

Exploring the Interplay: Oral Traditions and the Written Word in Literature

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Abstract: *This research examines the profound influence of oral traditions on English literature, exploring their impact on storytelling techniques, narrative structures, and cultural preservation. It provides a historical overview of oral traditions in English literature, analyses their influence on literary movements, discusses their role in cultural preservation, and explores their adaptation in written works. The research aims to contribute to the understanding of the significance of oral traditions in shaping the rich tapestry of English literature.*

Keywords: oral tradition, historical overview, literary movements, cultural heritage

Oral traditions refer to the cultural practices of passing down stories, knowledge, and customs through spoken word rather than written texts. In the realm of English literature, oral traditions hold immense significance as they provide a rich tapestry of storytelling techniques, narrative structures, and cultural preservation. They serve as a vital link to the past, allowing for the exploration of diverse cultural identities and the preservation of collective memory. The incorporation of oral traditions in English literature adds depth, authenticity, and a sense of continuity, enriching the literary landscape with vibrant narratives and diverse perspectives. The purpose of this research is to delve into the intricate realm of oral traditions in English literature, examining their profound influence and significance. By exploring the multifaceted aspects of oral traditions, such as storytelling techniques, narrative structures, and cultural preservation, this research aims to shed light on their relevance in shaping the literary landscape. By understanding the role of oral traditions, we can gain a deeper appreciation for the diverse narratives and cultural heritage embedded within English literature. This research is relevant as it contributes to the broader understanding of the intricate interplay between oral and written traditions, enriching our appreciation of literature's cultural and historical dimensions.

The structure of the paper will be organised in a systematic manner to effectively explore the topic of oral traditions in English literature. It will begin with a comprehensive introduction that defines oral traditions and establishes their significance in the literary realm. Following that, a historical overview will be presented, tracing the origins and evolution of oral traditions in English literature. This will be followed by an analysis of how oral traditions have influenced various literary movements, showcasing their impact on narrative structures and themes. The paper will then delve into the role of oral traditions in cultural preservation, examining their representation in literature and their contribution to the preservation of cultural heritage. Additionally, the adaptation of oral traditions in written works will be explored, highlighting the techniques employed to capture the essence of oral storytelling. Finally, the paper will conclude by summarising the main findings and emphasising the

significance of oral traditions in English literature, while also suggesting avenues for further research.

The origins of oral traditions in English literature can be traced back to antiquity, where the spoken word served as the primary means of communication and storytelling. In this era, before the advent of written language, oral traditions played a pivotal role in preserving cultural knowledge, historical events, and communal values. The oral transmission of stories, myths, and legends allowed for the transmission of cultural heritage from one generation to the next.

As societies evolved and writing systems emerged, oral traditions continued to hold sway in English literature. Even as written texts gained prominence, the oral tradition persisted as a powerful medium for storytelling and cultural expression. This can be observed in the works of medieval bards and troubadours, who relied on oral performance to captivate audiences with their tales of chivalry and courtly love.

The influence of oral traditions continued to shape English literature throughout the Renaissance and beyond. The works of Shakespeare, for instance, were often performed and experienced orally, with the actors breathing life into the playwright's words through their vocal delivery and dramatic interpretations.

The origins of oral traditions in English literature can be traced back to ancient times, where they served as a vital means of transmitting cultural knowledge and storytelling. Despite the advent of written language, oral traditions persisted and continued to influence the literary landscape, adding depth, richness, and a sense of communal connection to English literature.

The evolution of oral traditions in English literature has been a fascinating journey, marked by intricate transformations and adaptations. From its ancient origins as a primary mode of communication, oral traditions have undergone a metamorphosis, intertwining with the written word to shape the literary landscape.

Volume 12 Issue 9, September 2023

www.ijsr.net

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In the medieval period, oral traditions thrived through the performances of minstrels and troubadours, who skilfully recited epic poems and ballads to captivate audiences. These oral performances not only entertained but also conveyed moral lessons and historical narratives, preserving cultural heritage.

With the advent of the printing press, written texts gained prominence, yet oral traditions persisted, albeit in different forms. The rise of the theatre during the Renaissance brought oral traditions to life on stage, with actors infusing their performances with vocal prowess and dramatic flair, breathing life into the written word.

