

Article

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**Identifying Characters Using Transitivity: A Stylistics Study
of “I Stand Here Ironing”**

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Abstract

The study is about the application of the transitivity system, one of lexico-grammar used in a Systemic Functional Grammar's theory, to analyze a literary work “I Stand Here Ironing”. Considering that many previous researchers were interested in studying the short story from literary approach, I purpose to give an alternative perspective of tracking the characterization of the main characters using the SFG theory. The data are the text of “I Stand Here Ironing” by Tillie Lerner Olsen (1961). They are analyzed using the concepts of the transitivity system and field situation. The result shows that the author of the short story used material process more than the other processes to construct that the main characters did activities in the domestic and physical domain. The mental process is used to depict the characters' feeling and attitude. The relational process is used to characterize the characters explicitly. Related to the socio-cultural context, the analysis comes to the conclusion that the such characterization is constructed to criticize the patriarchal domination in America in the time of publication.

Keywords: transitivity system; characterization; field of discourse; feminism literature

1. Introduction

“I Stand Here Ironing” is one of Tillie Olsen's short stories talking about women image of working class Americans. The story tells a mother as a female character as well as a female narrator, who had to work hard for her first daughter, Emily, as another main female character, under the economic pressure era in America. Her husband left her and Emily when she was eight months old. There is an interpretation that the short story is an autobiography using the narrator as well as a mother to represent the author herself and Emily to represent her first daughter, Clara (Bao and Wei 2016: 341)^[1].

Using flashback narration, the narrator narrated the events that she had to manage her time, energy, and attention for her job and her daughter's life. The narrator also constructed certain characterization of the two characters, so the readers could imagine them as the representation of the women in that era. It is assumed that this is the representation of domination of men on women in the Great Depression Era in The United States.

The theme of discriminated women always interests feminist practitioners. Therefore, the short story received much attention from some critics such as Bao and Wei (2016)^[1] ; Li (2007)^[2]; Colston (2011)^[3]; and Jafni and Bahar (2014)^[4] . Using feminism and psychoanalytic approaches they made certain meanings of the text. The critics focused more on interpreting what is behind the text than on analyzing the way the author used language to practice the discourse. Studying literary works from linguistics point of view, however, provides the evidences of the interpretation, to make the interpretation more accurate. It will also complement the literary studies. For example, focusing on the language choice in "I Stand Here Ironing" to depict the feeling of Emily's mother when she abandoned her child will lead us to conclude that she was forced to abandon her child because of the unavoidable condition. The use of deontic modality *have to* when the narrator told the events of abandoning her daughter expresses that she was not happy to do that. Analyzing transitivity system may inform us the way the narrator represent 'the world' and the ideological values framing the representation. Based on those illustrations, I am interested in studying "I Stand Here Ironing" from the linguistics perspective. Using the systemic functional grammar approach, I want to know how the narrator or the main character represented the two main characters, the mother and Emily. The purpose of the study is to identify the characterization of the two main characters and the socio-cultural contexts influencing the characterization.

Similar to other narrative texts, "I Stand Here Ironing" is also a text that manifests layers of communication. The first layer is communication between the author and her readers. Through the text she may intend to communicate her imagined story, to portrait certain social condition, or to criticize certain institution. In other words, in this layer, the author conducted a discourse practice using a literary work as a medium (Fairclough, 2001)^[5]. To do that, the author is constrained by both the narrative structure and the language structure. Regarding the first constraint, the author should select certain characterization, plot, setting, and mode of narration (Simpson 2004) ^[6]. Considering the second constraint, the author should select and combined certain lexico-grammars to construct certain characters and setting, to represent and to arrange certain events and existences, and to create a certain narration. Instead of directly communicating with his/her readers, an author will use a narrator, an imaginary story teller in a fictional world (Fludernik 2009: 5)^[7]. The second layer in the narrative communication is when the narrator tells a story to the narratee, a fictional addressee of the narrator's discourse (Fludernik 2009: 23)^[7]. What a narrator tells covers portraying characters with certain identities, attitudes, physical appearances; the sequence of events; and the setting of the story. This is pseudo communication, because all the linguistic elements chosen and combined are under control of the author. Similar to the second layer of the

communication, the characters' conversation, as the third layer of communication, is also under control of the author. The lexico-grammar of the characters' speech is selected to represent characters' personality.

Seeing the model of communication, we can analyze narrative discourse from three perspective. First, seen from real 'world', this is discourse produced by the author and received by the reader(s). The non-discoursal elements influencing the process of production and interpretation come from either the author or the reader(s). Second, from narrative 'world', this is discourse produced by the narrator and received by the narratee. In analyzing the discourse, someone must perceive that as a text producer, the narrator is also constrained by the socio-contextual elements in practicing discourse, including the linguistic constraint (Fairclough 2003)^[8]. Third, seen from the story, there is discourse practiced by characters. Therefore, we must consider that the non-discoursal elements influencing the discourse come from the story 'world' narrated by the narrator. The theoretical framework helps us to analyze the discourse of the short story or other narrative texts.

