



Shakespeare and Semiotics: A Case Study of Song Lyrics from Hamlet's "How should I your true love know"

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Abstract: A literature is deep in meaning since it offers the author a choice to select words. The richness of a literature can be understood only when its hidden meaning is decoded. The interpretation of literature involves decoding complex structures. It is a tool to express emotions freely and emotions that can be understood well with metaphors. The present study is a semiotic analysis of the song "How should I your true love know" using logical semantics, which helps in interpreting the relations between the symbol and the meaning conveyed through it. The sample selected is from the play "Hamlet" which is considered to be one of Shakespeare's tragedies where the characters exhibit deep emotions of betrayal and sorrow. The song selected acts as a signifier which signifies the mindset of the character who is in deep loss and turmoil. The song is short and is well received by young adults as it carries the emotion they can empathise with. Though the song is short it conveys the crux of the play and the tragedy the character faces in the end. This characteristic feature is common in Shakespeare plays as he uses connotations and metaphors to explain the feelings of his characters and the situation, they are in. Word construction and meaning matching are a common feature during the time of Shakespeare which is well executed in these plays. However, this might be a problem for people from this era to decode the meaning of Shakespeare's language. Thus, the researchers chose to use logical semantics that can help in finding the meaning hidden in the song "How should I your true love know" from Hamlet. Qualitative research is used in this study to identify and decode the symbols using logical semantics. Purposive sampling is used in this research and the analysis helps in decoding the symbols told in the lyrics that depict the mindset of Ophelia.

Keywords: Shakespeare; Hamlet; semiotics; lyrics; decoding

Introduction

Communication is a basic need for human existence. It is facilitated effectively by using 'language' that are specific to the society through which people communicate with one another. Language exists in written and spoken form. It is human nature to speak the mind without preparation, while written



communication requires a lot of preparation, which is why oral communication is considered to be more honest (Chandler, 2007). Spoken language can be seen in day-to-day life in the form of conversation more often. This is referred to as ‘dialogue’ in films. It also appears in different dialects depending on the region it is spoken, representing nativity. Spoken language is also seen in other forms such as poems, traditional songs and also in film songs.

Songs play an important role in human life, because they are first written as lyrics and then sung with a tune that is liked by the audience (Culpeper, 2009). The lyrics written are done with great care and preparation to speak the mind in an honest way. When lyrics are written with deep meaning, they often carry meanings that can be interpreted in many ways (Danesi, (2004). According to Rifaterre’s semiotic theory, lyrics can exist in three ways such viz, displacing meaning (where one word stands for another) distorting meaning (ambiguous or more than one meaning) and creating meaning (giving meaning to things that don’t have a meaning).

Songs are often attached with emotions. They are sung to convey emotions in a strong way. Songs stay in the mind more than written words and they are passed on from one generation to the next. Songs depict sentiment which are reflected in the lyrics written. Song lyrics are also a representation of poetry since it represents many similarities. For instance, lyrics and poems have rhythm in common. Both use imaginary words, a large number of personifications and metaphors and use the content to express the feelings of the writer. Hence it can be understood that song lyrics and language do not deviate much from each other in expressing human emotions.

Lesmana (2018) explains that poems signify the signs used in the words in which the words used in poetry are equivalent to its significance, thus conveying the signifier and the signified. A similar ideology is conveyed in Riffaterre’s study which was cited in the year 1978. Poems are important in semiotics as they carry signs. Hence it is important for a reader to interpret those signs to decode the meaning. Contingent on this factual data, the researchers aimed at analysing the song lyrics by decoding the signs found in the lyrics of the songs “How should I your true love know” in Shakespeare’s tragedy play ‘Hamlet’.

The song was composed in 2012 by Wolfgang Rihm, a German Composer. He has composed the series “Ophelia sings” with three songs which are mentioned below:

1. How should I your true love know
2. Tomorrow is Saint Valentine’s Day
3. They bore him bare-faced on the bier

For the present study the researchers chose to decode the signs in the lyrics of the song “How should I your true love know” as this song is sung in a situation where Ophelia, the lady love of Hamlet feels pain and rejection due to her father’s death and separation from Hamlet. Studies show that the character of Ophelia is considered to be popular among young adult audience, as the character depicts forbidden love and rejection (Eco, 1986). This has reasons to emit strong painful emotions which young adults can empathise with. Songs are known to convey feelings better with deep meaning than dialogues. It is especially more significant when it conveys bitter emotions of human life. This motivates the research in finding the meaning behind the song lyrics “How should I your true love know”.