In more recent times, the advent of technology has further shaped the evolution of oral traditions. Digital platforms and social media have provided new avenues for oral storytelling, allowing individuals to share their narratives and experiences in innovative ways.

Today, oral traditions continue to evolve, blending with written literature and multimedia formats. Spoken word poetry, audiobooks, and podcasts are examples of how oral traditions have adapted to modern mediums, captivating audiences with their rhythmic cadence and emotive delivery.

The evolution of oral traditions in English literature has been a dynamic process, influenced by societal changes and technological advancements. From ancient oral performances to contemporary digital platforms, oral traditions have left an indelible mark on the literary landscape, enriching our understanding and appreciation of storytelling in all its forms.

Several notable works in English literature showcase the profound impact of oral traditions. These works demonstrate how oral storytelling techniques have shaped the narrative structure, language, and cultural themes within the literary canon.

One such work is "Beowulf," an epic poem from the Anglo-Saxon period. This masterpiece exemplifies the influence of oral traditions through its use of alliteration, rhythm, and repetition. The poem's oral origins are evident in its formulaic language and the emphasis on heroic deeds and the passing down of ancestral legacies.

Another example is the plays of William Shakespeare, such as "Hamlet" and "Macbeth." These works were written to be performed orally, with the actors relying on their vocal delivery and dramatic interpretation to bring the characters and stories to life. The plays showcase the power of oral traditions in captivating audiences and conveying complex emotions and themes.

In more contemporary literature, the impact of oral traditions can be seen in the works of African American writers, such as Toni Morrison's "Beloved" and Zora Neale Hurston's "Their Eyes Were Watching God." These novels incorporate elements of African American oral storytelling traditions, including dialect, call-and-response patterns, and the use of folklore and mythology. These narrative techniques add

depth and authenticity to the stories, highlighting the cultural heritage and resilience of the characters.

Notable works in English literature, such as "Beowulf," Shakespeare's plays, and the novels of African American writers, showcase the enduring impact of oral traditions. These works demonstrate how oral storytelling techniques have shaped the narrative structure, language, and cultural themes within the literary canon. Oral traditions play a vital role in preserving cultural heritage by passing down knowledge, values, and traditions from one generation to another. Through the spoken word, stories, myths, legends, and historical accounts are shared, ensuring that cultural identities and collective memories are preserved.

It serves as a repository of cultural knowledge, encompassing various aspects of a community's way of life, including their beliefs, customs, rituals, and social structures. These traditions are often transmitted through storytelling, where elders and community members share narratives that reflect their shared experiences and wisdom.

By orally transmitting cultural heritage, communities maintain a strong connection to their roots and ancestors. The oral retelling of stories, songs, and chants helps to reinforce cultural values, moral lessons, and societal norms. It fosters a sense of identity, belonging, and continuity, allowing individuals to understand their place within the larger cultural tapestry.

Oral traditions provide a platform for intergenerational communication and learning. Elders pass down their knowledge to younger generations, ensuring that cultural practices and traditions are not lost over time. This transmission of knowledge through oral means fosters a sense of cultural pride and strengthens community bonds.

Preserving cultural heritage, oral traditions also allow for adaptation and evolution. As stories are retold and shared, they may be modified or embellished, reflecting the changing needs and perspectives of the community. This dynamic nature of oral traditions ensures their relevance and continued resonance in contemporary times.

Oral traditions play a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage by transmitting knowledge, values, and traditions from one generation to another. Through storytelling and oral retellings, communities maintain a strong connection to their roots, fostering a sense of identity and continuity. Oral traditions also allow for adaptation and evolution, ensuring their relevance in the present day.

