

The Construction of Meaning in Robert Frost's Poem "Fire and Ice"

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Abstract

Reading is actually a process that involves communication. Particularly when reading a literary text such as poem, readers might go in through similar process, as the other readers subconsciously experience, to construct meaning, so that they will arrive in their interpretation about the poem being read. A poem writtern by Robert Lee Frost entitled "Fire and Ice" has been chosen to be the object of the research and three people coming from different background was appointed purposively to be the participants of the research. They were asked to make their own interpretation about the poem. Their activities when reading the poem itself were observed as well and finally thew were interviewed. It is then found that they could only deal with the stages of coherence and background knowledge.

Keywords: Meaning construction, Robert Frost, Poem

INTRODUCTION

Interaction does not only occur between people but also in a reading process; between text and readers, between the readers and their own mind. This statement is supported by Ibsen (1995) in which he states that reading is a two-way process where there is a dialogue and a process of constructing and interacting meaning between the readers and the text. Thus, a piece of a literary text, such as poem, will not exist until it is read.

The statement above indicates that when doing reading, readers are supposed to interact with the text; giving responses to what they read, understand, and feel. In this case, it is assumed that in the process of reading, meaning is negotiated and created by reader contextually (Thomas, 1995). Therefore it is negotiable in nature. As this phenomenon is real, it is then convinced that when people read a piece of literary text, in this case poem, several different meanings and interpretation will come up and be grasped by their minds.

The interpretation of a poem deals with the process of meaning

construction and (re)construction in readers' mind and yet, the construction of meaning in readers' mind will be determined by readers' experience, expectation, and previous knowledge (Thomas, 1995). Meanwhile, Yule (2000) elucidates that such process is derived from the analysis of coherence, background knowledge, cultural schemata and cross-cultural pragmatics. Thus, readers discover meaning through the process of articulation and exploring their thought.

Based on the explanation above, this study will be focused on investigating the process how readers could construct or reconstruct the meaning when they interact with a poem entitled '*Fire and Ice*'. It was written by Robert Lee Frost, one of America's leading 20th-century poets and a four-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize. It will also observe some interpretation that could probably present within the readers' mind when dealing with this piece of literary text. The analysis is executed based on the theory proposed by Yule, namely coherence and background knowledge.

This study is primarily aimed at obtaining detail description of how readers may construct and interpret the meaning of a Robert Lee Frost's poem entitled '*Fire and Ice*'. Besides that, this intends to obtain the participants' inter-subjective outcomes towards the poem as well.

To limit the scope of the study, the research is only focused on observing the way of how meaning is derived by readers when they are in the process of reading the poem. Thus interpretation may come up. As the result, this study would be able to produce a new piece of knowledge that could help people to get a much better comprehension when dealing with literary texts, especially poem.

As it is a good idea to imitate or at least consider the way of how successful readers rehearse themselves to understand literary texts, particularly poem, this research result is expected to be able to give enlightenment to other readers who feel highly interested in developing their skill in interpreting poem. They are then on the right track into a success. Therefore this study is really crucial to implement.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participants of this research comprised three people who possessed different background knowledge on the topic being observed. They were:

- a. A works as an English teacher at a senior high school in Bandung
- b. B works as a linguist
- c. C works as a poem lover

The three of them were chosen purposively to get involved as the participants of the research. They, however, were categorized as the persons who had, for sure, an ability in getting their logic interpretation on the poem observed and sharing the idea on how they could attain such interpretation.

Data collection methods

This study used descriptive qualitative method. It was found to be proper using such method as the problem observed here was closely related to social phenomenon regarding to human's behavior. Guba and Lincoln (cited in Alwasilah, 2009) additionally state that through benefiting the existence of qualitative approach -- which was discovered to be more suitable -- into our research, we could really feel the essence of the typicality of natural setting that mostly appeared when employing the research,

To gain the data, three types of research instrument were applied, namely questionnaire, interview and observation. Questionnaire functions to gain data on the distribution of various behavior or characteristics appearing in natural setting. Interview was implemented as an instrument to get in-depth information on the problems being observed. Observation was done to facilitate the researcher in acquiring tacit understanding. These three instruments were carried out to assist the researcher obtain detail and complete information about the problems being observed. So that it would be valid and reliable.

