

A New Historicist Interpretation of *The Imperialist*

YUAN Jingjing, WEI Li

Inner Mongolia University, Hohhot, China

Sara Jeannette Duncan (1861-1922) is a prominent Canadian female writer in her time. Her novel *The Imperialist* (1904), dealing primarily with Canadian nationality, is a sophisticated epitome of Canadian society that is most authentic to Canadian social and political life at the turn of the twentieth century. *The Imperialist*, as a product of a historical context in Canadian literature, incorporates historical reality and fictional imagination, and presents an uncertainty and perplexity in the ideology of Canadians at the turn of the twentieth century. Positioning *The Imperialist* in the context of New Historicism, this essay explores the intertextuality of the “historicity of texts” and the “textuality of history”. Furthermore, the essay investigates the circulation between literary text of *The Imperialist* and non-literary texts that surrounded it, revealing how literary text and historical-cultural context negotiate, circulate, and construct each other.

Keywords: *The Imperialist*, New Historicism, historicity of texts, textuality of history, historical-cultural context

Introduction

At the turn of the twentieth century, the surge of interest in romantic fiction appeared to denote changes in the accepted form and function of novels in Canada. Throughout the nineteenth century, most Canadian critics and writers assumed that the appropriate mode for Canadian fiction was romantic novel that modeled on Sir Walter Scott and should be “characterized by reality, ideality, impersonality, purity, humanity and chivalry” (Gerson, 1977, p. 139). Nevertheless, ever since the establishment of the Confederation from 1867, Canadian fiction has begun to step into the formative stage.

Of all Duncan’s books, *The Imperialist* (1904) as her sole piece of fiction, is set in Canadian reality and close to the social and political life of Canadian people at the turn of the twentieth century. *The Imperialist* has long been deemed as one of the most important Canadian novels and “it has been singled out from among Duncan’s many novels for special status in the Canadian canon because it is the only one to be set largely in Canada” (Quirk, 2008. p. 82). As an epitome of Canadian society in the second half of the nineteenth century, *The Imperialist* set in an imaginary town of Elgin in Ontario, which is assumed later by many critics as Brantford. The story unfolds interlaced along with two romances. Lorne Murchison, the protagonist, is the proponent of the “imperial idea” and is convinced that the British Empire stands for the highest development of the human race. Later on, he involved in an election in which the strengthening of Canada’s ties to the British Empire is an issue. He falls in love with an exquisite but shallow girl Dora Milburn. However, Dora finally chooses to marry a young English gentleman who was a friend of Lorne. Ironically, Lorne both failed in love and political ideal at the end of the novel. On the contrary, Lorne’s sister Advena’s romance with the young

YUAN Jingjing, graduate student, Foreign Languages College, Inner Mongolia University, Hohhot, China.

WEI Li, full professor, Foreign Languages College, Inner Mongolia University, Hohhot, China.

Scottish clergyman Hugh Finlay meets a happy ending.

The novel presents Canada after the Confederation being divided into two groups in regard to the issue of nation-building. One faction is the “imperialists” who advocate closer ties with the British Empire; the counterpart supports a middle course to maintain a perilous triangle between Great Britain and the United States. The protagonist of the novel, the young promising imperialist Lorne Murchison has come to prominence as an excellent attorney and standing as a liberal candidate that propagandizes the “imperial idea” in a by-election in South Fox, Ontario. Though he failed due to his idealism, he was portrayed as a typical Canadian representative of younger generation who courageously pursued political vision and dauntlessly envisaged the making of a nation.

Ever since the New Historicism movement emerged in academia in the 1980s, with an emphasis on dynamic and productive representation and intertextuality between literature and history, it has contested the boundaries of traditional historiography and literary criticism. As a cultural and literary theory, New Historicism re-assessed and re-interrogated the relationship among language, history, and literature with a critical undertone. It begins with New Criticism, continues through the periods of Deconstruction, Post-Structuralism, Marxist criticism, and Cultural Materialism, and eventually leads to a “return to history” within the discipline of literary studies.

The Imperialist is best understood against the backdrop of New Historicism context. By employing the New Historicist approach to *The Imperialist*, this essay explores “the imperial idea” as an early ideological form of Canadian nationalism, analyzes the “historicity” and “textuality” in the novel, and further testifies the practicability of the contextualization of the analysis from a New Historicist approach. By interpreting the novel from the New Historicist perspective, it facilitates the understanding of Canadians’ paradoxical sentiments towards England and America at the turn of the twentieth century, and meanwhile, provides contemporary readers with reference and enlightenment for comprehending Canadian nationalism.

