

How Pragmatics Leads to a Better Interpretation of Poetry: A Discourse Stylistic Study of D.H. Lawrence's Poem "Sorrow"

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Abstract- This paper is a serious attempt to show how pragmatics can be utilized in the linguistic analysis and interpretation of poetry. It supports the claim that a particular literary text may have more than one reading that leads to different interpretations of that text. The readers' own experiences, the paper claims, play a vital role in creating different readings of one single literary text.

Given the fact that in pragmatics an utterance may have more than one meaning depending upon the mutual background information between the addresser and the addressee, the researcher takes advantage of this very fact and uses it in the analysis and interpretation of the poem. The poem concerned is treated as a dialogue between the poet and the reader or the analyst, in which the latter tries to get totally involved in the events of the text (poem). It is worth noticing that only pure linguistic considerations are behind the selection of D. H. Lawrence for conducting this study.

Keywords: *Pragmatics, discourse, stylistics, hidden dialogue, interlocutor, poetic dialogue.*

Introduction

There is no doubt that the most important aspect of the study of literary genres is the explanation and interpretation of the literary content being examined. However, the question is why we always get fixed to one single interpretation of poems, plays and novels despite the fact that we are all different. There are no two persons sharing identical personal experiences and exact style of living. We all have different visualizations, thoughts, skills, etc. that usually create individual differences between us. These differences could be very much there when we start reading and interpreting a literary text.

It is, therefore, justified to say that every individual person has his own reading and

interpretation of texts, which would no doubt be affected by his individual experience and personal context. Verdonk (1991:96-97) stresses this claim, arguing that the reader can "create his own context of

meaning". He further illustrates that "different readers in different times and places will attach different sets of contexts to one and same verbal structure". Similarly, Enkvist (1991:14) supports this idea, confirming that "the reader has the right to interpret the text in his own way". This position harmonizes with the assumption held by many literary critics that every reader has his own response to the text and that his interpretation need not be identical with others' who may have their own responses to the same text. Moreover, the interpretive variation of a literary text goes in favor of the text, for it gives it a new flavor with every new interpretation.

However, the degree of accepting one interpretation than the other varies, depending upon the extent of persuasion, i.e. to what extent the reader is more persuaded to agree with one analyst's view than the other. It all depends on the analyst's skill and capability to make the reader accept and support his viewpoint. This does not necessarily mean that the reader will accept only one single explanation and throw away the others. Sometimes he may get convinced with more than one interpretation if he feels that each analyst has provided enough evidence and proof of his claim.

Poetry as Discourse

The idea that poetry can be treated as a social discourse is not new in the world of stylistics and discourse analysis (Cf. Nofal (2011), Semino (1997), Short (1996), Easthope (2003), etc.). Easthope (2003:17) makes it clear that "poetry always occurs as a specific material of discourse", stressing that "*it* (italics mine) is an extreme instance of its own material". (P15). Poetry, it can be argued, has most of the features of discourse including the three basic

principles, field, mode, and tenor introduced by Halliday (1989).

To Halliday, discourse can be analyzed in terms of three basic factors. The field of discourse "refers to what is happening, to the nature of the social action taking place" (Halliday and Hassan, 1989:12). The tenor of discourse focuses on the participants, i.e. "who is taking part, the nature of the participants, their statuses and roles" (ibid:12). The tenor of discourse, on the other hand, "refers to what part the language is playing" (ibid:12).

With reference to Lawrence's poem being analyzed, the field of discourse, it can be argued, is the literary interaction between the poet and the reader in which he former addresses the latter, expressing his feeling and pain of his mother's illness and death. The poet, in the form of poetry, tries to give a description of his mother's physical suffering and his painful emotional reaction towards that suffering. The mode of discourse here is the poem in the form of a dialogue and sometimes dramatic monologue. The tenor of discourse refers to the participants, i.e. the poet, the reader (active participants), and the poet's mother (passive participant).

Why D.H. Lawrence?

D.H. Lawrence was not arbitrarily selected for conducting this study. His literary contribution is known to everyone interested in literature. To many, Lawrence is recognized as a great novelist whose novels reached every part of the world and were widely read, analyzed and criticized from different perspectives. A few only know that he is also a poet and that he started his literary career by writing poetry not novels.

