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## **Interpreting Poetry through the Prism of Semiotics: Unveiling Layers of Meaning and Symbolism in Literary Discourse**

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### **Abstract**

Poetry is an art form that is imbued with beauty. The term "poetic" itself carries a special meaning in the context of poetry. As a forum for expression, poetry is a means for individuals to convey their feelings. The use of language in poetry tends to be more structured and full of intensity compared to the language used in everyday communication. This causes poetry to have a highly valued value in society's view. On the other hand, semiotics is a scientific discipline and analytical method used to reveal the meaning contained in the signs that appear in an object. In this research, a literature review method approach was used, where data was obtained from relevant literature and then analyzed according to the focus of the problem being discussed. After identifying the matrix or keywords in a poem, the next step is to determine the main theme in the poem, which aims to extract the core essence of the poetic work.

Keywords: Poetry, Semiotics, Prism, Interpreting

### **1. Introduction**

Giving meaning or interpretation to a literary work to provide benefits and contributions to the lives of the people who enjoy it can be done through various approaches and theories in literary science. Interpretation and concretization of literary works academically and scientifically often uses various theoretical approaches and methods such as formalism, structuralism, historical approaches, semiotics, and so on.

The quality, reliability, and trust in the interpretation results and meaning of a literary work largely depend on three main factors: the type of literary work being analyzed, the literary approach and theory applied, and the abilities of the literary analyst himself. Each literary genre, be it drama, prose, or poetry, has its own characteristics, features, and style that differentiate one genre from another. Apart from that, in terms of the approaches and theories used, each literary approach and theory has its own strengths and weaknesses. Then, the variability of interpretation depends greatly on the expertise and experience of the literary observer. In other words, literary theories and approaches have varying levels of suitability for a literary work.

Although various literary theories and approaches have different levels of suitability, all of these theories and approaches can be applied to analyze, study and explore the meaning of a literary work. However, each literary theory and approach has advantages and disadvantages in its application. For example, the study of prose may be more suited to using a structural genetic approach. On the other hand, drama analysis may be more in line with a sociological approach, while literary reception theory is often used to understand the novel. Additionally, poetry may be better approached using dynamic structure theory or semiotics. Apart from that, a combination of two or more existing theories is also often used in literary analysis.

It is important to choose an appropriate method to capture the essence and meaning of a literary work, which is in line with the nature and characteristics of the literary work itself. It needs to be understood that literary works use language as their main medium of expression. However, before a language is processed into a literary work, the language already has meaning in accordance with existing norms and rules. In research conducted by Pradop (2003) quoted by Preminger, it was argued that the meaning of language before it is used in a literary context can be placed in the realm of first level semiotics.

In this context, the use of language in literary works is an effort to explore deeper and more complex meanings from the language itself. Language is used as a tool to convey thoughts, emotions and conceptions that cannot be conveyed in other ways. However, the language used in literary works is still a pre-existing language, with rules and regulations that regulate its use.

In Preminger's understanding, literary works can be considered as a transformation of language from the first semiotic level to a higher semiotic level. This means that in a literary context, language undergoes a transformation process that elevates it from a basic or literal meaning to a deeper, complex, and often ambiguous meaning.

This understanding underlines that literary works are not just the literal use of language, but rather the use of language as a medium to express deeper, abstract, and often hidden meanings behind

words. Thus, literary analysis must consider this second level semiotic dimension to truly understand the essence and meaning contained in a literary work.

## **2. Literature Reviews**

Poetry is a work of art that makes special use of language to convey deep meaning and emotions. The term "poetic" itself contains connotations of beauty and uniqueness inherent in poetry. Djoko Pradopo, in his thinking, states that something can be called poetic if it is able to arouse feelings, attract attention, or trigger a clear response, as well as arouse emotions in general. Therefore, to understand the meaning of poetry more deeply, it is necessary to look for the essence and characteristics contained in it.