Historicity of Texts in *The Imperialist*

The Imperialist presents history as a collective memory, which gathers in a symbiotic fashion all that existed in the past into all that happens in the present. Duncan’s narrative method combined with her treatment of history weaves delicate connections between different phenomena so that no event becomes absolutely autonomous. This generates the mobility with which history traverses past and present, creating an acceptable fluid pattern of the history of time. Certainly, Duncan’s sense of history retains its historicity. In her creative writing, history becomes a process, hinging on characters who are still representatives of important historical tendencies without losing their realistic eccentricities.

New Historicists understand literature as being rooted in its cultural and authorial connections. Literary texts and representations are best understood only when considered in the context of their specific historical period. According to American New Historicist Louis A. Montrose (1989), “the historicity of texts” denotes that literary text and non-literary text both possess social historicity. They both are the product of mixture influences among history, culture, society, economy, politics, institution, and class, which means all writing mode and reading mode have historical specificity containing social and material implant. Thus, in terms of any literary text interpretation, it will inevitably deal with social historicity and cannot be done in a closed and isolated manner.

Duncan’s *The Imperialist*, published in 1904, offers a profound retrospect into the political consciousness of Canadians in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Without comprehension of the

historical events and attitudes of early twentieth Canada, particularly the Canadian nationalism in this exact period, people would miss the chance to read Duncan's work as a political commentary on Canadian society. Consequently, it is fundamental to perceive the historical realities and Canadians' attitudes encompassing the publication of *The Imperialist* in order to understand Duncan's portrayal of Canadian society within her literary text.

Although the Canadian Confederation was established in 1867, Canada was still a dominion remaining loyal to Britain as a member of the British Empire. In order to uphold Canada's national interests and oppose British interference with the autonomy of the Dominion, Canada advocates "Imperial Federation" in Canada at the end of the nineteenth century. In Chapter 5, Duncan made this point crystal clear by declaring "trade flourished, education improved, politics changed and we are here at the making of a nation" (Duncan, 1971, p. 47). Actually, although Canada had become an independent nation at international stage, due to the entrenched and intertwined relations with Britain, Canada was in a paradoxical dilemma. On one hand, when the interests of Canada and the interests of Great Britain conflicted, Canadians were not willing to reconcile but eager to get rid of the control of the Mother Country; on the other hand, paradoxically, the interests of Canada was partly bound with Britain and Canadian people somewhat had an inexplicable national sentiment to the "Mother Country" (Great Britain) (Duncan, 1971, p. 151). Besides, facing the threat to become an objected annexation of the United States, Canada has no choice but to maintain the connection with the British Empire, just as Duncan's illustration that "belief in England was in the blood" (Duncan, 1971, p. 59). In *The Imperialist*, Elgin, as a town of Canada, is actually the representative miniature of Canada itself in the context. This is obviously reflected in Chapter 7 as that "the politics of Elgin's daily absorption were those of the town, the Province, the Dominion" (Duncan, 1971, p. 59). After the Confederation, local people and administrative agency in Elgin were divided into two groups in regard to the issue of nation-building. One faction is the "imperialists" who advocate closer ties with the British Empire; the counterpart supports a middle course to maintain a perilous triangle between Great Britain and the United States. Under such paradoxical circumstances, Canada's national status was reflected as obviously swinging and absolutely uncertain.

Literary writing normally mirrors a stable and coherent ideology that is endorsed by the public of a society. According to Fredric Jameson's (2008) *Marxism and Historicism*:

"History is not in any sense itself a text or master text or master narrative, but that it is inaccessible to us except in textual or narrative form, or in other words, that we approach it only by way of some prior textualization or narrative (re)construction." (p. 452)

New Historicist situates the literary text in the political situation of its own day. The "imperial idea" or "imperialism", as a national ideology or what Canadians perceived as a form of nationalism, was very popular in Canada throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century.

Before putting the argument of the essay to go further, it is necessary to clarify the implication of the "imperialism" in *The Imperialist*. Canadians who advocate close ties with both Great Britain and imperial federation are called "Canadian Imperialists". In this context, "imperialism" refers to a national idea in Canada maintaining the close relationship politically and economically with the British Empire at the turn of the twentieth century. In the literary text of *The Imperialist*, the protagonist Lorne Murchison, as an imperialist himself, holds the view that Canada will benefit economically, militarily, and politically from retaining the close connections with the Mother Country.

Deeply examining the literary text of *The Imperialist*, in any case, it is obvious that Duncan herself is an imperialist. She assumed that imperialism is the ally of Canadian nationalism. In Chapter 12, Duncan demonstrated her view on England through the conversation between Lorne Murchison and Dora Milburn—"But I'll see England, Dora; I'll feel England, eat and drink and sleep and live in England, for a little while. Isn't it the very name great?" (Duncan, 1971, p. 98). Comparing with Lorne's passion for England and English men, Dora's attitude was quite the opposite. She replied, "I don't believe they are a bit better than we are" (Duncan, 1971, p. 99). Here, Duncan through Dora's words, articulates herself as a Canadian, seeing paramount importance of England on the one hand but refusing to admit English men are superior to her fellow Canadians on the other hand. There was an ambivalence of attitude that existed in Duncan's thought. In Duncan's early journalism during the 1880s and 1890s compiled in the book *Selected Journalism*, Duncan shows her "love and loyalty" to the British flag and "shows her to be every bit as proud an imperialist as Willison" (Duncan, 1978, p. 62). This historical record conspicuously presents Duncan is a supporter of Canadian imperialism.

