Critical Discourse Analysis Of Robert Frost’s Poem “The Onset”

Dr. Muhammad Akram¹, Bushra Sohail², Samreen Qudsia³

¹Assistant Professor (English), Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, Khawaja Fareed University of Engineering & Information Technology, Rahim Yar Khan.

²M. Phil Scholar (English), Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, Khawaja Fareed University of Engineering & Information Technology, Rahim Yar Khan.

³M. Phil Scholar (English), Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, Khawaja Fareed University of Engineering & Information Technology, Rahim Yar Khan.

Abstract

Critical discourse analysis of the poem “The Onset” is the aim of this research paper. Norman Fairclough’s 3D model is applied for discourse analysis. This article discusses the interlink and composition that must be expressed, analyzed, and explained in the poem's text. It critically evaluates the poem's underlying objective, which is extremely didactic. It digs into the technique of Fairclough's model, and poem's intended meaning. It explains to the readers, how the unique use of simple words may change the mind set of individuals in a certain society. This paper discovers how the poet turns the passivism and cruel description of winter into hope and ends it with an optimistic note.

Keywords: Critical discourse analysis, Fairclough, The Onset, Robert Frost

Introduction

Origin and development of CDA (Critical Discourse Analysis)

Several researchers and significant people in the area have proposed various overlapping definitions for the idea of discourse. Discourse, according to Fairclough (1989), is a component in the construction of people’s social identities, knowledge systems, and beliefs. Wodak's (2002) line draws a distinction between “discourse” and “text”. He regards discourse as a system of knowledge and memory, as opposed to text, which only communicates tangible spoken statements or written records. Discourse, according to Van Dijk (1988), is more than a textual or dialogical structure inside the same setting. It is, however, “a complex communicative event” that represents a collective situation, with all characters and, their relevant situations.
“Critical Discourse Analysis”, as a field of study, originated in 20\(^{th}\) century. Its foundation was provided by “Critical Linguistics” in Britain in 1970s and developed as proper field of linguistic research (Hodge, Kress, Trew, & Paul, 1979). CL was rooted in Halliday’s “Systemic Functional Linguistics”. CL practitioners like Trew (1979) wanted to illustrate the way, ideology and ideological processes are represented as systems of process and features of linguistic system, by separating ideology in discourse. Louis Althusser (1971) contributed a lot to the theory of ideology by illustrating the relationship between social institutions and social practices. With the emergence of “Systematic Functional Linguistics”, Encoding of different text of social and personal procedures are also focused by discourse analysis. According to Fitch (2005), previous “Discourse Analysis” focuses on the core erection of text. While Halliday had a huge impact on DA since field, tenor, and mode introduced by him as Meta functions of language. According to Halliday (1979), a text is both a process and a product that is made, implanted, and understood in a social context. The word ‘critical’ is also closely connected to Discourse Analysis. Chouliaraki, Fairclough, and Van. Dijk frequently used the term “Critical Discourse Analysis” by the end of twentieth century as the CL further strengthened, enhanced, and developed. Fairclough (1995) addressed two points, first claimed that prior and early Critical Linguistics work had overlooked “interpretive practices of audiences”. The CL of early times considered that the audience and readers interpreted the text in the same manner as the analyzer did. The second point raised by Fairclough in 1995 is that the early CLs did not focus on "intertextual text analysis". He further stated that early CL’s linguistic analysis was heavily focused on clauses, with little attention paid to the higher-level features of complete texts. Although, Fairclough (1995) brought into light the limitations of early CL, yet he admired its advances as well.

Van. Dijk’s work on CDA

Discourse, according to Van Dijk (1988), is more than just a textual or dialogic framework as it is a complicated communication event which contains production and reception processes along with a social context with participants. Consequently, Van. Dijk’s media discourse analysis considers higher level properties like coherence, themes, and news headlines along with the structure, semantic analysis and the entire schematic and rhetorical aspects of texts.

