

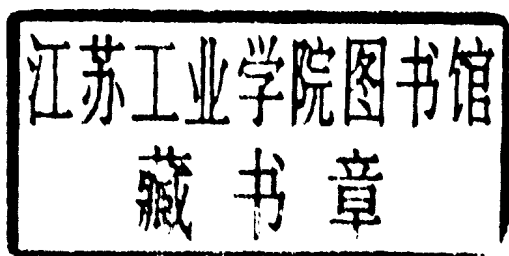
Textual
explorations

Language &
world creation
in poems &
other texts

ELENA SEMINO

LANGUAGE AND WORLD CREATION IN POEMS AND OTHER TEXTS

Elena Semino



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Preface

This book owes its existence to a number of people who, in different ways, created the conditions in which I could think, write, and re-write. My greatest debt is to Mick Short, who supervised the thesis on which the book is based and always boosted my confidence and sharpened my thinking. The following friends and colleagues gave me the benefit of their advice on drafts of chapters: Caroline Clapham, Geoff Leech, Colin Lyas, Gerard Steen, Katie Wales, and, last but certainly not least, Paul Werth, whose untimely death deprived current text-world theory of its central figure.

The book is dedicated to my mother, Marilena, and to the memory of my father, Gianfranco. They, together with the rest of my family, instilled in me a quiet sense of discipline and self-confidence that is pretty much essential in academic work, and many other things as well. I am also grateful to my daughter, Emily, for waiting to be born until the manuscript had been nearly completed, and to Jonathan for sharing everything with me.

How to use this book

Although one of the main aims of this book lies in bringing together different approaches to the analysis of poetic text worlds, each of the three parts in which the book is divided is self-standing and can be read independently. Each part contains an overview of the literature, a critical discussion of the field, and a number of text analyses. Part I is particularly relevant to readers interested in the traditional stylistic approach to the analysis of poetry. This approach is applied to a range of poems in order to offer new insights into the use and effects of the articles and deictics in poetry. Part II is particularly relevant to readers interested in the application of possible-world theory in literary studies. The most innovative aspect of this part of the book is that it shows how

possible-world frameworks, which have been almost exclusively applied to the study of narrative fiction, can be productively extended to the analysis of poetry. Part III is particularly relevant to readers interested in discourse comprehension, psycholinguistics and the use of cognitive theories in text analysis. Different versions of schema theory are compared and contrasted in detail, and reference is made to other influential models of cognition, such as Parallel Distributed Processing and Relevance Theory.

The 'Suggestions for Further Analysis' at the end of each Part are meant for readers who are interested in trying out on other texts the analytical approaches demonstrated in the book. In each case I start by directing readers to further examples from poetry. I then move on to other literary genres (including short stories, novels and plays), and finish with a selection of non-literary texts (notably advertisements and jokes). As a consequence, the sequencing of the suggested analyses does not always follow the sequencing of topics in previous chapters. I do not provide 'answers', but offer guidance in the form of multiple questions, brief comments and references to specific points and concepts in preceding chapters. I also often suggest comparisons between new texts and some of the texts I analyse in the course of the book. Where relevant, I point the reader to published analyses of the texts I refer to and to further readings. I will be grateful to receive any feedback on my 'Suggestions', as well as on the book as a whole, at the following E-mail address: E.Semino@lancaster.ac.uk.

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Introduction

1.1 The topic of this book

When we read, we actively infer a text world 'behind' the text. By 'text world' I mean the context, scenario or type of reality that is evoked in our minds during reading and that (we conclude) is referred to by the text. This book focuses on the creation of text worlds in poetry. I will explore different ways in which poetic text worlds can be described and classified, and investigate how they are constructed in the processing of texts. In order to do this, I will consider different approaches to the definition of text worlds drawn from theories and methods of analysis developed in text linguistics, literary semantics and cognitive psychology. Although my main focus throughout is a detailed analysis of the language of texts, I will gradually build up an interdisciplinary approach to the study of poetry, in which linguistic analysis is complemented by concepts and theories developed outside language studies. A wide range of British and American poems in English are analysed, dating mostly, although not exclusively, from the twentieth century. In addition, I will provide examples of how the same type of analysis can be applied to the study of other text-types, both literary and non-literary.

The process of constructing worlds from texts is often described as central to comprehension. Enkvist, in particular, has argued that the interpretability of texts cannot be explained simply in terms of grammatical correctness and of explicit links between sentences, but ultimately depends on the readers' ability to imagine meaningful worlds in their interaction with the language of texts:

... a text is interpretable to those who can build around that text a scenario, a text world, a state of affairs, in which that text makes sense.

