The Pulse of a Malaysian University

Ethno- and Sociolinguistic Issues and the TESOL Dimension

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CHAPTER TEN

Gender in Literary Texts: How To Capture Its Symbolism

Rosli Talif and Jariah Mohd. Jan

Introduction

In most societies men and women see themselves as individuals that must conform to the typical behavior of their sex group. From the moment they are born, Smith (1985) argues, genital anatomy becomes a cue for all kinds of beliefs, expectations and patterns of behavior. As a result, the members of some cultures maintain firm beliefs or, one may say, strong perceptions and expectations of how a man and a woman should conduct him/herself in that particular society. Earlier studies, such as, Spence and Helmreich’s (1978) and Worrell’s (1978) had already shown that members of a given society form their opinions or gain perceptions on the basis of what they think is the acceptable and most desirable pattern of behavior for male and female members of their society. This may involve a series of characteristic elements, such as, gender-biased costumes, activities, areas of expertise, social roles and gender-specific ways of communication.

Our constructs of masculinity and femininity both influence our reactions towards a man and a woman, that is, once we have categorized an individual as male or female, “...our gender constructs come into play, providing us with judgmental standards against which to compare a person, in forming impressions about their masculinity and femininity” (Smith, 1985:28). It is for this reason that men and women in a given society conform to these characteristics, since society’s expectations and perceptions shape people’s behavior in that society.

Higher institutions of learning are considered important settings for examining how gender roles should be conceived or must be enacted through everyday actions. Gender role differences may be altered or even be suppressed as most students seek, hopefully, to succeed in their studies. However, while the educational system of higher learning may reward the -supposedly gender-neutral - drive for academic success, students’ goals are
undoubtedly affected by the manner how these students can actually accommodate to such dichotomized gender roles.

Researchers from the area of reading and feminist literary critics as well have gathered valuable data on these issues. The empirical data gathered on gender-related similarities and differences among developing readers (Flynn, 1986:269) and the descriptive accounts on how texts can shape readers’ responses seem both to follow a strict gender-specific orientation. This also seems to be true for the reading patterns of relatively mature male and female readers. In literary interpretation, in particular in the area of readers’ response criticism, the text itself is not the most important component—the reader is. He creates the text as much as does the author. It is therefore that the emphasis is placed on the reader and the reading process, alongside with the interaction between reader and text. In a recent study, David et al. (2001) argued in Gender Differences in Responses to Texts that male and female students impose their own moral values on the characters and their reactions to the characters depend on their approval of their characters’ behavior.

The Study

Purpose

The present study is an attempt to expand the studies of reading research that explores the behavior of male and female college students. This is done through the analysis of a selected literary text giving a reader-oriented along an approach advocated by a group of feminist critics. More specifically, this exploratory study is designed to examine the interpretive strategies of college freshmen in their responses to William Blake’s poem The Sick Rose. The article explores the differences in gender roles as college students evaluate the poem in their English Literature course. The analysis of students’ scripts seeks to investigate the nature of the students’ responses to the poem with attention to Blake’s symbolism of gender which could lead to a formulation of different forms of reader response strategies that co-exist during the interaction between respondents and text.

Respondents

The respondents in the present study were 30 male and 30 female students who were registered in the third semester of the Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL) undergraduate distance learning program at the
these students can actually s.
eminist literary critics as well the empirical data gathered on g developing readers (Flynn, ow texts can shape readers’ p specific orientation. This also vely mature male and female the area of readers’ response t component—the reader is. hor. It is therefore that the 3 process, alongside with the t study, David et al. (2001) Texts that male and female characters and their reactions ir characters’ behavior.

lies of reading research that age students. This is done in a reader-oriented along tics. More specifically, this pretive strategies of college poem The Sick Rose. The 3 college students evaluate analysis of students’ scripts responses to the poem with ould lead to a formulation that co-exist during the

le and 30 female students Teaching of English as a learning program at the

**Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM).** These respondents were all enrolled in the course entitled Introduction to Critical Appreciation. It was their second literature course after having completed the Survey of Prose Forms and Poetry course.

**Procedure**

The data for the study were the students’ reactions to the poem by William Blake entitled The Sick Rose. For the students, it was the first time that they had read the cited poem. After reading it, they were asked to interpret the poem with special attention given to any symbolism expressed in it.

**The Instrument**

*The Sick Rose*

O rose, thou art sick! Has found out thy bed
The invisible worm Of crimson joy,
That flies in the night, And his dark secret love
In the howling storm, Does thy life destroy.

William Blake

**Authorized Interpretation**

From a Freudian perspective, argues Guerin et al. (1999), the sexual implications of Blake’s imagery are readily discernible. The rose is a classical symbol of feminine beauty. This beauty, however, is being spoiled by some agent of masculine sexuality: the worm, symbol of death, of decay, and also phallic (worm = serpent = sexual instinct). We encounter flying as a symbol of sexual intercourse. Images of night, darkness and howling storm suggest attributes of the unconscious or *id*, as in the forest of Young Goodman Brown. The second stanza sets explicit images like the idea of sensual destruction. Blake’s poem is a vaguely disturbing parable of death instinct, which psychoanalysts affirm is closely conjoined with sexual passion. The juxtaposition of crimson joy and destroy coupled with bed and his dark secret love suggests that Eros, unmitigated by higher spiritual love, is the agent of evil as well as of mortality.

Barnet (1996), in turn, suggests that a symbol is an image so loaded with a significance that is not simply literal and does not simply stand for something else; it is both, itself and something else, in the sense that it richly
The Pulse of a Malaysian University discloses the research agendas of language scholars at a Southeast-Asian university, allowing western readers to gain deeper knowledge of an Asian perspective on language issues. In Part A, the essays address diverse ethnolinguistic/sociolinguistic issues such as the Minangkabau Pasambahan, media response to terrorism, negotiation discourse, bilingualism, and status of foreign languages. In Part B, the essays focus on the teaching of English in Malaysia with emphasis on grammar, reading, writing, and literature. Altogether, these essays feature important cultural and linguistic data revealing the range of insight and knowledge that Malaysian/indonesian professionals possess on such issues.

Rodolfo Jacobson obtained degrees from the University of Panama and the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. He held professorial appointments at Cortland's State University of New York College and at The University of Texas at San Antonio from which he retired in 1986 with the rank of Emeritus. He was Visiting Professor at Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Malaysia.

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