Despite his great literary heritage and worldwide fame and reputation, the writer of this article is particularly concerned with Lawrence's language and style. His language, it is claimed, is simple, direct and clear that makes it a preferred target for any linguistic study. Bell (1992:57) comments on Lawrence's language and style, saying that "his language doesn't rely on formal hyperbole, and that "the emotional meaning is communicated through language not within it". So, Lawrence tries to incorporate the semantic unit with the emotional feeling without neglecting the poetic pattern and stylistic features that determine the literary frame of the genre. This is not an easy mission, it is in fact one of the most difficult tasks and challenges that faces authors and poets. Lawrence, however, could do it very skillfully, by managing a creative combination between linguistic tools and literary language, an art that can only be done by great writers.

A discourse stylistic analysis and interpretation of the poem¹

Bakhtin (1984) describes the interaction between the poet and the reader in terms of what he calls "hidden dialogue". He illustrates what he means by this term in these words: "Imagine a dialogue of two persons in which the statement of the second speaker are omitted, but the general sense is not at all violated" (Bakhtin, 1984:197).

Thus, Bakhtin clearly defines the relationship between the author and the reader, leaving no room for any further debate. This remarkable notion supports the claim that discourse is the basic unit of any stylistic analysis. Verdonk (1991:98) agrees with Bakhtin's view, indicating that there is "a communicative interaction between the poet and the reader". This type of interaction works within the text world and discourse world (Cf. Werth 1999:17). The reader and the analyst should also connect these two worlds with the real world outside the text. The poem at hand, the researcher argues, can be best analyzed and interpreted under this type of a discourse based stylistic model of analysis.

Having a glance at the poem (see the appendix), one can easily notice that it is nothing but a dialogue between Lawrence and his readers, a dialogue in which each participant maintains one single role. Lawrence writes the poem in the free verse form, which may indicate that he wants to avoid any poetic interruption caused by what can be called rhyme maintenance. He starts the first line of the first stanza by asking an incomplete question, *why does the thin grey strand*, which is a clear indication of the conversational mode of the poem. In terms of discourse structure, starting with an interrogative sentence increases the degree of interaction between discourse interlocutors. Moreover, using a wh-question instead of a yes-no question further supports the communicative trend of the poem, as the answer of the wh-question is always longer than the yes-no question one. The completion of the question doesn't come in the second line, because Lawrence has inserted a clause before completing the question in the fourth line. In terms of Grice's conversational principles, Lawrence has violated the second maxim, the maxim of quantity, in which the speaker is asked not to make his contribution more informative than is required. Thus, the clause *floating up from the unforgotten cigarette between my fingers*, is an

1- When we talk about discourse stylistic analysis, we consider discourse as the basic unit of analysis, i.e. the whole poem will be treated as one single entity, unlike those who consider the sentence or utterance as the basic unit of analysis

additional informative clause used by Lawrence to keep his readers in full knowledge of the text world. In terms of pragmatics, cigarettes and tension can be considered as a kind of collocation. This enables the reader infer that Lawrence is perhaps suffering a trouble. The symbolic use of cigarettes embodies the poet's worries and instability.

In the fourth line, Lawrence provides his addressee with the missing piece of information of the first line, *why does it trouble me?* This type of communicative technique (information delay) evokes the interlocutor's curiosity, and entices him to interact with the addresser in a more active way. It may be argued here that this technique can be considered as a stylistic device used by Lawrence to highlight the communicative aspect of the poem. The repetition of the question in the fourth line clearly shows his urgent need for an answer to come from anybody, including his reader. The use of the simple present tense, it can be claimed, indicates the poet's repeated suffering and unstoppable restlessness. Therefore, It can be pointed out here that the opening stanza clearly shows a convincing linguistic manipulation of the poetic content.

In the second stanza, Lawrence attempts to break the reader's silence, using the discourse interjection "Ah" which is used when the listener fails to take his turn in the dialogue, being unable to respond to the addresser's contribution and thus prefers to be silent. Also, the use of this informal discourse marker reveals the poet's feeling towards the reader as the marker is "purely emotive" (Quirk et al, 1985:853).

Lawrence, in the poem, needs someone to talk to, complain to, interact with; he finds nobody but the reader. He uses the pronoun "you" referring to the reader, who fails to provide any answer to the question raised in the first stanza. This communicative failure on the part of the reader leaves no choice for him but to provide the answer himself. Such a choice usually takes place in the naturally occurring communicative situations.