As a branch of literature, poetry has been an object of interest for researchers and literature lovers from ancient times to the present. According to Plato, poetry comes from deep inspiration, such as inspiration received by Sufi experts or prophets, or from feelings of intense love. Sigmund Freud also added that inspiration is an extraordinary way for poets to convey desires that cannot be expressed in the real world.

In his understanding, poetry can be interpreted as the use of language that is denser and more intensive compared to everyday language. Etymologically, the word "poetry" comes from the Greek *poieima* which means "to make" or *poesis* "making", which was later adopted in English to become "poetry". Thus, poetry can be seen as a "making" or "creation" through the use of specific language. Through poetry, a person creates a unique world, which may contain a message or image of a certain atmosphere, both physical and mental.

From a physical perspective, poetry is characterized by rich and compelling linguistic expression. In Colridge's view, poetry is the poet's carefully chosen use of language. This means that every word and sentence in poetry is carefully chosen to achieve a certain effect and meaning. This emphasizes that every element in poetry has an important role in conveying the message and atmosphere desired by the poet.

According to Abrams, poetry is an indirect expression in words, or rather the rhythmic words of several emotions that dominate one powerful feeling or feelings that arise directly from within the poet. Poetry is a medium for people who want to express their feelings. The language used by poetry is trimmer and more intensive than the language used for daily conversation. This intensive disclosure is what makes poetry valuable in the eyes of humans. As a literary work, poetry has its characteristics. Namely, it has a density in its writing. As a genre, poetry is different from novels, plays, or short stories. The difference lies in the density of the composition with strict conventions so that poetry does not give the poet open space to freely create.

It is challenging to interpret the meaning of a poem or poem in words because if the sentence is mentioned, it will dominate the human soul by providing a mirror with various viewing angles. Furthermore, the various viewing angles depending on the person and the soul who sees it and his desires. Robert Forst said that poetry begins with pleasure and ends with wisdom. However, learning to read poetry is an experience that, at first, is annoying and ends in confusion. This is because the composition of poetry is different from writing or the way of everyday speaking, and poetry often does not show themes and meanings (Badrun, 1989, p. 1).

We can conclude that poetry is an inner experience voiced through language by poets. Because poetry is presented to create an inner experience, when reading poetry, we are often a bit difficult to find the meaning or theme of the poem. The experts' explanations above show that poetry has a very complex definition because poetry itself is present in a way that is also complex to explain. *Inner experience* is an experience that is difficult to analyze physically. The poets try to express the inner experience through language. Robert Fost said that poetry is expressed differently from writing or everyday language, so that poetry readers must activate their imagination so that they find the poet's experience through his poetry.

Semiotics is a scientific discipline and analytical method that can examine the signs contained in an object to find out the meaning contained in the object. Semiotics comes from the Greek "Semeion", which means sign. Semiotics is the study of signs (signs). In Zoest's view, anything that can be observed or made observable can be called a sign. Moreover, signs are not limited to objects (Zoest, 1993:18).

Semiotics or semiology is the study of signs. The origin of the name comes from the Greek, semeion, which means sign. In English, semiotics is known as semiotics, and is sometimes also referred to as semiology, with the same meaning, namely the science of signs.

In terms of terminology, semiotics can be explained as a branch of science that investigates various objects and events in all cultures as signs. Semiotics includes various theories that describe how signs represent objects, ideas, circumstances, situations, feelings and conditions that are attached to things outside the sign itself.

Semiotics has become part of a broad tradition in communication theory. The semiotic tradition consists of a variety of theories that examine the way signs represent things outside themselves, including objects, ideas, states, situations, feelings, and conditions.

As explained by Littlejohn in his work "Communication Theories of Human Communication", 9th edition, semiotics aims to reveal the meanings contained in a sign or interpret these meanings. Thus, semiotics seeks to understand how communicators construct messages and

how these messages are interpreted by recipients. It includes an analysis of how signs are used and understood in communication contexts.

