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A FRAME-THEORETIC INTERPRETATION OF ANNE SEXTON'S  
POEM  
'BUYING THE WHORE'

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**1. Introduction**

Understanding everyday English can hardly be likened to a mechanical process. But understanding or rather appreciating literature goes far beyond a mechanised procedure; as Eagleton (1983: 88) writes "interpreting a poem *is* in an important sense freer than interpreting a London underground notice." And that is because literature, much more than everyday English, is fraught with life and all its explicit and implicit meanings. Literature is embedded in what has been called "existential holism" (Haugeland, 1990).

Existential holism, which is the foundation of literature, could be said to involve two major faculties of humans: one is the cognitive faculty which projects humans as perceiving, intelligent, thinking and acting human beings, and the other is the emotional dimension of human existence: humans are feeling creatures which bring their emotive involvement to bear on hearing and reading texts in order to understand and appreciate them. This is to claim that machines cannot either fully understand or appreciate literature, because machines do not care.

However, computerised analyses of stories is a fact of life and such achievements point to the former dimension of the human existence: its cognitive makeup, which encompasses within its dynamics an amazingly vast amount of experiential data. These data are tightly structured and to a very large degree uniformly organised into compact packets for all speakers of a language. Identifying same organisation to experiential data of same language speakers is misleading, though, since same organisation extends well beyond the speakers of a language community.

In what follows, we wish to utilise work carried out in the field of Cognitive Science, and more specifically in the area of knowledge representation, on the assumption that computerised cognitive models of such conceptual representations lend themselves in partially accounting for literary interpretation amongst other benefits accrued therefrom.

**2. Literature and text worlds**

We wish to claim, therefore, that we are in alignment with the novel view that literariness cannot be confined to textual or other formal features. Literariness comes afloat in the interplay between those features and the reader's processing of them. This interaction ultimately lays a considerable onus on the reader. In constructing the textual world the reader does not rely on the textual features alone. On the

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contrary, the reader has to give flesh to those formal features of the text and thereby create the full textual world. (This of course does not mean that there is just one textual world, or that it has to be identical for all readers). A text, and even more so a poem, does not make sense, or cannot be interpreted, unless the reader can build around it a text world that will envelop the textual features.

All this points to the reader's cognitive and emotional worlds. But we propose to leave the latter on one side, thus acknowledging the inherent difficulties attached to any project dealing with emotions. These difficulties are clearly brought out in any attempt to deal with emotional aspects of language use in computerised language analyses.

### 3. Frames and scripts

Concentrating on the cognitive aspects of understanding and interpreting, we need to stress that the reader approaching a text is not a *tabula rasa*. This is well known. What has not been adequately appreciated, though, is that the reader approaches texts as a well tuned, tightly organised, intelligent computer. We use the metaphor, not because computers are intelligent, but because we wish to stress the procedural aspect of the cognitive machinery of the human understander.

Within a holistic approach to literature, we need to distinguish between natural language, on the one hand, and conceptual representation systems existing independently of language, on the other. These conceptual representation systems are cognitive models corresponding to well organised, internally structured and separate packets of background knowledge which we have come to acquire in a rather systematic and predictable manner in our life histories.

Jakobson, the father of modern stylistics, who identified 'literariness' as an "organized violence committed on ordinary speech" (quoted in Eagleton, 2), claims that literature deviates systematically from everyday speech, this function being the locus of literariness. If one is approached at the bus stop by someone who murmurs 'Thou still unravished bride of quietness', Jakobson would maintain that his/her language draws attention to itself, flaunts its material being, as statements like 'Don't you know the drivers are on strike?' do not (quoted in Eagleton, 2). Indeed, we cannot fail to agree with Jakobson that such a poetic utterance thrown at me as I am waiting for my bus would of necessity draw attention to itself. But not for reasons of literariness put forth by Jakobson, but rather because I would think that the guy needs to be referred to a psychiatrist. And my distinct inclination to do so would have nothing to do with any inability to appreciate the guy's poetic speech, but rather because I would be in no position to match his utterance with any conceptual representation that would be relevant at the moment.

In short, we want to stress that it is not the systematic violation or coercion of natural language by 'literariness' that is at issue. What is at issue is the systematic violation, coercion, or subversion of our conceptual structured representations of our background knowledge and experiential data effected on the basis of textual features acting as triggers. In other words, what is subverted is not the language but rather the textual worlds as the outcome of the interaction of textual formal features with cognitive models representing knowledge, belief-systems and strategies (Cook, 1994).

