Title of poem: Owl

Performer's name: Richard Carter

Date of Performance: 16th January 2009

Place of Performance: University of Bristol

Length: 06:57

Summary of Features

Anthropomorphism	■	■	■	■	■
Blending	■	■	■		
Eyegaze	■	■	■		
Handshape	■	■	■	■	
Neologism	■	■	■		
Symmetry	■	■			
Use of space	■				

Notes:

Overview

This is the story about the interaction between a Deaf boy and a signing owl. The Deaf boy, the protagonist of the story, does not like school because a hearing teacher dominates the classroom and bans the use of sign language. One day the teacher brings in an owl (presumably a toy), who secretly signs to the children and interprets what the teacher is saying. The deaf children are all excited but the next day the owl is gone. The sulking protagonist finds the owl in a rubbish bin and takes it home. The boy studies hard with the help of the owl, and the story ends with the picture of the boy, wearing a graduation mortar board, with the owl on his shoulder and a certificate in his hand.

Translation

A child is asleep, breathing heavily, in and out of dreams
His mother comes into his bedroom and taps him on the shoulder
He shrugs her off and rolls over in bed
She taps harder and he wakes
"What?!"
"Get up now!"
"Why?"
"You have to go to school! Now!"
Sulkily he gets up and gets dressed, puts his bag over his shoulder and his cap on his head
"Time to go!" He huffs and puffs as they go down the stairs together. "Now!"
He sulks unhappily all the way to school and when they get to the gate, his mother says, "Now, you be a good boy at school, OK?"
He scowls and she says, "Now, give me a kiss".
He pulls a face, "No! Yuk!"
She sighs and shakes her head as she watches him go into school
Inside school all his Deaf friends are running about,
he smiles happily as he says hello to all of them
He goes into the classroom and sits down happily on a chair in a row of his friends
"What's the plan for tomorrow?" he asks excitedly and, "What did you get up to yesterday?"
Suddenly the door bangs open and they all turn to see the teacher arrive, her hands stiffly clasped, her hair in a knot on the top of her head, severe glasses on her nose, and a long, tight, full-skirted dress
They look with fear as she marches to the front of the class and stares at them sternly with her hands on her hips
"You are not allowed to sign! You must all use your voices!" she shouts
"You!" she points at one child, "no signing, not even under the table!"
"And you!" she points to another child, "No giggling! You're not allowed to have fun!" she stands there, with her hands clasped
She picks up a case and puts it on the desk as the children gasp and gaze on with curiosity. She opens the case and removes something from inside and places it on the desk
The children peer, "What is it? What is it?" they ask each other. "
No signing allowed!" shouts the teacher, "Use your voices! Look at me!"
"That" the teacher says, "is ..." she turns and picks up a pen and takes the lid off, "Watch me, lipread ... OWL" she says carefully and deliberately
She children peer at her and copy her lip-pattern OWL but look at each other in confusion, not understanding
"What is it?" one of the asks.

"She means 'Owl' " his friend signs to him.
"Oh! Owl!" he signs back
"No signing allowed! Stop signing!" the teacher shouts. "Watch my lips OOOOOWWWWWLLLLLLL" she enunciates
She takes her marker pen and turns to the board where she writes a great big 'O' then quickly turns to check the children aren't misbehaving
She then writes 'W' then spins round to check the children
Then finally a giant 'L' before turning back to the children, pointing to the word on the board and saying "OOOWWWWLLL, OOOWWWLLL"
"Come here" she says to one child, "OOOWWWLLL ... let me hear you say it? ... OK"
"Now you say it"
"oowwwlll" says another child, obediently.
"Again, let me hear? ... good boy"
"Now you" she says to the little boy.
"OWEU" he tries unhappily as the teacher scowls at him crossly.
"Come here" she beckons.
"I can't speak, I sign!"
"No! Lipread! Come on!" she shouts
He tries again, really hard, "OWWELLH" and she smiles sourly as she says, "Good boy!"
The teacher takes the owl and places it on a shelf high up behind her, smiling.
"OK ... "
"That is an owl!" She tells the children as they all look up at the motionless bird on the shelf
The teacher talks to the class, and they peer at her, trying to understand what she is saying
They glance up at the owl, who very slowly gives them a wink
"Shhhh" the owl signs. "I'm an interpreter for all of you. I'm here to help you but the teacher doesn't know so you have to keep it quiet! OK?"
The teacher carries on talking but she sees the children are all looking at the owl, she quickly turns to look up but the owl is motionless
She looks from the owl to the children and they are all looking straight ahead again, but then carefully glance up at the owl
The teacher talks and they watch the owl from the corner of their eyes
The owl signs "You need to get on with your work, your writing, it will help you learn, it's really important that you all do this"
The teacher stops talking and sees the children watching the owl then suddenly all look at her. She frowns, hands on hips and looks quickly at the owl
Just then the bell goes so the teacher tells all the children it's time for home and they all leave
The little boy rushes outside to meet him mother, he races towards her joyfully, "I love school! I love school"!" he cries