Semiotics, as a science that studies signs, introduces three essential components: signs, symbols and signals. All three are important in facilitating communication between subject and object, forming the foundations of semiotic understanding. Signs are the main elements in semiotics that are used to show or describe something to the subject. These can be physical objects, events, written language, or actions. Signs always refer to entities that can be observed or felt. Symbols are concepts that help subjects understand objects better. The relationship between subjects and objects in symbols often involves cultural, situational and conditional aspects. Symbols have dynamic, subjective, and figurative meanings, often found in literary works such as poetry, fictional stories, or drama, in the form of color symbols, objects, sounds, atmosphere, tone, or imaginative visualization. A gesture is an action performed by a subject to inform an object at a certain moment. Gestures are temporary and can turn into signs or symbols if they are no longer used. Even though the three (signs, symbols and gestures) have differences in language, color and other aspects, they all play a role in forming communication between subjects and objects in a semiotic context.

### **3. Research Method**

This research adopts a literature review approach, which involves collecting reading materials and literature relevant to the research topic. After these materials are collected, an analysis of the research content is carried out with a focus on solving the problems that have been determined. The aim of this approach is to organize and translate data in a comprehensive manner, thereby enabling the identification of relevant data that can be analyzed further.

Semiotic analysis is an attempt to uncover the meaning contained in signs, including the hidden meaning behind text, advertisements or news. It is important to note that sign systems are highly contextual and can vary depending on who is using the sign. In this context, the interpretation of the meaning of a sign not only depends on the intrinsic characteristics of the sign itself, but also on the social context, culture and experience of the subject who receives it.

Through a semiotic analysis approach, the research aims to explore the meaning contained in various signs. This includes an understanding of how these signs are represented, received, and interpreted by individuals or society. By paying attention to the context and conventions surrounding the use of signs, semiotic analysis helps in uncovering layers of meaning that may be hidden behind a sign, as well as in understanding how the sign functions in communication.

Apart from that, semiotic analysis also considers the important role of context in the interpretation of signs. Social, cultural, and historical context can influence the meaning of a sign, so

accurate interpretation requires a deep understanding of that background. By taking these contextual aspects into account, semiotic analysis can provide deeper insight into how signs are produced, received and interpreted in various communication situations.

Thus, through a semiotic analysis approach, this research seeks to explore the meaning contained in various signs, as well as to understand the context that influences the interpretation of these signs. Thus, it is hoped that this research can provide a valuable contribution to the understanding of communication processes and the dynamics of meaning in various communicative contexts.

The thinking of sign users is the result of the influence of various social constructions in which the sign user is located (Kriyantono, 2006). Peirce distinguishes the types of signs into icons (icon), index (index), and symbols (symbol) based on the relationship between the representamen and the object. Can be described as follows: (1) Icon: something that performs the function as a marker similar to the shape of the object (seen in pictures or paintings); (2) Index: something that performs the function of a marker indicating the signified; and (3) Symbol: something that performs its function as a marker which by convention has been commonly used in society (Sobur, 2002). Sign types, such as icons, indexes, and symbols, have different nuances. The difference between icons, indexes and symbols can be seen in further studies.

This research adopts qualitative research methods in semiotic analysis. This decision is based on the basic assumption of semiotics that this science is the study of signs, the interpretation of which can vary between individuals based on cultural background, ideology, experience, and other factors.

A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore the complexity of semiotic interpretation in more depth. In this approach, researchers can focus on individuals' subjective understanding of observed signs, as well as taking into account the context and conventions that influence their interpretations.

Qualitative research allows researchers to gain deeper insight into the way individuals or groups understand and assign meaning to signs in different contexts. This includes an understanding of how semiotic interpretation is influenced by social, cultural, and psychological factors.

By using a qualitative approach, this research can explore the diversity of perspectives and understandings that may emerge in semiotic analysis. This allows researchers to capture the complexity of semiotic interpretation from various points of view, as well as to understand the dynamics of communication and meaning in a broader context.

Through a qualitative approach, researchers can produce in-depth and contextual data about how individuals or groups understand signs in everyday life. This can make a valuable contribution

to the understanding of communication processes and meaning construction in diverse cultural and social contexts.

