CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF WILLIAM BLAKE’S POEM THE SICK ROSE

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ABSTRACT. This paper analyzes the language of William Blake’s poem The Sick Rose. The study is grounded in critical discourse analysis, claiming that “text within contexts” is the fictional world within the text which has always been open to diverse interpretations. The selected text components are assessed, thus revealing the World with in the Text.

Keywords: Discourse; text within text; sick rose

1. Introduction. Literature has always been open to interpretation since very long and the readers interpret it in order to put certain literary, political, critical and social ideas into practice. Language plays a fundamental role, for every artistic activity is prepared, accompanied, influenced and played by language. This paper analyzes discourse of literary writing, namely the Sick Rose by W. Blake. Given the enormous stylistic and literary significance of the said poem, in times of critical turmoil, it is absurd to rely on one interpretation. The title of the poem and its overall significance is enhanced with the techniques of Discourse Analysis. The aim of this paper is to examine the strategies of discourse analysis and its literary and critical value.

2. Theoretical underpinnings
2.1. Discourse
Discourse, as such, is a broad term with many a definition, which “integrates a whole palette of meanings” (Titscher et.al. 1998: 42), ranging from linguistics, through sociology, philosophy and other disciplines. For the purposes of this paper, the definition of discourse, based on William Blake’s poem The Sick Rose and his general concept of discourse as text in context, seen as “data that is liable for empirical analysis” is applied (Titscher et.al. 1998: 44), with focus being put on discourse as action and process. From this, it follows that “discourse” is a wider term than “text”; “I shall use the term discourse to refer to the whole process of social interaction of which a text is just a part” (Fairclough 1989: 24).

2.2. Critical discourse analysis
Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is obviously not a fixed rule nor a principle, but at most a shared perspective on doing linguistics, semiotic or discourse analysis. (Van Dijk 1993b: 131) The objective is to perceive language use as social practice. The users of language do not function in isolation, but in a set of cultural, social and psychological frameworks. CDA accepts this social context and studies the connections between textual structures and takes this social context into account and explores the links between textual structures and their function in interaction within the society. Such an analysis is a complex, multi-level one, given the obvious lack of direct, one to one correspondence between text structures and social and literary functions. The relatedness of the complex mechanism of discursive practice and their literary function is frequently and willingly left opaque, especially when the need occurs to create and maintain differences in interpretation. One of the objectives of CDA is to create a framework for decreasing this said opacity. Fairclough (1993: 135) in his definition perceives CDA as discourse analysis which aims to
systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practice, events and texts, and (b) wider literary and critical structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are literary shaped by relations between discourse and text in itself a factor.

It should be noted that the relationship is bi-directional. Not only is the language use affected by its groundedness within certain frame of cultural or social practice, but also the use of language influences and shapes the literary and stylistic context it finds itself in. It can be concluded that discursive practices are constitutive of literary structures, the same way as the literary structures determine discursive practices. CDA recognizes both directions, and in particular it “[explores] the tension between these two sides of language use, the literary shaped and textual constitutive. Language is a constituent of the society on various levels. A division proposed by Fairclough (Ibid. 134-136) is that of social identity, social relations and systems of knowledge and belief. All of these levels are affected, only with a variation as far as the strength is concerned. The issue of interpretation of these levels in the context of discourse models and literary cognition will be addressed in the latter part of this work.

The one element of CDA by which it is differentiated from other forms of discourse analysis lies in its attribute of ‘critical’. “‘Critical’ implies showing connections and causes which are hidden; it also implies intervention, for example providing resources for those who may be disadvantaged through change” (Fairclough, 1992: 9). It is important to expose the hidden things, since they are not evident for the individuals involved, and, because of this, they cannot be fought against.

Of the theoreticians of discourse linguistics, who, in the words of Van Dijk contributed “many articles and books that establish CDA as a direction of research, and that focus on various dimensions of power”, is the work of Norman Fairclough (1989, 1992). It is for him that CDA is perceived as a research tactics rather than a direction of thought or a model of analysis.

