Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame

by Andre Lefevere · Language: EN

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Overview

Andre Lefevere's "Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame" is a foundational text in translation studies, arguing that translation is not a neutral act of linguistic transfer but a powerful form of "rewriting." Lefevere posits that literary texts, when moved across cultures, are actively reshaped by various agents—including translators, critics, publishers, and anthologists—to conform to the ideological and poetological norms of the target culture. This process of rewriting is not merely an interpretation but a manipulation that significantly influences how a text is received, understood, and valued, ultimately determining an author's literary fame and place within a new literary canon.

The book challenges traditional, source-text-oriented views of translation by placing it within a broader cultural and systemic context. Lefevere demonstrates how external factors like patronage, prevailing literary trends (poetics), and societal beliefs (ideology) exert pressure on the rewriting process, making translation a site of cultural power and negotiation. By analyzing these forces, he reveals that literary fame is not an intrinsic quality of a work but a constructed phenomenon, shaped by the choices made during its re-presentation. This perspective is crucial for understanding the dynamics of cross-cultural literary exchange and the often-invisible mechanisms that govern literary history and canon formation.

Key Takeaways

- Translation is not a neutral act but a form of "rewriting" influenced by the ideological and poetological norms of the target culture.
- Literary fame is actively constructed and manipulated through various forms of rewriting, not solely based on an original text's inherent quality.
- Translators, critics, anthologists, and publishers act as gatekeepers who shape how a text is received in a new culture.
- Dominant ideologies and prevailing literary trends in a target culture significantly influence how texts are translated and presented.
- Understanding the mechanisms of rewriting helps to deconstruct the perceived objectivity of literary history and canon formation.

• The study of translation should move beyond linguistic equivalence to encompass the broader cultural and power dynamics at play.

• Patronage, whether by individuals, groups, or institutions, plays a crucial role in determining which texts are rewritten and how.

Chapter Summaries

Introduction: Translation and Rewriting

This introductory chapter lays out Andre Lefevere's central thesis: translation is not a neutral transfer of meaning but a powerful form of rewriting. He argues that all forms of rewriting—including translation, literary criticism, historiography, and anthologization—are instrumental in shaping the reception, interpretation, and ultimately the "fame" of literary works. Lefevere challenges traditional views that often relegate translation to a secondary or derivative status, positioning it instead as a primary force within literary systems. He sets the stage for exploring the complex mechanisms and various agents involved in this process of cultural manipulation, asserting that rewritings are never innocent but are always produced with specific intentions and within particular constraints, influencing how a text is perceived and valued by different audiences over time.

The Concept of Rewriting

This chapter elaborates on the definition of rewriting, categorizing its various forms beyond just interlingual translation. Lefevere explains that rewritings are essentially interpretations of a source text, designed to adapt it for a new audience or purpose. He discusses how different types of rewrites, such as adaptations for film or stage, summaries, critical essays, and even scholarly editions, contribute to the construction of an author's or work's "image." The core argument is that these rewrites are always produced for a certain audience, under specific constraints (e.g., cultural norms, political agendas), and with a particular purpose, often to make a work acceptable, understandable, or relevant within a new cultural or historical context. He emphasizes that these processes are inherently ideological, reflecting the values and perspectives of the rewritter and the target culture.

The System

Lefevere presents literature not as a collection of isolated, timeless texts, but as a dynamic and interactive "system" that is constantly in flux. He explains that this system is influenced by a multitude of internal and external factors, including prevailing aesthetic norms, social structures, and historical developments. Within this framework, rewritings are shown to operate both within and upon the literary system, serving to maintain existing structures or to instigate change. The chapter introduces the idea that the reception and interpretation of literary works are not spontaneous but are mediated by this system. Lefevere distinguishes between the "universe of discourse" (the shared knowledge and assumptions within a culture) and the "literary system"

itself, highlighting how both interact to shape the production and consumption of literature.

Patronage

This chapter delves into "patronage" as a primary controlling factor in the production and reception of literature and, consequently, of rewritings. Lefevere identifies three main types of patrons: ideological patrons (e.g., political parties, religious institutions, educational systems) who dictate what is acceptable; economic patrons (e.g., publishers, funding bodies, literary agents) who control financial resources; and status patrons (e.g., academies, influential critics, literary prizes) who confer prestige. He explains how these patrons exert significant influence over what gets translated, how it is translated, and how it is presented to the public, thereby directly shaping an author's or work's literary fame. The chapter provides examples of how the demands and preferences of patrons can dictate the very existence, form, and content of a rewrite, often leading to censorship or adaptation.