Ruth Wodak’s work on CDA

Ruth Wodak bases her approach on "Sociolinguistics" and on “Frankfurt School Concepts”, notably those of Jurgen Habermas. Wodak (1996), defines “Discourse Sociolinguistics” as a type of “Sociolinguistics” that is not only committed to the contextual study of text, but also gives both variables, alike weightage. It's a method for identifying and describing the fundamental mechanisms that underpin the problems in a dialogue that are inserted in a certain context. In 1990, her study on anti-Semitism rhetoric led to the development of a method known as the "Discourse Historical Method". In the examination of a text, the historical context of conversation is a trait that distinguishes it from preceding methodologies and ideas in “Critical Discourse Analysis”. The "Discourse Historical Method Approach" is comparable to Norman Fairclough's concept of intertextuality in that it believes that language both displays and produces social processes and interactions (R. Wodak & Ludwig, 1999). The appropriate
interpretation, according to Wodak and Ludwig (1999), does not exist. Although interpretations might be plausible, they can also be incorrect. Fairclough also posed a similar question in 1995.

**Relationship of Discourse and Ideology**

Critical Discourse Analysis, as defined by Widdowson (2000), is an effort to uncover hidden ideologies in texts. The concept of “ideology” appears to be particularly essential in “Critical Discourse Analysis”, as many linguists discuss in their CDA frameworks. For Hodge and Kress (1979), ideology is a structured representation of reality. The fundamental goal of a text analysis, according to Van. Dijk (1997), is to show how diverse ideologies exhibit themselves in various types of text structures. Contexts are inextricably linked to the ideology of social systems, and writings cannot exist without them. Van Dijk's ideology analysis has three dimensions: speech, socio-cognition, and social analysis. Contexts are inextricably linked to the ideology of social systems, and writings cannot exist without them. Language and text have a key role in displaying, differentiating, modifying, and even regenerating ideologies since they are not ideologically neutral. According to Fairclough (1989), the word ‘Critical’ is added to “Discourse Analysis” in order to focus on the fundamental topic, ideology, or "core concealed agenda" in text and talk with an original context. People have varied beliefs about various aspects of the community and society in which they live. They discuss many topics in an oblique and impenetrable manner, which is why Fairclough called it "Hidden Agenda.” In short, a text reflects and generates ideology, which can only be investigated via the use of CDA frameworks. When ideology becomes invisible, it is at its most powerful. The discourse becomes natural when ideology becomes part of ordinary common sense. Speakers and writers have the ability to express them naturally and intuitively using words. The identities and constructs of the world are formed by ideology. New discourses emerge for individuals to produce and talk in the world when ideologies shift. Discourse creation and reception undergo changes for the time being. It is conceivable, for example, to create a new discursive hegemony to replace the existing one. As a result, CDA investigations are more important than DA studies since they begin with a predetermined research topic or issue and then, like an explorer, explore the cave of a speaker's or writer's mind in order to steal the hidden agenda or invisible ideology. CDA enters the mind space by meticulously describing a map based on the words of a speaker or writer, and then delves into the valuable treasure of purpose. The concealed agenda becomes obvious as soon as the aim is understood. CDA grabs the mask and explains how words may be used to become racists, moralists, conservatives, liberals, terrorists, and anti-terrorists, among other things.

**Objective of the Research**

Research objective is to find out the imbedded ideology in Robert Frost’s poem “The Onset” by using Fairclough’s model as a framework for research.

**Research Question**

What type of ideology is displayed by Robert Frost in his poem ‘The Onset’?

**Literature Review**
Because only a few studies have fulfilled this goal, critical discourse analysis of Robert Frost's poetry is generally neglected and dismissed as insignificant. CDA has grown over the last two decades as a scholarly activity involving researchers and students from a wide range of fields, and it is now suggesting new paths and road maps for innovation (R. Wodak & Chilton, 2005). It examines discourse in connection to social structures, practices, and power relations in a dialectical manner. Several CDA studies in the field of poetry have been completed in recent era, such as “The Critical Discourse Analysis of Marsiya-e-Hussain” (Rizwan, Saeed, Fayyaz, & Humanities, 2013), “Poetic Discourse Analysis of Syntactic Parallelism Biblical Hebrew Verse” (Ayars, 2013), “Discourse Analysis of the Interpersonal Meaning in Wordsworth’s poem ‘An Evening Walk’ Through Tenor and Mood” (SARI, 2014) and “Discourse Analysis of Lyric Poetry” (Harris & Humanities, 1989). Under the auspices of CDA, academics have sought to investigate Robert Frost's poetry during the last few years (Sabir, Kanwal, & Humanities University of Wah, 2018), but, the current work will seek to carry CDA of Robert Frost's poem "The Onset," which has yet to be completed, using Fairclough's three dimensional model.

