

SPEECH ACT THEORY AND THE  
TEACHING OF LITERATURE

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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SPEECH ACT THEORY AND THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE

by



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"Communication is the fixed experience whose hermeneutic designation is interpersonal meaning; it is encounter by exchange for people."

R. Lanigan, Speech Act  
Phenomenology, 1977.

#### ABSTRACT

Speech act theory is a relatively recent subject of study in the philosophy of language and in the philosophy of the mind. The movement appears to have commenced in 1962 with J.L. Austin's How to do Things with Words. The impetus, however, came with the writings of John Searle, beginning with Speech Acts in 1969.

To philosophers who study this phenomenon, the notion of intentionality is seen as a major component of any work of language used for human communication. Common background experiences and knowledge of speech acts of the common culture are other items of importance in the interpretation of an utterance.

Because a literary work is a work in language, and since the purpose of language is communication, the literary work is viewed as discourse, and thereby subject to interpretation using speech act theory. The literary text becomes the mediary between writer and reader. The reader completes the speech act with his interpretation of the writer's utterance made manifest by the text.

The major purpose of this paper has been to argue that a theory of speech acts is tenable as an approach to the interpretation and analysis of literary works at the classroom level. To that end, an overview of speech act theory is attempted, as well as a positing of literature as discourse. The conclusion proposed is that prior to any analysis of, a

literary work, along the lines of the "New Criticism" for instance, there must be an understanding of the utterance, and this is best accomplished from the point of view of speech act theory.



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER</u>		<u>PAGE</u>
I	The Problem .....	1
II	Speech Acts - Definition and Explication .....	4
	What are Speech Acts? .....	4
	Why Study Speech Acts? .....	5
	The Structure of Illocutionary Acts .....	7
	Meaning and Speech Acts .....	8
	Indirect Speech Acts .....	10
	Summary .....	13
III	Intentionality - Its Place in Interpretation ..	14
	Problems of Definition .....	14
	Searle, on Intentionality .....	20
	Conclusion .....	22
IV	Literature as Discourse .....	25
	To Please and Instruct .....	25
	A Definition .....	27
	Pratt's View of Literary Discourse .....	29
	Generic Characteristics of Literary Works ..	31
	Metaphor in Literature .....	32
	Intersubjectivity of Literary Discourse ..	33
	Liberty in Interpretation .....	34
	Conclusion .....	35
V	Speech Act Phenomenology .....	37
	Speech Act Theory .....	37
	Two Concerns of Intentionality .....	39
	Conclusion .....	41
	Epilogue .....	45
	Interpretation in the Classroom .....	45
	Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening .....	45
	The Limerick .....	51
	The Tell Tale Heart .....	53
	Conclusion .....	57
	Bibliography .....	60

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE PROBLEM

#### Introduction

This investigation was prompted by this writer's concern for the state of the teaching of poetry in our schools. The observation can be made with some validity that the positiveness of the response to the genre diminishes from the enthusiasm of the kindergarten to the dislike expressed by the high school student. This perception is based on twenty-five years of teaching English (along with other disciplines) at all levels from primary grades to the senior high school. Kelly (1983) adds considerable weight to this view when she discusses her experiences with literature in the junior and senior high school both as a student and as a teacher.

This concern was found not to be unique to Newfoundland nor indeed to any one generation. Seeley, in 1931, was saying, "our pupils tell us they hate poetry (viii)". Edmunds (1966) suggests why:

Two of the major causes for the child's dislike of poetry which spring immediately to mind are the 'poetry lesson' and the vast majority of anthologies for children. (109)

Larrick (1971) feels:

The goal is to let each child develop such a liking for poetry that he will search for it wherever he goes. (55)

Clifford (1979) questions the methods of teaching when he states:

Our students need a philosophy of teaching that encourages them to begin the critical process with uninhibited responses. (39)

True (1980) goes beyond this question of methodology when he asserts:

Those (teachers) who don't like it (poetry) ought not be forced to impose that dislike on anyone else. (43)

This view is shared by Edmunds (1966) and Reeves (1958), and is strongly hinted at by Kelly (1983) when she observes that less than half of the teachers who teach English in Newfoundland schools are trained in this discipline.

The comments of the readers of the Newfoundland Public Examinations add another very closely associated dimension to the problem. Over the years a somewhat regular observation is that many candidates experience difficulties with interpretation, not solely of literature, but of the examination questions themselves. As example, the chief marker for the 1980 English examination cites "students ignoring directions given" as the reason for poor answers to a certain question. As remedy:

The panel strongly suggests that teachers instruct students in the proper reading and answering of questions. (12)

In the same year the appraisal of Religious Education IV states, in part, "students in some cases misinterpreted question 3(a) ..." The markers of Religious Education II (1980) inject a note on the other aspect of the problem: "But more important, many teachers are not qualified to teach the course.

Generally, the readers of these examinations seem to be saying that public examination candidates misread questions, as well as the selections provided for interpretation, and that their answers are lacking in those aspects of style that should reasonably be expected from students at this level.

Though the initial focus of this paper was to have been the interpretation of poetry, the foregoing evidence indicates that the problem is not restricted to poetry alone, but is rather that of interpretation per se. The problem appears to stem from several sources, chief among them being the manner in which teachers approach the teaching of their subject, and secondly, the qualifications, aptitude for the subject, and the general background of the teacher of English literature. This writer chooses to investigate an approach to the teaching of literature which perceives poems as not "written to conceal meanings" (Beatty, 1965) nor as evoking a response of "pure pleasure" (Lewis, 1956) but as an example of communication. That is to say, the approach will be neither of the two afore-mentioned paths, yet will be a combining of the two of them and somewhat more besides. The approach to the teaching of literature which seems to be the most appropriate is to pursue interpretation from the point of view of speech act theory.

To that end, then, this paper will examine the speech act theory of discourse analysis and attempt to determine the extent to which literary interpretation rests on this notion.