#### **4. Results and Discussions**

##### **4.1 Semiotic Nature**

There are several variations of terms related to semiotics, such as semiotics, semiology, or semantics. Broadly speaking, these terms refer to the science that studies signs and their meanings. Cobley and Janz mentioned by Ratna (2004) explained that semiotics comes from the word "seme" in Greek which means interpreter of signs. However, another explanation states that semiotics comes from the word "semeion", which means sign. Sinha (1988:3) quoted by Kurniawan (2001) states that the word "semeion" seems to originate from the inference of Hippocratic or asclepediatric medicine, where "sign" still refers to something that indicates the presence of something else, such as smoke indicating the presence of fire.

Before the term semiotics became commonly used, two experts used the term with slight differences. Saussure's followers tend to use the term semiology, while Peirce and his followers tend to use the term semiotics (Sayuti, 2000). The differences in the use of the terms semiotics or semiology by these two elementary schools also reflect differences in their views on reality. For Saussure, reality influences thoughts or ideas, while for Peirce, reality stands outside thought and is a separate entity. According to Moris, a supporter of Peirce, there is a dualism between external and internal aspects, where the processes seen externally are no different from the internal processes (Masionmbow and Hidayat, 2001).

Regarding the nature of the concept of semiotics, definitions of semiotics are quite diverse and varied. Semiotics, for example, studies signs in human life, while according to Preminger in Pradopo (2007), semiotics is a science that studies socio-cultural phenomena, including literature as a sign system. Apart from that, semiotics is also defined as a branch of science that studies signs and everything related to signs, such as the signs themselves and the processes that take place in signs, as mentioned by Zoest (Soekawati, 1993).

According to Eco, a modern semiotics scholar in his work "The Name of the Rose" (1979), defines semiotics as a scientific discipline that studies signs, where a sign is defined as anything that has a significant ability to represent or replace something else. , even without any concrete existence. In other words, semiotics studies various elements that can be used to deceive, in accordance with Eco (1979) as cited by Ratna (2004). Meanwhile, according to Berger (2000) quoted by Ratna (2004), semiotics is an imperialistic scientific discipline and can be applied in various fields, including contemporary cultural phenomena. In this context, signs not only act as a means of communication,



but also enrich understanding of the surrounding reality. Therefore, humans are often referred to as homo semiotics.

Even though they are basically the same, signs in a particular context may have different meanings for different groups of people. For example, the swastika symbol for Hindus has religious meaning, while for some people, this symbol is a symbol of the Nazi regime. Likewise, the term "Jakarta" does not only refer to the capital of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia, but can also be a sign that represents various other concepts or meanings, such as symbols of power, corruption, hegemony, prostitution, and so on, as explained by Ratna (2004).

#### 4.2 The Nature of Literary Semiotics

In fact, the study of semiotics has been around for a long time. However, semiotic research in the context of literature has only begun to develop rapidly since the beginning of the 20th century. Various ways of conveying discourse have meanings that are interpreted by Pradopo, as expressed by Jabrohim (2001). Literary language, as a unique branch of language, has a second model system that is different from ordinary language. Lotman (1977) stated that literary language is synonymous with the use of metaphor, connotation and multiple interpretations, as a communication system that is full of cultural messages.

Pradopo (2007) explains that in the semiotic study of literary works, there are two levels of meaning involved, namely the meaning of the first-order and second-order semiotic systems. Before language becomes part of a literary work, it has meaning in its own conventional context, so it is called a first-level semiotic system according to Preminger (1974), as explained by Pradopo (2007). However, in second-order semiotic studies, the main focus is on the meaning of language in the context of literary works, which is referred to as meaning or significance of meaning according to Preminger (1974), as stated by Pradopo (2007).

Literary language which is rich in metaphorical connotations, creative and imaginative is the main factor that makes the sign system dominate in literary works. It is important to note that literary signs are not only limited to written texts, but also involve the relationship between the author, the literary work, and the reader, which gives a broad interpretative dimension to the sign, as explained by Ratna (2004). Even in nonverbal elements such as novel covers, color arrangements, and typography, everything is considered a sign system that requires interpretation, as seen in the book "Jakarta Undercover" by Emka (2002) with its distinctive cover and colors that invite interpretation.

