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Carmen and Cello as Figures in Hart Crane's "Carmen De Boheme" Poem

Hart Crane'in "Carmen De Boheme" Şiirinde Figür Olarak Carmen ve Çello

Derya KIRAÇ SABZEZHAR*
Hiva RASHVANDHARANAKİ**

Abstract

Poetry and music have long been existing as parallel and interconnected fields throughout the history of art. Poetry and music bear considerable resemblance where the words, become synonymous with sounds in crafting expression. In other words, it can be said that music is essentially the embodiment of verbal expression in sound. With this similarity in mind, it is clear that Hart Crane's overlooked poem "Carmen de Boheme," which is to be analyzed in this study, is notably influenced by Bizet's opera *Carmen*. Therefore, in this poem where the cello figure is mentioned, the cello partition of Bizet's *Carmen* opera has been examined as required by the poem. This analysis delves into how these two art forms, poetry, and music, can harmonize thematically and figuratively. To explore this relationship, the poem is examined through the lens of figure-ground theory, allowing for the scrutiny of various figures that contribute to the establishment of a sensual and feminine atmosphere within it. This exploration sheds light on the intricate relationship between poetry and music, demonstrating their capacity to intertwine and enrich each other.

Keywords: Poetry, music, cello, figure-ground theory, femininity.

Öz

Şiir ve müzik, sanat tarihi boyunca uzun süredir iç içe geçmiş, paralel ve birbiriyle bağlantılı alanlar olarak varlığını sürdürmüştür. Şiir ve müzik, ifade biçimi bakımından kelimelerin seslerle eşanlı hale geldiği önemli bir benzerlik taşır. Başka bir ifadeyle müziğin esas itibarıyla sözün ifadenin seste vücut bulmuş hali olduğu söylenebilir. Bu benzerlik dikkate alındığında, Hart Crane'in çok bilinmeyen ve bu çalışmada incelenecek olan, "Carmen de Boheme" adlı şiiri, Georges Bizet'in *Carmen* operasından belirgin biçimde etkilendiği görülmektedir. Bu nedenle çello figüründen söz edilen bu şiirde Bizet'in *Carmen* operasının çello partisi, şiirin gerektirdiği ölçüde incelenmiştir. Bu analiz, bu iki sanat formu olan şiir ve müziğin tematik ve mecazi olarak nasıl uyum sağlayabileceğini araştırmaktadır. Bu ilişkiyi araştırmak için şiir, şekil-zemin teorisi merceğinden incelenerek, şiirde duyuşal ve kadınsı bir atmosferin oluşmasına katkıda bulunan çeşitli figürlerin incelenmesine olanak sağlamaktadır. Bu keşif, şiir ve müzik arasındaki karmaşık ilişkiye ışık tutarak, bu iki alanın iç içe geçen ve birbirlerini zenginleştiren kapasitelerini ortaya koymuştur.

* Assist. Prof., Pamukkale University, Faculty of Music and Performing Arts, Department of Music, e-posta: dsabzehzar@pau.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0001-5174-3718

** Master Student, Akdeniz University, Faculty of Letters, Department of English Language and Literature, e-posta: hivarashvand@yahoo.com, ORCID: 0009-0000-6457-2962.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Şiir, müzik, çello, şekil-zemin kuramı, kadınlık.

Introduction

As an often overlooked example of a particular kind of ekphrastic poetry in literature, Hart Crane's "Carmen De Boheme" celebrates the fusion of music and poetry. It goes beyond being a mere poem and resonates with the impact of Georges Bizet's 1875 opera, *Carmen* (Bratton, 2019, p.12). *Carmen* was first performed at the Opera-Comique Theatre in Paris on March 3, 1875. This work is considered one of the turning points in French opera. Despite its heavy and realistic dramatic plot, it is classified as a comic opera from a technical perspective due to the presence of spoken dialogue without music in the opera. The libretto is inspired by Prosper Merimee's realistic story. The plot of *Carmen* is set in Spain. Similar to Bizet's other work, "L'Arlésienne," where he dreamed of distant lands, this opera also falls into the exotic movement (İlyasoğlu, 2009, p. 146).