CHAPTER TWO  
SPEECH ACTS - DEFINITION AND EXPLICATION

What are Speech Acts?

When we speak a language we are engaged in a rule governed pattern of behaviour. We obey the rules for asking questions, giving commands, making statements, making promises and so on. As speakers of the language we "encode" our messages by the rules so that our hearers may "decode" these same messages under the same guidelines used to set them up. If "encoding" and "decoding" were the sole components of language activity, a study of language would consist only of analyzing the linguistic components of the utterance of the message. However, if speaking a language is to be considered as engaging in rule governed behaviour, we must, of necessity, examine the behaviour implied in our original statement.

That the main purpose of language is communication is a commonly held view. As such, then, language activity involves intentional behaviour. In other words, when we make an utterance we do so for some specific purpose either stated or implied. Searle (1979) feels that we use language for five general purposes:

We tell people how things are (Assertives),  
We try to get them to do things (Directives),  
We commit ourselves to doing things (Commissives),  
We express our feelings and attitudes (Expressives), and we bring about changes in our world through our utterances (Declaratives). (vii)

These uses of language form the basis of the theory of speech acts as proposed by Searle (1969), and further elaborated by him in 1971 and 1979.

Linguistic communication essentially involves acts. When one makes a noise or, as I am now doing, makes marks on paper, such an occurrence can be construed as communication only if the intention to communicate something is evident. Such activity cannot be regarded as accidental, or as a natural phenomenon as wind blowing through the trees, or as a random sampling of sounds which may, after some fashion, resemble human speech. In order for a verbal utterance to be considered linguistic communication, it must be looked upon as the production of a speech act to accomplish one or more of the previously mentioned general purposes of language use.

Austin (1962), to whom Searle appears indebted for the original notion of speech acts, coined several phrases which are now basic to the discussion of speech act theory. The basic utterance, the act of saying something, is termed the locutionary act. This provides the hearer with a core of information from which to infer the speaker's communicative intent, the illocutionary act. There is, as well, what Austin terms the perlocutionary act. This is the notion of the consequences or effects illocutionary acts have on the actions, thoughts, and beliefs of the hearers. To these concepts Searle has added the idea of proposition which is essentially the content of the utterance based upon subject predication.

### Why Study Speech Acts?

If communication involves intentional behaviour on the part of the speaker and the hearer, such behaviour should be the proper study of a philosophy of language. The intentional nature of communication is the essence of the speech act. Put another way, if there is no intention to communicate there is, in effect, no communication. To study language use in communication is to study the speech act, to study discourse.

Ricoeur (1975) defines discourse as "the actualization of language in a speech act based on a kind of unit irreducible to the constituents of language as 'code'." (66) In Ricoeur's view, the basic unit of language as discourse is the sentence. If a sentence is to "talk with" (Searle, 1979), speech act theory and discourse analysis will provide us with a set of rules for interpretation which will have consequences in other parts of linguistic theory, such as syntax.

One can, therefore, study sentences as entities with the aim of discovering their meanings. A more significant study would be the study of performances of speech acts. In this arena the sentence would mean something in a certain context in the performance of a particular speech act. That is to say, in a certain context there is a sentence, the utterance of which would provide a meaning peculiar to that context and so constitute a particular speech act.



7

If, as Fish (1978) posits, "a sentence always has the meaning that has been conferred on it by the situation in which it was uttered" (644), we, as listeners, always know which speech act is being performed, since we are never not in a situation and a sentence is never not in a context. It is the context of the speech act and the illocutionary force of the sentence which must be studied if we are to correctly interpret utterances, whether spoken or written.

#### The Structure of Illocutionary Acts

What is said, if we follow Austin's formulation, is the context of the locutionary act. For the most part, the words used by the speaker determine what he means, - but not entirely. The words used by the speaker may well be ambiguous and the sense of a particular utterance may be vague. The listener then has to rely on more than his knowledge of the language, and the assumption that the speaker shares that knowledge, to determine what the speaker is saying. "To mean" depends on what expression is uttered, what meaning it has in the language, what the speaker means by it, and what things he is referring to. From the identification of these items the hearer can proceed to identify the speaker's illocutionary act. (Bach and Harnish, 1979).

Searle (1969) feels illocutionary acts occur under certain conditions and according to determinable sets of rules. By using the act of promising as a basic illustration, Searle worked out a set of conditions and rules which apply

generally to all illocutionary acts. I shall here attempt a brief overview of the more salient features.

The sincerity condition tells us what the speaker expresses in the performance of the act and the preparatory condition tells us what he implies in the performance of the act. For example, if I make a statement, I imply that I can back it up.

Whenever the illocutionary force of an utterance is not explicit, it can be made explicit. This is the principle of expressibility, which in essence states that whatever can be meant can be said. An extension of this idea is that whatever can be implied can also be said.

Where Searle's (1969) view of illocutionary acts goes beyond Austin (1962) is in the idea of propositional content as part of the illocutionary force. That is to say, for example, if an utterance counts as an attempt of someone to do something, the propositional content rule has to involve some future behaviour in the hearer.

#### Meaning and Speech Acts

Speech acts, as earlier indicated, are performed either by the uttering of sounds or the making of marks. The difference in the last named actions and the performance of speech acts has to do with the notion of meaning. When one speaks in a speech act situation the sounds decoded by the hearer are characteristically said to have meaning and the speaker is said to have meant something by them.

