transformations of ideologies into a concrete form” which these scholars consider an important strategy to naturalise ideologies. Their theory recognises the fact that there is no single reading of a landscape and emphasises the importance of examining the motivation of visitors dwelling in that landscape. The perspective adopted by this paper is based on the general principles underlying the main theory and its extensions and draws from an overlap of the above-mentioned approaches rather than a specific one.

One characteristic of literature is that it can motivate a journey first in the mind of the reader and then in reality. According to Nicola MacLeod *et al.* (2018), readers turn into tourists as a way of consolidating their reading of favourite books and

reconstructing the concept of *lieux d’imagination* on the spot. A literary text may encourage empathy and self-reflection (Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015: 79), but also action: the reader is an active agent who looks for “real existence” for the work (Bennet, 1995: 32). As such, literature becomes a performative art with the reader (re)creating their own version of a literary work in space in the form of literary tourism which is marked by the curiosity to find out what it would be like to follow in the footsteps of a character, see what a writer saw, live the city they are visiting as described in fiction. Thus, interpretation of the perceived meaning of a work enhances the power of the message as the reader will naturally tend to place art (text) in a larger social and geographical context.

In a study conducted through in-depth interviews, Reijnders (2015) found the following reasons to visit a media-related place (i.e. one associated not just with novels, but also films or television series, especially those based on a literary text): wishing to be in the shoes of a character and becoming part of a story one likes; paying a tribute to writers or directors whose work one values; identifying with the values of a story and thinking that visiting locations can somehow materialise one’s beliefs; bringing imagination to life with the hope of encountering like-minded people. The author mentions memories related to the physical spaces in which stories are set as a significant motivator: “The diegetic world forms, alongside plot and character, an important tool for recalling, extending and experiencing the memory” (Reijnders, 2015: 686). Visiting the physical location may be one way of extending such memories associated with beloved stories.

In the case of Venice, it could be claimed that it is the polyvalent presence and meanings of water that makes it possible for narratives to be engaged with on a deeper level with relation to concepts of place and space. Sherman (2021: 18) explains that narratives that make use of symbols such as water create a multi-layered message conveyed through connotations which engage readers in “constructing meaning within the liminal space between depicted and lived realities.” This space allows narrative to become “displacement fiction” or fiction in which meaning, context, and memory become tied to place and space by highlighting connection points which had been somehow obscured by the subjectivity of personal experience. Sherman (2021: 17) believes that as a familiar concept and a quintessential element, water increases the interaction of the reader with the text:

In order for narratives to impact their audience and prompt them to contemplate abstract con-

cepts, the audience must be able to recognize the semiotic motifs or artefacts as familiar or meaningful or reflecting some sort of truth within which they feel included. This can include a familiar setting or cultural meaning tied to a symbol. These symbols then act as anchors of identification for an audience and increase investment within a narrative. As such, the audience is able to engage with subject matter that they may never be able to experience themselves as they have a means of relating to the narrative despite this basic disconnect.

Bachelard (1983) also considers water as crucial to the imagination and creativity. He explores the symbol of water as fluid along human life: our watery birth, our mother’s milk as one of the first fluids in our encounter with life, the movement of water that rocks us till we fall asleep ([1942] 1983: 115-131). He believes that it is because of such flow of water through the body that we have a special bond with it. It is through our experiences with such a core natural element that we can create meaning, activate the imagination and generate images, and understand our position in the world. This is made possible through reveries, a conscious engagement with the inner self, the internal powers that activate memories and experiences. Bachelard (1983: ix) believes that a reverie based on water imagery leads us to look for the “profound level of any experience.” A reverie takes us first inward and then outward into a larger world.

As the aim of imagery is to connect a reader to a text, writers pay attention to the language they use, the words they choose to capture a reader’s attention by engaging them mentally and emotionally through painting a picture in words for the reader. Vivid language helps readers create memorable images which they might want to materialise by visiting the spaces where such images were created. Words are a drive powerful enough to set people in motion by turning them from readers into tourists. The stimulus created by literature calls for a sensory experience of physical space and visiting the setting of a work seems to be the best way in response to such stimulus. It has already been mentioned that Venice owes a lot of its tourism success to the way in which it has been described by various writers. As shown by the examples analysed in the previous section, the language and power of description manage to perfectly capture the waterways of Venice as an integral component in the city’s urban space. The words build edifices in an intimate dialogue with the water’s reflective and aesthetic qualities, all of which transport the reader-tourist into a seemingly otherworldly realm. The mental images created by the writer for the reader through the

words they choose might fuel the reader's imagination beyond the pages of a book. As Venice is the typical place where the real and fictional merge, the reader can turn into a tourist trying to search for and get a feel of those places that were first constructed in the fictional imagination as archetypes of love, beauty, and dreams. As Bachelard puts it, "If reverie becomes attached to reality, it humanizes, enlarges, magnifies it" (1983: 151). Bachelard sees a close relationship between language and water: "Liquidity is a principle of language; language must be filled with water" (1983: 192). He adds that "Liquidity is the very desire of language. Language needs to flow" (1983: 187).