Data analysis methods

The researcher first analyzed the result from the questionnaire that he distributed to his research participants. This was aimed to get a general overview of the topic and problem that he was interested in observing. Afterwards, he would be able to formulate questions that were going to be addressed to his participants on the interview section. As the questionnaire was designed in the closed-question format, he then found it necessary to have an interview.

Through the interview, the researcher was able to paraphrase the questions that could not be comprehensible enough to several participants. Moreover the researcher

would possess an opportunity to raise follow-up questions. Having finished with the interview, the researcher tried to prove whether or not the participants told honest answer when being interviewed. This could be done by doing an observation. The conclusion of the study came up after the researcher noticed that the recurring patterns happened. After all of the three instruments were carried out, the results were then analyzed.

The interpretation from each participant on the poem was also asked. This was then synthesized and there would appear the conclusion of what the poem was all about.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Construction of Meaning

When talking about how a person could attain a meaning –not only when referring to oral language, but also to the written one—he will go in through the process which is extremely complex to define. Thomas (1995) states that there presents seven concepts in line with the process of meaning construction:

1. Pragmatic Ambivalence
This conception becomes particularly fundamental in taking forward the view of pragmatics as ‘meaning in interaction’ in which both speaker and hearer possess their own part to play. By using an ambivalent utterance instead of making a direct request, the speaker reduces the risk of a confrontation or of receiving an embarrassing refusal.
2. The Collaborative Nature of Speech Acts
The collaboration of the hearer is necessary in order for the speech act to succeed. In fact it is found that almost all speech acts are collaborative, at least to a degree.
3. The Negotiability of Force
It is a reason for moving away from the view that illocutionary force comes neatly packaged

from the mouth of the speaker and towards a theory of pragmatics in which the hearer is seen as playing at least some part in assigning pragmatic value to the speaker’s words.

4. Preparing the Ground for a Speech Act

To prepare the ground of speech act, speakers often build up particular utterance in particular situation.

For example:

A: Are you going to be in on Monday

B: Why?

A: I need someone to look at our entry in the *UCAS Handbook*?

B: I’ll be in for a couple of hours first thing

A: Will you be able to check it for me then?

B: O.K

5. Successive utterances in situated discourse

Interpretation of utterances is influenced by the force the hearer has assigned to earlier utterances. Pragmatic force of successive utterances can have cumulative effect, for example:

A: So you’re sure you’ll be all right?

B: What??

A: I said you’re sure you’ll be all right?

B: Will you get me my bed jacket?

6. Discoursal Ambivalence

It deals with discoursal function. Example:

A1: Are you going to be in on Monday

B1: Why?

A2: I need someone to look at our entry in the *UCAS Handbook*?

B2: I’ll be in for a couple of hours first thing

A3: Will you be able to check it for me then?

B3: O.K

7. Dynamic Pragmatics

Meaning is an active procedure. Meaning is not given but is constructed by the hearer. When hearer cannot ask for more contexts, they will often construct a context and from that derive meaning for an ambiguous word or an ambivalent utterance.

A Glance on Robert Lee Frost

Robert Lee Frost, b. San Francisco, Mar. 26, 1874, d. Boston, Jan. 29, 1963, was one of America's leading 20th-century poets and a four-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize. An essentially pastoral poet often associated with rural New England, Frost wrote poems whose philosophical dimensions transcend any region. Although his verse forms are traditional - he often said, in a dig at arch rival Carl Sandburg, that he would as soon play tennis without a net as write free verse - he was a pioneer in the interplay of rhythm and meter and in the poetic use of the vocabulary and inflections of everyday speech. His poetry is thus traditional and experimental, regional and universal.

