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A cognitive-stylistic analysis of Page's *Real Estate* and Wasserstein's *Isn't it Romantic*

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بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

"وَقُلْ رَبِّ زِدْنِي عِلْمًا"

(سورة طه : الآية ١١٤)

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Abstract

The present study is a cognitive-stylistic analysis of two modern feminist plays, namely *Real Estate* (1985), by the English dramatist Louise Page, and *Isn't it Romantic* (1983), by the American playwright Wendy Wasserstein. Both plays represent the conflict of modern women between complying with the socially-prescribed role for women as mothers and housewives and pursuing a professional career. The leading female characters in both plays experience the same dilemma of being torn between satisfying the social and filial demands and moving along in the path of self-achievement. The stylistic approach adopted is a cognitive approach, which is typically a traditional linguistic analysis coupled with theories of cognitive processing in an attempt to show the influence of social cognition on the understanding of the leading characters. The main purpose of the study is to examine how Culpeper's (2000, 2001) cognitive-stylistic approach helps in analyzing the character of the protagonists in both plays as they engage in cross-gender interaction and intergenerational conflict. The analytic framework incorporates Halliday's (2004) theory of functional grammar, coupled with Hasan's (1985) cline of dynamism theory. The cognitive-stylistic approaches employed include Fiske and Neuberg's (1990) continuum model of schema instantiation and development, and Steen's (2003) model of analyzing cognitive scenarios of love relationships. The analysis is also informed by findings in the field of conversation analysis. The findings of the study suggest that the female protagonists in both plays defy the social constraints imposed by marital and filial bonds. Both characters go through a significant change and choose life of independence, liberty and absolute personal integrity.

Introduction

0.1 Context of the study

The cognitive stylistic approach has been previously employed in the analysis of literary works in many studies, especially by the British linguist Jonathan Culpeper who advocated applying this framework to dramatic characters. Culpeper (2000) argues that the abstract concepts about real-life people stored in the audience/readers' mind influence their understanding of a given dramatic character. Culpeper (2000) also sees that applying theories of social cognition and cognitive psychology to literary characters can result in more plausible analyses (p.291). This way, he challenges the assumption that the existence of the literary character is limited to the text.

In his study entitled "A cognitive approach to characterization," Culpeper (2000) applies, as the title suggests, this cognitive framework to his analysis of the character of Katherina, the protagonist in Shakespeare's masterpiece *The Taming of the Shrew*, a dramatic masterpiece which has been analyzed from a literary critical perspective. What Culpeper considered to be perfect to distinguish his method of approaching the character of Katherina is to add psychological theories to the traditionally used linguistic theories.

0.1.1 Plot summary of *Real Estate*

The selected plays deal with similar issues, focusing on the role of women in modern age and their struggle between social expectations and their advancement in the world of business. Page's *Real Estate* represents the conflict of an elderly mother between continuing to practice her job as a successful estate agent and surrendering to her daughter's persuasion to give up her job and dedicate herself to taking care of her coming child. Jenny, Gwen's daughter, is apparently self-centered and always foregrounds her personal benefits to filial relationships. She deserts her mother for twenty years before the action of the play starts and only comes for utterly self-serving purposes. What is most striking about the play is the reversal of gender roles; Gwen is the breadwinner of the family, while Dick, her husband, is a retired man who dedicated himself to domestic affairs and housewifery. Gwen noticeably enjoys strength of character and invincible determination; she announces it clearly from the very beginning that her integrity and freedom of choice should never be bound by any external forces:

Gwen: It is my own life. I throw it away as
I please. (Page, 1985, p.135)

Gwen seems no longer constrained by the social codes that oppressively framed the status of women. The dissolution of the concept of male superiority is utterly clear in the way she refers to Dick's undistracted interest in housework saying:

Gwen: Dick's province, not mine. He's the one
who knows how long the mince has been in the

freezer. How many sheets there are which haven't been turned edge to edge. Don't think that we can't afford new sheets. We can, easily. It's just we prefer them to be linen and at our-that's what we prefer. (Page, 1985, p.135)

Another interesting point in this play is the mother-daughter interaction of Gwen and Jenny. From the initial observation of the play, Jenny's character seems similar to her mother's in many aspects, however, she is, unmistakably, highly materialistic. Gwen is a frustrated mother who is grieved by her daughter's negligence and manipulation so as to take over her business on the pretext of her advancement in age. When Jenny visits her mother after twenty years of absence, she does not mention the reason of the visit. Realizing that her daughter is primarily motivated by her personal interests, Gwen rejects her imposed presence and chooses her freedom of action; when Dick tries to convince her to accept her daughter's suggestion to dedicate herself for the rest of her life for bringing up her coming grandchild, she deliberately refuses.

Real Estate is one of Page's several dramatic pieces that represent women in their quest for identity and equality with the social members of the other gender. However, what gives it its most distinguishing tenet is that it marks the change of women's idea about family and marriage.