What the followers of CDA try to achieve has been summarised by Batstone (1995).

Critical Discourse Analysts seek to reveal how texts are constructed so that particular (and Potentially indoctrinating) perspectives can be expressed delicately and covertly; because they are covert, they are elusive of direct challenge, facilitating what Kress calls the “retreat into mystification and impersonality” (Batstone 1995: 198-199).

The definitions, as proposed above, are quite complete, but they would need further specification of how CDA is undertaken. Norman Fairclough, in his work Language and Power (1989), wishes to “examine how the ways in which we communicate are constrained by the structures and forces of those social institutions within which we live and function” (Fairclough 1989: vi). In the same publication, the possible procedures for analysing of texts are suggested. Fairclough (Ibid.: 24-26) gives his opinions on the actual nature of discourse and text analysis. In his view, there are three levels of discourse, firstly, social conditions of production and interpretation, i.e. the social factors, which contributed or lead to the origination of a text, and, at the same time, how the same factors effect interpretation.

Secondly, the process of production and interpretation, i.e. in what way the text was produced and how this effects interpretation. Thirdly, the text, being the product of the first two stages, commented on above. Fairclough subsequently gives three stages of CDA, which are in accord with the three abovementioned levels of discourse:

- **Description** is the stage which is concerned with the formal properties of the text.
- **Interpretation** is concerned with the relationship between text and interaction – with seeing the text as a product of a process of production, and as a resource in the process of interpretation.
- **Explanation** is concerned with the relationship between interaction and social context – with the social determination of the processes of production and interpretation, and their social effects (Fairclough 1989: 26).
2.3 Conceptual basis

Our conceptual basis is adopted from Norman Fairclough’s ideas on discourse and power and discourse and hegemony. We attempt to link social practice and linguistic practice, as well as micro and macro analysis of discourse (Fairclough 1989: 97). At the same time, analytical part of this paper analyzes the possible interrelatedness of textual properties and critical relations, which is also underpinned in Fairclough’s conceptual work. Furthermore, this paper attempts to deconstruct covert ideology which is ‘hidden’ in the text, stemming from the theoretical conceptualization of Batstone, who claims that “critical discourse analysis seeks to reveal how texts are constructed so that particular (and potentially indoctrinating) perspectives can be expressed delicately and covertly; because they are covert, they are elusive of direct challenge, facilitating what Kress calls the ‘retreat into mystification and impersonality’ (Batstone, 1989: 57)” . The main analytical tool of our paper reflects the “three dimensional method of discourse analysis”, introduced by Norman Fairclough, namely the “language text, spoken or written, discourse practice (text production and text interpretation), and the socio cultural practice” . This notion of Fairclough transforms into an analytical method, including the “linguistic description of the language text, interpretation of the relationship between the discursive processes and the text, and explanation of the relationship between the discursive processes and the social processes” (Fairclough 1989: 97).

References to the Text

Just 36 words – but, for me, it is one of the most powerful poems, one of the most resonant images in the language. What makes it so special? First, it’s because Blake, with his artist’s inner eye, thinks beyond the easy, lazy cliché, for example, lion which is usually taken for bravery, moon for pale wanderer and rose for beauty, but not for Blake, these are something else. What he describes here can be seen by anyone who has ever set foot in a garden, but he defies poetic convention, forces us to look at the rose in a different way – corrupted, diseased, and dying.

Woven into the poem, there’s a second powerful image, implicitly sexual. The worm finds its way into the rose’s ‘bed of crimson joy’ and again corrupts from within.

Every time I come back to the poem, there seems to be a new layer of meaning, rippling out from the center. It’s about the impermanence of beauty, it’s about questioning long-held beliefs, it’s about sexuality, which is about Blake’s views on England, echoing Jerusalem again. But none of these ideas are presented as arguments. Poetry works by suggestion. It doesn’t ask me to agree or disagree. It just demands that I reconsider my own experience and preconceived ideas.