Poetics

Lefevere explores "poetics" as another crucial controlling factor, referring to the dominant aesthetic and literary conventions, genres, and stylistic norms of a given time and place. He argues that rewritings, particularly translations, are heavily influenced by and often conform to the target culture's prevailing poetics to gain acceptance and readership. This means that a translator's choices regarding style, form, and even content are often dictated by the literary models and expectations of their own culture, potentially leading to significant alterations or adaptations of the source text. The chapter illustrates how different historical periods or cultural contexts, each with its distinct poetics, can lead to vastly different interpretations and presentations of the same source work, demonstrating the subjective and culturally bound nature of literary appreciation.

Ideology

This chapter focuses on "ideology" as the third major controlling factor, encompassing the dominant belief systems, values, moral codes, and political norms of a society or group. Lefevere argues that rewritings are inevitably shaped by and often serve to reinforce the prevailing ideology of the target culture. He discusses how politically, religiously, or culturally sensitive elements in a source text might be altered, omitted, or emphasized in a translation or other rewrite to align with the target ideology, making the work more palatable or useful for the receiving culture. This process highlights the manipulative potential of rewriting in shaping public opinion, constructing cultural narratives, and even influencing historical memory, demonstrating that translation is rarely a neutral act but rather an engagement with power structures.

The Universe of Discourse

Lefevere introduces the concept of the "universe of discourse" as the shared knowledge, cultural assumptions, common references, and background information that readers and writers

operate within. He argues that rewritings must effectively bridge the gap between the source text's original universe of discourse and the target audience's, which may be vastly different. Translators and other rewrites make conscious choices to render a text comprehensible and acceptable by aligning it with the target culture's existing knowledge framework, often by adding explanations, omitting obscure references, or adapting cultural specifics. The chapter discusses the significant implications of failing to adequately address these differences for the reception and understanding of a work, emphasizing that successful rewriting involves navigating these cultural and cognitive disparities to ensure relevance and accessibility.

Professional Rewriters

This chapter examines the crucial role of "professional rewrites" – the individuals who actively produce and disseminate rewritings. Lefevere identifies these agents as translators, literary critics, literary historians, anthologists, editors, and educators. He discusses how these professionals operate within the complex constraints imposed by patronage, poetics, and ideology, yet also possess significant agency in shaping literary fame and cultural understanding. Their choices, interpretations, and adaptations are not neutral; they are informed by their own positions, their understanding of the source text, and the demands of the literary system they operate within. The chapter underscores that these professional rewrites are the gatekeepers and mediators who ultimately determine which texts are introduced, how they are presented, and how they are remembered within a given culture.

Case Studies: Catullus and Anne Frank

To illustrate his theoretical framework, Lefevere presents concrete historical and literary examples. He meticulously analyzes the various rewritings of Catullus's poetry across different historical periods and cultures, demonstrating how the interplay of patronage, prevailing poetics, and dominant ideologies influenced its translation, interpretation, and reception. He also examines the rewritings of Anne Frank's diary, particularly focusing on how different translations, adaptations, and critical interpretations have shaped its public image and meaning, often to fit specific ideological agendas or cultural narratives. These detailed case studies serve to ground the abstract concepts developed in previous chapters in tangible literary history, providing compelling evidence for the manipulative power of rewriting in constructing literary fame and cultural memory.

The Manipulation of Literary Fame

This concluding chapter synthesizes the arguments from the preceding discussions to explicitly address how literary fame is systematically manipulated through the process of rewriting. Lefevere reiterates that fame is not an inherent quality of a text or author but is rather a social construct, continuously built and rebuilt through ongoing interpretation, selection, adaptation, and dissemination. He discusses how certain works or authors are elevated, marginalized, reinterpreted, or even forgotten to serve specific cultural, political, or aesthetic purposes within a given literary system. The chapter concludes by emphasizing the profound power and ethical

responsibility of rewrites in shaping literary canons, influencing cultural memory, and determining which voices and narratives endure or fade within the global literary landscape.

Themes

- Translation as rewriting
- Manipulation of fame
- Ideology and poetics
- Cultural mediation
- Canon formation
- Power in translation

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame about?

It explores how literary texts, especially translations, are not passively transmitted but actively reshaped by various agents to fit the target culture's norms. Lefevere argues that this "rewriting" process, driven by ideology and poetics, fundamentally manipulates an author's fame and the reception of their work. It challenges traditional views of translation as mere linguistic transfer.

Is Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame worth reading?

