

# New Textual Interpretation of "The Fall of Icarus" by William Carlos Williams

**Bam Dev Sharma and Ram Prasad Rai**

Ratna Rajyalaxmi Campus, Tribhuvan University, Nepal

doi: <https://doi.org/10.37745/bjmas.2022.04252>

Published March 06, 2025

---

**Citation:** Sharma B.D. and Rai R.P. (2025) New Textual Interpretation of "The Fall of Icarus" by William Carlos Williams, *British Journal of Multidisciplinary and Advanced Studies*, 6(2), 9-15

---

**Abstract:** *The poem "Fall of Icarus" is one of the epochs making and experimental poems in terms of its stylistic composition, containing hybrid literary form based on visible and implicit imagery as an example of transformative poetry. This poem is a paint manifestation by Peter Brueghel who tries to capture rather vivid and descriptive imageries from past to the present. It is a Greek myth in which Daedalus threatens his son, Icarus, not to fly towards the sun. However, his exalted passions never deter him and finally he comes to an end by falling as his waxed wings melt down. The moments he falls down and the surrounding beside his dead body captured in the painting are also poetically captured in the poem. Different sources of textual formulations take place in the poem: Greek myth to modern experimental poetry. This poem can be interpreted from some of the dominant traces of new textuality. It has a strong cultural and mythical element in it and therefore it tries to manipulate deeper and inner textual features. This article, in this sense, explores hidden links and textual elements for a comprehensive analysis and objective interpretation of the poem. Though painting and poetry are inter-related, they, though, use two different ways of manifestation of texts that can enrich new textual premise for interpretation. So, this article tries to analyze it from new textual interpretation taking help from prominent critics of the time like Linda Huttenchon, Richard J. Lane, and Peter Stockwell.*

**Keywords:** Digital technology, landscape, textuality, tragic death, vision

---

## INTRODUCTION

In the book "After Post Modernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism" by two eminent editors, Lopez and Potter categorically state that post modernism is not sufficient branch of knowledge that can deal with the contemporary issues of the modern world as the world is torn into several facets concerning, real, actual and empirical (Richard Jane 2013 p. 720). Such issues, according to them, may be tackled through critical realism which tries explore things comprehensively from scientific perspectives. Critical realism part of new textuality

therefore makes a distinct view points between real, actual and observable entities, opening up hidden frontiers of knowledge. Richard Lane (2013) further adamantly states,

The complex dynamics of new textualities can be seen into two apparently antithetical movements that have occurred after theory: the religious turn and the rise (and rise) of the digital humanities. The religious turn is an interesting phenomenon, since the most influential theorists within this field have also driven theory's deconstruction of metaphysics and virtually all modes of transcendence and belief. (p. 725)

Admittedly, the concept of new textuality is complex because it comprises divergent textual entities. After the theoretical premise, there was a sort of intrusion in academic field, especially in complete picture of human discourses. As the theoretical interpolation in both subjective and objective understanding of text have gone paradigm shift, new textual dynamics seems to shoot up taking a revolting understanding of taking textual sovereignty beyond theoretical grip.

Linda Hutecheon (2002) states, "Whether the medium be linguistic or visual, we are always dealing with systems of meaning operating within certain codes and conventions that are socially produced and historically conditioned" (p. 139 ). The progressive proliferation of the text creates a ground of radical approach and validation of the text. New textuality hints about the radical forms of creating and dissemination of texts in visual other forms. It also represents historical propagation of textual forms. We can take example of Shakespearean tragedies being put in visualized forms so that they can be produced and retrieved in technological formats. Rampley thus asserts, "Visualization is not simply the productions of objects that are visible. Nor is all vision visibility. Visibility is that renders the process of history visible to power. It is therefore "realistic" in that it describes the real whatever its mode of representation"(p. 43).

Generally, new textuality tries to examine an objective validity of written or spoken text, normally interpreted as "critical realism." It can be either technical, social, cultural, or meta textual forms to see hidden prevalence of the text beyond theoretical and philosophical perspectives . Furthermore, the new textualists state that the post print culture and innovative production of texts, beyond traditional print form following the development and productions of reading and writing, has been varied. It incorporates textual features constructed, designed, and formulated in hybrid forms of amalgamation. That is, they can be textual, visual, and meta-textual entities. This bodes that post print culture has given space for the proliferation of the text as unusual embracing social and cultural contexts.

Associated with this, recent developments like inter- textuality, meta-textuality and hyper textuality converge together. They help explore meanings and interpretations of the text broadly. The new textual concept, thus, stipulates dynamic comprehension of the text, not as the text that simple reflects meanings, but also manifests some discourse propositions with an organic form. George J. E explicitly asserts:

A text is not like the pile of sand in which the weight of the whole is no more or no less than the sum of the weight of the grains that compose it, regardless of the way in which these grains have been arranged. A text is more like an organism, in which the distribution, the character, and functions of its parts from a whole whose characteristics are more than the sum of the characteristics of the parts. (p.25)

As is considered, new textuality is an organic way of approaching a text. It is to see a text in complete form: studying and interpreting of the text, thereby believing that nothing beyond it ever exists. In this, a text is what is read and textuality is defined as how it is read because a text is undecidable until textuality is put on to it in order to decipher meanings in comprehensive context. That is to say, a text can have several layers of textuality and only scientific investigations and studies can expose its objective prevalence. According to Gracia (1995) in his book, *A Theory of Textuality: The Logic and Epistemology* is of the opinion that there appears confusion in the understanding of text due to lack of proper distinction among logical, and metaphysical, and epistemological issues involved in it.