What about the structure? First, what does Blake do with words? Not too much. He doesn’t try to be poetic, loading lines with fancy adjectives. Had he done so, he might have detracted from the symbolism. Nevertheless, there’s a master craftsman at work, and words are carefully chosen. The rose isn’t ‘unwell’ or ‘fading’ or ‘poorly’. It’s ‘sick’: monosyllabic, shocking, isolated at the end of that first line. It’s a ‘howling’ storm – you hear the storm in the word. Then ‘Crimson’ – not ‘red’, or ‘pink’: there’s an association with blood, and the consonant clusters in the word somehow give it sensuality.

You’ll perhaps hear the impact of the words as I read the poem aloud – the best poetry always comes to life in a live reading. Listen too for the natural rhythm of the lines. Each has a double beat, but when you analyze closely you’ll see that none of the lines are regular. If you want to impress, you can tell people that the rhythm is an Anaplectic Dimeter with Substitutions. That’s what someone on the web says anyway. I could care less. What I know is that it’s a joy to read, and it would be easy to set to music. That works for me.

So as a writer, what can I take from The Sick Rose? There’s power in symbols – and in a short poem – one central image is probably enough. I’d like to offer layers of meaning, just as Blake does. I want to offer fresh perspectives, to develop my inner eye. I don’t want to overload my poems with ‘poetic’ language. And the final edit will always be a check for clichéd ideas and words: I don’t want them to appear unless it’s deliberate.

Text with in a context is another name for mind style of the author. To start off, the background for this poem is set in England in 1794, a time when one of the only jobs a woman could get was one within
prostitution. The overall idea of the poem is the spread of syphilis from a man who has had sex with a prostitute then had sex with his wife who happens to be with child. The syphilis is then spread to the child causing severe defects and ultimately death. The Rose is a metaphor for ‘love’, a love that is sick in some way or malfunctioning. The invisible worm references to some type of bacteria or virus, which if looked at under a microscope would look like a worm, and because it is so small would be seen as ‘invisible’, meaning that the invisible worm would be syphilis, which happened to be very common in that time. “That flies in the night” means that it is spread in the night in a howling storm, referring to the howling of pleasure, or sex. This reference is to the man fornicating with the prostitute and then his wife. “And his dark secret love which thy life destroy” means that because the syphilis was spread to the child and the child’s life was lost.

3. Conclusion. This paper analyzes the text of the poem Sick Rose and an attempt is made to describe the world within the text through discourse analysis. It is observed that the text has a world of its own and things are created within the text according to the mind style of the author. It is attempted to use another concept of Fairclough, namely that “meanings are produced through interpretations” and to decipher the possible interpretations of various references of the text. In this process we have managed to identify the framework of William Blake’s ideological standpoint present in the poem.

i. The results of the first part of our analysis have shown that the key literary components of the poem can be summarized into the following concepts: pragmatism, liberalism, inclusiveness, acceptance of religious and ethnic diversity and unity.

ii. The results of the keyword analysis have shown that the most prominent words employed by William Blake are rose, worm, dark secret love, life, and a overall dominance of the personal pronoun thou and thy, which is an evidence of Blake’s inclusive perception of the woman in his time and society and there is a need for unity, understood as necessary in the ideology of a nation.

iii. The results of the references to the semiotics have shown that Blake’s choice of discourse was to strengthen the notion of love and respect for woman among the various members of the English diverse society.

iv. The overall, underlying theme of the poem is the need to be inspired towards discourse analysis as a tool for interpreting the text.

v. The discursive event and discursive structure interrelatedness ideas proposed by Fairclough have been highlighted by the results of our analysis. The discursive structure, plus, the discourse have become the subject of interpretation for the readers.

REFERENCES