Signs are present in every aspect of the world. While some signs have intrinsic meaning in them, others don’t. Still the ones without meaning can also be given meaning through the process of creating meaning. This parameter of meaning creation was mentioned in Riffaterre’s semiotics which was quite popular and cited in many research works in literature and semiotics.

Semiotics is the branch of science that explains what signs convey to the receivers. Signs constitute anything ranging from words to figures. These signs might have different interpretations to different



audience based on their own perception towards what is signified in the semiotic language. This implies that a universal can be done in multiple ways for a given text (Wardoyo, 2005).

Pauzan (2018) mentions that lyrics are short poems that express emotions. Many scholarly research articles have mentioned that poetry and lyrical poetry have a very strong meaning. Poetry and lyrics exhibit commonality in length and deep meaning that is accommodated in the short length. Both represent meaning beyond what is written or exhibited.

Woedoyo (2005) said that 'signals' from texts can be structured into paradigmatic which reflects how signals are decoded and syntagmatic which reflects how signals interact with each other. The paradigmatic signs often form a category with the combination of a series and the syntagmatic signals integrate with each other to form a holistic meaning.

Methodology

Qualitative method is best suited for analysing semiotics as it provides an opportunity to explain and decode signs in detail. Qualitative research is especially useful when explaining research that involves concepts requiring in-depth explanation (Hancock, 2009). Qualitative research is also considered as a method that is suitable for interpretation of data that requires explanation of concepts that are abstract (Sugiyono, 2014). Hence the researchers have used qualitative data analysis for this study to explain the semiotic language used by Shakespeare in Hamlet's song "How should I your true love know", sung by Ophelia. This method is useful in interpreting the data related to signs and symbols that is collected in the data set in a way that is easily understood by all.

Purposive sampling technique is used for the study. The researchers chose Shakespeare's tragedy Hamlet, from all of his plays with careful consideration of factors that involve semiotic studies. Shakespeare's plays involve genres like comedy, tragedy and history. The reason for choosing tragedy is because tragedy is a sorrow feeling and the emotions are very strong in it that are expressed in song lyrics with deep meaning (Hadiyanto, 2018). The song chosen in this study is a popular song that is liked by many young adults out of the three other songs sung by Ophelia.

The lyrics in the song are also chosen based on considering factors such as the context of the scene and the circumstances in which the scene takes place. The connotations of the scene and the researcher's curiosity to interpret the meaning of certain signs in the film are factors that motivated to choose this sample.

The lyrics from the song "How should I your true love know" from Hamlet constitute the main data set of this study which included identification and analysis of syntagmatic and paradigmatic semiotic signs in the song.

Result

William Shakespeare's Ophelia's life is severely wounded by the characters surrounded by her. Her life is brutally grabbed and snatched by a circumstance which eventually takes her own life. Ophelia is characterised by William Shakespeare as a modest woman, from a noble family. Her nobility is often described by the use of words like "soft", "fair", "fragile" and "concerned" by Shakespeare. Ophelia expresses her deep feelings in a song before her death, which can be attributed to extreme sorrow. The song "How should I your true love know" is full of hidden meanings that hint the audience about her plight (Sarafin, 2017). Ophelia's song does not represent a single experience or emotion, it is the expression of sorrow over Polonius (Ophelia's father) and Hamlet (her love), as well as a close examination of Gertrude's (Hamlet's mother) interpretation of love. Ophelia deeply mourns about how patriarchy exploits women in the society. She also ruminates on the way she has been used and exploited in it. Ophelia is often judged by others as someone with poor sanity, but she is undoubtedly more matured and perceptive than those around her. Shakespeare's Ophelia sings this song to express



her distress; the lyrics contain a number of deeper connotations.
The song “How should I your true love know” has the following lyrics:

*“How should I your true love know
From another one?
By his cockle hat and staff
And his sandal shoon
He is dead and gone, Lady
He is dead and gone
At his head the grass-green turf
At his heels a stone
White his shroud as the mountain snow—
Larded all with sweet flowers,
Which bewept to the ground did not go
With true-love showers”*

For the sake of understanding the lines and its interpretations are given separately.