### **Statement of the problem**

It is obvious that modern textual entity has shifted over the years since the dawn of post structuralism and post modernism. Many of the texts are now interpreted through excessive theoretical obsession and lose their textual entity which is a must for the comprehensive interpretation of any particular text. This research article tries to open up the new avenue of textual sovereignty through the interpretation of a powerful poem by William Carlos Williams.

### **Research questions:**

- a. How can new textuality expose new paradigm of the text?
- b. Why does new textuality evade structural premise of the text?
- c. Why does new textuality open up new frontiers of interpretation?

### **METHODOLOGY:**

Analytical study from the secondary sources of information available in the text. For this, the prominent new textual thinkers would be referred and their ideas would be analyzed for the interpretation of the poem. The methodology would have combined approaches: it would be both linguistic and new textual interpretation of it.

### **Literary context**

Since the advent of post- structuralism and post- modernism, it is generally considered that there always prevails a gap left by post modernistic and post structural thinking and academic discourses. The gap fundamentally appears between the scientific existence of the text and overburdened theoretical interpretation of it. This gap, according to the objective interpretation, lessens due to new textual analysis. Moreover, new-textual analysis tries to see and examine a literary text from textual entities and self contained premise and scientific objectivism. In this connection, it will be relevant to refer to a famous critic Phillip Tew who aptly states about new textuality as "all thoughts and all theories are something. All perceptions are of

something. All texts have referents. They exist independently of our perceptions, thoughts and theories" (qtd. in Richard Lane, p. 721).

New textuality primarily relies on the concept of critical realism, disregarding theoretical assumptions within post modern critical view points, thereby proposing human desire for change and transformation. It lays emphasis on the supremacy of the text, language, and structural connection in terms of social, cultural, digital, graphic, and meta- textual preview. Furthermore, it is to see a text from all undercurrent elements and explore rational and justifiable meanings through objective and scientific elaboration. Having that said, it is a breakaway from literary, theoretical, and critical analysis to consider a text from self explanatory justification. That said, a text can comprise several facets of constructions and even latent elements in exploring meanings. Based on that premise, it is to analyze a text, specifically focusing on language than any other propositions which dominated literary and academic scene during post modern era. It is thing in itself, for a text is self reliant in propagating meaning as a text does not need any subsidiary meanings as it is made up.

New textuality proposes a discourse with assumptions about race, individuality, culture, and historical contexts to connect missing links of any text. New textuality, therefore, unlike Derrida's deconstructive angle, hints us to revisit a text with an objective perspective, adhering to changing humanistic discourse as far as technological and digital transformations of human intellectuality. In this sense, new textuality is becoming humanistic discourse. Peter Stockwell (2009) in his comprehensive book called *Texture: Cognitive Aesthetic of Reading* is of the opinion that literary criticism and theoretical readings are simple descriptions of reading experiences and they cannot supplant objective meanings of texts based on social, cultural, and historical contexts. They provide rather distorted sense of meanings and so there should be remediation of meanings.

Several factors proliferate in the realm of new textuality in contemporary societies. New criticism, critical realism, post modern rationality have contributed to its proliferation. In addition, new textuality proposes an unexplored grounds in seeking meanings of a particular text that is pragmatically viable; it tries to examine composition of material entity from the objective and realistic perspective. At the same time, it takes account to social and cultural elements embedded in a text that have not been analyzed. We see technological diversifications to have occurred since eighties with the advent of computer science, hyper text, media flow, and so on. That taken into account, a text is full textual entity, seeking self explained conceptual references. This being the case, we see the digital technology has opened up innovative space for reading and writing. That has specifically created an alternative platform in reading, transforming, retrieving of the text. Besides, electronic space or cloud space are easily available to all in the making and formulating of a particular text. For the analysis of this research paper, a poem by William Carlos Williams is taken into consideration.

### **Landscape with the Fall of Icarus**

According to Brueghel

When Icarus fell

it was spring

a farmer was ploughing  
his field  
the whole pageantry

of the year was  
awake tingling  
near

the edge of the sea  
concerned  
with itself

sweating in the sun  
that melted  
the wings' wax

unsignificantly  
off the coast  
there was

a splash quite unnoticed  
this was  
Icarus drowning (Lines 1-21)

### **New textual analysis:**

William Carlos Williams, as a poet is known for brilliant imagery and experimental genius, is called a proponent of imagist movement in America. His poetry is famous for vivid descriptions and imagery. He is adept at using idiosyncratic language structure and words, illustrating pictorial imagery. The present poem entitled "Landscapes with the Fall of Icarus" captures a dramatic scene of falling of the legendary character, Icarus, near the sea where the farmers are engaged in agricultural activities.