Sabir, M., & Kanwal, N. (2018) critically analyzed highly didactic hidden agenda of the poem “Fire and Ice”. The study shows the internal connections and patterns that must be stated, analyzed, and explained in the content of the poem. It investigates by the methods of Fairclough's model and moreover the poem's intended meaning. It clarify to readers how the distinctive use of modest words may mold the brains of individuals in a certain community.

Research Method

The current study employs the qualitative research approach since quantitative data measurement is not required. Quantitative research, according to Lincoln (2000), is an effective technique of gathering information of a population group's culture, norms, values, attitudes, and views. Moreover, Jennifer (2000) favors the way of quantitative investigation since it is centered on flexible rather than inflexible data generating approaches.

Three-dimensional model of CDA by Fairclough

Norman Fairclough is a researcher on the CDA. In his 1989 research, he elaborates the relationship between power, language, and ideology. In 1989, Fairclough introduced a model, which he improved in 1995. His paradigm may be thought as the center of CDA studies. A theoretical foundation for CDA and text interpretation rules was firstly provided by him. Fairclough's approach is made up of a three-step analytical process that is linked to three interconnected aspects of discourse, which are listed below. Language usage is a social practice, according to Fairclough, since it involves a variety of social activities(N. Fairclough, 1992; 1998).

Text Analysis (Description)

Discourse is treated as a text in the first step, or micro-level, of his model, and the text's linguistic properties are examined. (Alhumaidi, 2013). Vocabulary selection, patterning, grammar, coherence, and text structure are all examined at this level.
Discursive Analysis (Interpretation)

The second dimension, or miso-level, is concerned with text generation, dissemination, and consumption, as well as their inconsistency influenced by social circumstances (N. Fairclough, 1992). It demonstrates the link between discourse processes and text is demonstrated at this level. Reading is the result of a connection between the text's qualities and the interpretive manners that the interpreter puts to comprehend the text. According to the nature of the text, the range of possible readings will be confined and delimited.

Social Analysis (Explanation)

The relationship of speech with social and cultural realities is considered at this level. For the true interpretation of a text, its initial context in which it emerges, is very important. The subject of this examination is the language and specific words that make-up a text. One can start the analysis from any stage, which will eventually collaborate with all the three processes at the conclusion of the conversation. The root of this framework is that discourse is an element of social existence.

Data Analysis

Robert Frost as a Symbolist (1874-1963)

Robert Lee Frost, an American poet, holds a special place in the world of literature. In “Poems for Stud” Leonard Unger and William Van O’ describe that “Frost’s poetry depicts no marked difference from the poetry of the nineteenth century”. Didactic style and moral values are profound in his poetry replete with symbolism. So his poetry needs to be understood. According to Frost, one should take poetry as first form of understanding. If poet fails to understand the whole world, it is not worth anything.

Selected Text

“The Onset” is from fourth volume “New Hampshire” published in 1923. This volume won prize and contains well known poems like “Fire and Ice”, “The Road Not Taken” and “Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening” is a lyrical poems written by frost. The poems in this anthology cover a wide range of topics with subtlety and depth. His maturity is seen in this work. Even when he's being personal, Frost keeps his emotions under check. He doesn't let his emotions get the best of him. “The Onset” is a lyrical poem and revolves around the phenomenon of seasonal cycle and reoccurring of spring. Season is the main concern in this poem. Seasonal feelings are described in the poem in an elaborate manner. Every season has its own flavor.

The Onset

“Allways the same, when on a fated night
At last the gathered snow lets down as white
As may be in dark woods, and with a song
It shall not make again all winter long
Of hissing on the yet uncovered ground,
I almost stumble looking up and round,
As one who overtaken by the end
Gives up his errand, and lets death descend
Upon him where he is, with nothing done
To evil, no important triumph won,
More than if life had never been begun.
Yet all the precedent is on my side:
I know that winter death has never tried
The earth but it has failed: the snow may heap
In long storms an undrifted four feet deep
As measured again maple, birch, and oak,
It cannot check the peeper’s silver croak;
And I shall see the snow all go down hill
In water of a slender April rill
That flashes tail through last year’s withered brake
And dead weeds, like a disappearing snake.
Nothing will be left white but here a birch,
And there a clump of houses with a church.”