It has been the tradition within pragmatics and pragmatic analyses of discourse to identify 'context' or 'mutual knowledge and beliefs' and like under-determined, fuzzy notions which have been judged indispensable in order to account

for problems unaccountable for in other terms. Not only that, but it has also been the tradition to postulate a number of principles and maxims, such as Grice's wide-currency Co-operative Principle and inferencing principles and strategies thereof in order to account for various phenomena of language use within discourse analysis and literary analyses. Major works in Pragmatics do not seem to combine these two areas in a systematic way (Levinson, 1983, Leech, 1983, Schiffrin, 1994).

However, it was suggested in Koutoupi-Kitis (1982, and forthcoming) that such inferencing principles and maxims could be collapsed within the framework of such cognitive schemata, that is within the boundaries of well defined frames and scripts without loss of their general import. In our view, such powerful prioritising function do such schemata have in language use in general and in literary analysis in particular, that other matters such as truth and perspicuity seem to be utterly dependent on principles of relevance relating linguistic manifestations to fitting frames.

Conceptual representations of background knowledge and beliefs have been identified in terms of both frames and scripts (Minsky 1980, Schank and Abelson 1977, Schank 1982). Frames seem to structure more static scenes while scripts organise procedural knowledge, that is knowledge of events and procedures. The necessity for postulating such cognitive representations is taken for granted in this presentation (see Koutoupi-Kitis 1982, Cook 1994 for evidence), and we therefore proceed to a partial analysis of Sexton's poem along these lines.

### 4. Analysing the poem (see appendix)

#### 4.1. The title: 'Buying the whore'

Understanding a text requires understanding its topic and in understanding a poem we need to understand its title which figures as the main topic of the poem. Two structures are projected by the title: one is the frame within which we enclose the theme 'whore' and all surrounding knowledge attached to it. The other is the script of 'buying' which is instantiated by the actional gerund "buying." (figure 1)

These two schemata are concurrently activated and gain equally competing staging in our conceptual world. "Buying" is a two-argument predicate and as it is an actional gerund its external argument is the agent of the action. This role slot is activated in our mind but remains pending to be filled in as we read on. On the other hand, the internal argument seems to be filled by the noun phrase "the whore", itself activating a competing frame. We will see below why the noun phrase "the whore" cannot form part of a buying script but instead instantiates a competing frame.

The activation of these two schemata subsumes all other sub-schemata, whether frames or scripts or scenes, within the range of the script of buying, on the one hand, and the frame including knowledge relating to prostitutes, on the other. Subsequently activated conceptual structures are: the cooking script, the boat-renting script, a glass shattering and a fireplace self-warming scene, as well as a vomiting scene at the conclusion of the poem (figure 1). The inclusion of all these frames and scripts as sub-structures within the major script of "buying" is borne out by two elements: (a) all four subscripts contain subscripts of the script of *buying*, as we can pictorially see in figure (1) (you cook the beef you have *purchased*, you steer the boat you have *rented*, you shatter the glass you have *paid for*). In all these scripts and scenes money is the pivotal unifying energy. The remaining two scripts have in common the feature of *use*, though not through buying. (b) the aspectual quality of

the gerund of the title. The verb "buy" is an accomplishment verb (Vendler 1967), of a terminative aspect (Verkuyl 1972, quoted in Jacobson 1979).

However, although the verb "buy" denotes an activity of limited duration leading to an accomplishment ("buy something"), the gerundive form in which it appears in the title of the poem enhances the procedural aspect of the activity rather than its terminative, accomplished nature. The use of the gerund, therefore, despite the surface value of its internal argument ("the whore"), subverts the nature of the verb projecting a non-terminative, non-accomplished aspect which quantifies over all the subsequently activated sub-frames and scenes subsuming them into its range.

Moving now on to the second part of the title, the noun phrase "the whore", we have already claimed that it invokes a competing frame, encompassing matters relating to the world of prostitutes, which in our western culture is assigned a distinct set. Within this frame we include knowledge of the trade conducted by prostitutes, that they lend their services to male population on a monetary basis. This transaction is a semblance of other trade transactions, like buying objects or goods for consumption, etc. However, what is paid for are services, which may be the object of verbs like selling and buying, but certainly not terms referring to human entities. Moreover, all this is enveloped in a totally unreputable atmosphere (accentuated here by the word "whore" rather than "prostitute"), from which human decency averts its face (so much so that even our computer spelling checker refuses to recognise the word "whore"). This frame, too, is sustained throughout the poem by a variety of textual triggers, as we shall see.