Yes, for anyone interested in translation studies, comparative literature, or cultural studies. It offers a foundational and influential perspective on how literature functions across cultures, revealing the power dynamics and ideological forces behind canon formation and literary reception. Its insights remain highly relevant today.

Who should read Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame?

Scholars and students of translation studies, comparative literature, literary theory, and cultural studies will find it essential. Translators, literary critics, publishers, and anyone interested in the mechanisms of cultural influence and the construction of literary value will also benefit greatly from its arguments.

How long does it take to read Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame?

Given its academic nature and typical length for such a book (around 150-200 pages), it would likely take an average reader approximately 4-6 hours to read thoroughly. This estimate can vary based on reading speed and the depth of engagement with its theoretical concepts.

Best Quotes

“Rewriting is manipulation, undertaken in the service of power, and in the service of a certain image of literature and society.”

Introduction: Rewriting and Manipulation

This foundational statement defines rewriting not as a neutral act but as an intentional shaping of a text's reception. It highlights the political and cultural forces that influence how literature is presented and understood, emphasizing the role of power structures in determining literary fame and meaning.

“Translation is, of course, a rewriting of an original text.”

Introduction: Rewriting and Manipulation

This line establishes translation as a primary example of rewriting, challenging the traditional view of translation as a purely faithful reproduction. Lefevere argues that every translation inherently involves interpretation, adaptation, and manipulation, thereby shaping the source text for a new audience within a different cultural context.

“The three main factors governing the reception, and therefore the rewriting, of literature are patronage, poetics, and ideology.”

Patronage, Poetics, Ideology

This is a core theoretical framework of the book. It identifies the key external and internal forces that dictate how texts are rewritten and received. Patronage provides the means, poetics dictates the form, and ideology shapes the content and message, all contributing to the manipulation of literary fame.

“The image of a text, or of an author, or even of a whole literature, is often determined by the rewritings of that text, author, or literature.”

Introduction: Rewriting and Manipulation

This quote underscores the profound impact of rewriting on literary reputation and historical understanding. It suggests that what we perceive as 'original' or 'authentic' is often a construct shaped by subsequent interpretations and adaptations, highlighting the constructed nature of literary history and fame.

“Rewriting is not just a matter of translating a text from one language into another, but also of adapting it for a new audience, a new culture, a new time.”

Introduction: Rewriting and Manipulation

This expands the definition of rewriting beyond mere linguistic transfer. It emphasizes the cultural and temporal dimensions of adaptation, illustrating how texts are continually recontextualized to resonate with contemporary readers, which inevitably involves alterations to suit prevailing norms and expectations.

“Rewriters adapt texts to a certain ideology and a certain poetics, and they do so under the aegis of a certain patronage.”

Patronage, Poetics, Ideology

This statement succinctly summarizes the interplay of the three main factors. It clarifies that rewritings are not random but purposeful, aligning texts with specific cultural values, aesthetic standards, and institutional support. This process fundamentally influences how texts are perceived and valued.

“The manipulation of literary fame is not an accidental by-product of rewriting, but its very essence.”

Introduction: Rewriting and Manipulation

This quote asserts that the shaping of a text's reputation is inherent to the act of rewriting, rather than an unintended consequence. It highlights the deliberate or unconscious power dynamics at play, where rewritings actively construct and control how literature is remembered and celebrated.

“What is accepted as 'literature' in a given culture at a given time is largely determined by the rewritings of literature.”

Introduction: Rewriting and Manipulation

This suggests that the canon and definition of literature are not fixed but are fluid constructs, continually shaped by how texts are reinterpreted and presented. Rewritings, therefore, play a crucial role in establishing and maintaining literary hierarchies and cultural values.

“The translator is the most visible, and therefore the most vulnerable, of all rewritings.”

Translation and the Manipulation of Literary Fame

This highlights the unique position of the translator, whose work is often scrutinized against an 'original' and whose choices are easily identifiable. It points to the power and responsibility of the translator in shaping a text's reception, while also acknowledging the potential for criticism.

“Every translation is an interpretation, and every interpretation is a rewriting.”

Translation and the Manipulation of Literary Fame

This reinforces the idea that translation is never a neutral act of transfer. It inherently involves an interpretive process that reshapes the original text, making it a form of rewriting. This perspective challenges notions of absolute fidelity in translation.

“The history of literature is largely the history of its rewritings.”

Introduction: Rewriting and Manipulation

This statement fundamentally redefines literary history, moving away from a focus on original creation to one that emphasizes the continuous process of reinterpretation and adaptation. It suggests that understanding literature requires analyzing how texts have been reshaped across time and cultures.