Oral storytelling techniques have been incorporated into various forms of artistic work, showcasing the power and versatility of this traditional practice. Here are a few specific examples:

1. Epic Poetry: Epic poems, such as Homer's "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey," utilise oral storytelling techniques to convey grand narratives and heroic tales. These poems were originally composed and performed orally, relying on rhythm, repetition, and vivid language to captivate audiences.
2. Folktales and Fairy Tales: Many folktales and

fairy tales from different cultures have been passed down through generations via oral storytelling. These stories often feature moral lessons, magical elements, and memorable characters, captivating listeners with their imaginative narratives.³ Indigenous Oral Traditions: Indigenous communities around the world have rich oral storytelling traditions that preserve their cultural heritage. These traditions include creation stories, legends, and histories, which are shared orally to maintain their cultural identity and pass down ancestral knowledge.⁴ Griot Tradition: In West African cultures, griots are oral historians and storytellers who preserve the history and traditions of their communities. Through music, poetry, and storytelling, griots convey the collective memory and wisdom of their people.⁵ Spoken Word Poetry: Spoken word poetry is a contemporary art form that combines elements of oral storytelling, performance, and poetry. Poets use their voices, gestures, and emotions to convey their personal experiences, social commentary, and cultural narratives.⁶ Radio Dramas: Before the advent of television, radio dramas relied on oral storytelling techniques to engage listeners. These audio productions used dialogue, sound effects, and narration to create immersive storytelling experiences. These examples demonstrate how oral storytelling techniques have been adapted and incorporated into various art forms, showcasing their enduring impact on cultural expression and preservation.

Oral traditions have exerted profound influence on the narrative structures and themes in English literature, engendering a plethora of intricate ramifications. The incorporation of oral storytelling techniques has imbued literary works with a heightened sense of rhythm, repetition, and orality, thereby augmenting the overall aesthetic and communicative impact.

In terms of narrative structures, the influence of oral traditions can be discerned in the utilisation of episodic storytelling, where the plot unfolds through a series of interconnected events. This technique, reminiscent of the oral tradition's reliance on memorable episodes, is exemplified in works such as "Moby - Dick" by Herman Melville, where Captain Ahab's pursuit of the white whale is punctuated by distinct episodes that contribute to the overall narrative arc.

Oral traditions have engendered a predilection for the use of vivid and descriptive language in English literature. This propensity for evocative imagery and sensory details can be observed in the works of William Shakespeare, whose plays are replete with poetic language that engages the audience's imagination and facilitates an immersive storytelling experience.

Thematically, the influence of oral traditions is evident in the exploration of communal memory, cultural heritage, and the power of storytelling itself. Works like "Beowulf" and "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" delve into the preservation of heroic tales and the transmission of cultural values through generations. These narratives underscore the significance of oral traditions as vehicles for collective memory and the perpetuation of cultural identity.

The effects of oral traditions on narrative structures and themes in English literature are manifold. From the episodic structure to the evocative language and the exploration of communal memory, the incorporation of oral storytelling techniques has enriched the literary landscape, infusing it with a distinct oral quality that resonates with audiences across time and space.

The influence of oral tradition on various literary movements has been a subject of profound scrutiny and scholarly discourse. Its impact can be discerned in the multifaceted interplay between orality and written expression, engendering a dynamic and transformative relationship that has shaped the trajectory of literary evolution.

During the Romantic movement, oral traditions served as a wellspring of inspiration, fostering a renewed appreciation for the natural world and the folkloric heritage of different cultures. Poets such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge drew upon oral storytelling techniques to infuse their works with a sense of immediacy and emotional resonance, thereby forging a deeper connection between the reader and the natural world.

In the Modernist movement, the influence of oral traditions manifested in the exploration of fragmented narratives and nonlinear storytelling. Writers like James Joyce and T. S. Eliot employed stream - of - consciousness techniques, reminiscent of oral storytelling's fluid and associative nature, to challenge traditional narrative structures and offer a more subjective and fragmented representation of human experience.

Postcolonial literature, with its focus on reclaiming marginalised voices and challenging dominant narratives, also bears the imprint of oral traditions. Writers such as Chinua Achebe and Derek Walcott drew upon the rich oral traditions of their respective cultures to challenge colonial hegemony and assert the importance of indigenous storytelling as a means of cultural resistance and empowerment.

In the realm of contemporary literature, the influence of oral traditions can be observed in the resurgence of spoken word poetry and performance - based storytelling. Artists like Sarah Kay and Shane Koyczan utilise the power of oral delivery to engage audiences and convey their narratives with an emotional intensity that transcends the written word.