(Enkvist 1991: 7; see also Enkvist 1989;
Enkvist and Leppiniemi 1989)

The following is one of Enkvist's examples:

The ball rolled slowly across the line. The goal-keeper was writhing in pain. The fans shouted. The dance of triumph was interrupted by a whistle. The referee declared the kick offside. (Enkvist 1991: 6)

In spite of the absence of overt links between sentences (such as conjunctions, cross-reference, etc.), Enkvist argues, this text is easily interpretable for people who have some knowledge, however limited, about football: the text world involves a football match where one of the teams has a goal disallowed by the referee. The process of interpretation can be described as an interaction between the text and the reader's background knowledge, which results in the construction of a text world characterized by a set of specific states of affairs (Enkvist 1989: 166 and throughout).

When we read poetry, the process of constructing meaningful worlds around texts may not be as straightforward as in the case of Enkvist's example, but the results can be considerably more challenging and rewarding. Talking about the interpretative difficulties posed by modern poetry, Enkvist makes the following remark:

Perhaps the reason why many people dislike modern poetry is that they lack the imaginative ability of surrounding their texts with a meaningful scenario; to others, such exercises of the imagination may be a source of pleasure.

(Enkvist 1991: 9; see also Enkvist 1989: 183)

While exploring different approaches to the study of poetic text worlds in the course of this book, I will touch on some of the potential difficulties that Enkvist hints at in his comment. As a preliminary example, I will begin to discuss the poem that will be analysed in detail in the final chapter of the book, 'The Applicant' by Sylvia Plath:

THE APPLICANT

First, are you our sort of a person?

Do you wear

A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,

A brace or a hook,

Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,

5

Stitches to show something's missing? No, no? Then

How can we give you a thing?

Stop crying.

Open your hand.

Empty? Empty. Here is a hand

10

To fill it and willing
 To bring teacups and roll away headaches
 And do whatever you tell it.
 Will you marry it?
 It is guaranteed 15

To thumb shut your eyes at the end
 And dissolve of sorrow.
 We make new stock from the salt.
 I notice you are stark naked.
 How about this suit— 20

Black and stiff, but not a bad fit.
 Will you marry it?
 It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof
 Against fire and bombs through the roof.
 Believe me, they'll bury you in it. 25

Now your head, excuse me, is empty.
 I have the ticket for that.
 Come here, sweetie, out of the closet.
 Well, what do you think of that?
 Naked as paper to start 30

But in twenty-five years she'll be silver,
 In fifty gold.
 A living doll, everywhere you look.
 It can sew, it can cook,
 It can talk, talk, talk. 35

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.
 You have a hole, it's a poultice.
 You have an eye, it's an image.
 My boy, it's your last resort.
 Will you marry it, marry it, marry it. 40

This is not an easily interpretable poem, particularly at a first reading. Its difficulty does not result from lexical or grammatical complexity, but from the fact that the construction of a text world involves a number of problems: (i) the identity of the speaker is rather hard to pin down (an interviewer? a seller? a father?); (ii) apparently contradictory information is given about the gender of the addressee (*Do you wear . . . rubber breasts* in line 5, but *My boy* in line 39); (iii) some of the objects referred to by the speaker are likely to be perceived as impossible, since they do not exist in the actual world (*a rubber crotch* in line 5, a suit that is *shatterproof, proof / Against fire and bombs through the roof* in lines 23–4); (iv) the

speaker's words are reminiscent of several types of situations that readers are likely to be familiar with (interviews, sales pitches, marriage arrangements), but the world of the poem is not fully consistent with the reader's knowledge and expectations about any of them.

These problems will be discussed in depth in Chapter 9. What begins to emerge from my list of interpretative difficulties, however, is the possibility of describing the poem's text world in at least three different ways, namely as:

- (a) a situation of discourse involving a speaker, a hearer, and a number of third-person referents within a particular communicative context;
- (b) a set of states of affairs that are partly impossible if compared with the 'real' world;
- (c) a cognitive construct that arises in the interaction between the text and the reader's previous knowledge.

These descriptions correspond to the three approaches to the analysis of text worlds that I will discuss in the course of the book. The first of these approaches is commonly adopted in the study of poetry. The second has been developed in literary studies for the analysis of narrative fiction, but has seldom been applied to poetic texts. The third is more innovative, since it involves the application to poetic text analysis of theories and concepts that originated in artificial intelligence and cognitive psychology. In order to introduce and contextualize these approaches in more detail, I will now consider some general issues on the role of text-world construction in the interpretation of literary texts.