“A text is not simply 'there'; it is made 'there' by a series of rewritings.”

Introduction: Rewriting and Manipulation

This challenges the notion of a text existing independently of its reception. It argues that a text's meaning, significance, and presence within a culture are actively constructed through various rewritings, which mediate its interaction with audiences and shape its cultural impact.

“Patronage is the power (person or institution) that commissions and/or finances the writing and rewriting of literature.”

Patronage, Poetics, Ideology

This defines patronage as a crucial external force in the literary system. It clarifies that patrons, whether individuals, publishers, or state bodies, exert significant influence by controlling resources, thereby shaping what literature is produced, translated, and promoted.

“Poetics is the dominant concept of what literature should be, what its function is, and how it should be written.”

Patronage, Poetics, Ideology

This defines poetics as the internal aesthetic and formal norms guiding literary production and reception. It explains how prevailing literary theories, genre conventions, and stylistic preferences influence how texts are created, judged, and rewritten to fit cultural expectations.

“Ideology is the dominant concept of man, society, and the universe.”

Patronage, Poetics, Ideology

This defines ideology as the overarching system of beliefs and values that shapes a culture's worldview. It explains how these deeply ingrained perspectives influence the content, themes, and moral messages conveyed in literature and how texts are rewritten to align with or challenge

these prevailing ideas.

Questions & Answers

What is the central argument of Andre Lefevere's "Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame"?

Lefevere argues that translation is a form of "rewriting," and all rewritings—including translations, historiographies, anthologies, and criticism—are fundamentally manipulative. These manipulations are driven by factors like patronage, poetics, and ideology, and they significantly shape the reception, fame, and very image of literary texts and authors within a given culture and historical period. He posits that literary systems are not autonomous but are constantly influenced and reshaped by these forces.

How does Lefevere define "rewriting" in the context of his book?

Lefevere defines "rewriting" broadly as any text produced on the basis of another text, with the intention of adapting it for a certain audience or purpose. This includes not only translation but also literary criticism, anthologies, historiographies, adaptations, and even editing. He emphasizes that rewriting is never neutral; it always involves a degree of manipulation, whether conscious or unconscious, reflecting the interests of the rewriter, the patron, or the dominant ideology and poetics.

What are the "three main factors" that Lefevere identifies as governing the reception and rewriting of literature?

Lefevere identifies patronage, poetics, and ideology as the three main factors. Patronage refers to the individuals or institutions (publishers, governments, academies) that commission or support literary production and rewriting. Poetics encompasses the dominant literary conventions, genres, and aesthetic norms of a given time and place. Ideology refers to the prevailing beliefs, values, and worldviews that influence how texts are created, interpreted, and rewritten. These three factors interact to shape the "image" of literature.

Why does Lefevere consider translation a primary example of rewriting?

Lefevere views translation as a prime example of rewriting because it inherently involves adapting a text from one linguistic and cultural context to another. This process necessitates choices regarding vocabulary, style, and cultural references, which inevitably reshape the original text to suit the target audience's poetics and ideology. Thus, a translation is never a neutral transfer but a deliberate manipulation that influences the source text's reception and fame.

What role does "patronage" play in the manipulation of literary fame, according to Lefevere?

Patronage, for Lefevere, is the power structure that commissions, finances, and disseminates literature and its rewritings. Patrons—who can be individuals, publishers, or state institutions—exert significant influence by deciding which texts are translated, published, or promoted. Their financial and institutional support directly shapes the visibility and reception of certain works, effectively manipulating their fame by controlling access and dissemination.

How do "poetics" influence the rewriting of literary texts?

Poetics refers to the dominant literary conventions, aesthetic norms, and genre expectations of a given culture and time. Rewriters, including translators, often adapt texts to conform to these prevailing poetics, making them more acceptable or appealing to the target audience. This can involve altering style, structure, or even content to align with what is considered "good literature," thereby influencing how the rewritten text is perceived and valued.

In what way does "ideology" impact the process of rewriting and literary reception?

Ideology represents the prevailing beliefs, values, and worldviews of a society. Rewriters often consciously or unconsciously adapt texts to align with or challenge these dominant ideologies. This can involve emphasizing certain themes, censoring others, or reinterpreting events to fit a particular political or moral agenda. Ideological considerations profoundly shape how a text is presented, understood, and ultimately integrated into a culture's literary landscape.

What does Lefevere mean by "the manipulation of literary fame"?

By "manipulation of literary fame," Lefevere refers to the deliberate or unconscious process by which the reputation, recognition, and historical standing of authors and texts are shaped through rewritings. This manipulation is not accidental but inherent to rewriting, as each adaptation or interpretation presents a text in a specific light, influencing how it is remembered, valued, and canonized within a particular culture.