The influence of oral tradition on various literary movements is a testament to its enduring significance and transformative power. From the Romantic to the Modernist to the postcolonial and contemporary eras, oral traditions have served as a wellspring of inspiration, shaping the trajectory of literary expression and enriching the tapestry of human storytelling.

The role of oral traditions in preserving cultural heritage is of paramount significance, as it serves as a conduit for intergenerational transmission of knowledge, values, and customs. Through intricate and nuanced oral narratives,

cultural traditions are safeguarded and perpetuated, ensuring their continuity amidst the ebbs and flows of time.

Oral traditions, with their complex and multifaceted nature, embody the collective memory of a community or society. They encapsulate the wisdom, history, and cultural identity of a people, providing a rich tapestry of stories, myths, legends, and rituals that bind individuals together and forge a sense of belonging.

Within these oral traditions, the ancestral knowledge and experiences are passed down from one generation to the next, fostering a deep connection to the past and a shared understanding of cultural heritage. The oral transmission of customs, rituals, and practices ensures their preservation and allows for their adaptation and reinterpretation in response to changing social contexts.

Oral traditions serve as repositories of indigenous languages, dialects, and linguistic nuances. They embody the unique linguistic expressions and idiomatic phrases that are intrinsic to a particular culture, safeguarding linguistic diversity and preventing the erosion of indigenous languages in an increasingly globalised world.

These traditions foster a sense of cultural resilience and resistance. In the face of external pressures and the homogenising forces of globalisation, oral narratives provide a platform for marginalised communities to assert their distinct cultural identities and challenge dominant narratives. They offer a space for alternative perspectives, counter-narratives, and subversive voices to be heard, ensuring the preservation of cultural diversity and the empowerment of excluded groups.

The role of oral traditions in preserving cultural heritage is indispensable. Through their intricate narratives, intergenerational transmission, linguistic preservation, and cultural resistance, oral traditions serve as guardians of cultural identity, ensuring the continuity and vitality of diverse cultural heritages across the globe.

The representation of folklore and indigenous oral traditions in literature is a subject of profound scholarly inquiry. It entails the intricate interplay between literary creativity and the preservation of cultural heritage through the written word.

When authors incorporate folklore and indigenous oral traditions into their literary works, they engage in a process of cultural reclamation and revitalisation. By drawing upon the rich tapestry of oral narratives, myths, and legends, these writers imbue their stories with a sense of authenticity and cultural depth. This serves to amplify the voices and experiences of marginalised communities, allowing their stories to be heard on a broader stage.

Literary works that incorporate folklore and indigenous oral traditions often serve as a bridge between the past and the present, connecting readers to ancestral wisdom and cultural practices. Through these narratives, readers gain insights into the values, beliefs, and worldview of indigenous cultures, fostering a deeper appreciation for their unique contributions to the human experience.

The representation of folklore and indigenous oral traditions in literature can challenge dominant narratives and disrupt colonial frameworks. By centring indigenous voices and perspectives, these works subvert the erasure and marginalisation of indigenous cultures, offering alternative narratives that challenge prevailing power structures.

It is crucial to approach the representation of folklore and indigenous oral traditions in literature with sensitivity and respect. Authors must engage in extensive research and consultation with indigenous communities to ensure accurate and authentic portrayals. This collaborative approach helps to avoid cultural appropriation and promotes ethical storytelling practices.

The representation of folklore and indigenous oral traditions in literature is a complex and multifaceted endeavour. It serves as a means of cultural reclamation, amplifies marginalised voices, and challenges dominant narratives. When approached with care and respect, these literary works contribute to the preservation and celebration of diverse cultural heritages.

Authors skilfully harness the power of oral traditions to effectively convey cultural identity and values within their literary works. Through the integration of folklore, myths, and legends, they infuse their narratives with the essence of their respective cultures. These oral traditions serve as a medium through which authors can explore and articulate the unique experiences, beliefs, and customs of a particular community or society.

By incorporating elements of oral storytelling, authors can evoke a sense of collective memory and shared history. Through the retelling of traditional tales and legends, they create a bridge between the past and the present, allowing readers to connect with their cultural heritage. This connection fosters a deeper understanding and appreciation of one's roots, reinforcing a sense of identity and belonging.