Thus, Lawrence starts explaining the reason behind his sadness and suffering. In terms of pragmatics, the intended meaning can be inferred when there is mutual background knowledge between the discourse interlocutors. The reader or the analyst of this poem has some knowledge about Lawrence's relationship with his mother. It is a well-known fact that Lawrence had a very strong mother fixation. It is also known that he was suffering from Oedipus complex, which was reflected in one of his great novels, *Sons and Lovers* (1913). This information helps a great deal in inferring the intended meaning of the remaining lines. Lawrence is extremely sad because his mother is sick

and can't walk. Looking at the way he is attached to her, one can easily justify his desperate utterances in the coming lines. The use of the simple past instead of the past continuous, it can be inferred, suggests that he didn't use to carry his mother regularly during her foot disease period, which has further increased his regret and pain. The specification of the place deixis, downstairs, has a significant connotation here. Carrying someone downstairs is not so hard as carrying him/her upstairs, for in the latter more efforts and energy are consumed. The Oedipus behavior, if it is at all happening in this particular situation, is more likely to take place while carrying his mother downstairs not upstairs. This psychological behavior makes the poet feel more repentant and increases his suffering.

In the last stanza the poet tries to get rid of the self-blame revealed in the previous lines. It is quite clear that he is looking for anything that would release him from the suffering. Luckily, he finds a few hairs of his mother on his coat. It can be easily inferred that these grey hairs must have fallen down on his coat while he was carrying his mother downstairs. These hairs remind him of the positive side of carrying his mother and thus decreases his sadness.

In the last two lines we come to the fact that his mother passes away. In terms of associative meaning (Yule,2010:113), a particular word or utterance can have more than one meaning associated with it, a part from the conceptual meaning or literal meaning. The word needle, for example, has a literal meaning, which may include conceptual components such as thinness, sharpness and steeliness. Besides, it has some connotative implications such as pain, blood, illness, drugs, etc. Likewise, when the poet describes the old grey hairs floating the dark chimney, it cannot be said that he intends to convey the literal meaning of the utterance. We all know that the hairs belong to his mother. We also know that when the hairs fall down in the chimney, they will never be seen again. The chimney for the hairs is like the tomb for people. The tomb is dark from inside and the chimney is dark too². On the basis of the mutual background knowledge between the poet and the reader, which illustrates that the poem has been written on the sad occasion of his mother's death, the analyst can predict that the poet in his last two lines means nothing but his mother's death.

Thus, it is the role of pragmatics that usually appears in such critical situations to enable us guess

2- The poet's insistence on using the adjective dark for the chimney though we all know that it is dark, supports the claim that he might have used it as symbol for the tomb.

what others want to say and what meaning they intend to convey. This role has been extended to deal with literary texts, an issue that has led to the emergence of what Sell (1991) calls "literary pragmatics."

Conclusion

So, this has been one reading of the poem. Of course, there might be some other readings, which might be totally different from this one. It has been noticed that the treatment of the poem as one cohesive discourse unit has played a vital role in arriving at the overall interpretation of the poem. The dialogic style of the poem has contributed a good deal to achieve this ultimate purpose. It has also been observed that the interpretation of the poem is highly determined by applying the concept of "mutual knowledge", which is a key issue in the world of literary pragmatic analysis. In addition, the interlink between the text world and the real (outside) world can never be ignored in this regard.

It is, therefore, a different type of stylistic analysis, in which three disciplines are involved, pragmatics, discourse, and stylistics. It is pragmatics because of the pragmatic concepts used in the analysis and interpretation of the text. It is discourse because the poem has been treated as a dialogue, which is a type of discourse. And it is stylistics because it deals with a literary register, whose linguistic features are totally different from those of the naturally occurring discourse.

This paper has taken into account the role of the author as a vital player and active participant in what can be called poetic dialogue interaction. This role used to be totally ignored in the traditional version of stylistics, in which the author's language was the only key point in any stylistic study. Stylistics, in this way, has become a three-dimensional area in which the author, the reader, and the text are equally important. The paper, hopefully, has achieved its objectives, presenting some new ideas and suggestions in stylistics that can further be developed in prospective researches.

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Appendix

Why does the thin grey strand

Floating up from the forgotten

Cigarette between my fingers,

Why does it trouble me?

Ah you will understand;

When I carried my mother downstairs,

A few times only, at the beginning

Of her soft – foot malady,

I watched them float the dark chimney.

I should find for a reprimand

To my gaiety, a few long grey hairs

On the breast of my coat; and one by one

I watched them float the dark chimney.



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