Lyrics:

*“How should I your true love know
From another one?”*

Interpretation:

In the midst of her mourning for her father’s death, Ophelia connects her father’s absence with the absence of true love. She doubts and questions whether Hamlet’s love for her was really a true love. In her dubious feeling, Ophelia compares Hamlet to an unknown person and believes that his love for her was non-existential like a stranger’s love for her. These lines also denote her feeling towards missing her only love Hamlet, where she suspects whether he really loves her or not. She doubts Hamlet’s feelings towards her, based on his recent encounters and conversations with her and Ophelia reflects this in her song, while she deeply mourns over her father’s death, thus telling the audience that the physical loss of her father and the emotional loss of her lover are causing her deep pain and suffering which can be weighed equally.

Lyrics:

*“By his cockle hat and staff
And his sandal shoon”*

Interpretation:

The lines “cockle hat and staff” and “sandal shoon” are familiar words used by Shakespeare to represent shoes or sandals. By these lines we understand that Ophelia is referring to Hamlet and not her father.

Lyrics :

*“He is dead and gone, Lady
He is dead and gone”*

Interpretation:

The linear sequence and repetition of lines “He is dead and gone, lady, He is dead and gone,” depicts an image of Polonius’ death and the death of King Hamlet. Though Ophelia does not have a maternal support, she felt affection, attachment towards her father to whom she obeyed continuously. The role of Polonius is significant as a father figure in Ophelia’s life and his bereavement creates an impact in the conscience of Ophelia. The death of Polonius and other tragic events drag her to stress and insanity



which makes her to outpour her devastated feelings through songs. Hence, her last song “How should I your true love know” becomes an exit to her thoughts and anxieties and an entrance to another world. Here the lines “he is dead and gone” is repeated twice, one denoting her father’s death and the other denoting the death of Hamlets love for her. This feeling of losing her love drives her to insanity and makes her end her life by drowning.

Lyrics

*“At his head the grass-green turf
At his heels a stone”*

Interpretation

These lines indicate the type of burial Ophelia’s father had, where Ophelia exclaims that he is buried under a turf of green grass and a stone is placed at his feet. This brings suspicion about the death of the deceased person, because the dead usually have a head stone placed when they are given a proper burial. Here the lines ‘heels a stone’ indicate that the burial is done in a quick way or as identification of the place where someone is killed and buried quickly. In the play, Polonius is killed accidentally by Hamlet when he mistakes him for King Claudius and stabs him. Hence the line ‘at his heels a stone’ depicts a burial that a person has had because of unnatural death.

Lyrics:

*“White his shroud as the mountain snow—
Larded all with sweet flowers,
Which bewept to the ground did not go
With true-love showers”*

Interpretation:

The above lines bring the picture of dead Polonius before the eyes of the readers where Ophelia describes that the cloth covering her father’s dead body is as white as snow. Erainbowd (2018) explains that in the snow cover mentioned here is actually not the cloth but the perfect way to cover someone under a snow who was mysteriously murdered. This unceremonious death and burial of Polonius has driven Ophelia insane where she keeps reflecting on true love, life and eventually is drowned by sorrow to death.

Conclusion

This research paper redefines the song “How should I you true love know” by identifying the syntagmatic and paradigmatic semiotic theories. The researchers analyzed the song for a better understanding which denotes alternate meanings. To understand the deeper meaning of songs, the songs are decoded which assists the reader and the listener to enjoy or endure literature as a whole. The song has a wide reach to the young adult audience as it evokes pathos in their minds. A reader must contemplate the profound connotations of each word in a song to relish the essence of literature. The freedom to interpret and understand is the main aim of literature. Hence, this research article helps the readers to have a definite knowledge and understanding about the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic signs used in Hamlet’s song lyrics “How should I your true love know” to comprehend literature works.



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