In the context of the poem, Crane does not simply depict the experience of opera as art on himself; instead, he sketches a fresh scene where it is not he, but the audience, who are awed by *Carmen*. This encapsulates the mystical-empirical essence within his poetry, the theme that Ronald Bonham (1967) suggests, is a kind of balance that Crane aims to strike in his work (p. 2). "Carmen De Boheme" blends various figures to create vivid imagery—images of desire, tension, and, to some extent, exoticism and enchantment. However, what adds to the poem's enchantment is the transformative quality of its figures, with the central ones being the female figure of Carmen and the cello. These figures gradually meld into a unified entity throughout the poem. In essence, it has been observed that in this poem by Hart Crane, there is an interaction between the figure of Carmen and the cello. The idea that these two figures, Carmen and the cello, transform into each other in certain lines where we understand the influence of Bizet's opera *Carmen* on the author, is studied in the analysis of the poem through the lens of figure-ground theory. At the same time, this interaction compels us to consider the role of the cello in the *Carmen* opera. Within this context, it is crucial to analyze the musical impact of the cello in the opera *Carmen* and, in a parallel manner, the presence of Carmen as a female figure in the poem. In this regard, the figure-ground framework enables us to identify the principal figures, as they are the elements that command our most attention (Gibbons and Whitely, 2018, p. 150) within the poem's context in relation to their backgrounds. This framework enhances credibility and a more profound understanding of the foregrounded figures, or as Peter Stockwell (2002) puts it, the defamiliarized ones, concerning the backgrounded or deviated ones (p. 14). Hence, this analysis aims to implement a practical tool, rather than solely relying on thematic analysis, in order to examine how the transformation occurs between the figure of Carmen and the cello.

Methodology

In literary fields, a promising framework for analyzing a credible figure structure within a text is found in figure-ground theory. Therefore, as for the methodology of this analysis, figure-ground theory and its linguistic approaches are not only applied to the poem but also examined the relationship between the use of the cello in Bizet's opera and the figure of Carmen. This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of the significant role played by the cello in the opera, where it functions as the primary figure in the composition. In this context, it becomes evident that while the cello serves as the foregrounded instrument for the poet, setting the emotional tempo within the opera, it generates a similar impact within the poem. This impact eventually melds with Carmen as the central figure of the poem, which effectively unites them into a singular entity, or in other words, presents the cello as a female figure.

To begin with the framework, cognitive linguistics is "the study of language with the study of the mind and brain" (Gibbons and Whitely, 2018, p. 149) which is one of the sub-disciplines of the field of linguistics, and was initially introduced in 1970s. In order to scrutinize the interconnectedness of linguistics and the brain, Gibbons and Whitely highlight the following basics:

- Language is dependent upon the cognitive mechanisms which are used in other areas of human experience: such as the way we perceive, categories, and imagine/represent the world.
- Human minds work in fundamentally similar ways because they possess these cognitive mechanisms.
- An account of language should accord with what is generally known about the mind and brain in other scientific and psychological disciplines (p. 149).

Bearing the above in mind, Stockwell (2002) highlights the strength of figure and ground theory as an idea belonging to cognitive linguistics (p. 13). He considers 'foregrounding' as the most important "correspondence of the phenomenon of figure and ground is in the literary critical" through which literary devices attempt to defamiliarise certain points and therefore, call attention to them. In this regard, foregrounding leads to dominance, which is the most striking element in the text. He draws connection between the striking elements in the text with the description of figure and ground, the first observations of which were made by gestalt psychologists who "study perception and describe the manner of spatial organization" over a century ago (Chen, 2022, p. 427). Further on, Stockwell underlines that "making figure and ground is clearly and literally an embodiment of human condition" which aids with our "ability to perceive style and stylistic differences in objects". In order for an element to be the striking one on its background or in other words, the figure, it requires to be "self-contained with well-defined edges" that move against the ground or is a broken part of that is more detailed and brighter than other components on the presented image (p. 15).

In this regard, by identifying locative expressions, which are words describing spatial relations between figure and ground, this study attempts to recognize the figure and ground in each stanza and their roles in creating a musical atmosphere centered around the cello. These understandings play a vital role in comprehending the musical image schemas occurring in the poem. The identification of figures and grounds as such was suggested by Leonard Talmy (1975), who described the figure as the "object moving or located with respect to another." The ground, on the other hand, is a stationary reference point within which the figure's path is characterized (p. 419). With a primary focus on Talmy's locative expressions, the poem will be divided into a few cases of analysis.