Utterances, or sentences if you will, would seem to bear meaning not from the lexical, context-free meaning of the words of which they are composed. Meaning seems rather to be determined as a set of truth conditions in a given set of background practices and assumptions. Relative to one set of practices and assumptions a sentence may determine one set of truth conditions; relative to another set of practice assumptions another set (Searle, 1980). To support this theory Searle (1980) examines the meaning of "cut" in such sentences as "Cut the grass", "Cut the cake", "Sam cut Tom's hair", "Sam cut two classes last week", and so on. Plainly, the meaning in each sentence is different because the context - the background practices and assumptions - are different. "Cut" in the first three instances, exhibits the basic lexical meaning "to divide with a sharp instrument." The context of each situation, however, dictates that a different sharp instrument be used in the cutting. For instance one would no more dash off with a scissors to cut a cake than one would take a lawnmower to cut Tom's hair. "To cut classes" has a metaphorical aspect which will be dealt with later.

The proposition stands, however, that to understand a sentence (i.e., to recognize the meaning of an utterance) is to recognize speech acts as fundamental to the use of language. As well, we must accept that some of their aspects are mentalistic in nature, that is, involving intentions, preferences and beliefs. It would seem from this view that

understanding utterances in context is a process of recognizing speakers' purposes and attitudes (Kasher, 1976).

This concept of speech act in interpretation is what Van Dijk (1981) addresses in his theory of pragmatic comprehension. "Pragmatic Comprehension is the series of processes during which language users assign particular conventional acts, i.e., illocutionary forces, to each other's utterances" (p. 217, 18). How does a person, though, understand when a particular sentence is uttered, just what it is the speaker means? Van Dijk feels that information coming from various sources such as grammatical rules, para-linguistic qualities such as stress, shared knowledge and shared beliefs with the speaker, recall of previous similar speech acts, general knowledge of pragmatics, and other world knowledge or frames facilitate the interpretation.

This theory is very close to Searle's (1979) view. He postulates that in every speech situation there is always a shared set of interpretative assumptions in play, and these are, though in different terms, virtually those outlined in Van Dijk above.

#### Indirect Speech Acts

To this point we have been examining speech act in general terms. The simplest example of meaning possible is when the speaker of a sentence means exactly and literally what he utters in that sentence. That is to say, the speaker intends by the illocutionary force of his utterance that he:

... intends to produce a certain illocutionary effect in the hearer, and he intends to produce this effect by getting the hearer to recognize his intention to produce it, and he intends to get the hearer to recognize this intention in virtue of the hearer's knowledge of the rules that govern the utterance of the sentence. (Searle, 1979, p. 30)

This type of speech act can be classified simply as a direct speech act. The basic notions we have been discussing hold and an adequate interpretation results.

What is more difficult to cope with is when the speaker says one thing and means what he says, and yet at the same time means something more. To put it another way, one kind of illocutionary act is indicated by the sentence, yet at the same time, quite another type of illocutionary act is intended. This concept is perhaps best illustrated by Searle's (1979) example. At a dinner table someone says, "Can you pass the salt?" What is the meaning of this question? Is the physical ability to pass the salt in question or is there something more? Searle's view is that the hearer, having at his command a theory of speech acts, a theory of conversation, factual background information as to the context and situation, and an ability to rationalize and infer, will arrive at the conclusion that the utterance is a request to pass the salt. This procedure involves a series of ten steps.

Step 1. X has asked me a question as to whether I have the ability to pass the salt (fact about conversation).

Step 2. I assume that he is cooperating in the conversation and that therefore his utterance has some aim or point (principles of conversational cooperation).

Step 3. The conversational setting is not such as to indicate a theoretical interest in my salt-passing ability (factual background information).

Step 4. He probably already knows the answer is "yes" (factual background information).

Step 5. Therefore, his utterance is probably not just a question. It probably has some ulterior illocutionary point (inference from steps 1,2,3,4). What can it be?

Step 6. A preparatory condition for any directive illocutionary act is my ability to perform the act predicated in the propositional context condition (theory of speech acts).

Step 7. Therefore, Y has asked me a question, the affirmative answer to which would entail that the preparatory condition for requesting me to pass the salt is satisfied (inference from steps 1 to 6).

Step 8. We are now at dinner and people normally use salt at dinner; they pass it back and forth, try to get others to pass it back and forth, etc (background information).

Step 9. He has, therefore, alluded to the satisfaction of a preparatory condition for a request whose obedience conditions it is quite likely he wants me to bring about (inference from steps 7 and 8).

Step 10. Therefore, in the absence of any other plausible illocutionary point, he is probably requesting me to pass him the salt (inference from steps 5 and 9). (Searle, 1979, 46-47)

In general, then, when one has to assign an interpretation to an utterance one does so in the context of the circumstances in which such utterances are most often heard or spoken.

"Can you pass the salt?" is understood, as all speech acts are understood, by way of relying on mutually shared background information. One understands the meaning of the cited speech act by attending to "what is said, how it is said, and why it is said" (Tyler, 1978). A similar view is proposed by Fish (1978).

#### Summary

In summary, then, speech act theory is a proposal or methodology for interpreting utterances so as to ascertain the meaning and intent of the utterance. The theory is operative under the conditions that what is said is meant in some fashion, and that what can be meant can be said (principle of expressibility). In order for communication to occur, according to this theory, both speaker and hearer must mutually share the requisite theories and background information as outlined in this chapter.

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## CHAPTER THREE

### INTENTIONALITY - ITS PLACE IN INTERPRETATION

#### Problems of Definition

As readily evidenced by the preceding chapter, the notion of intentionality plays a significant role in speech act theory. With the development of this theory and the recent interest in the pragmatics of discourse, a renewed attention is being given to the concept of intention both by those who adhere to the pragmatic view of the spoken and written word and by those who do not. This adherence to intentionality is a departure from the approaches of the New Critics and structuralists whose focus has been the supremacy of the text.

Krieger (1976) says that to interpret a poem the text must be:

plucked out of all discourse as its own closed system composed of once of ordinary words ... but with its own meaning emanating from within. Though written and experienced in time, it is endlessly recoverable within a presence ever renewed. (212)

The meaning thus comes from the poem as artifact quite separate from any intention of the author. Culler (1975) postulates that a poet "cannot assign meaning but must make possible for himself and others, the production of meaning" (117). Again, the implication is that the meaning is produced by the reader and has little if anything to do with any intention of an author or speaker to convey meaning.



