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: 68) 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 about 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 textual 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 computational 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-trained, tightly organized, 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 understanding.

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 organized, 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 be of necessity drawn attention to itself, 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 voice, 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 reflected in these 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, beliefs 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
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 unpreemptable 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 in the second stanza (calls for: 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 apostrophe. 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", I 10) partially relinquishing it to the instigating "you" who strikes 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 stanzas 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", I 11).

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

Anne Sexton's 'Buying the Whore' in Frame Theory

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 activated distinct frame or scene. All these frames, however, are interlinked with the persons taking up their role slots (see figure 1). On the textual level, all stanzas interconnected by cohesive parallelism, manifest in the monotonous repetitio pattern: "You are F and I do G." This cohesive textual element correspond to the textual world element of overpowering control exercised by the "I" on the "you" included in all activated scripts. Moreover, going back to the pictorial foregroung of the poem, the two lines of each stanza are mostly 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 last 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 role for the following reasons: It is first of all juxtaposed to the "you" it addresses five stanzas; the latter personal pronouns not as anaphoric reference to the theme "the whore", as it is the only nominal preceding "you" with an extension. Secondly, the controlling agentive role the "I" enacts in all the activated (with the possible exception of the final one) invests it with the robustness and prowess we come to associate with male existence in conceptual worlds. Thirdly, in default of other arguments, "I" occupies the ex unidentifed thematic role of "buying." So, "I buy you" is generalized both as an aspectual nature of the gerund "buying" and by the absence of any reference specificity of the personal pronoun to the open schema "buying 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 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 of other frames. The commonalities between the two frames of the title and their 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, stuffing, steering, shafting, swallowing), and even the uncontrollable vomitting 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 intertwining themes that have been identified contribute to the sustained activation of the frame where. 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 where on a metaphorical line.

5. An emergent frame: sexual intercourse

As we read through the poem, we come to realize 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 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 cavety, 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 penetrative) 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 (vomiting) at the conclusion of the poem.

Sexual intercourse is projected in the textual world as a painful, unpleasant but tension-relieving 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. Afterall, 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

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Anne Sexton's 'Buying the Whore' in Frame Theory

into which the "you" is literally 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 we seem unable to subsume it as a felicitous value assignment within the frame of the activated script of buying. On the other hand, focusing on the trigger phrase, we again are unable to subsume the act of buying within the frame of prostitution 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 dehumanizing metaphors (Leech, 1981). 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, this entities, being textually predicated of the addressee, "you", metamorphose the referent into a variety of utility objects: roast beef, boat, glass, etc. Even in the last stanza, when she is close to acquiring human status due to the persona's memories of a stinking Mary, she only comes as close as becoming-hand (metonymy), which again is used to hold the male's vomit.

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

Expectations deriving from our world representations that go astray or are consistently violated by the constructed frames of the textual world are galore: include the reining of the female body by the hour (I, 3), the substitution of the giving sperm into vomit (I, 10), the male rage as the driving force in an intercourse (I, 1), the non-gestating effect on the male body of sexual intercourse (I, 1, 10) amongst others. All these disturbing values configure subversion of our expectations of the blissful condition following sexual intercourse into a stinking shameful guilt-ridden condition.

7. Conclusion

As was acknowledged in the Introduction, emotional reactions engendered by poem should be sharply distinguished from a "cognitive" understanding (Haugaard 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 comprehension reducible in principle to machine understanding and those as of text appreciation for which we, as human readers, need to utilise all our emotive resources. Within the former part, a very useful cognitive apparatus has proved 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 schemata, scripts, scenarios, or frames, depending on the conceptual structure bringing to bear on a knowledge base.

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2 One should notice the mention of the stinking Mary in the last stanza which 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 schemes organizing 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**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Buying</th>
<th>the whore</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>frame 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cooking frame</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you</td>
<td>control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>roles</td>
<td>roast beef (purchased)(consumption)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>boat-renting frame</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you</td>
<td>control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>roles</td>
<td>boat (renting)(use)(destruction)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>glass-shattering scene</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you</td>
<td>control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>roles</td>
<td>glass (paid to shatter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self-warming scene</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you</td>
<td>control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>roles</td>
<td>grate (fireplace)(use)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reversal of power relations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>use of you</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>loss of control</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2**

- poem
- reinforcing
- conceptual structures (frames, scripts)
- agreeing

**Figure 3**

- poem
- reinforcing
- conceptual structures (frames, scripts)
- conflicting

**Appendix**

*Buying the Whore*

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

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

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

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

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

**July 15, 1971**

Anne Sexton
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