Thus, the semiotic method in the study and interpretation of literary works involves the search for signs which can be in the form of vital signs, icons, indices and symbols. Literary texts are rich in various icons, indexes and symbols that reflect social reality, politics, advertising aspects and so on.



#### 4.3 Steps of a Semiotic Approach in the Study of Poetry Meaning

Literary research or study using a semiotic approach is basically an attempt to reveal the meaning of a literary work by utilizing semiotic theory. The process of applying a semiotic approach in research or literature review must comply with systematic and theoretical steps. However, a systemic approach can also be taken without abandoning the core steps in semiotic analysis (Kinayati, 2006).

Although the semiotic approach aims to obtain the final meaning of a literary work like other approaches, the process towards this understanding must be carried out with systematic steps that theoretically guide the researcher or reviewer in achieving the meaning of the literary work. In other words, before the final meaning of a literary work can be understood, there are often intermediate or alternative meanings that must be identified first.

The main stages in interpreting literature according to the semiotic approach include two main phases, namely heuristic reading and hermeneutic reading. Heuristic reading is an initial process in which the reader finds out about the literary work by paying attention to the semiotic elements contained in it. Meanwhile, hermeneutic reading is the stage where the reader begins to interpret the deeper meaning of a literary work based on a more complex understanding and interpretation (Riffatrrre, 1978 in Jabrohim, 2001).

#### 4.4 Heuristic Reading

Heuristic reading refers to the process of reading poetic texts systematically based on existing language structures. This refers to a reading that follows the conventions of a first-order semiotic system. In heuristic reading, poetic texts are analyzed in detail based on normative grammar, morphology, semantics and syntax rules. The main goal is to find the overall meaning of the poem in accordance with the prevailing poetic language structure. However, the results of this heuristic reading do not necessarily provide the meaning intended by the author.

As an example, we take a line from Chairil Anwar's poem entitled "A Room":

"A window surrenders this room to this world."

If we read the line heuristically, we must change the structure of the original language to obtain a clearer meaning. For example, the original line could be naturalized to: "Through the window, outsiders can see this room."

This process sometimes requires adding words or synonyms to clarify the meaning in the reading context.

In the process of heuristic reading, we can notice changes in original language patterns into more normative patterns. For example, from the original pattern "A window gives this room to the world," we can obtain a heuristic result such as "Through the window, outsiders can see this room." This shows how heuristic reading involves adjusting the structure of language to achieve more precise understanding.

The heuristic reading process also involves creative interpretation of poetic texts, where the reader must change the structure of the original language to obtain a clearer and more appropriate meaning. This can be done by rearranging sentences or adding additional words to clarify the reading context. Thus, heuristic reading allows us to understand the meaning of poetry more deeply by following applicable language principles.

#### 4.5 Retroactive or Hermeneutic Meaning

The results of heuristic reading basically do not produce the true meaning of a literary work, such as poetry. However, this reading provides a guide or reference for understanding the true meaning of the poem. Therefore, the next step is to carry out retroactive or hermeneutic reading.

Retroactive or hermeneutic reading is reading that belongs to the second level of the semiotic system, which produces interpretation or interpretive meaning. This hermeneutic reading refers to the meaning of language based on literary conventions. This is important because the language in poetry often uses figurative language, metaphors, or ambiguous meanings.

Returning to the previous example, "Through the window, the outside world (people) can see this room" (heuristic result). If we interpret the phrase "this room", we will find that it refers to the space within, which could be the poem's own space. With the presence of windows, people from outside can see or know the secrets of the room, such as themes or personal aspects of the writer's life. This is reinforced by the next line of the poem, "The shining moon inside wants to know more," which shows the moon's interest emerging from inside the room to know more things.