Analysis

The entry of the poem aims to evoke a somewhat sensual atmosphere, as seen in the following lines:

"Sinuously winding through the room
On smoky tongues of sweetened cigarettes, --" (Crane, 1918, p. 382).

In terms of locative expressions, the word 'through' assists in understanding the positioning of the smoky tongues and sweetened cigarettes as figures against the background of the room. These figures contribute to the establishment of an erotic

atmosphere at the beginning of the poem. Following this segment, against the same ground, the figure of the cello is introduced as follows:

“Plaintive yet dignified, the cello tones resume
The andante of smooth hopes and lost regrets” (p. 382).

In this section, the cello holds a notable presence due to the attribution of dignity to it. It is worth noting that the cello appears to have been present in the setting even before the poem begins, as the poet mentions that it ‘resumes’ its melody. This section is also associated with the cello’s dignified spirit as portrayed in the *Prelude* of the opera. It is believed that the use of *andante* in the poem refers to the *andante moderato* section in the prelude of *Carmen* opera, signifying a slow execution in musical terms. In this section, the cello is to perform the ‘fate’ motif as “Bizet assigned the fate motif to the cello within the *overture* and throughout the opera” (Borowsky, 2019, p. 23). This theme leads to an association between the ‘lost regrets’ of the character of Carmen, who will be analyzed through the end of the stanzas in Crane’s poem, and the fate motif voiced by the cello. It can be interpreted that Carmen is thematically linked to the cello in Crane’s poetry.

In the *Carmen* opera, this motif in the cello partition is demonstrated below:



Figure 1. Bizet’s *Carmen* Opera, *Prelude- Andante Moderato*, (p.11).

In the next lines of the poem, the poet shifts the focus to another figure:

“Bright peacocks drink from flame-lit pots by the wall,
Just as absinthe-sipping women shiver through
With a shimmering blue from the bowl in Circe’s hall” (p. 382).

The primary figure is the bright peacock drinking by the wall, as indicated by the locative expression ‘by.’ The peacock not only conveys femininity but also establishes a luxurious setting. The figure then shifts to the women sipping absinthe. This juxtaposition, combined with the earlier sensual tone of the poem, showcases that the poetic ambiance is predominantly feminine. Subsequently, the theme of transformation becomes prominent; the absinthe is depicted as being consumed from a bowl in Circe’s hall. At this point, the absinthe becomes the figure against the bowl. This figure then shifts to the bowl itself, with Circe’s hall serving as the ground. Given that Circe is a mythological female figure renowned for her ability to transform humans into wolves or in other words, a bridge between human civilization and magic (Martinez, 2016, p. 2), it is evident that amid the main figures the poet depicts, an important theme, specifically transformation, remains in the background or deviated. Later on, the transformation takes place as the women’s “brown eyes blacken, and the blue drop hue,” highlighting the dominance of the notion of a feminine transformation within the poem.

The second part of the poem begins as the musical tension reaches its zenith. The following lines bear a striking resemblance to *andante moderato* section of the opera:

"The andante quivers with the start of crescendo,
And subsides as the fire is ignited in each man's heart" (p. 382).

Crescendo, Italian musical term denoting the gradual increase in sound, is believed to be referenced by Crane when he mentions the extinguishing of this fire in the subsequent line. It is thought that Crane alludes to the *crescendo* and *decrescendo* expressions in *Carmen* opera's *andante moderato* section. In this context, while the cello articulates the previously mentioned fate motif, other string instruments contribute to the tension through *crescendo* and *decrescendo*, which are dynamic fluctuations in sound. It can be claimed that Crane makes a reference to a section of the opera in accordance with the musical expressions written. (Figure 1. symbol of crescendo < and decrescendo >)

Following this passage, the poem synchronizes most closely with Bizet's opera:

"The tapestry reveals a finger slipping through
The slit, softly pulling; – – – and the music follows suit.
There is a sweep, – a shattering, – a choir
Disquieting of barbarous fantasy" (p. 382).