Ricoeur (1975) is quite definite in his perceptions of authorial intention. As far as the spoken language is concerned he suggests that the intention of the speaker and the meaning of the discourse overlap so that both the speaker's intention and the discourse meaning are one and the same thing. But, he concludes that:

with written discourse, however, the author's intention and the meaning of the text cease to coincide ... Inscription becomes synonymous with the semantic authority of the text. (29)

He further advances the notion of textual autonomy when he speaks of the appropriation by the reader of the meaning of a piece of discourse (1976):

not the intention of the author, which is supposed to be behind the text; not the historical situation common to the author and his original readers; not the expectations and feelings of these original readers, ... what has been appropriated is the meaning of the text itself. (92)

Yet the separation of the author's intention from textual meaning is not clear cut, even for Ricoeur. In an article, "Creativity in Language" (1973), he defines context as meaning:

not only the linguistic environment of the actual words, but the speaker's and the hearer's behaviour, the situation common to both, and finally the horizon of reality surrounding the speech situation. (101)

In the same year in another article "From Existentialism to the Philosophy of Language" he asserts that,

to understand discourse is to interpret the actualizations of its polysemic values according to the permissions and suggestions imposed by the context. (96)

If one were to abide by his definition of context it would appear that through the speaker/author and the commonality of the speaker/hearer situation, the speaker does indeed impose his mental intentions upon the text and hence upon the meaning or meanings which may be gleaned from it.

Holland (1975) appears quite definite when he states that "each reader must give the words meaning, and he can only give them meanings they have for him" (43). That is to say, the meaning of any piece of discourse is completely free of a contextual association of the author and his situation. Meaning here, though, as with Ricoeur (1973), seems to come from a merging of reader and text, since the meaning a word holds for a reader must be one of several acknowledged meanings conventionally attributed to the word. Certainly a reader cannot be of the "Mad Tea Party" variety where a word can mean anything a person wants it to mean. Nor do I think this is the position being put forward by Holland.

What seems to be a point here is the meaning attributed by various writers to the word "identification". The range varies all the way from the concept of the one true meaning of Schleiermacher to Ricoeur's use of polysemy of meaning - but not to the extent of "intention" meaning anything at all. Take for example Wijsen's (1980) position. He first of all states:

The position that a novel or poem can be fully understood by uncovering what the writer wanted to say and his motivations for saying it, is untenable. (24)

This statement appears to be arguing for the autonomy of the text. Further along he says:

He (reader) is not a mere observer of another person's illusion, but through the acceptance of the writer's perception he contributes imaginatively, cognitively, and affectively in the re-creation of an illusion. (58)

Here he seems to be acknowledging the constraints imposed upon the text by the author's perception and hence the author's mental intention. His ultimate conclusion is:

The function of the literary symbol is not communication but communion. The communion takes place first of all between the work and the reader, and indirectly between the reader and the writer .... (155)

Wijsen thus demonstrates the difficulty of pinning down precisely the extent of the influence of the author's intention upon a given text.

Hirsch (1976) acknowledges that such views as those expressed above are tenable when he says:

Authorial intention is not the only possible norm of interpretation though it is the only practical norm for a cognitive discipline of interpretation. (7)

It is also Hirsch's (1976) view that since our history is a pre-given, it is part of the context in which all discourse takes place and as such cannot be disregarded in an act of interpretation. Certainly it seems, that in

terms of speech act theory, historicity plays a significant role in the interpretation of discourse. The background knowledge and experiences of the speaker and hearer, that is the historical situation of the speaker and the hearer, determine to a large degree what transpires in the speech act. If there are no similarities in the background of the participants, very little communication is possible, since, certainly, even such components as pronunciation, use of idiom and dialect and connotations can set up rather insurmountable barriers. This problem may be even more pronounced in the case of written language, since even lexical meanings of words change over the course of the years and thereby obscure the intended meanings of the work. Hence, it appears that the historical context of any utterance must be considered if one is to make sense of the way things are as expressed in that utterance.

Fish (178) puts the idea quite nicely when he says:

A sentence neither means anything at all nor does it always mean the same thing; it always has the meaning that has been conferred on it by the situation in which it was uttered. Listeners always know what speech act is being performed, not because there are limits to the illocutionary uses to which sentences can be put, but because in any set of circumstances the illocutionary force a sentence may have will already have been determined. (644)

The stand that Hirsch (1977) takes is very similar to that of Fish. He feels that every speaker must have in

mind before he speaks a probable response and a probable understood meaning. "To speak or write is to project meaning as understood meaning." (28)

Juhl (1980) holds a view which departs far from the structuralist notion of the autonomous text. His belief is that when one understands a literary work what is understood is actually that which the author intended to convey or express. His entire thesis, it seems, can be wrapped up in the phrase "a statement about the meaning of a work is a statement about the author's intention." (12) Tyler (1978) posits that in giving meaning to any sentence we hear or read we suppose that it has an intended meaning. In summarizing his views regarding intentions, Tyler presents several points of interest. First, we believe that utterances have conventional meanings which are realized only in an intentional context. Utterances without intentions are without meaning. Secondly, meaning is tempered by the intentions the speaker attributes to the utterance. He also notes that speakers and hearers may assign the same or different intentions to the same utterance (387).

In the past several years a number of writers have expressed views concerning authorial intention similar to those indicated above. A partial listing would include Schaff (1962), Peacock (1972), Unger (1975), Abrams (1977), Chiari (1977), Chatman (1978), Mazzeo (1978), Rogers (1978), Russel (1978), Horton (1979), Mandel (1979), Olafson (1979), Miller (1980), Altieri (1981), de Beaugrande (1981), Dretske (1981), Heelas (1981), and Vogel (1981).

