

Poetry in Motion: Is the movie better than the book?

Abstract: The purpose of this study is to understand whether presenting poetry as animated text changes readers' attitude toward or motivation for reading poetry. This poster describes a study that divides subjects into two groups: animated poem readers and static poem readers, and it will compare subjects' responses to questions about motivation, engagement, attention, and fatigue. Results of this study will be used to inform design of a poetry curriculum.

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Introduction

Standardized tests such as the SAT and movements like the National Curriculum have increased attention given to poetry in secondary education. The newest version of the SAT and SAT subject tests in English require students to read poems and respond to question about language use, expression, and meaning. In England, the National Curriculum also requires that poetry be included in English studies (DOE, 1995).

In a survey of English teachers, over 70% of respondents recognized that reading and discussing poetry was “very important,” especially for helping students develop knowledge about language use (Benton, 1999). Through reading and discussing poetry, students learn to carefully consider word choices, to appreciate creativity in controlled forms, and to focus their attention on clear uses of language. Poetry, like any other unfamiliar subject, can be difficult to engage upon first meeting. It is hard for novice readers to know how to approach a poem, what one should get out of it, or where to start discussing it. Although the importance of poetry in a broad education is recognized, teaching poetry remains problematic for many teachers (Tobias and Abel, 1990). Teachers struggle to motivate students to read and discuss poems, perhaps because poetry has been seen as too feminine for male readers, as highbrow and elitist, or as useless (Benton, 1999). An approach to teaching poetry that would make it more manageable for novice readers and motivate students to read would be likely to improve instructional outcomes. The experiment described in this poster is designed to test whether multimedia, specifically text animation, could make poetry seem more accessible and in doing so, facilitate discussion (by whom, to what end?).

The Poetry in Motion experiment pits a static poem against an animated poem in a between-subjects design. Other research on the effects of animated text, often called kinetic typography, found text helpful in ambiguous information situations and in producing stronger emotional effects. One study of the use of animated text instead of static text for describing a piece of art work found museum-goers were more able to understand the ambiguous meaning of the work after reading animated text (Uekita, et al, 1999). Animated text is often used in media such as television and film to set mood or stir up energy; the opening titles of *North by Northwest* were one of the first uses of kinetic typography for this purpose. It is now popular in opening titles (Showtime’s *The L Word*), commercials (Hershey’s kisses), and transitions within show segments (ESPN’s *SportsCenter*). The Poetry in Motion experiment asks whether animated poetry can change a reader’s mood more than can static text. Earlier research also addressed concerns that moving text is difficult to read or understand (Granaas, et. al, 1984). Specifically, presenting characters on screen at varying speeds did not reduce comprehension; in fact, presenting text in a way that emphasized linguistic structure may actually facilitate reading (Mills and Weldon, 1987). The question remains then, can animating a poem make it easier for novice readers to understand and engage the poem?

Methods

Each stimulus is composed of the text of an excerpt from Edna St. Vincent Millay’s poem *Renascence*. Subjects in the control group will be shown a static text version of the poem, and those in the experimental group will be shown a QuickTime video in which the poem’s text is animated (see Figures 1 and 2 for examples). This poem was selected because it is reasonably short, available in animated form, and is arguably canonized. Further, this poem, or at least the author, would likely be encountered in an introductory poetry course.

Subjects will access the experimental interface through a web-browser. There they will complete a questionnaire about their demographics and prior history with poetry. By random assignment, subjects will then be shown one of two versions of the poem and then asked to complete another questionnaire about their experience.

An excerpt from *Renesance* by Edna St. Vincent Millay

But, sure, the sky is big, I said;
Miles and miles above my head;
So here upon my back I'll lie
And look my fill into the sky.
And so I looked, and, after all,
The sky was not so very tall.
The sky, I said, must somewhere stop,
And -- sure enough! -- I see the top!
The sky, I thought, is not so grand;
I 'most could touch it with my hand!
And reaching up my hand to try,
I screamed to feel it touch the sky.

I screamed, and -- lo! -- Infinity
Came down and settled over me;
Forced back my scream into my chest,
Bent back my arm upon my breast,
And, pressing of the Undefined
The definition on my mind



Left: Figure 1. Static version of poem; Above: Figure 2. One frame from animated version of poem.

Expected Results

Based on the literature reviewed and some pilot testing conducted to aid the development of the interface for the poems, I expect to find significant differences in motivation and engagement between treatment conditions. Specifically, readers who view the animated poem are expected to exhibit higher motivation and engagement with the poem and produce more elaborated answers to questions about the poem.

References

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