0.1.2 Plot summary of *Isn't it Romantic*

Moving to Wasserstein's play *Isn't it Romantic* (1983), we find that it represents a totally different female character who suffers weakness of character, indetermination, and inability to fit into the expectations of the patriarchal society. Janie, the protagonist, is a twenty-seven-year-old young woman of limited experiences in life. She is torn between two contrasting choices: starting a professional career as a writer and giving up her wish of self-accomplishment on accepting a generous offer of marriage to an extremely attractive young physician.

The change of women's views about marriage is marked and highlighted in this play. Being constrained by her own passivity and inability to improve her status as she wishes, Janie briefly finds relief in the thought of giving up all her efforts for the sake of self-achievement through getting married to Marty Sterling, the handsome physician she meets by coincidence and appears later to be an old acquaintance of her brother's. Marty enjoys the typical qualities of a modern prince charming: a material wealth, a comely appearance, and a prestigious professional career. Janie gets attracted and is directly triggered to think of him as a good husband.

Janie and Harriet, her friend, appear to have contrasting opinions concerning marriage in modern age. Harriet, as proven by her action and her way of choosing her life partner, is totally against choosing a husband for his attractive appearance or material wealth.

Later, Harriet is given the chance to articulate the wish of her generation of women to achieve success in both marriage and practical life.

Harriet seemingly experiences a hardship in sticking to the requirements of her current status and feels a desire to retain the freedom she enjoyed in her adulthood. The way her mother replies to her question reflects an inability to negotiate, assuring the lack of mutual understanding as a result of generation gap. This problem is similarly experienced by Gwen and Jenny in Page's play, as well as by Janie and her mother, Tasha.

Janie's relationship with her parents is equally confused. When she is asked by Marty about their relationship, she replies in a way that reflects their emotional detachment:

Marty: Are you close to them?

Janie: In a way. She's a dancer and he's very sweet. It's complicated. (Wasserstein, 1983, p.97)

Janie's romantic nature is further revealed, stressing her inability to identify with a materialistic society that only favors those who can identify with its norms. Janie is frustrated by her inability to achieve most of her girlhood dreams and the wishes she used to cherish as a young school girl and later seemed far-fetched and rather impossible.

With the development of action in the play, Janie and Marty get more acquainted with each other as their characters are gradually exposed. Despite the couple's initial mutual understanding and their harmonious attachment, they clash because of the difference in their perspectives on life. By the end of the play, Marty is revealed to be embracing the social ideology that assigns women to a subservient social role. He appears to be against Janie's attempts to explore practical life in favor of co-operating with him to found a family together, yet the defining principles of this foundation is exclusively his own.

0.1.3 The comparability of the two plays under study

Simpson (2004) posits that the most appropriate circumstances for comparing texts should include related or contrasting themes, as well as a constructional similarity (p.166). The first point of similarity is in theme, as both plays epitomize men and women in their conflict for reasons imposed by the nature of life in modern society, while the second is tackling typical experiences of modern female women, including their attitudes towards marriage and exploring the world of business exactly as men do. As for the third point of similarity, it is the reference to confused filial relationships between parents and their daughters. Yet another point of relatedness of similarity is that Gwen and Janie, the protagonists in both plays, evidently have similar personality types. Despite the fact that Gwen is an accomplished estate agent who seems practical and Janie is a romantic dreamer who does not seem determined enough to attain her dream of self-accomplishment, both characters prefer the maintenance of sound human relationships and preservation of filial bonds to material satisfaction. Despite

this difference, both Gwen and Janie choose uncompromised personal integrity and deliberate freedom of action at the end of both plays.

Both Gwen and Janie have an unfavorable experience concerning their family ties. The inability to interact smoothly with their interlocutor, the daughter in Gwen's case and the mother in Janie's case, is commonly shared by the protagonist in both plays. Both protagonists confront the same conflict between filial ties and personal integrity and both of them show the same tendency to overcome any binding external force, even if it is their relationships with their family members.

0.2 Objectives and research questions

Consequently, the first aim of this study is to examine the influence of gender perception and social cognition on cross-gender communication in the two selected modern plays and to what extent the leading male and female characters adhere to the stereotypes associated with their gender role by social practices. The second aim is to analyze the relationships between parents and their grown-up children, in this case their daughters, shedding light on this form of interaction and the factors that lead to the success or failure of their communication. The struggle of female social members in their pursuit of success in professional life and/or creativity is another focal point, which is studied applying the linguistic approaches suitable in this respect, which are functional grammar, conversational analysis and schema theory.

The research questions are:

1. How does an eclectic linguistic approach that includes the application of functional grammar, schema theory and conversation analysis help in analyzing cross-gender and mother-daughter interaction in both plays?
2. To what extent do male and female characters in the plays adhere to the social stereotypes inherent in the prevailing social ideology, in the light of functional grammar and schema theory?
3. How does a cognitive-stylistic framework, in the light of functional grammar, assist in understanding the development of the protagonists in both plays?

0.3 Division of the thesis

The introduction is an outline of the main points of the study, its dimensions and purpose. The previous studies that explore gender relations are reviewed and tentatively mentioned. The objective of the present study and the context of the plays under analysis are specified. The cognitive-stylistic approach to character analysis and the studies that applied it are referred to.