

Calls for “The Sick Rose”—A Semiotic Inquiry into Poetry

Lucia Y. Lu
Clark Atlanta University

Plato conceived that poetry was a winged creature inspired by the gods (Else, 1970), and during the process of hermeneutics, the interpretation of poetry, many factors like reader, author, text, time, society, culture, history, language, etc. are all involved and conditioned by one another to build an interpretation of poetry. Hermeneutics is thus an educational process from which the ancient Greeks acquired knowledge and wisdom (Dilthey, 1972; Gallagher, 1992). Since the meaning of poetry is supplied by the reader, different readers may utilize a wider variety of memories, associations, allusions, experiences, and so on, in their interpretation of the poem (Eco, 1990; Rosenblatt, 1978). The interpreting of poetry is an open-ended process (Kintgen, 1983) and is capable of eliciting strong responses from readers (Collie & Slater, 1987; Dias & Hayhoe, 1988). In language arts curriculum, poetry holds the potential for providing an immeasurable sources for the development of figurative speech and metaphorical thinking (Pugh, 1995). But several years of informal polls of preservice elementary teachers continue to affirm that a large percentage of these students bear an ambivalence toward poetry, and this attitude alienates children from poetry (Tunnell & Jacobs, 2000).

This research is an exploration of the conceptualization of semiotics in poetry. Semiotics is the study of signs. The four components of semiotics are signs, semiosis, inference and reflexivity (Cunningham, 1992; 1998). Languages, arts, music, dance, drama, mathematics, cultural modes, etc. are signs or sign systems which humans created to mediate the world (Halliday & Hason, 1985). According to semiotics, a good language arts curriculum must be able to expand a learner’s potential for understanding and communicating through a variety of sign systems, not only languages (Hubbard, 1989; Leland & Harste, 1994; Suhor, 1994). When readers are striving to communicate and construct different sign systems to interpret their understanding of the text, and since the connection between different sign systems does not exist a priori, it would be an anomaly to learners (Ortony, 1993; Siegel, 1995). To Peirce, the greatest

American philosopher, anomalies which learners encounter in their daily lives drive the process of inquiry into the endless cycle of inference (Cunningham, 1998; Neilsen, 1989): abduction (generating hypotheses), deduction (testing hypotheses), and induction (making final decision). Learners should be provided with opportunities to become actively involved in the construction of knowledge through these reasoning processes. In education, the shift from a knowledge transmission model to an inquiry-oriented model of teaching and learning can be achieved through the process of inference or reasoning in a social context (Burke, 1996).

I conceptualized this theory in my teacher education program by inviting my students of literature and language arts at Clark Atlanta University to read poems, and to interpret poems through written reflection, thinking aloud, story-telling, individual drawings, and collaborative drawings in a series of literacy meetings. The readers’ responses to the poems were discussed from various sociocultural and psycholinguistic perspectives. The findings suggest that reading poetry from socio-semiotics makes text an open playground; invites multiple interpretation from the readers; evokes multiple intelligences to unlimited semiosis, or the on-going generating of meanings among the readers (Harste, 1996); motivates reading and critical thinking; and fosters cultural awareness. In such an interactive classroom, the adult learners from different sociocultural backgrounds can see with different eyes (Oster, 1989), to listen to different “drums” (Watson, Burke, & Harste, 1989), to speak with different voices, and to think from different perspectives.

For three semesters, I sent my students out of school for their internship, they had to read four poems to their students in the public school setting and to invite their students to give semiotic responses in terms of drawing, singing, dancing, acting, and story-telling to the poems. My students’ field experience journals revealed that they and their students all enjoyed this kind of semiotic inquiry into poetry. When we read

“The Sick Rose” (by William Blake), the students were invited to use drawing and thinking-aloud to interpret the poem.

One adult student said, “I smelt something bloody and violent when I read this poem.” This poem signified the relationship between the sexes. A pretty girl was loved by a man who loved her so much that he attempted to take her by force. Finally his love destroyed her! I am thinking of sexual violence, or sexual assault that is so popular in a patriarchal society. Women had no rights, no freedom! They were subject to men, to violence from men.” This student expressed his righteousness, his social concern for women’s rights, which have been assaulted for so many generations in human history. He is a feminist.

One adult student said, “The rose is a very beautiful flower. The many elements from nature make its life short. But it regenerates again and again. It withers, but it blooms several days later. This poem reminds me of the cycle of human life. This is the normal process of organic life.” This student’s major is natural ecology, he explores the relationship between nature and living things. He looks at birth, growth, illness, death in the cycle of life as very natural.

One 5-year old girl said, “I colored the rose brown, because it is dying; my green caterpillar is smiling because it is happy to eat the rose, and the big black circle is the thunderstorm, it is scared.” The little girl used her color perception to interpret the poem.

At the same time, I help my preservice teachers to conceptualize Sebeok’s *Sight, Sound, and Sense* (1979, 1991) to write poetry: Sight - what you see, Sound - what you hear, and Sense - what you feel. Since poetry is the winged creature inspired by the gods, our preservice teachers can not wait for the divine inspiration, I borrow sight, sound and sense as the inspiration from nature to guide my preservice teachers to write poetry. When I looked out of the window and wrote:

Spring is coming,
I see her on the tree top;
I hear her from the lark,
I feel her in the air
Wake up,
All thy lazybones,
Spring is coming.

My students reflected that writing poetry is not as hard as they thought before. We all enjoy the semiotic inquiry into poetry. I plan to continue to conceptualize this theory in my future instruction of poetry at different school levels.

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