Text Analysis

Textual analysis at lexical level

Symbolism

The poem is replete with symbols. In the very first line ‘night’ symbolizes death or sadness and “dark woods” and “snow” stands for death, destruction and evil. Similarly, “hissing” like hissing of snake represents evil. In the same way cycle of winter and spring represents the cycle of life and death while “peeper’s silver croak” stands for reconstruction or life and happiness after death and destruction. Moreover, writer’s “stumble” symbolizes his own gloom and disappointment at times whereas the “church” and “disappearing snake” stands for life and hope. Apart from that “withered brake” and “dead weeds” in the last lines also stand for destruction caused by evil.

Imagery
Three types of imagery are used in the poem. Visual imagery is presented through the
description like, “gathered snow”, “dark woods”, and “the snow may heap in long storms an
undrifted four feet deep”. Similarly, “snow lets down as white”, “I almost stumble” and
“disappearing snake” are the examples of the use of kinesthetic imagery. Lastly, the use of
auditory imagery is also evident through the examples like “silver croak” and “hissing”.

**Simile**

Comparison is made in this poem as use of simile is evident in line 21, where the movement of
melting snow and snake is compared as “like a disappearing snake”.

**Metaphor**

Direct comparison or metaphors are also used in the poem. In this poem the poet describes
“hissing of snow” like Milton used the words “the hissing of Satan” in “Paradise Lost”. Next
the poet is talking about death as it is human, in line 13 and 14. “…death has never tried the
earth but it has failed:” Similarly, in line 20, ‘April rill’ is compared with a fish “That flashes
tail through last year’s withered brake…”

**Over-lexicalization**

In this poem the writer has made use of over-lexicalization as well. The concept of death is
described through words like, ‘fated night’ and “dark woods”. Similarly, “snow”, “white color”
and “hissing” all stand for the concept of evil.

**Textual analysis at phonological level**

**Alliteration**

In the poem (line 3), (line 15), (line 18) and (line 11) display the use of alliteration as initial
consonant sounds are repeated in these words.

**Consonance**

If we analyze the poem then words like, “night, white”, “shall, all”, “done, won” and “dead,
weeds” etc. display the use of consonance as final consonant sounds are similar in these words.

**Assonance**

Moreover, striking repetition of vowel sounds is present in the poem “The Onset”. Words like
“ground, round”, “oak, croak”, “hill, rill” etc. are clear examples of the use of assonance.

**Textual analysis at graph logical level**

The poem is divided into two stanzas but the second stanza continuous the theme of the first
stanza.

The tone of the poem is lyrical.

Moreover, use of capitalization and punctuation marks is present.

e.g. “…More than if life had never been begun.”
Textual analysis at grammatical level

Transitivity analysis

Transitivity analysis is a powerful tool for analyzing the meanings expressed in clauses. It describes how events and processes are connected with subjects and objects. In the poem “The Onset”, the writer is describing the whole procedure of snow fall.

Example= “Always the same, when on a fated night
At last the gathered snow lets down as white
As may be in dark woods,
…”

First of all there is existential process described through the phenomenon “always the same” and “on a fated night”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actor</th>
<th>Process material</th>
<th>Attribute</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Gathered snow”</td>
<td>Let’s down</td>
<td>As white as may be in dark woods, and with a song</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>It shall not make again all winter long</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Of hissing on the yet uncovered ground,”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this line the actor “gathered snow” through a material process lets itself down. The writer here attributes the quality of the hissing of snake, to the sound of falling snow. Further, he attributes that it may not make this hissing sound again, while falling, because the ground will already be covered with it.

Example= “I almost stumble looking up and round,
As one who overtaken by the end
Gives up his errand, and lets death descend
Upon him where he is, with nothing done
To evil, no important triumph won,
More than if life had never been begun…”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actor</th>
<th>Process material</th>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Attribute</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I”</td>
<td>Almost stumble, looking</td>
<td>Up and round</td>
<td>As one who overtaken by the end</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Gives up his errand, and lets death descend</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Upon him where he is, with nothing done
To evil, no important triumph won,
More than if life had never been begun.”

Here the actor “I” through a material process “almost stumble”. He further compares his stumble with a person who surrenders himself to death, with nothing achieved or completed as if in the beginning of his life. However, the use of adverb ‘almost’ suggests that the actor didn’t actually fully stumble and he kept his balance anyhow, which suggests he didn’t actually let death get triumph over him, and it was only a momentary weakness.

Example= “Yet all the precedent is on my side:”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phenomenon</th>
<th>Existential</th>
<th>Existent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Yet all the precedent”</td>
<td>is</td>
<td>On my side</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above mentioned clause displays the use of existential process. All the previous occurrences are in favor of the writer.