#### 4.6 Matrix or Keyword Search

Although there are two main steps in interpreting literary works using a semiotic approach, there are additional steps that can be taken to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of a literary work, especially poetry. This step involves searching and reading the matrix as well as finding the theme of the literary work. This is done because sometimes the results of hermeneutic reading alone are not enough to reveal the hidden meaning in a literary work.

The next step in interpreting a literary work is to search for a matrix or keywords, which is then followed by finding the theme of the literary work. This matrix or keyword is not always

explicitly stated in the text, but is often implied implicitly. Therefore, efforts need to be made to concretize or identify these keywords textually.

This matrix or keywords can be single words, combinations of words, phrases, or even parts of sentences. This matrix acts as a key in understanding the hidden meaning in poetry. Even though the matrix basically leads to a certain theme, initially the matrix was not directly the theme or main topic of discussion in the poem. By doing a matrix search, we will also find the themes contained in the poem.

#### 4.7 Theme Determination

After successfully identifying the matrix or key words in a poem, the next step in analyzing poetry using a semiotic approach is to determine the theme. Determining the theme is done to get the essence of the message the poet wants to convey through the poem. Theme has an important role in understanding the essence and meaning that the poet wants to convey to the reader. According to Riffaterre (1978) quoted by Pradopo (2007), theme is the main essence of a poem that reflects the message the poet wants to convey.

The process of determining a theme in poetry analysis involves a deep understanding of the content of the poem as a whole. Theme often reflects the dominant idea or ideas in the literary work. Determining a theme allows readers to summarize the main message or meaning that the poet wants to convey through the poem. By knowing the theme, readers can better understand the context and purpose of the poet in creating the literary work.

The theme in a poem is also the focal point in interpreting the meaning contained therein. Themes reflect fundamental aspects of human experience or reality that the poet wishes to explore or convey through his poetry. By knowing the theme, readers can better understand the implied and in-depth meanings in each line of poetry.

Understanding theme also gives readers a guide to linking various elements in poetry, such as images, metaphors, and symbols, with the overall message to be conveyed. This allows readers to absorb and interpret poetry better, so that the meaning contained in it can be conveyed more clearly and deeply.

Thus, establishing a theme in poetry analysis is a crucial step in understanding and interpreting the meaning contained in the literary work. Theme provides direction and focus for the reader in absorbing and interpreting the poem as a whole, so that the message the poet wants to convey can be better understood.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the previous explanation and explanation, several important things can be summarized as follows. First, theoretically, understanding poetry is a relatively complicated and complex task because poetry makes use of language in language, making it more ambiguous and requiring deep understanding to reveal its overall meaning. Second, it is important to remember that the results of literary analysis tend to be subjective and within the domain of estimates of truth. However, a scientific and objective approach must be adhered to in conducting literary studies, referring to existing scientific standards to ensure the accuracy of interpretation. Third, the semiotic approach offers solutions that make it possible to approach the truth in understanding poetry. By utilizing a semiotic framework, researchers can decipher the hidden meanings in poetic texts in a more systematic and structured manner.

Fourth, it needs to be acknowledged that poetry has deeper and more complex dimensions compared to other types of literary works. Poetry often contains multiple layers of meaning and can be interpreted differently by different readers. Therefore, the process of interpreting poetry requires precision and carefulness in reading every word, phrase and metaphor contained in the text. Fifth, in interpreting poetry, it is important to consider the cultural, historical and social context in which the poem was written. This context can provide valuable insight into the intentions and messages that the poet wants to convey through his poetry. By understanding this context, readers can understand and interpret the poetry more deeply.

Sixth, the interpretation of poetry can also be enriched by paying attention to the literary techniques used by the poet, such as rhyme, meter and the use of certain language styles. These techniques are often used to strengthen or convey certain meanings in poetry, so understanding will be more complete if all these aspects are paid close attention. Thus, the process of poetry interpretation is a collaborative effort between the researcher and the text, which requires a deep understanding of the language, context and literary techniques used, as well as patience and precision in revealing the meaning hidden in each line of poetry.

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