The activation of two frames or scripts by just one title is an unusual phenomenon. But this is poetry and this phenomenon has been called in the past the coercion of language. We will prove, however, that we are experiencing a textual world coercion, rather than a textual violation.

#### 4.2. Pictorial foregrounding

On the level of graphology, the poetic text is arranged into five stanzas, four of which are two-verse ones, whereas the final one is differentiated as it consists of an extra line. This differentiation coincides with a rather radical change of the type of frame it calls up: All the frames and scenes instantiated in the previous stanzas contained two role slots always taking up as values a "you", an addressee to which the narrating persona of the poem, the "I", addresses his apostrophes.<sup>1</sup> In all prior scenes, the narrating voice, the "I", is always in control occupying the agent role slot, whereas the addressee, the "you", is the controlled participant or rather involuntary patient. In the last stanza, the "I" loses control for the first time ("and I vomit", l. 10) partially relinquishing it to the instigating "you" who stinks like Mama. This switching of roles is partially brought about by an increase in the number of role slots incurred by the presence of the noun "Mama". The pictorial augmentation of the specific stanza seems to correspond to this increase of participant roles. On a different level, the final stanza seems to pictorially portray the climactic activity of emptying one's own internally hidden, tension-creating contents ("its cold hard quarters", l. 11).

<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that we use the masculine anaphor to refer to the poetic persona (see 4.3.1.)

#### 4.3. The other frames/scenes

##### 4.3.1. Interconnecting themes

The poem consists of five stanzas, as has been said, each one of them activating a distinct frame or scene. All these frames, however are interlaced with the persons taking up their role slots (see figure 1). On the textual level, all stanzas are interconnected by cohesive parallelism, manifest in the monotonous repetition of the pattern: "You are F and I do G." This cohesive textual element corresponds to the textual world element of overpowering control exercised by the "I" on the "you". This control is included in all activated scripts. Moreover, going back to the pictorial foregrounding of the poem, the two lines of each stanza are neatly assigned to these two distinct functions enacted by the cohesive textual triggers of "you" and "I":

You are a roast beef...  
and I stuff you...

You are a boat...  
and I steer you...

You are a glass...  
and I swallow...

You stink...  
and I vomit...

This pattern seems to be somehow breaking down in the second line of the final stanza,

You are the grate...  
searing the flesh

partially preparing the ground for the subversion of these role-functions in the final stanza.

The unidentified addressing voice of "I" assumes a distinctly male resonance for the following reasons: It is first of all juxtaposed to the "you" it addresses in all five stanzas; the latter personal pronoun acts as anaphoric reference to the phrase "the whore", as it is the only nominal preceding "you" with a head extension. Secondly, the controlling agentive role the "I" enacts in all the frames activated (with the possible exception of the final one) invests it with the robustness and prowess we have come to associate with male existence in our conceptual worlds. Thirdly, in default of other arguments, "I" occupies the explicit thematic role of "buying." So, "I buy you" is generalised both by the aspectual nature of the gerund "buying" and by the absence of any referential specificity of the personal pronouns to the open schema "buying the whore." "The whore", therefore, acquires generic reference as does the unidentified but distinct male voice of the narrating persona.

We have identified the personal pronouns "you" and "I" as values for the role slots created by the argument structure of the title (*Buying the whore*). We have pointed out that the same values formally fill in all the subsequent role-slots in all the other frames. The commonalities between the two frames of the title and the other activated frames are not confined, however, to this feature only.

Other interrelating themes common in all the frames are:

(a) The control exercised by the "I" on the "you", i.e. by the male persona on the female patient (*buying, stuff[ing] steer[ing] shatter[ing] swallow[ing]*), and even the uncontrollable vomit[ing] occurs *into your hand*.

(b) The monetary basis on which this control is exercised (*buying, purchased, rented, paid*),

(c) The cavity that is common to all the objects predicated of the pronoun "you" ("*You are ... a roast beef [to stuff], a boat, the grate [fireplace], hand*"),

(d) The annihilation of the female body (the beef is to be consumed, the boat to be steered aground, the glass to be shattered and swallowed),

(e) The ever silent female addressee.

These themes, common to all the instantiated frames, contribute in a decisive way to the construction of a dominant metaphor, a frame in its own right, that cuts across all the rest, as we shall see below. Moreover, all these interrelating themes that have been identified contribute to the sustained activation of the frame *whore*. So, on the one hand, the themes of the monetary basis of all the activities, control and consumption link up to the frame of buying converting the activities into scenes of the script *buying*. On the other hand, exactly the same themes tie up with the frame *whore* on a metaphorical line.