As previously mentioned, the purpose of the study is to provide a fuller interpretation of characterization in "I Stand Here Ironing" using the systemic functional linguistics (SFL) approach. SFL sees that people use language to construct social relation, to represent experience, and to arrange the discourse (Halliday and Mattiesen 2004)^[9]. In other words, people use language or do discourse to conduct social activities. Therefore, a text is not merely a sequence of words, but as a manifest of social activities mediated by the discourse. Every choice of linguistic element or lexico-grammar has metafunction consisting representational, interpersonal, and textual function (Halliday and Mattiesen 2004)^[9]. The metafunction can be identified through analyzing wording or lexico-grammar used in the text (Martin and Rose 2006: 4)^[10]. Using a transitivity system, we can analyze parts of clause as participants, process, and circumstance that function to represent events or existences in a narrative text. Using a mood system, we can analyze the way the author, the narrator, and the characters enact social relation, do evaluation, and perform appraisal. Using cohesive devices and theme-rheme patterns, we can track identities of characters and identify flow of information. In other words, SFL practitioner sees that every choice of linguistic element in communication has function to deliver intended message. A text producer, when conducting communication, will select certain lexico-grammars and exclude the others to express certain message connected to socio-cultural context. The author of a narrative text, similarly, will also select certain lexico-grammars to construct certain intended 'world' through the fictional speakers, such as narrators and characters.

2. Methods

This is a stylistic study using "I Stand Here Ironing" by Olsen ^[11] as data. The text is taken from http://producer.csi.edu/cdraney/2010/278/resources/olsen_ironing.pdf. As previously mentioned, the purpose of the study is to give fuller interpretation of the short story using a systemic functional linguistics approach. Therefore, the text is broken down

into clauses because clauses are the unit analysis in systemic functional linguistics. Since the dominant aspect of the short story is about the feminism issue, I focus on the way the main narrator represent American women in the Great Depression Era. To do that, I used transitivity system to interpret the way the narrator represent herself and Emily as the main character. I start analyzing the text as manifestation of communication in ‘fictional world’ and continue to interpret the communication between the author and her readers.

3. Results and Discussion

As mentioned in the previous description, this study wants to explore the characterization of the mother and Emily in “I Stand Here Ironing” using the systemic functional approach. The first stage of the analysis is analyzing clauses as a product of communication. In the short story, most of the clauses are produced by the mother as a narrator narrating the story to her narratees. Using the transitivity system, I found that most of her discourse is about herself and her daughter, Emily, as the main characters. The following are the explanations of the characterization constructed through the discourse of the narrator.

3.1. The Characterization Through Narrator’s Discourse: Mother as an active participant

There are 40 clauses exploited to narrate the mother as an active participants. Among the 40 clauses, 27 clauses express material processes, 11 clauses express mental processes, two clauses express a relational process, and one clause expresses a verbal process. It means that the narrator focused more on narrating her physical activities rather than that on other activities. Using the material processes, the narrator portrayed her non-goal oriented domestic activities such as *running* and *getting off* (to meet her daughter soon), *rising* (when her daughter called for her), *getting up* and *going*, *doing*, *standing*, and *starting*. They are the activities that affect *I*, the mother, as an actor. Using the such verbs, the narrator intended to depict the activities usually done by the average women. On the other hand, using transitive verbs such as *nursed*, *hold*, *found*, *leaved*, *brought*, *gather*, and *put*, the text producer, positioned either as a narrator or as a main character, depicted the physical activities that affected other participants, such as Emily, children, a story, and a job. Depicting Emily as the goal of the activities, the narrator put her as the participant received advantages such as in “I nursed her”, as well as the dis-advantages, such as in *I had to bring her to family and leave her*.

In addition to depicting her physical events, the narrator also expressed her mental activities when she played as the character of the story. The verbs chosen to describe the mental activities, *love* and *like*, reveal that the narrator wanted to show her positive emotive-feeling towards Emily. She depicted the way she tried to love Emily unconditionally. The narrator also used other mental verbs referring to the cognitive activities, such as *think*, *knew*, and *remember*. The mental verbs are used to inform the

reader that as a mother, the narrator knew much about Emily and remembered the many things happening to her.

Compared to the material and mental processes, the relational and verbal processes are not dominant in this discourse. The narrator used attributive relational process to talk her feeling and her condition of being with her Emily. The verb of verbal process *tell her* and the circumstance of manner *over and over* is used to describe the importance of the activity.