After his father's death in 1885, when young Frost was 11, the family left California and settled in Massachusetts. Frost attended high school in that state, entered Dartmouth College, but remained less than one semester. Returning to Massachusetts, he taught school and worked in a mill and as a newspaper reporter. In 1894 he sold "*My Butterfly: An Elegy*" to *The Independent*, a New York literary journal. A year later he married Elinor White, with whom he had shared valedictorian honors at Lawrence (Mass.) High School. From 1897 to 1899 he attended Harvard College as a special student but left without a degree. Over the next ten years he wrote (but rarely published) poems, operated a farm in

Derry, New Hampshire (purchased for him by his paternal grandfather), and supplemented his income by teaching at Derry's Pinkerton Academy.

In 1912, at the age of 38, he sold the farm and used the proceeds to take his family to England, where he could devote himself entirely to writing. His efforts to establish himself and his work were almost immediately successful. *A Boy's Will* was accepted by a London publisher and brought out in 1913, followed a year later by *North of Boston*. Favorable reviews on both sides of the Atlantic resulted in American publication of the books by Henry Holt and Company, Frost's primary American publisher, and in the establishing of Frost's transatlantic reputation.

Frost was more favorably impressed and more lastingly influenced by the so-called Georgian poets Lascelles Abercrombie, Rupert Brooke, and T. E. Hulme, whose rural subjects and style were more in keeping with his own. While living near the Georgians in Gloucestershire, Frost became especially close to a brooding Welshman named Edward Thomas, whom he urged to turn from prose to poetry. Thomas did so, dedicating his first and only volume of verse to Frost before his death in World War I.

Frost's importance as a poet derives from the power and memorability of particular poems. *The Death of the Hired Man* (from *North of Boston*) combines lyric and dramatic poetry in blank verse. *After Apple-Picking* (from the same volume) is a free-verse dream poem with philosophical undertones. *Mending Wall* (also published in *North of Boston*) demonstrates Frost's simultaneous command of lyrical verse, dramatic conversation, and ironic commentary. *The Road Not Taken*, *Birches* (from *Mountain Interval*) and the

oft-studied Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening (from *New Hampshire*) exemplify Frost's ability to join the pastoral and philosophical modes in lyrics of unforgettable beauty.

Robert Frost wrote poetry using traditional theories and practices of versification. He delighted in imposing on himself the discipline of rhyme and meter. Form was of prime importance to him as a philosophic principle and for the "making" of poetry. The word "design" was sacred to Frost. He was very interested in the rules of poetry, but he had his own twist on them. He kept the rules and he broke the rules; that should be kept in mind in studying his use of poetics. Frost rebelled at being labeled with any of the current fads in Poetry. He

said, "I started calling myself a Synecdochist when others called themselves Imagists or Vorticists." Actually, Frost was more a Classicist - he adheres to traditional standards that are universally valid and enduring. An important innovation, along with other poets of his time, was the use of everyday language. He believed conversational language and tones of voice combined with ordinary experience could be good poetic material.

Frost's poems are virtual treasure troves of all those principles of versification and yet his poems are also jewels of psychological meaning. Above all, Frost was a humanist. (http://www.geocities.com/sir_john_eh/)

Fire and Ice

(From Harper's magazine, December 1920)

Some say the world will end in fire

Some say in ice

From what i've tasted of desire

I hold with those who favor fire

But if it had to perish twice

I think I know enough of hate

To know that for destruction ice

Is also great

And would suffice

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Coherence

Coherence is what language users have most in mind (Yule, 2001). It means that coherence is temporary assumptions that is perceived from personals' experience of things. The experiences are normally based on familiarity or common knowledge of readers. However sometimes readers try to make assumption without considering background knowledge expected by writer.

Thus when readers deal with discourse analysis, they will have varied kinds of interpretation since perhaps readers prefer to make instant

interpretations with familiar material or common knowledge and tends not to see possible alternatives (Yule, 2001).