Robson (1982) echoes and reiterates what has been said by all these proponents of intentionality when he questions whether any intelligible distinction can be made between the intention of the author and the meaning of a work. He goes on to say that words can only be interpreted according to what they meant at the time they were used. Hirsch's (1976) statement is renewed by Robson when he says:

With texts in general, the utterances of speakers and writers, it is perfectly in order to refer, when disagreements about intention arise, to their context of origin. (32)

Beebe et al. (1983), in assessing their research in reading comprehension, decided upon comprehension in terms of the degree to which the reader's meaning corresponds to the writer's meaning. One conclusion of this study was that comprehension was high when the reader was able to relate background knowledge to text information.

#### Searle, on Intentionality

Searle (1983) begins his most recent and comprehensive work on the subject of intentionality by defining Intentionality (capitalized in Searle, to distinguish from ordinary "intend" from the intentionality) as:

that property of many mental states and events by which they are directed at or about or of objects or states of affairs in the world. (1)

Intentionality for Searle is then hinged on the notion of "directedness." In this terminology, intending to

do something is just one form of intentionality among many. The term "directedness" suggests what Searle describes as "direction of fit." By this is meant that all forms of Intentionality have either a world-to-mind or a mind-to-world direction of fit. For example, beliefs or statements can be true or false and have a mind-to-mind direction of fit. They can be made to conform to the world - the way things are - by changing the belief or statement. Desires and intentions, on the other hand, cannot be true or false, but can be complied with, and as such have a world-to-mind direction of fit. We cannot change the way things are to make it correspond to our desire or intention.

Searle (1983) claims that in the performance of a speech act there is a dual level of Intentionality. There is, first of all, the Intentional state expressed - that is, there is some representative content in a certain psychological mode which requires certain conditions for its satisfaction. Secondly, there is the intention, in the ordinary sense of the word, with which the utterance is made. By following this line of reasoning, meaning comes into being when there is "a distinction between the Intentional context and the form of externalization" (28). In other words, the meaning is the Intentional context that goes with the form of externalization - whether that be spoken, written, gestured, etcetera.

In this light, all actions have intentions in action. That is; all actions have Intentional content but

not all actions are performed with prior intentions. Actions are reflective of some intentional state but yet one can do something without having a prior intention of doing it. Conversely, one can have an intention to do something without actually putting that intention into action.

Speech acts - being, actions - fall under the influence of this notion. Searle (1983) sees the key to the problem of meaning as being able to see that:

in the performance of the speech act the mind intentionally imposes the same conditions of satisfaction on the physical expression of the expressed mental state, as the mental state has itself. (164)

Put another way, the mind imposes intentionality on the marks on paper, the sounds, the gestures etcetera, by imposing the conditions of satisfaction of the mental state upon the production of the sounds. "Saying something and meaning it is a matter of saying it with the conditions of satisfaction intentionally imposed on the utterance" (169). Meaning, then, comes directly from an intention to represent and so is at the basis of communication. Without intention to represent there can be no communication. It is intentionality which makes meaning possible, and the same intentionality limits the meaning that it makes possible.

#### Conclusion

The question of intentionality certainly appears to be a much discussed notion as far as interpretation theory is concerned. For the most part, intention is considered from



the point of view of intending to do something. If one is to interpret the speech act of another as communication of some sort, it seems entirely reasonable to endeavour to decide what the speaker intends by his speech act. If we do not conceive of meaning in this way, there seems to be little point in searching for meaning. If a discourse is not intended to communicate something, it is by definition without meaning, and hence the search for the meaning of it would indeed be meaningless. Simply put, there would be no communication. Random samplings of words generated by a computer to create "sentences" cannot have meaning because there exists no intention to communicate - that is, there is no intention to represent anything with the words and therefore, no intention to communicate.

Essential to any discussion of intentionality is the notion of text. Even though Ricoeur (1973, "From Existentialism ...") feels that "the objective meaning of the text [is] distinct from the subjective intention of the author" (92), he feels that:

to understand discourse is to interpret the actualizations of its polysemic values according to the permissions and suggestions imposed by the context ... Thus the whole problem of text-interpretation could be renewed by the recognition of its roots in the functioning of ordinary language itself. (96)

Though Ricoeur is arguing for the autonomy of the text, it would seem that he neglects the position of the speaker/author as a vital component of that context of which he

speaks. Should one divorce Ricoeur from his text and assume that what the text says is not necessarily what Ricoeur intended to say? Should one interpret his text solely "the functioning of ordinary language itself"? Or should one's approach be, like Wolfe's (1983), "language as a delivery system, carrying meanings and bringing sense into being"? Should we also see a speaker, "who acts intentionally in the very process of expressing his impression" and "who frames his notions of how things are as he senses his own life-world" (Wolfe 1983)? As Russell (1978) states:

What we can mean is a function of what we are saying ... If acquiring language were only a question of learning the structure, language would not be for anything ... (188)

## CHAPTER FOUR

### LITERATURE AS DISCOURSE

Spoken and written discourse have been severally and collectively examined so far in this essay, without making any clear distinction between them. It could well be assumed from this stance that for all intents and purposes written language should be considered as discourse according to the notion of speech act. As such, then, written discourse presupposes a relationship involving a speaker/writer and a hearer/reader with the text offering a means of communication between the two. That is to say, the written text must be examined as a process - a process of communication. It is a well known fact that most literary studies do not focus on the process. Instead they analyse the text itself as an object - an artifact - an entity entire unto itself. Culler (1975) feels that the study of literature should "become an attempt to understand the conventions which make literature possible" (viii). If written texts are to be regarded as literature, as seems to be the case at present, it would be useful at this point to attempt to define what literature is.