Imperialism at the turning of the twentieth century, was a demonstration of Canadian nationalism and national ideology, and concurrently involved in a social-historical ideology construction. The publication of *The Imperialist* was around the era that Canada was claiming political legitimacy as an equal partner with Britain. By virtue of presenting this sort of national ideology in history and literary writing to explore how imperialism influences Duncan and governs the novel, the preceding paragraphs enunciated the "historicity of texts" in *The Imperialist*.

What seems a paradox, however, is that Canada tends to maintain loyalty to England and requires complete commercial independence at the same time. There launched a Canadian nationalist movement—"Canada First Movement" at the end of the nineteenth century, calling for the autonomy of Canada in conducting its own foreign policy. In *The Imperialist*, Duncan depicted Canadians as the victim of free trade treaty contracted with England under Reciprocity and Free Trade (1850-1914):

Enterprise was laid flat, mortgages were foreclosed, shops were left empty, the milling and forwarding interests were temporarily ruined, and the Governor-General actually wrote to the Secretary of State in England that things were so bad that not a shilling could be raised on the credit of the Province. (Duncan, 1971, p. 210)

In this quote, it is indisputable that Canada is treated unequally under such unreasonable foreign policy imposed by the Mother Country. When facing England's foreign policy towards Canada, in Chapter 7, Duncan made a parallel of the relationship between England and Canada as "Father-Son relationship", and she further states that, "a father's financial obligations might be to a child he had parted with at birth"(Duncan, 1971, p. 59). In this case, the unfair relation would legitimize the duty that Canada conveys interests to Britain as a loyal member of the British Empire.

From the perspective of New Historicism, putting the literary text of *The Imperialist* in its own historical context and examining it with the real historical text and record, a panoramic view of the political and economic situations existing between Canada and England is retrospective both in the novel and in history as well.

To sum up, the historicity of texts in *The Imperialist* realized and acknowledged the literary text as an approach to a specific era and approach to the historical reality and facts. From New Historicist perspective, history contains structure and content of literary works juxtaposed to the economic, political, and cultural

contexts. By analyzing the national status of Canada and one of its prevailing national ideologies “imperialism” at the turn of the twentieth century, “the historicity of texts” in *The Imperialist* has been convincingly testified.

Textuality of History in *The Imperialist*

New Historicists analyze literary text with key attention to history and they base their assumptions of literature on the connection between literary texts and historical contexts. Louis Montrose, as a major innovator and exponent of “New Historicism”, puts forward a reciprocal concept of “historicity of text” and “textuality of history”. According to Montrose, “textuality of history” denotes that historical and social atmosphere in the past could be appreciated by means of preserved texts. Another leading proponent Stephen Greenblatt gives best interpretation of “textuality of history” by maintaining that New Historicism “concerns to examine the textual traces of the past is premised on the notion that the past is available to us only in the form of a textuality which is also embedded in that of the present” (Rice & Waugh, 2001, p. 252).

New Historicism holds that any text is equivalent to an “event” of history. A text is not merely a reflection of history but an active participation in the formation of history, and even becomes a dynamic force in shaping and constructing history. In the following paragraphs, the Anglo-Saxon bond and the paradoxical “imperialism” in the novel are examined along with historical texts in order to investigate links and influences that the novel imposed in the process of historical development.

Considering the core issue of Canadian nationality in *The Imperialist*, Duncan presents a notion of “a union of the Anglo-Saxon nations” to readers. In Chapter 29, Lorne passionately delivered an eloquent argument on composing an Anglo-Saxon world:

“...Let us not hesitate to announce ourselves for the Empire, to throw all we are and all we have into the balance for that great decision... As between England and the United States the predominant partner in that firm will be the one that brings Canada...” (Duncan, 1971, p. 233)

The quote apparently illustrates that in the final speech of the election campaign, Lorne’s attitude towards building an ally or an Empire of Canada and other Anglo-Saxon nations is straightforward and unswerving. He announced insights to make “a union of the Anglo-Saxon nations of the world” and deem “imperial idea” as the “great decision” to benefit Canada as an independent nation (Duncan, 1971, p. 233). In Canadian history, Joseph Chamberlain deemed the “Imperial Federation League” as the Anglo-Saxon racial bonds. He delivered his speech in Toronto on imperial federation, and argued, “The Anglo-Saxon race that proud, persistent, self-asserting and absolute stock” (Cawood & Upton, 2016, p. 28). Therefore, Anglophone nations faced a common past and culture.