Oral traditions enable authors to highlight and reinforce cultural values. Through the use of moral lessons, proverbs, and wise sayings, they impart important teachings and ethical principles. These values often reflect the core beliefs and ideals of a community, promoting virtues such as respect for elders, communal harmony, and the importance of oral storytelling itself.

The oral nature of these traditions adds a distinct flavour to the literary works. Authors may employ rhythmic patterns, repetition, and performative elements to recreate the oral storytelling experience. This not only enhances the authenticity of the narrative but also engages readers on a deeper level, immersing them in the cultural fabric of the story.

Authors utilise oral traditions in English literature to convey cultural identity and values by incorporating folklore, myths, and legends, evoking collective memory, reinforcing cultural heritage, imparting moral teachings, and employing performative elements. This integration of oral traditions enriches the literary experience, fostering a greater

understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures and their unique contributions to the world of literature.

Oral traditions have been skilfully transformed into written literature through various techniques. Writers have captured the essence of oral storytelling by incorporating vivid descriptions, dialogue, and rhythmic language. They've also preserved the cultural and historical aspects of oral traditions in their written works. This adaptation has allowed for the preservation and wider dissemination of these rich narratives. In more detail, When oral traditions are adapted into written literature, several key elements are considered. First, writers strive to capture the dynamic nature of oral storytelling by employing techniques such as vivid descriptions, engaging dialogue, and rhythmic language. These elements help recreate the immersive experience of listening to a story being told. Writers pay special attention to preserving the cultural and historical aspects embedded within oral traditions. They carefully research and incorporate cultural practices, beliefs, and values, ensuring that the essence of the original oral narrative is faithfully represented in the written form. This adaptation allows for the wider dissemination of these stories, reaching audiences beyond the immediate oral tradition community. Writers often employ literary devices such as repetition, alliteration, and metaphor to mimic the oral performance style. These devices not only enhance the aesthetic appeal of the written work but also evoke the rhythmic patterns and emotional impact characteristic of oral storytelling. The adaptation of oral traditions into written literature enables the stories to be documented and preserved for future generations. This written form provides a lasting record of the narratives, ensuring their longevity and accessibility. the adaptation of oral traditions into written literature involves capturing the dynamic nature of storytelling, preserving cultural and historical elements, employing literary devices, and ensuring the longevity and accessibility of these narratives. This transformation allows for the wider dissemination and preservation of these rich and diverse oral traditions.

let's dive into the techniques used to capture the essence of oral storytelling in written literature. Writers employ various strategies to recreate the immersive experience of listening to a story being told.

One technique is the use of vivid descriptions. Writers paint a detailed picture with their words, allowing readers to visualise the characters, settings, and events as if they were present in the oral performance. This helps to engage the reader's imagination and bring the story to life.

Dialogue is another important element. By incorporating dialogue, writers give voice to the characters, allowing their personalities, emotions, and interactions to shine through. This adds depth and authenticity to the narrative, mimicking the lively exchanges that occur in oral storytelling.

Rhythmic language is also utilised to capture the oral tradition's musicality. Writers employ techniques such as repetition, parallelism, and poetic devices to create a rhythmic flow in the text. This mirrors the melodic quality of oral storytelling, enhancing the overall reading experience.

Writers pay close attention to the cultural and historical aspects of the oral tradition. They conduct thorough research to ensure the accurate representation of cultural practices, beliefs, and values. By incorporating these elements, writers preserve the cultural richness and authenticity of the oral tradition within the written work. The use of storytelling devices such as suspense, foreshadowing, and dramatic tension helps to maintain the audience's interest and engagement. These techniques mirror the captivating nature of oral storytelling, keeping readers hooked and eager to discover what happens next.

Capturing the essence of oral storytelling in written literature involves employing vivid descriptions, engaging dialogue, rhythmic language, cultural and historical accuracy, and storytelling devices. These techniques work together to recreate the immersive experience of oral storytelling, allowing readers to be transported into the world of the narrative.

When we analyse the impact of adaptations on the overall meaning and reception of works, we can see how these changes can shape the way audiences perceive and interpret the stories.

Adaptations, whether they are film adaptations of books or stage adaptations of films, can bring new dimensions to the original works. They have the power to enhance or alter the meaning of the story, depending on the choices made by the adapters.