#### Literature - To Please and Instruct

Hirsch (1976) states that literature should "please and instruct" (157). This notion is not a new one and bears investigating a little further. The earliest literature of

England was indeed didactic. The early use of short narrative was to illustrate or confirm a general moral statement. Such use was encouraged by great churchmen such as Gregory (the Great) and Cardinal Jacques de Vitry. The incidents cited in any given exempla were not cited for love of stories but rather as an aide in showing the truth with profit to the reader/listener. These tales were popularized greatly with the coming of the friars to England during the thirteenth century. By the middle of the fifteenth century secular tales began to mingle with the religious ones and the number of monastic tales was enormous. The tales began to become more and more entertaining as stories rather than as religious and moral agents (Mosher, 1911). Here, then, dates the notion of literature to instruct and to please.

This earliest use of literature did comprise an audience/speaker relationship since these tales were developed for specific audiences and were delivered from pulpits in churches. As such they were delivered orally. Yet when these tales were collected and transcribed they became written texts still bearing the same function for which they were originally composed. That the audience (more properly "congregation") had certain expectations of these texts is beyond doubt. The context of their presentation ensured just that, since all were ostensibly in church for the specific purpose of receiving instruction. The fact that these texts tended to become entertaining indicates to us that the authors tended to consider the audience as they

prepared their work. To use Davis's (1978) words, the purpose of this literature was:

to structure social life by presenting a pre-existent context in the form that is most appropriate to it in the light of the audience the author is trying to reach. (101)

Making the monkish tales more entertaining seems to have been an attempt to make them more appealing.

#### Literature - A Definition

Of what must a text consist in order for it to be considered literature? Fowler (1981) defines literature as:

an open set of texts, of great formal diversity, recognized by a culture as possessing certain institutional values and performing certain functions (81).

These values and functions vary from age to age as the culture evolves, and so the concept of literature changes also. In these days the word "literature" is loosely used in everyday language to mean just about everything that is written. It is perhaps correct to say, though, that for those who purport to study literature, the field is somewhat more restricted than that. Most often, literature is synonymous with fiction and is confined to the genres of poems, essays and narratives. Obviously, however, there is no set of values by which literature can be defined since essays and narratives, to be sure, do not necessarily confine themselves to fictive matter. What literature is depends ultimately upon what the culture will accept as literature.

There are, according to Searle (1979), certain concepts which determine what is regarded as literature. The first of these is that there is no one set of traits which all works of literature have in common. As indicated in the previous paragraph, these characteristics can vary in time and culture. Yet, as Searle points out, one could use Wittgenstein's terminology and say that literature is a "family-resemblance" notion. In other words, one work of literature resembles another work of literature no matter how much the genre has changed over time. For example, a novel is generally recognizable as a novel from Tristram Shandy to The Stone Angel without the reader's having to perform an analysis of any intensity to reach that decision.

Searle's (1979) second belief is that:

"literature" is the name of a set of attitudes we take toward a stretch of discourse, not a name of an internal property of the stretch of discourse, though why we take the attitudes we do will, of course, be at least in part a function of the properties of the discourse and not entirely arbitrary. (519)

Once again the reader, at the most elemental level, decides for himself whether the piece of discourse he is confronted with is a poem or a prose-offering. He also decides for himself whether or not the piece is worth his attention, and, indeed, whether or not it is literature as he knows the term. The most basic attitude, perhaps, is that literature is discourse and as such stays close to the actual regularities of language.

Pratt's View of Literary Discourse

The first of these "regularities of language" is that language is for communication. Oral discourse serves a communicative function; so also does the written literary text. The literary text can be regarded as a literary speech act. Pratt (1977) sees the narrator in a literary work as being similar to the natural narrator in that he is:

understood to be displaying an experience or state of affairs, creating a verbal version in which he and we along with him, contemplate, explore, interpret and evaluate, seeking pleasure and interpretive consensus. (140)

In other words, Pratt sees the speaker in a literary work to be expressing his impression of "the way things are and behave" and he, and we, examine the "evidence" to assess the validity of his "claim" (Wolfe, unpublished). Viewed from this perspective the literary text is a speech act.

The literary speech act, however, is not so freely intersubjective as the spoken situation. Pratt (1977) views the literary speech situation as one we knowingly and willingly enter into where "another speaker has unique access to the floor" (114). This situation is, as well, very similar to that of the exempla example in which the congregation did not take an active speaking role in the discourse. Yet in both situations the audience expects that the speaker or writer make his offering worth the attention that is being asked of it and the presentation is judged as

to its success by the audience. Granted, the criteria for the evaluation would not be the same, since in any speech situation the context in which the discourse takes place has to be considered in any description or assessment of it.

Literary discourse, as previously indicated, does not stray far from the conventions of ordinary discourse. That is to say, the relationship between a reader and a literary work does not result from a suspension and moving away from the rules of spoken discourse. One has to agree with Pratt (1977) on this point and also that the relationship must be accounted for by the general rules of talk. In other words, the reader brings to the encounter with the text a set of assumptions and presuppositions, the foremost of which being that this text is an intentional communicative action. As well, the reader must bring into play his background knowledge, not only of the rules governing discourse, but also his own world view. In light of this knowledge the appropriateness conditions and the "direction of fit" are established for the reader and in this manner he makes sense of the text. Perhaps Pratt (1977) best expresses this view when she states:

Far from being autonomous, self-contained self-motivating, context-free objects which exist independently from the "pragmatic" concerns of "everyday" discourse, literary works take place in a context, and like any other utterance they cannot be described apart from that context. Far from suspending, transforming, or opposing the laws of non-literary discourse, literature, in this aspect at least, obeys them. (115)



Besides the conventions of ordinary language there is another aspect to the literary context of which both the writer and reader must be aware. For the purpose of interpretation, both author and reader must "recognize certain properties of the text as belonging to a specific literary convention, which allows them to assign specific pragmatic function to the text" (Van Dyke 1981).