Talking about liquidity, while in Bachelard's view it is closely related with the flowing of language, for Zygmunt Bauman (2000), liquidity is "the leading metaphor for the present stage of the modern era" (6) that affects all aspects of human life. Mobility has become a crucial element of modern life which is no longer as solid as it used to be. As such, travelling seems to be a normal condition, an epitome of the need of the human being to be fluid and take shape from new experiences encouraged by imagination and enabled by mobility.

As a city built on water, it is no wonder that Venice has inspired the imagination of writers and in turn of readers as well. The narratives on watery Venice providing a rich and ambivalent imagery of the city as romantic, corrupt, and heterotopic, seem to invite the reader to explore the relation between the literary and the literal, the imagined and the real, the inner and outer world, beyond the pages of a book. What turned Amber Regis, a specialist in the work of John Addington Symonds, from a reader into a traveller, was a text by Symonds in which he described the waters of Venice. Regis came across an unknown word there, *chrysopraxe*. She googled it but what she found did not fully satisfy her curiosity. She realised she would have never grasped its full meaning had she not travelled to Venice:

A few weeks later I found myself on a plane landing at Marco Polo Airport, Venice. A short bus ride later I was at the Piazzale Roma catching a vaporetto on my way to San Marco. It was then I noticed the water—its colour, its movement and its differing shades. A striking phrase resurfaced in my mind: "Venice, with her pavement of liquid chrysopraxe". What I had assumed to be Symonds's purple prose, yet another example of his hyperbolic tendencies, proved to be a rather exact description. The canals were indeed a striking shade of blue-green, and everywhere I looked, the luminous brine was interspersed with dark fronds of seaweed. ... I spend a lot of

time with Symonds's words, and it is all too easy to begin to see them as nothing more than ink on paper—words, words, words. But now I can locate Symonds's homoerotic gaze to a precise location—I have walked the street; I have crossed the bridge; I have gazed at the gondoliers that still pass by his window. How refreshing it is to *see* as well as to read—to read "pavements of liquid chrysopraxe" and see the colour of Venetian canals.

As shown by the above impressions, Venice offered the chance for this scholar to blend her mindscapes with the waterscapes, to reconcile the fictional with the factual. Literature provides a way to see the world with the eyes of others; travelling to the locations described enables us to see the world with our own eyes. Literature adds to reality, but reality may also add something to literature. As a city shaped by water, Venice emerges as a half-real, half-surreal space in its literary images. Richard Gerrig and Allan Bernardo (1994) who have conducted experiments on the reader's state of mind during and after a literary experience have found that while reading, readers may accept improbable or fantastic things. As Venice has been described as "the most improbable of cities" (Mann [1912] 2018: 16), it is no wonder that readers may be driven to the city from curiosity, as a way of filling in textual "gaps," perceiving and inhabiting the spaces described in the literary text. On the other hand, a pull factor to Venice would be the very opposite: a familiarity provided though literature— as Murray (1842: 326) says "no one enters Venice a stranger." Yet, even though "Venice has been painted and described many thousands of times and of all the cities in the world it is the easiest to visit without going there" as Henry James said, you still "desire to embrace it, to caress it, to possess it" (James, [1900] 1993: 287). A final reason for visiting literary places may be escapism: Venetian waterscapes seem to offer the perfect refuge to escape a boring reality.

4. Conclusions

Reading is a performative act which involves a transaction between the text's inferred meaning and the individual interpretation by the reader influenced by their personal emotions, knowledge, and life experiences. Reading a text and reacting to it is a very personal act: some limit themselves to a mental/imaginative journey and others prefer to take a real one. Turning from a reader into a traveller (or reconciling both in one) is a way of making a text come to life, by linking the imagined with the real.

There are several reasons to go on a literary tour. In the case of Venice, the distinctive aquatic topography and geography of the city have gained it the name of the floating city and have made it a popular tourist attraction for centuries. Water holds a peculiar fascination. Colourless, odourless, and shapeless as it is, water constitutes an essential and omnipresent element on Earth which has always attracted the attention of philosophers, scientists, as well as men of letters. Water has as many uses as meanings, so it is no wonder it is a recurrent motif in literature. In its unfixed shape, water represents transcendence of life, and death; it is both fascinating and lethal. As a city built on water, the literary image of Venice is that of a romantic and dream-like as well as a lethal city, but above all, it appears as an otherworldly, heterotopic space, suspended in-between imagination and reality, which adds to the appeal for turning from a reader into a tourist.

This paper explored the ways waterscapes have been represented in selected literature related to Venice and how they attract tourists. The abundance of literary works on it makes it possible to see and understand this unique aquatic space from a totally different dimension. The practice of fictionalising Venice has been going on since Renaissance up to this day mainly thanks to its exceptional watery geography, so it is more likely to be visited by people more than other locations, hence contributing to its being chosen as a tourist destination.

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