After the *andante moderato* in the *prelude* part mentioned above in *Carmen* opera, a chorus with *basses* and *tenors* in *Act 1* is thought to be the part referred to in this part of the poem. The reason of this is that the chorus starts at this point for the first time in the work. Therefore, in the section, the cello plays a role accompanying the choir along with the double bass, which is evident as follows:

Figure 2. Bizet's *Carmen* Opera Act 1, No.2, (p.15).

The analysis of the above-mentioned sections of the opera gives insight into the fact that the reading of the poem aligns with the opera through the beginning.

Furthermore, in this section of the poem, the tapestry becomes the central figure, discerned with the assistance of the locative expression 'through.' The action of touching a tapestry, which is a decorative wall hanging, is succeeded by dominant expressions such as 'sweep,' 'shattering,' and a choir. This section notably mirrors Bizet's opera, contributing to the creation of an exotic and sensual atmosphere, similar to the presence of the peacock in the earlier lines.

In the following lines, *Carmen* is a recurring figure that is foregrounded the most by the refrain. In Bizet's opera, *Carmen* is a young Gypsy woman known for her beauty. She is employed at a cigarette factory and is recognized for her skill in pickpocketing (İlyasoğlu, 2009, 147). She owns a bohemian lifestyle filled with love affairs. The recurring figure of this character comes as follows:

"The pulse is in the ears, the heart is higher,
And stretches up through mortal eyes to see.
Carmen! Akimbo arms and smouldering eyes;

Carmen! Bestirring hope and lipping eyes;
 Carmen whirls, and music swirls and dips.
 "Carmen!" comes awed from wine-hot lips" (p. 383).

The mention of figures of 'pulse' and 'heart' preceding Carmen's appearance accentuates the sensuous atmosphere and tension once again. As the music "stretches up through mortal eyes to see," it becomes evident that music, serving as the principal figure in this section, is not merely heard but also visually experienced. It mirrors the presence of a woman, Carmen, in the poem, who is being seen rather than being heard. It can be interpreted that Crane is notably influenced by the role of the cello as the opera reaches its conclusion. Given his apparent musical knowledge, the prominently featured figure of Carmen transforms into the impact of the cello's dramatic conclusion for him. Therefore, what is heard as music aligns precisely with what is seen on the stage—a woman, Carmen. Given the transformative theme in the first lines of the poem, it can be understood that the cello, as the lead instrument, is indeed a female figure, equivalent to Carmen, leaving an erotic impression on the "wine-warmed lips" of the audience. Hence, the female figure seamlessly transitions into the role of the cello, mirroring the musical influence of the cello in Bizet's opera.

With opening lines that explicitly emphasize the cello, it can be inferred that the instrument mentioned by the author is intricately connected with the image of Carmen. In addition, when the cello is regarded as a visual object, it becomes closely associated with the female bodily form, which makes a vivid imagery of the woman-cello. Although this approach, more frequently encountered in popular culture, might appear unconventional in the art fields, the cello is visually equated with the feminine figure, given the pronounced emphasis on femininity throughout the poem. This notion is specifically discussed by Shulamit Sarid (2022) in her study, according to which, due to their physical resemblance, the cello is often considered as a metaphor for women and sexuality. Additionally, a quantitative study has shown that, subconsciously, participants tend to attribute a female gender to instruments such as the cello, harp, flute, or piano (Delzell and Leppla, 1992, p. 94).

When we seek to elucidate the relationship between Carmen and the cello in the opera by providing an illustrative example, it would be fair to discuss the *Habanera* section. At the beginning of Act I, No. 5, in the *Habanera* section of the *Carmen* opera, the cello accompanies the character of *Carmen*. Although other instruments join the accompaniment later on, the cello maintains a persistent rhythmic figure throughout the section. The cello's consistent use of the same rhythmic pattern can also be seen as an inner voice trying to control the passionate character of Carmen.

Below, an example of notation is provided to illustrate how the cello consistently performs this same rhythm:

The image shows a musical score for the Habanera section of the opera Carmen. The score is written for a full orchestra and includes the following parts: CARMEN (Soprano), 1^{re} et 2^{de} SOPRAN (Cigarettes), TENORS (Amour gens), BASSES (Hommes du peuple), Violoncelles (Cello), and C. Basses (Double Bass). The cello part is highlighted with a red line and shows a consistent rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The lyrics for Carmen are: "L'amour est un oiseau rebelle. Que nul ne peut apprivoiser, Et c'est". The cello part is marked "Allegro quasi Andante".