How does Lefevere's theory challenge traditional views of literary history?

Lefevere's theory challenges traditional literary history by shifting focus from the "original" text and authorial intent to the dynamic process of rewriting and reception. He argues that literary history is not a linear progression of original creations but rather a continuous series of reinterpretations and adaptations. This perspective highlights the constructed nature of literary canons and the influence of cultural forces on what is deemed significant.

What types of "rewritings" does Lefevere discuss beyond translation?

Beyond translation, Lefevere discusses several other forms of rewriting, including literary criticism, historiography, anthologies, and adaptations. Literary criticism reinterprets texts for new audiences, historiographies construct narratives of literary development, anthologies select and frame texts, and adaptations transform texts for different media or genres. All these forms actively shape a text's meaning and reception.

How does Lefevere's work relate to polysystem theory?

Lefevere's work is deeply influenced by Itamar Even-Zohar's polysystem theory, which views literature as a dynamic, stratified system interacting with other cultural systems. Lefevere applies this systemic approach to explain how rewritings function within a literary polysystem, showing how texts are adapted and positioned according to the dominant patronage, poetics, and ideology, thereby influencing their status and function within the system.

What are the implications of Lefevere's theory for translators?

For translators, Lefevere's theory implies a significant responsibility and agency. It moves beyond the idea of the translator as a mere conduit, recognizing them as active rewritters who inevitably manipulate the source text. This perspective encourages translators to be aware of the ideological and poetic constraints they operate under and to understand how their choices contribute to shaping the target culture's image of the original work.

Can Lefevere's concept of rewriting be applied to contemporary media beyond traditional literature?

Yes, Lefevere's concept of rewriting is highly applicable to contemporary media. Adaptations of books into films, TV series, or video games, fan fiction, remakes, and even critical reviews or social media discussions about cultural products can all be seen as forms of rewriting. These processes similarly involve manipulation driven by commercial patronage, prevailing aesthetic trends (poetics), and societal values (ideology).

How does Lefevere's theory address the concept of "fidelity" in translation?

Lefevere's theory implicitly challenges the notion of absolute "fidelity" in translation. By defining translation as a form of rewriting and manipulation, he suggests that perfect fidelity is an illusion. Every translation involves choices and adaptations that depart from the original, making it an interpretation rather than an exact reproduction. The concept of fidelity becomes relative, judged against the specific poetics and ideology of the target culture.

What is the significance of the title "Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame"?

The title encapsulates the book's core arguments. "Translation" is presented as the most prominent example of "Rewriting," which is broadly defined as any adaptation of a text. The ultimate consequence and inherent purpose of these rewritings, driven by patronage, poetics, and ideology, is the "Manipulation of Literary Fame"—the shaping of how authors and texts are perceived, valued, and remembered across cultures and time.

Does Lefevere view "manipulation" in rewriting as inherently negative?

Lefevere does not necessarily view "manipulation" as inherently negative. For him, it is a descriptive term for the inevitable process of adaptation and shaping that occurs whenever a

text is rewritten. While manipulation can serve oppressive or biased agendas, it is also the mechanism through which texts are made accessible, relevant, and meaningful to new audiences, ensuring their continued life and reception in different cultural contexts.

How does the book use historical examples to support its claims?

Lefevere uses numerous historical examples, often focusing on the reception of classical texts (e.g., Greek and Roman literature) and their translations/adaptations across different European cultures and periods. He analyzes how figures like Homer or Virgil were rewritten to fit the poetics and ideologies of various eras, demonstrating how these rewritings shaped their fame and influence, illustrating the theoretical framework with concrete cases.

What is the main takeaway for a reader interested in literary studies?

The main takeaway for a reader in literary studies is to approach texts not as static, autonomous entities but as dynamic constructs constantly shaped by cultural forces. Lefevere encourages a critical perspective that examines how texts are mediated through rewritings, recognizing the influence of patronage, poetics, and ideology on their interpretation, reception, and canonization. It shifts focus from original genius to the processes of cultural transmission.

Spoiler: What is Lefevere's ultimate conclusion regarding the nature of literary value?

Spoiler: Lefevere's ultimate conclusion is that literary value is not inherent or universal but is constructed and relative. It is determined by the interplay of patronage, poetics, and ideology within a given cultural system, which dictates how texts are rewritten and received. There is no objective, timeless literary value; instead, value is constantly negotiated and manipulated through the processes of rewriting, making it culturally and historically contingent.