She looks at him and scratches her head in disbelief. "This morning, when you got up you were miserable, and now you say you love school?"
The little boy goes to race off but his mother grabs him and insists they walk home together
That night, the little boy gets into bed and tries to go straight to sleep,
he can't wait to wake up tomorrow morning and go to school again!
He tosses and turns with excitement
His mother comes in the next morning to wake him up and he jumps straight out of bed, full of excitement
"Calm down!" she says, "every morning you're really miserable, but now, you've changed, what's happened?"
"I don't know I just really, really LOVE school, I LOVE IT!"
"All right" thinks his mum, very confused as her little boy rushes to get dressed,
"Come on!" he cries
She grabs hold of him to stop him rushing off, "Just wait!"
"I want to go to school now, all my friends are there, everybody signing!"
"No signing, remember? Lipreading"
"OK" the little boy sighs, "I want to go to meet my friends!"
"All right then" sighs his mother "Give me a kiss!"
The little boy plants a big kiss on his mother's lips and runs off, leaving her taken aback
He runs in to see his friends, "I'm so excited about learning with the owl today, I 'm so happy, I love school!"
all his friends are the same, really excited
The door bangs open and they all turn to stare at the teacher before quickly looking straight ahead
She marches in and smiles sweetly at all of the children as they politely look straight ahead
She starts talking and the children all smile happily as they turn their gaze to the shelf but ... oh no!
The owl has gone! Oh no!
They turn their eyes back to the teacher and desperately try to lipread her
"What's she saying?" "What's she saying?" but they have no idea as they struggle to understand
The teacher carries on talking at the children, then she gives a wicked smile,
"Oh yes, the owl has gone" she tells them
The bell goes and the teacher watches as the children file out. She pushes her glasses up her nose, smoothes down her dress and feels pleased with herself
The little boy stomps out of school to meet his mother, who looks at him very confused, he's miserable again!
"What's up?"
"I hate school, I hate school!" he shouts

"Yesterday you were happy and now you're miserable again, what's happened?"
"I don't know! I hate school! I don't like it, I hate school and I hate YOU!"
"It's all right, all right" says his mother just as the little boy sees something
He runs across the playground, "Stop! Stop!" as the rubbish bin is being emptied
"Stop, stop!" cries the little boy, running up to the skip and peering in,
"That's mine!"
"What is?" asks his mother
"Excuse me" she says, speaking to the rubbish collector, and "What are you looking for?"
"It's my owl!" cries the little boy desperately
"He's looking for his owl" she explains and suddenly they find it.
The owl is passed to the little boy who clutches it tightly to his chest
The mother looks at the owl but says nothing and they all go home together
At home, the little boy puts the owl on his desk and looks at it and taps it,
but the owl is motionless. "Come on!" implores the little boy, "Sign!"
He taps the owl, but nothing. Dejected, he opens his book and starts to do his homework
Just then, the owl winks
"Hello! I'm here to help you with your homework"
"Brilliant! I want some help with my work so I can get a really good mark from school!" says the little boy
"OK, you need to get some books from the shelf and read them. That will help you to learn more, and you need to use the computer to do some research"
So that's what the little boy did, he read and learned until one day, he sat there looking at a photograph of himself. And do you know what that photograph was? It was him, wearing a mortar board, the owl on his shoulder
A degree certificate in his hand

Theme

The story has a layer of different themes.
The central to the story is the situation regarding Deaf children and their education. The poet describes how they have to struggle in the classroom where the use of sign language is banned and the children are forced to lip read and pronounce the spoken language. The owl comes in as a ‘savior’ to the children.

The bond between small children and animals (which is hidden from the eyes of adults) is a key theme in children’s stories and in sign language literature as well. In this story, the bond is reinforced by the shared language between the Deaf children and the owl.

There is also an element of "buildungs roman" in this story. It can be read as a growing up process of a Deaf boy overcoming difficulties with hard work. The graduation mortar board and the degree certificate symbolise his academic achievement. A similar theme and symbolism can be found in Dorothy Miles' poem The Staircase.