Figure 3. *Carmen Opera Act 1, No.5, (p.79).*

Furthermore, the cello's accompaniment with the consistent rhythmic figure persists even during tonal shifts within the composition, such as the transition from the key of D minor to D major.

Figure 4. *Carmen Opera Act 1, No.5, (p.80).*

The conclusion of the poem corresponds to the ending of the opera, with everyone seemingly leaving the opera hall within the poem. Therefore, the poet likely depicts the aftermath of the opera:

"Finale leaves in silence to replume
Bent wings, and Carmen with her flaunts through the gloom
Of whispering tapestry, brown with old fringe: –
The winners leave too, and the small lamps twinge" (p. 383).

In this excerpt, Crane seeks to shift the setting and diminish the luxurious ambiance with the tapestry figure introduced earlier in the poem. The figure of bent wings and Carmen recognized through the locative expression 'through,' suggests that Carmen's demise has occurred, mirroring the central theme of Bizet's opera – fate. This is also associated with the lost regrets mentioned in the earlier lines of the poem. The mention of the small lamps 'twinging' suggests that the earlier sensuous atmosphere has come to an end too, giving way to silence. Crane continues into the morning following the opera:

"Morning: and through the foggy city gate
A gypsy wagon wiggles, striving straight.
And some still dream of Carmen's mystic face
Yellow, pallid, like ancient lace" (p. 383).

What is particularly notable is the utilization of the figure of the 'gate,' as indicated by the locative expression 'through.' According to ancient symbolism, circular objects such as gate and entrance allude to femininity and represent woman (Schott, 2005, p. 1509). Thus, the presence of a gate reinforces the incorporation of femininity within the poem.

In these lines, the figure of the gypsy wagon recalls the bohemian atmosphere in the poem. The poem's voice is that of an onlooker: it gives us both a description of the opera-goers and their surroundings encoded according to contemporary tastes, while also containing moments from Bizet, such as the gypsy wagon 'wiggling' away in the last stanza" (Bratton, 2019, p.12).

Once again, Crane brings Carmen's figure to the forefront. Carmen is portrayed as a mystical presence, described as "yellow, pallid, like ancient lace," emphasizing that she is not merely a woman but perhaps also a timeless figure, as enduring as a musical instrument. It can be said that the use of the color 'yellow,' which shares a similar hue

with brown, the typical color of cellos, together with the notion of timelessness, reinforces the idea that Carmen and the cello are interchangeable figures within the poem. In other words, the unity of all the figures within the poem, under the impact of Bizet's opera underscores that the cello assumes the role of a womanly figure in this poem. In the recollections of the audience, *Carmen* endures as a memorable piece, and what stands out most prominently is the enigmatic female figure, or the influence of the so-called cello.

Conclusion

In accordance with figure-ground theory, specifically using Leonard Talmy's locative expression and questions as an analysis tool, this article sets out to examine various figures that contribute to a feminine ambiance and explore the underlying theme of transformation within Hart Crane's "Carmen De Boheme" poem. These figures, combined with a musical analysis of Georges Bizet's *Carmen* opera, were instrumental in asserting that the primary musical instrument influencing the poet is likely to be the cello. To better comprehend this concept, the figures of the peacock, Circe, tapestry, gate, cello, and Carmen—particularly as it is a refrained figure—were identified through locative expressions and subjected to analysis to understand their role in crafting sensual and feminine imagery and atmosphere. Additionally, the connection arising from the cello's physical resemblance to the female form and its melody that accompanies the character of Carmen in the opera is posited as a merging point in the poet's mind, ultimately turning into a unified concept within his poem. This exploration aims to shed light on the intricate interplay of these figures and their thematic and figurative significance within the poem. What remains timeless and deeply etched in the poet's memory by the opera's conclusion, as he believes it is true for the audience as well, is Carmen and the impact of the cello on him. Given Crane's evident musical knowledge, reflected throughout the poem by his use of musical terminology, it becomes evident that although the cello may not be the lead instrument in the composition, it is the primary instrument that has profoundly affected the poet. In him, the cello symbolizes Carmen or, in his poetry, becomes synonymous with Carmen.

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