#### Generic Characteristics of Literary Works

The reader expects certain characteristics such as plot and plausibility to be features of a narrative. With lyric poetry the reader expects that the writer is exploring or presenting states of mind, giving his impressions of states or conditions in the world, or attempting to evoke some emotion with respect to an experience. In the case of the lyric poem the reader usually assumes that which is being presented is unusual or problematic but at the same time carries with it Searle's (1969) condition of "expressibility", which enables the reader to enter into the speech act situation with the writer. The writer, for his part, is presenting this poem in such a way that he expects the reader to respond affectively and to interpret the poem in the way he intended. One would assume, along with Hirsch, that the experience would give a degree of pleasure. To say it another way, both the writer and reader in a literary speech act situation must be aware of the appropriateness conditions of the situation they are in, especially those for the genre

which has been selected. Besides that, the encounter must be considered worthwhile. To use the words of Ricoeur (1975):

To produce discourse as a poem, or as a narrative, or as an essay is to "encode" it according to the rules of the appropriate mode of discourse. (68)

So the function of literary genres is to provide rules for the production of poems, narratives and essays; hence, the text cannot be isolated from the processing operations which formed it.

#### Metaphor in Literature.

Another consideration in the production and interpretation of literary texts is the role of metaphorical expression in the speech act. How is it that a speaker or author says what he says and means it and yet at the same time means more than he actually says? Mazzeo (1978) sees "the metaphorical process as the master key to interpretation" (6). He sees the literary work as a representation and interpretation of reality which reveals and hides at the same time different attributes of the world it seeks to present. It is also evident that there are always more metaphorical possibilities apparent in a text than can be satisfactorily and coherently accounted for by the events of the text. Ricoeur (1975) posits that "literary texts involve potential horizons of meaning which may be actualized in different ways" (78). Searle (in Ortony, 1979) accounts for metaphorical

meaning by calling it "speaker's utterance meaning" to differentiate it from "sentence or word meaning". In this view, "literal meaning" is defined as the coincidence of speaker's utterance meaning and sentence meaning. Metaphor works on the principle that the truth conditions of literal meaning call to mind another meaning with another set of truth conditions. The difficulty Searle sees is in explaining how these principles work and even to state them precisely. The point remains, however, that the reader does bring to the literary speech situation a notion of metaphor and succeeds in getting two meanings from the same utterance, the textual meaning remaining primary since the metaphorical meaning cannot be understood without an understanding of the sentence's literal meaning. Ricoeur (1975) states that "poetic language does not literally say what things are, but what they are like" (87). This then is the function of metaphor: by saying what things are like, metaphor actually says what they are.

#### Intersubjectivity of Literary Discourse

Another notion that becomes apparent in the discussion of literary discourse is the interaction of author and reader through the intermediary of the text. Wijsen (1980) feels that the function of the literary text goes beyond communication to communion. "The communion takes place first of all between the work and the reader, and indirectly

between the reader and the writer" (155). This notion hinges on the intentionality aspect of the speech act situation. Wijsen (1980) sees the reader not as a mere "observer of another's illusion" (58) but as one who contributes "imaginatively, cognitively and affectively in the re-creation of an illusion" (58). As such, then, the reader is a vital part of the interpretive process which is viewed as "re-creation" rather than as "re-construction". In this way, meanings become intersubjective accomplishments through the actions of both writers and readers. Tyler (1978) sees the reader coming to know what the speaker means by constructing a context and in that context a meaning. The text, after all, is not an entity unto itself but is a creation of an author for an audience and as such cannot divorce itself from the world of speech acts.

#### Liberty in Interpretation

That the text is open to a number of interpretations is one more aspect of literary discourse that rates some discussion. Even though the number of interpretations may seem to be infinite, they are indeed finite. The meanings are restricted by the author as he goes through the process of creating a literary discourse. That is he engages in a process of selecting ideas, he wishes to express; he selects the words with which to express them; and he chooses the vehicle for his expression, that is, he decides on narrative, essay, or poetry. It is in this preparation

and preselection process that the finiteness of interpretations is predicted, taking into account the polysemic nature of words. Granted, there may be meanings which are not apparent to the author and his original audience, and which are discovered by readers of later generations. Holland (1975) points out that "each reader must give the words meaning, and he can only give them the meanings they have for him" (43), but liberty of interpretation cannot and will not be totally free since the author does indeed choose the plot, the setting, the format, and the words which comprise his discourse. The reader does, however, have the freedom to evaluate the work, that is, to judge whether or not the writer actually did what he seemed to promise.

#### Conclusion

To sum up, the purpose of literature is to give pleasure and provide instruction of some sort. The pleasure is gotten by the reader actually learning more about himself through the medium of the literary text. Collins (1970) asserts that:

We get nothing out of poetry - it is  
poetry that gets something out of us.  
To put it simply - the words of a poem  
make us remember, in a precise way, what  
we already know. (4)

Literature exists as discourse, and the literary text should be considered as a speech act so that its meaning can be determined. The literary text, in that sense, is

essentially the expression of somebody's impression of the way things are and behave. Hence the reader brings to the text his own impressions - his own world view - to interact with the world view being presented to him in the text. The said text is viewed with a mind to the rules by which literary discourse is achieved so that the range of meanings allowed by this production process may be realized. That range of meanings is not infinite but to quote Chiari (1977) in his analogy to sculpture,

Once it has been quarried, any man can pick it up and descry through it aspects of the world that combine the truth of the one who originally quarried and shaped it, with that of the one who views it at any particular moment. (95)

The literary experience is the intersubjective mingling of the author and the reader through the text, wherein the interaction is manifest.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### SPEECH ACT PHENOMENOLOGY

In summary, one could say that speech-act theory arises from that branch of philosophy concerned with the workings of the mind - of itself and in conjunction with other minds. In particular, the function of language in the study of speech acts is of primary concern. Language as man's chief vehicle of communication is the focal point of the human sciences, especially philosophy. Lanigan (1977) asserts:

The concept of 'communication' is problematic because it suggests both 'meaning' (the nature of language) and the activity of speaking (the function of language).  
(vii)

The study of speech-acts is an attempt to analyze and make sense of speech as the use of language to describe or express one's perception of the way things are while at the same time seeing language as the process by which that 'expression' becomes communication.