And as written in the first and second line of Frost's poem:

"Some say the world will end in fire and

...

Some say in ice..."

If this line is interpreted by coherence concept then it can be assumed that the world will be destroyed by fire. In this case, fire, if uncontrolled, will bring its destructive effects and when it grows it wants more and more. Thus, readers will interpret that world

will be burn out by the huge uncontrolled fire.

Yet, in the second line, it is stated that world will be destroyed by ice. If it is interpreted textually, ice is a familiar material for us, and for an instance, in geological destruction, earth can be destroyed by iceberg. We can also say with our common knowledge that ice is the substance of water. Thus, we can interpret ice as plenty and lots of waters or great storm that can destroy the whole world.

However, if the reader refers to the third and fourth line of the poem:

“...From what I've tasted of desire,
I hold with those who favor fire...”

They may create coherent interpretation for a text and “fill in the gap” between the texts. Yule states that reader can construct familiar scenarios in order to make sense and create coherence meaning (2001). Fire, as written in the poem, is correlates with desire. The third and the fourth line denote that fire and desires has the same degree to portray humans' emotion and the effect of emotion.

In this case, readers' can interpret fire with their normal experience, common knowledge, and have understood on fire but when it deals with desire, perhaps, readers can have alternatives interpretation. As Yule states in his book that pragmatic of discourse can predictably explore what the speaker or writer has in mind (2001).

Desire is defined as a wish or longing, a request or petition, the object of longing: my greatest desire is to go back home, or sexual appetite; passion. (<http://www.answers.com/topic/desire>). Merriam-Webster defines desire as stresses the strength of feeling and often implies strong intention or aim to get something a person wishes for. (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/>).

Thus, the third and the fourth line, can be assumed that fire and desire are two substance that equally destructive and when the two substances are uncontrolled they can bring lots of destruction.

The coherence of first four lines may be interpreted that the poems is discussed about some persons' (particular person) emotion, and in this case the emotion is the desires. Human with strong force of desire can ruin lots of things and the desire can take form in the following state as humans' greediness, ambition, wealth, or power to rule the worlds. Thus, in this poem, desire is symbolized to fire since fire is an element that can destroy its surroundings.

Whereas in the four last lines, Frost wrote:

“... But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate,
To know that for destruction ice is also
great,
And would suffice...”

Here, the writer imagines if only the world can perish twice, the writer prefers to destroy it with ice since ice with its cold effect is similar to hate. Hate is part of human's emotion, has an equal destructive effect to desire. Hate can make a person being so ignorant and careless. Human who fullfilled by hate can destroy every thing around him/her. They have no tolerance with others.

Thus, the world can be destroyed by ice or fire as the elements of worldly things which can carry out destructive sensation. A person also has emotions that similar to the nature of fire and ice, that is desire and hate. The two emotios, when it is uncontrolled, can brings negative effect to humanity and their existence.

Background Knowledge

Our ability to arrive automatically at interpretations of unwritten and the unsaid must be based on pre-existing knowledge structures. These structures function like familiar pattern from previous experience that we use to interpret new experiences or known as pre-existing knowledge structure in memory called schemata and if it is fixed or be a static pattern to the schema, it is called frame. Frame shared by everyone within a social group would be something like a prototypical version (Yule, 1996)

Background of knowledge as the component of discourse analysis in Frost' poem " Fire and Ice" can be found when he wrote:

"some say the world will end in fire
And some say in ice (line 1 and 2)

Here we can see that Frost's belief as the represent of the most human beings beliefs that one day that this world will end, this world will be not eternal

CONCLUSION

People will have different interpretation when they are faced with an object. They, however, may possess a similar way or stage in term of the process of how they could come into

such interpretation. So it is, when readers create their own argument or meaning towards a literary text, particularly poem. They might encounter some common cognitive phenomenons to be able to construct meaning and thus reach the interpretation.

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