##### 5. An emergent frame: sexual intercourse

As we read through the poem, we come to realise that the various frames and scenes activated in it join forces to construct a major frame, that cuts across all the others, that of sexual intercourse. In actual fact, the whole poem constructs a textual world of a sexual intercourse, which, however, has little affinity to our conceptual model of human sexual intercourse.

The commonalities we identified in section 4. 3. 1. shared by all the activated frames (male control, monetary transaction, female cavity, female passivity, female destruction) are implicated both for the construction of this emerging frame, on the one hand, and for its disturbing violation of our cognitive models of reality.

This latter frame is also pictorially foregrounded in the typography of the poem: As was noted in section 4.2., the four stanzas project the monotonously repeated, rhythmic action of the subjection (mostly penetrating) of the female body by the male "I." This rhythmic action seems to break down in the last stanza, its augmented size pictorially foregrounding the penetrator's or perpetrator's climactic, orgasmic tension violently released (*vomit*) at the conclusion of the poem.

Sexual intercourse is projected in the text world as a painful, unpleasant but tension-releasing action which leaves the female body shattered and destroyed and the male scarcely, if at all, relieved, but in a disgusting manner. This textual frame hardly agrees with the blissful condition we normally associate with the termination of sexual intercourse.

##### 6. Frame subversion by the textual world of the poem

The textual triggers of the poem, right from the very title, set up a textual world that is in sharp conflict with the world as we know it. The dominant frame is that of buying, while the dominant theme is that of control exerted by the "I" on the "you", referring to the male and the female respectively and generically. This pervasive theme does not come into conflict with our world-view. After all, if the textual world is not sufficiently similar to ours then comprehension fails completely. It is however, driven to a deviant and disturbing extreme by the dehumanising metaphors

into which the "you" is 'serially' transformed in each and every stanza by overpowering male dominance.

We can now explain why the title activates two frames rather than one buying-script in our conceptual representation does not include within its domain any internal object slots that can take as values nominals with human extensionality. And as we run into the nominal "the whore" in this position seem unable to subsume it as a felicitous value assignment within the boundaries of the activated script of buying. On the other hand, focusing on the trigger "whore", again we are unable to subsume the act of buying within the frame of prostitute world for the same reason: because the internal argument of buying is assigned to services or commodities but to a human referent.

The text of the poem is fraught with dehumanising metaphors (Leech, 1990). In other words, all the frames invoked include certain inanimate entities handle objects by a human overpowering agent, the addresser "I". As we have said, these entities, being textually predicated of the addressee, "you", metamorphose the female referent of "the whore" into a variety of utility objects: *roast beef, boat, glass, grate*. Even in the last stanza, when she is close to acquiring human status due to her persona's memories of a stinking Mama, she only comes as close as becoming a hand (metonymy), which again is used to hold the male's vomit.

All these frames instantiated by the textual triggers set up ground for dehumanising metaphors which have a conflictual function on our schematic world knowledge. Indeed, it is this function that Anne Sexton thought poetry should have when she wrote that poetry "should be a shock to the senses. It should almost be a shock" (quoted in Georgoudaki, 1989: 172).

Expectations deriving from our world representations that go astray or that are consistently violated by the constructed frames of the textual world are galore: include the renting of the female body by the hour (l. 3), the subversion of the giving sperm into vomit (l. 10), the male rage as the driving force in sexual intercourse (l.4), the non-gratifying effect on the male body of sexual intercourse and ejaculation (ll. 8, 10) amongst others. All these distorting values configure a subversion of our expectations of the blissful condition following sexual intercourse into a stinking shameful guilt-ridden condition.<sup>2</sup>

##### 7. Conclusion

As was acknowledged in the introduction, "emotional" reactions engendered by the poem should be sharply distinguished from a "cognitive" understanding (Hauge 1990). This is not to say, of course, that cognitive understanding does not generate emotions. We simply want to draw a line between those aspects of our world-comprehension reducible in principle to machine understanding and those aspects of text appreciation for which we, as human readers, need to utilise all our emotional resources. Within the former part, a very useful cognitive apparatus has proved to be a variety of computerised models replicating chunks of our background knowledge. These schemata have been devised on the assumption that our knowledge of the world is highly structured into tight compartments. They have been variously configured as schemata, scripts, scenarios, or frames, depending on the conceptual structure they bring to bear on a knowledge base.

<sup>2</sup> One should notice the mention of the stinking Mama in the last stanza virtually 'caught' amidst the sexual relief of the male persona.