Poetic Features

Anthropomorphism

The most notable character in this poem is the anthropomorphised owl. This owl not only possesses human emotion but it can also "sign" by moving its wings. It has the same intellectual ability of human beings, and therefore can serve as the "interpreter" for Deaf children. This owl is presumably not deaf (as it can "hear" what the teacher is saying) but through its capability of signing, it forms a strong bond with the Deaf children, especially with the protagonist.

We should note that the interpreting is one-way. The hearing teacher shows no interest in understanding her pupils, and thus the owl does not offer help to her. It feigns ignorance in front of the teacher (no movement, non-directed gaze, vacant expressions). This leads to the notion of "privileged humans" (Cosslet 2006) who are "chosen" to communicate with talking animals, plants and objects. In sign language literature, Deaf people, and Deaf children in particular, are likely to be selected as "privileged humans". The owl in this story reveals its identity only to the Deaf children. When it first signs to the children, it winks and gestures "Shhh... (Don't tell her I can sign)" to give a sense of conspiracy to the children. The same sense of conspiracy is found in Richard's Jack-in-the-Box.

Blending

Common blending of different perspectives can be found occasionally. When the mother comes to wake up the boy, the poet's left hand represents the tapping movement of the mother while the rest of the boy represents the boy in the bed. In the classroom sequence, the poet's face provides the focused view of the face of pupils while his hands are in the form of "collective classifier", representing the group of pupils simultaneously. It is interesting that at 1:55, the division between the focused and defocused perspectives changes. The right hand which has been used as a collective classifier turns into the hand of a pupil and starts to tap on another pupil's shoulder (and signs to him). Now the left hand alone represents the defocused view, and the right hand and the face (and the large part of the body) are understood to represent a real-size human being (a Deaf boy).

Eyegaze

Most of the time, the poet takes the character's gaze through role shift (the Deaf boy, the mother, the teacher, and the owl). There are several occasions he looks at the audience and explains the situation as a narrator (such as OWL at 3.34, ARRIVE HOME 6.14 and the last sequence between 6:50–6:55).

Common mapping between the gaze and the power relationship can be found in this story. The adults are all naturally taller than the Deaf children, so the children are forced to look up. It is interesting that despite its smallness, the owl is placed at the highest position in the classroom because the teacher put it high up (on a shelf or perhaps the top of a cupboard). This positioning of the owl is physical, of course, but can be seen symbolically, considering the importance it bears in this story. Even the arrogant teacher who literally and metaphorically "looks down upon" the Deaf children needs to "look up" at the owl.

Handshape

The anthropomorphised owl uses only the flat B handshape (which iconically represents its wings) when it signs. This overrides the handshape of some of the signs (such as HELP, which normally uses Å handshape, TEACHER, which uses the index finger 'G' handshape, and IMPORTANT, which also uses a G handshape) but the meaning is still clear. Although practically very restricted, such signing adds enormous visual pleasure and amusement.

In the classroom sequence, the handshape (together with facial expressions and gaze) helps make clear the distinction among the characters. The Deaf children are often expressed by the two-handed collective classifier in 5 handshape; the teacher is represented by a posture of holding her fists at her waist (A handshape). The owl is characterised by its unique signing style that solely consists of signs with B handshape.

Neologism

The most memorable neologism in this story is the signing of the owl, blending the physical features of the owl and BSL lexicon (see above section on handshape).

The signs used to describe the unsympathetic, stereotypical middle-aged female teacher are very creative as well.

Symmetry

The symmetry in the first several signs is symbolic as it represents the happy and peaceful boy in his dream, which is to be "broken" by a one-handed asymmetric sign representing the mother coming to wake him up.

Also, the sequence starting at 5:43 shows strong emotion of the boy through the succession of one-handed signs (HATE SCHOOL I HATE SCHOOL/ I HATE SCHOOL I DON'T-LIKE HATE YOU).

Use of Space

There is not much symbolic use of space, except that the owl is placed at the upper right of the signing space, the location which is often used to refer to a positive concept.

Any Other Comment

There are some examples of "visual sonority" (i.e. the size of signing which corresponds to the volume of the sound). The teacher's confidence is well expressed by the bigger size of her signs (many of them are articulated using the shoulder joint). She also uses a wide range of body postures (turning to the blackboard, leaning to each student), also contributing to the impression that she is conceptually "big". In contrast, the signing of Deaf children in presence of the teacher is very restricted. Their signs are mainly made at the elbow joint (see, for example, the boy's signing at 3:04).

References

Cosslet, Tess. (2006) Talking Animals in British Children's Fiction, 1786-1914. Aldershot: Ashgate.