The poem is a beautiful blend of myth and reality. The myth depicts through the Greek legendary story portraying of the fall of Icarus from the space when his waxed wings melt. As an aspirant to make a quest of the space, Icarus does not heed to his father's suggestion that he should not fly too high. Eventually, he ends up having a tragic death. This beautiful mythical story is lapped with modern elements of descriptive poetic manifestation.

The spring season, the sea, landscape, and space are intertwined to perpetuate the scenic descriptions. This combination helps connect myth with reality, past with present, seen with the unseen. Furthermore, there is a beautiful blend between death and life, reality with fantasy, pictorial with dramatic, heroic with non heroic. That is, the Greek hero does not seem to have

any glorified sense of life in the modern time because the pride and glory is commoditized in the array of modern perception of reality. That is, relevance of the hero in Greek society is deconstructed; he has been turned into an insignificant creature who drowns into the sea without anybody's knowledge.

This event further foregrounds mythmaking and worshipping of the past glory is just based on narrative concept, which, however, is distorted in dramatic manifestation of present reality. The narrative is thus a traditional and mythical perception which cannot justify the poetic interpretation. The new textual perception tries to point out other hidden links that can help in making this interpretation holistic and comprehensive.

According to new textual critics, the interpretation of any text should be based on "critical realism" which tries to see a text from objective and critical perspective unlike that fallacious post modernistic approach. We find the same implications here: the myth is depersonalized or critically examined in the poem.

On this backdrop, palpable new textual premise can be suitably interspersed in this poem. We know that history and myth contexts change over the time and their bases on cultural and social contexts. They would not be as valid as they were in the past. The modern day reality, if taken in pragmatic and scientific elaboration, cannot accept a person flying with waxed wings and reaching the sun and finally falling down onto the sea. There is a wide space to be covered by new textual justification. Besides, the poem comes to existence through the painting by Brueghel, who was a famous painter whose paintings reflect renaissance spirit, including the popular myth of Icarus. From new textual analysis, the painting and myth are transformed into modern context. There is a serious poetic remark by Williams: Should the culture of worshipping hero be valid? New textual analysis would try to find the gap.

In addition, the poet shows modern approach of art. It is unlike that of the past. An art piece can make use of all possible artistic expositions. Art has to exist on its reference of mode of expressions employed by prevalent language and words. The poet brings an ironic contrast between Icarus and a farmer. The poet may have hinted that modern world reality worships a farmer, not a mythical personality! From new textuality, there are layers of things in the production of the poetic theme: the mythical story of Icarus, Peter Brueghel's painting, and William's poetic descriptions. Hence, history, art, and poetry help explore the meanings of the poem.

Moreover, the experimental poetic style and peculiar syntax, without punctuation in three lined poems, can be aptly described from new textual ground. It also breaks away from traditional poetic form. New textual language is not loaded with marked context of meaning, worshipping of hero, or describing or narrative events. It is to comprise various entities of textual matters that help manifest meanings.

As we know new textuality is to take turn from myth and its grandeur to mere linguistic references of the things, Williams doesn't see any fancy idea in the hero, spring time,

pageantry, and the sea movement. Though they are always expressed in grand narrative and rhetorical contexts in literature, Williams has handled them with simplistic terms. They are just common place phenomena of life. Flying of Icarus therefore signifies nothing but ploughing of farmer is really meaningful act because he is one who satisfies hunger of many and thousands. Even nobody does hear the splashing sound of a person drowning and thinks of rescuing him. It is modern life where people are engaged in their professions and don't bother about thinking others.

## CONCLUSION

It is commonly understood that text and context help us for comprehensive interpretation of it. The new textual reading of the poem "The Fall of Icarus" gives us a glimpse of new textual reading, thereby invigorating textual subjectivity of the poem. To some extent, this is a hybrid approach which tries to see different layers of the text: social, cultural, linguistic, digital and so on. The new textual reading gives us a glance to make a text composite without any subjective and theoretical interpretation of it. It is often believed that any text is not the ground of theory for its objective and realistic presentation. Rather, it is the text itself that has to be seen from historic and realistic interpretations so as to see the new focal points of it. The interpretation of the poem from the new textual aspect, thus, would give the readers some academic and intellectual hints. The article writers believe that this would be a point of departure to study and make research on new textual interpretations.

## REFERENCES

- Garcia, George J. E. *Theory of Textuality: The Logic and Epistemology*. State University of New York Press, 1995.)
- Hutcheon, L. (2002). *The Politics of Postmodernism*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Routledge.
- Lane, R. J. (2013). Ed. *Global Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Routledge.
- Lopez, J & Potter, G. (editors) (2001). *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism*. Athlone.
- Rampley, M., (editor) (1999). *Exploring Visual Culture: Definitions, Concepts, Contexts*. Edinburgh UP.
- Stockwell, P. (2009). *Texture: Cognitive Aesthetics of Reading*. Edinburgh UP.
- William, W. C. (2005). "Landscape with the fall of Icarus." In Norton Anthology of Poetry, *Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Saltar, Jon Stalworthy, WW Norton Company*.