Example= “I know that winter death has never tried

The earth but it has failed: …”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sensor</th>
<th>Process mental</th>
<th>Phenomena</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| “I”    | Know           | that winter death has never tried
|        |                | The earth but it has failed: the snow may heap
|        |                | In long storms an undrifted four feet deep
|        |                | As measured again maple, birch, and oak,
|        |                | It cannot check the peeper’s silver croak;”|

In the lines above the sensor “I” through a mental process “know” that “winter death has never tried
The earth but it has failed”. This clause shows writer’s optimism. He is of the view that death or destruction always fails, and no evil can be everlasting. He further believes that no matter how big the snow heap is, it cannot resist the silver voice of the spring birds.

Example= “And I shall see the snow all go down hill
In water of a slender April rill
That flashes tail through last year’s withered brake
And dead weeds, like a disappearing snake.
Nothing will be left white but here a birch,
And there a clump of houses with a church.”

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That flashes tail through last year’s withered brake
And dead weeds, like a disappearing snake.
Nothing will be left white but here a birch,
And there a clump of houses with a church” |

Ending of the poem also display the use of mental process. The writer believes that he will see the end of winter and melting of snow into the April rill, where nothing will be left white, except for a few things.

**Discursive analysis**

The poem begins with the description of snow fall on a fated night. Here the phrase “always the same”, depicts that it always happens. First stanza displays the comparison of the falling snow sound with that of, ‘hissing of snake’ which shows that snow here represents evil. Then the writer says that, “I almost stumble…” Here use of the adverb ‘almost’ shows that the writer was at the verge of fall but he managed to escape. Here fall can represent both evil and death. The poem describes the seasonal cycle along with the cycle of good and evil. Sometimes the evil spreads, leaving no good behind like the snow in winter season. Everything is dark and destroying in that season. The writer himself stumbles during this season of evil. But he does not fully surrender himself to evil.

Next stanza begins with an optimistic note when the poet says, “Yet all the precedent is on my side”. Death or evil during winter cannot stop the rebirth of good in spring. He believes that no matter how deep the snow heap is, it cannot block “peeper’s silver croak”. The sound of birds during spring season represents hope and good here. Along with the symbolization, element of exaggeration is also present in this stanza. The description of the snow four feet deep, is as if
he himself has measured it and it is the exact measurement. Moreover, the poet is hopeful that he will see the spring again along with the melting of snow in an April rill. Here “dead weeds” and “disappearing snake”, also represent the ending of death and evil. In second last line the poet says that “Nothing will be left white but here a birch, And there a clump of houses with a church….” which means white color also symbolizes evil and it will no longer be there except for a few birch trees and houses. The poem ends on the note that evil or death cannot completely end even in spring season and whiteness will be there on some birch trees and houses along with the church. Church stands for hope and good, and neither good nor evil can truly triumph over one another and it is a cyclic process.

Social analysis

Poem “The Onset” like many other Frost’s poems includes natural elements. He beautifully describes the cyclic nature of good and evil through cyclic seasons. His description of snow, woods and birches in the poem is a New England setting. Then presence of evil along with the good describes the true nature of human world that neither good nor evil can be completely vanished. Moreover, it describes the courage and efforts of poet that he keeps his eyes on the “silver croak” and “April rill” even during the fierce winter storm, which displays his triumph over weakness. In the end we can say that the poem is replete with deep meanings. A simple seasonal snow fall is used as a medium to describe the whole struggle of good and evil in human nature and the world. And finally, it ends on an optimistic note that no matter how hard the situation is, one should remain hopeful in all kinds of circumstances.

Result

The analysis of the poem “The Onset” using Fairclough’s 3D model presents profound ideology of the poet in this poem. The deeper meaning of life and death, and good and evil is described using the symbols of winter and spring. The poem is divided into two stanzas. First stanza depicts the spread of death and evil through the symbol of snow season. While the second stanza describes hope and optimism that all this destruction will end soon and spring is not far behind. The poet has made use of figurative language to give a deeper meaning to the poem and leave an ever-lasting effect on the reader. The transitivity analysis shows the use of material and mental processes as poet himself is experiencing everything and believes in the arrival of good and ending of the evil.

Study limitations

The study is limited only to the one poem of Frost while, various genres of the literature also can be analyzed by applying the Fairclough’s model.

Suggestion

More poems of Frost can be analyzed through CDA to better understand his writings.