The linguistic description through transitivity system results the interpretation about the character of the mother constructed by the narrator. The choice of certain material processes as described above constructed the mother as a woman in domestic domain who worked for her children. The relational process and the temporal circumstance are used to characterize the mother as a responsible mother because almost all her life is dedicated to work for and care her children, especially Emily. The mental process is used to build the character of a loving mother. Even though I only found one clause of verbal process, actually the communication between the mother and Emily happened many times. The narrator represented the verbal action using Free Direct Discourse (FDD) and Free Indirect Discourse (FID) modes, so the verbs of the verbal process are omitted. The high frequency of the verbal activity aims to show that the mother is a communicative person.

3.2. The Characterization Through Narrator's Discourse: Emily as an active participant

As an active participant, Emily is represented as using 46 clauses. Among them, 21 clauses represent material processes, 18 clauses represented relational processes, and 7 clauses represented mental processes. This means that the narrator prefer narrating Emily's physical activities and identity to narrating other elements.

The material process is used to depict the Emily's activities from a baby's period until teenager's period. During her childhood, Emily is described to do the activities usually done by a child, such as *battering (her mother)*, *blowing (shining bubbles of sound)*, *weeping*. Other material processes talked about the way she came, walked, brought and selected something, and the physical activities of helping her mother such as caring her younger brother or sister, and of preparing her school when she was teenage. The discourse showed the readers that the transitive verbs do not place the mother as the goal of the activities. The narrator selected the activities with non-human goal or other participants as goals.

Finding that the narrator used 18 clauses to express the relational process, I argue that the narrator might think the importance of explicitly narrating Emily's identity. The relational process is used to give certain attributes to Emily, either negative or positive attributes. The negative attributes are realized through

the words such as *vulnerable*, *imprisoned*, *thin*, *delirious*, *asthma*, *not glib or quick*, *an over conscientious "slow learner"*, and *was absent entirely too often*. The such narration doesn't give the meaning that Emily has a bad character, but the narrator may aim to emphasize that Emily is an unlucky girl.

On the other hand, the narrator used lexicons such as *beautiful* and *miracle* to depict the positive one. Even though there are only two lexicons used to give the positive attribute, the narrator used it four times to identify Emily. The clause *making me tell her over and over how beautiful she had been* informs the readers that the mother, or the narrator, thought it was necessary to emphasize the attribute.

The third process used to characterize Emily is mental process. The process depicts Emily's consciousness about the world she experiences (Halliday and Mattiesen 2004: 245)^[9]. The mental verbs such as *hate*, *fret*, *torment*, (*not want (to eat)*), are selected to describe Emily's negative feeling. The lexicon *love* is used to portrait both her positive and negative feeling. The lexicon creates positive feeling when it is used to depict her habit when she was a baby, as in *She loved motion, loved light, loved color and music and textures*, and when she was a girl, such as in *Emily who loves to keep things*. On the other hand, the lexicon has negative feeling when it is used with a certain adverb, *painfully*, as a circumstance.

Analyzing material, relational, and mental processes used to represent Emily as the active participant, I interpret that Emily is constructed as a girl in general who conducted activities according to her age. She did in a domestic domain and was depicted as a miserable child. The description that she was beautiful when she was a baby, and became thin and nervous in her childhood results the interpretation that the condition happened because of the social factor when she grew up. Those may be the description of the children in an American working class at that time and also of the single parent caring.

3.2. Socio-cultural Contexts Constraining the Characterization

The certain construction of a character in a narrative text is influenced by the field of discourse consisting of social context and communicative purposes (Martin and Rose 2006: 4)^[10]. The temporal and spatial setting of the story is the 1930's when people of America faced economical problem and women lived in patriarchal society. Influenced by the social perspective in the fictional era (the 1930's) the narrator chose portraying a mother as a part of average women living in the patriarchal society. The depiction of a mother who loved and cared her children is the representation of the perfect woman at that period. On the other hand, leaving her child with other people because the mother had to go out to work is not the representation of a good women.

That is why the narrator told the events using the deontic modality *have to* implying that something outside her, that is the social condition, *forced her* to do that.

On the other hand, the temporal setting of the publication is in the 1960's when there was the second wave feminist movement purposing to resist the patriarchal view point. Related to the other field of discourse, that is the communicative purpose when doing the discourse, the author of the short story may intend to criticize the patriarchal society. The character of a mother in the story is the representation of women's struggle. Women are portrayed as independent people economically and socially.

4. Conclusions

This study shows that using linguistic approach, especially using SFG approach, to analyze a literary work, someone can construct interpretation as a compositional meaning of lexico-grammatical meaning and socio-contextual meaning. Using the transitivity system, I can reconstruct the characterization of the main characters in *I Stand Here Ironing*. The dominant use of material process to describe the main characters' activities in the domestic domain reveal that the author may create the main characters as representation of working women in that era. Related to the situational and cultural context, that is field and tenor of discourse, the short story is a text manifesting the author's discourse of criticizing the patriarchal domination.

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