One significant impact of adaptations is the visual representation of the story. When a book is adapted into a film, for example, the audience gets to see the characters, settings, and events come to life on the screen. This visual element can add depth and immediacy to the story, allowing viewers to connect with the narrative in a different way. However, it's important to note that the visual representation may not always align with the reader's imagination, which can lead to varying interpretations and reactions.

Another impact of adaptations is the compression or expansion of the original material. Books are often much more detailed and expansive than their film or stage adaptations. This compression can result in certain elements being emphasised or omitted, which can alter the overall meaning and reception of the work. For example, a film adaptation may choose to focus on specific themes or characters, while leaving out certain subplots or details from the original book. This selective approach can shape the audience's understanding and interpretation of the story.

Adaptations can also introduce new perspectives or interpretations to the original work. Adapters may choose to emphasise certain themes or add their own creative elements, which can lead to a fresh and unique take on the story. This can spark new discussions and debates among audiences, as they explore different layers of meaning and engage with the work in a new light.

Adaptations have a significant impact on the overall meaning and reception of works. They bring visual representation, compress or expand the original material,

and introduce new perspectives. These adaptations can shape the audience's interpretation and understanding of the story, leading to varying reactions and discussions.

Let's delve into the main findings and insights from the research on oral traditions in more detail.

The research highlights that oral traditions play a crucial role in preserving and evolving stories across generations. Through the act of storytelling, these traditions pass down cultural knowledge, values, and history from one generation to another.

One key finding is that oral traditions allow for the transformation of stories over time. As stories are retold and shared orally, each storyteller adds their own unique interpretation and embellishments, shaping the narrative in different ways. This process of adaptation helps keep the stories relevant and meaningful to the specific community or culture in which they are shared.

Oral traditions provide a sense of communal identity and belonging. The act of gathering together to listen to stories fosters a shared experience and strengthens social bonds within the community. It creates a sense of continuity and connection with the past, as well as a platform for cultural expression and creativity.

Another insight from the research is that oral traditions are dynamic and responsive to their environment. They can adapt to changing circumstances, incorporating new elements or themes to reflect the evolving needs and values of the community. This adaptability ensures the continued relevance and resonance of the stories, allowing them to address contemporary issues and challenges.

The research on oral traditions underscores their significance in preserving cultural heritage, fostering a sense of community, and allowing for the adaptation and evolution of stories over time. Through the act of storytelling, oral traditions serve as a powerful medium for cultural expression, knowledge transmission, and the preservation of collective memory.

Oral traditions hold immense significance in English literature as they form the foundation of storytelling and the evolution of literary works. Before the advent of written language, stories were passed down orally, allowing for the preservation and transmission of cultural knowledge and narratives.

One key aspect of oral traditions in English literature is the rich heritage of folktales, legends, and myths. These stories, often rooted in local customs and beliefs, were orally transmitted from generation to generation. They reflect the cultural identity and values of different regions and communities, providing insights into their history, traditions, and worldview.

Oral traditions played a vital role in the development of epic poetry. Works like *Beowulf* and *The Canterbury Tales* were initially composed and performed orally, with bards and storytellers captivating audiences through their recitations.

The oral nature of these works allowed for improvisation, variation, and audience interaction, shaping the narrative in response to the immediate context.

Even after the introduction of written language, oral traditions continued to influence English literature. Shakespearean plays, for example, were written to be performed and experienced orally. The rhythm, meter, and linguistic devices employed in his works were designed to engage the audience's senses and create a powerful dramatic experience.

Oral traditions have influenced the development of literary techniques and narrative structures. The use of repetition, rhythm, and oral formulas in poetry can be traced back to the oral tradition of storytelling. These techniques enhance the musicality and memorability of the works, making them more engaging and impactful.

Oral traditions have left an indelible mark on English literature. They have shaped the content, style, and form of literary works, providing a rich tapestry of stories, myths, and cultural expressions. By understanding and appreciating the significance of oral traditions, we gain a deeper insight into the roots and evolution of English literature. By delving into these areas, researchers can further our understanding of the significance, dynamics, and cultural implications of oral traditions in literature and beyond.

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