One of the most arresting details in the novel is that Duncan excluded Canadian Indians that lived in Moneida Reservation out of her Anglo-Saxon group. In Chapter 31, Mrs. Murchison declared, “You can never trust an Indian” (Duncan, 1971, p. 242). Similarly, in Duncan’s description of a Canadian Indian at Moneida Reservation, she employs negative adjectives as “stiff”, “pathetic”, “lank”, “muddy”, “shrewdness”, “rakish”, and “intoxicated” to the construction of the images of Canadian Indians in Moneida. Subsequently, those Indians are perceived as troublemakers on the ballot. In this regard, it seems that Duncan has an inexplicable, presupposed, and preconceived prejudice on non Anglo-Saxon racial groups.

Carl Berger (1970) claims that “Canadian imperialism was one variety of Canadian Nationalism” (p. 9) in his monograph *Sense of Power*. He delivered a message of an ideological paradox of Canadian nationalism in

the book. The imperialist-nationalists had conceived Canadian nationality as a unique national identity based on Canadian history. From Berger's perspective, the loyalty of Canadians to the Empire was a "tradition" and was rooted in their blood. They conceived Canadian imperialism as a "native product". Thus, the imperial federation provided a platform for those Empire loyalists bearing a primary idea of maintaining the imperial unity. However, Great Britain compelled the Canadian government to adopt the Free Trade Act, which caught Canada in a disadvantaged situation. In the novel, a liberal statesman Mr. Winter figured out this British policy and further assured his fellowmen:

"Great Britain has sold them before, and she would sell them again. He stood there before them as loyal to British connection an any man. He addressed public as loyal to British connection as any public. But-once bitten twice shy." (Duncan, 1971, p. 210)

Reflected on this attitude, the manufacturer Milburn responded bitterly that "imperial union is very nice to talk about, but when you come down to the hard fact its Australia for Australians, Canada for the Canadians, Africa for the Africans, every time" (Duncan, 1971, p. 211). Milburn's understanding might explain the reason why the manufacturers in Elgin town would not be willing to vote for the liberals. They concerned about the practical interests in spite of ideal imperialism and imperial bonds.

Duncan's strong political view occasionally fell into memorable characters she created. In the article "Silent Flag in the New Fallen Snow": Sara Jeannette Duncan and the Legacy of the South African War, Peter Webb (2010) argues that Duncan pledges her "love and loyalty" to the British Flag in her early journalism of the 1880s and the 1890s. This also shows Duncan is every bit of an imperialist of herself. When she dealt with the paradoxical imperialism, she attempted to separate the idealistic imperialism from the practical advantages and disadvantages of imperial relations.

Lorne and all Empire loyalists strongly require the commercial independence of Canada. They endeavor to remain loyal to England in order to gain benefits from the Empire and make Canada as the center of the Empire; nevertheless, the two sentiments, being interweaved and conflict to each other, consequently produce such a paradoxical ideology of imperialism echoed in the novel.

To sum up, interpreting the text of *The Imperialism* from the perspective of New Historicism, the event of imperial federation league in Canadian history stimulated the production and promotion of such work as *The Imperialist*, in which Duncan intricately merged imagery of Anglo-Saxon bonds and a paradoxical nature of imperialist. Therefore, the historical event is textualized by Duncan and the text of *The Imperialist* is simultaneously participated in the construction of Canadian history.

Conclusion

During the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, Canadian political thoughts were imbued with Canadian nationalism and imperialism of the era. By virtue of analyzing the literary text of *The Imperialist* and historical texts surrounded it, this essay has investigated the political, economic, and social aspects of *The Imperialist*, and explored how these aspects and ideas are juxtaposed in a New Historicist manner to illuminate the shifting ideological and political ground that underpinned Canadian visions of nation-building at the turn of the twentieth century.

The Imperialist approaches literary sophistication by deliberately mixing and blurring the boundary between history and literary text. Based upon the discussion over the issue of "historicity of texts" and

“textuality of history” in *The Imperialist*, the essay illustrates the fact that the novel not only reflects the social and cultural situation of its historical period with the contribution as the product of history; but also participates in the creation of the ideological and cultural history of its own era to a certain extent, and thus completes a formation of what New Historicist called intertextuality between literature and history.

To conclude, a literary work is a dialogue between a specific cultural construction and its corresponding historical context. Literature has a discursive mechanism that affects history as the same extent as history affects literature. *The Imperialist*, as a product of historical context in Canada, incorporated historical reality and fictional imagination, presenting an uncertainty and perplexity sense of Canadians at the turn of the twentieth century. It is undisputed that the existence of this novel has participated in the contextual record Canadian history and has also influenced the ideological evolution of younger generations in a significant way.

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