1.2 Literature, text worlds and contexts

The process whereby a context or world is built around a particular text has often been presented as a peculiarity of literary communication, resulting, it is argued, from the fact that literary texts, unlike other texts, exist in a contextual vacuum. The following claims have been made in relation to poetry in particular:

The poet is both free of context and bound to create it: free of any binding real context, he is bound to supply verbally the context that gives objects attributes, scale, setting and significance.

(Nowottny 1965: 43)

Poetry is virtually free from the contextual constraints which determine other uses of language, and so the poet is able – in fact compelled – to *create* situations within his poems.

(Leech 1969: 187; author's italics)

[Poetry] is essentially dislocated from context, set aside: it presupposes no previous or existing situation outside that created by itself. . . . It exists apart, complete in itself, self-contained in its own pattern.

(Widdowson 1984: 146)

The big variable in the significance and implications of these statements is, of course, the meaning of the word 'context'. In this section I will discuss the relationship between literary communication and different types of contexts, and reflect on the resulting consequences for the study of literary text worlds (see Fowler 1986: 86–90 for a similar discussion).

One fairly obvious sense in which literary communication may be said to be context-free is the fact that it does not take place in a situational context shared by addresser and addressee. Rather, the producer and the receiver of the message (the author and the reader), are typically dislocated both across space and time. As a consequence, the subject-matter of the text is independent from any specific extra-linguistic context of communication. This contrasts, for example, with classroom teaching or party chit-chat, where communication may rely upon, and is often directly influenced by, the immediate setting of the interaction.

The existence of a split between the context of production and the context of reception of the text, however, is a common feature of a wide range of discourse types, including the vast majority of writing (e.g. letters, newspaper articles, the book you are reading now) as well as some spoken forms of communication (e.g. leaving messages on telephone-answering machines). More importantly, face-to-face communication does not necessarily revolve around the shared communicative situation, but is often characterized by a displacement between the topic of talk and the setting in which talk takes place: a conversation at a party, for example, may involve both comments on the furniture in the room and jokes, anecdotes or stories where the immediate situation is largely irrelevant. Smith (1982) captures this opposition by drawing a distinction between 'situation-dependent' language, i.e. language whose interpretation is directly dependent on the situation in which it is uttered, and 'context-dependent' language, i.e. language whose interpretation depends solely on the interplay between the words of the text and

the interpreter's previous knowledge (in Smith's description, 'context' corresponds to the linguist's 'co-text' (e.g. Brown and Yule 1983)).

If a dislocation between addresser and addressee and a displacement between subject-matter and situational context are common features of human communication, why is it that these aspects are often singled out in discussions of literary discourse in general and poetry in particular?

As for the dislocation between addresser and addressee, it may be argued that literary communication is often associated with larger historical, geographical and cultural 'gaps' than many other discourse types: while today's editorial in *The Times* is unlikely to be widely read after tomorrow, Wordsworth's poems are still read today and will probably be read for hundreds of years to come, in Britain and elsewhere, and both in English and in translation. The main answer to the question in the previous paragraph, however, is to do with the tendency, or possibility, for literature to be fictional: while we expect the world of *The Times* editorials to be related and faithful to specific states of affairs in the real world, we do not make similar demands of poetry. As Leech puts it, poems are not necessarily fictitious, but 'they leave the choice between fact and fiction open' (Leech 1969: 196). In this sense, the relationship between the worlds of literary texts and 'real' contexts in Nowotny's sense, can be somewhat looser and freer than in other types of discourse. Moreover, the worlds of poems may involve fictional speakers and fictional addressees interacting in fictional contexts of utterance: the relationship between the first-person speaker in Plath's 'The Applicant' and the poet herself, for example, is not the same as the one we expect between the first-person speaker in a personal letter and the person who wrote it (see Widdowson 1975: 53). This explains a fairly general tendency to treat poetic text worlds primarily as fictional contexts of discourse (e.g. Fowler 1986; Leech 1969; Widdowson 1975), which corresponds to approach (a) in the previous section.

What is obscured in the quotations given at the opening of this section is the fact that, in spite of the dislocation between authors and readers, literary communication does take place in a context. In this case, by 'context' I mean the broad complex of institutions, activities, roles, functions and conventions that each culture associates with the production, distribution and interpretation of texts that are regarded as literary (see, for example, Pratt 1977; Schmidt 1982). In contemporary Western cultures for example,