In this presentation, we have borrowed the conceptual apparatus from Cognitive Science and we have tried to apply it to a cognitive partial interpretation of Anne Sexton's poem 'Buying the whore'. We believe that by positing three levels of analysis, one at the textual level, one at the level of the textual conceptual world, and one at the level of the conceptual representation of our reality, we manage to conclude that: (a) *Contra* Jakobson and general stylistic theories, talk about deviant language is a myth that confuses the issue. (b) There are texts which project a textual world that is consonant with our own as structured in frames and scripts (figure, 2). In this case, these schemata organising our knowledge are reinforced. And (c) there are texts, especially poetic texts, which project textual worlds which deviate sharply from our conceptual schemata (figure, 3). In this latter case, they exert a subversive, distorting function on our conceptual schemata (cf. Kitis, 1995). Such deviant textual worlds have traditionally been assigned a high degree of literariness. This particular poem falls within this category.

figure 1

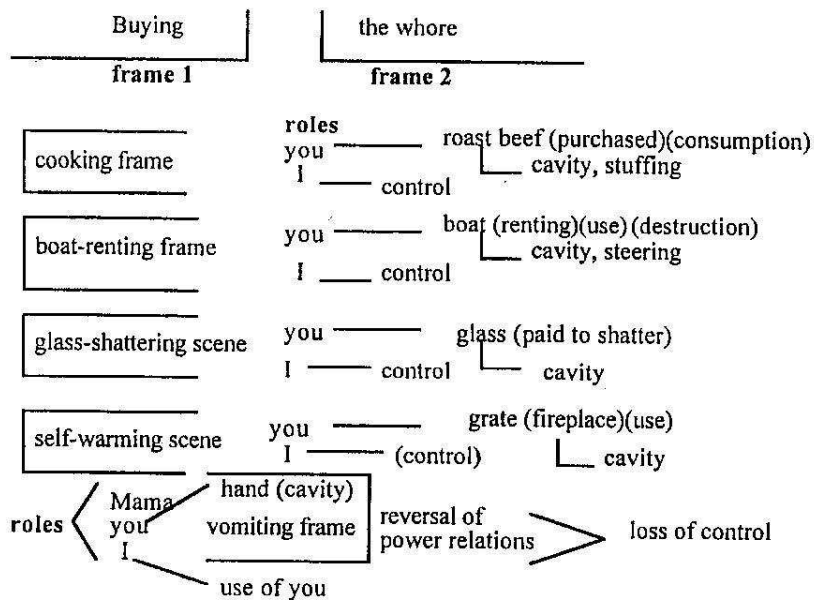


figure 2

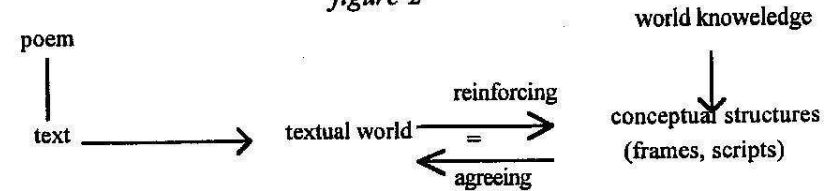
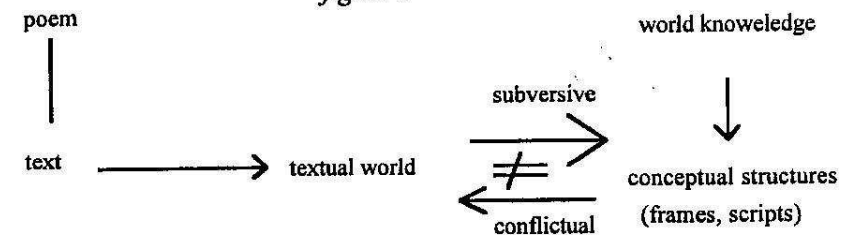


figure 3



Appendix

Buying the whore

You are a roast beef I have purchased  
and I stuff you with my very own onion. 2

You are a boat I have rented by the hour  
and I steer you with my rage until you run aground. 4

You are a glass that I have paid to shatter  
and I swallow the pieces down with my spit. 6

You are the grate that I warm my trembling hands on,  
searing the flesh until it's nice and juicy. 8

You stink like my Mama under your bra  
and I vomit into your hand like a jackpot  
its cold hard quarters. 10

July 15, 1971

Anne Sexton  
The complete poems  
Words for Dr. Y. (1978)  
II Poems 1971-73.  
ed. Linda Gray Sexton  
U.S.A.

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