#### Speech Act Theory, a Brief Review

Austin (1962), and Searle in his various writings on this topic developed the theory of speech-acts. Austin posited three types of acts which Lanigan (1977) summarizes succinctly:

Locutionary acts are those which are performed in order to communicate. The illocutionary acts are those speech acts that are accomplished by communicating one's intent to accomplish them, and

perlocutionary acts are acts of communication in which the effects that are intentionally caused by the utterances are the chief function of the act. (8)

To accomplish these acts, the end result of which is the hearer/reader's interpretation of what appears to be the intended communication of the utterance, certain preconditions, presuppositions and assumptions are called for. Both speaker and hearer must share a common background experience and knowledge so that each will know what type of speech-act is in force at any particular time. There must be a similar commonality as to the perception of the genre operative on the specific occasion, and perhaps most of all a belief that the speaker/writer is engaged cooperatively with the hearer/reader. To say that another way, the engagement of the writer and reader in a speech-act situation comprises a mutual knowledge of the facts of the act, as well as a mutual knowledge of rules for performing various speech-acts. These mutually shared facts and knowledge enable the use of the various syntactical forms of English to aid in the processing of the communication. Sander (1981) sees that the assignment of interpretations also depends on:

... such pragmatic factors as the personal relationship and interpersonal beliefs of the author and interpreter and the conventions of utterance in force at the moment  
.... (209)

It is perhaps worthy of note that neither Sanders nor Lanigan shared Searle's notion of rule governed behaviour. The difference appears to lie in the perception that 'rule-governed' suggests that rules are established to



regulate behaviour; whereas, 'convention-governed' would imply that the patterns or conventions are established empirically and hence change with use and with time. So, participants in speech acts would have considerable knowledge of the conventions governing speech acts because they are embedded in the culture and every culture would necessarily have evolved some degree of standardization of basic art types. In sum, as John Lyne (1981) says:

It is widely assumed that communicative competency requires both a knowledge of language and knowledge of the world. (203)

Jean Kennerd (1981) phrases the same notion just slightly differently in referring to literary texts.

An interpretation/reading of any text is dependent on two things: one, the literary conventions known to the reader at the time ...; two, the choices the reader makes to apply or not to apply any one of these conventions - the choices are dependent on what the reader is at the time. It is a question, then, of what the individual reader chooses to notice or ignore at the time of the reading .... (72)

#### Two Concerns of Intentionality

Reichert (1981) senses a certain reluctance on the part of readers generally to accept that a poet may have meant what he wrote. He attributes this reluctance to "our inability to know for sure whether he in fact did so" (64). This is, in effect, questioning the notion of intentionality and its importance to the study of discourse. Readers see two concerns of pragmatic inquiry as being:

to discover the features of the communicative situation that allows interpreters to infer which propositions were intended by a given utterance; the second is to locate the patterns involved in various types of linguistic acts that allow an interpreter to infer the utterance's specific intent and whether that intent is personal, interactive or standardized. (198)

The use of speech acts and the manner in which they are processed is an example of the second concern raised by Cushman. Further to that notion, Wolff (1951) states that:

Personality .. is revealed by the specific use of words through which the individual communicates himself, by his symbolic expression of behaviour, and by the beliefs that motivate and guide him. (ix)

Two notions are at play in Wolff's assertion. The first leans towards intentionality as Searle sees it: That is to say intentionality is more than "intending" to do or say something. It has attached to its conditions of satisfaction a psychological mode - Wolff's "personality." As well there is the notion of belief to contend with.

Richards (in Tate 1960) says that "the poet is a marker of beliefs ... himself and his world first and thereby other worlds of other men" (70). In this way literature is, as Peacock (1977) posits, "a function of living". It enables the reader to engage in the process of communication through the speech act and as Lanigan (1977) states, "words are the articulated embodiment of the person and his lived reality" (107). That is not to say, however, that the interpretation of a particular text is the same for all readers despite the

fact that we manage to communicate more or less successfully most of the time by means of utterances. Nevertheless, as Wright (1982) rightly points out:

- Two persons can look at what they regard as the same field of vision and select therefrom what in their form of life they call the same object or person, but there is no guarantee that their private knowledge is the same, even though they may both be assuring each other in good faith that it is. (468)

How an interpretation is made depends not only then on what is objectively (if such is possible) but "upon our training, habits and concerns" (Goodman 1968). And it, is true as Wellex (1982) says that:

Literature does refer to reality, says something about the world, and makes us see and know the external world and that of our own and other minds. (30)

#### Conclusion

The stance adopted in this paper, then, is one in which the phenomenon of speech act in communications becomes the basis for the interpretation of literary works. It is, as Robinson (1975) says, a "deliberate following through of that process of creation in response to the poet's words" (184). The literary work must be viewed as the intermediary through which the author and reader interact. Hence, communication in the literary, as well as other senses, is by nature intersubjective. The text interpreted by the reader is itself an interpretation of reality as seen by the writer. To use Lanigan's (1977) words:

Speaking means no less than the phenomenological truth that a person lives in the articulated reality that is "I" and "me". (103)

and that:

Phenomenological existence as a living experience is embodied in the phenomena of human communication as the dialectic of speaking and speech acts. (102)

So existence itself hinges on language and its use in communication as, through language use in discourse, we, in Ricoeur's (1980) words, "understand ourselves in front of the text" and make sense of the way things are from our individual vantage points.

Huck (1968) conceives the school literature program as providing for a "gradual development of understanding and appreciation" (687) in which the student, among other things, experiences literature, develops taste, develops knowledge, develops skills of literary criticism, and develops appreciation. In achieving these objectives the student goes quite a way towards receiving critically not only literature but all forms of communication with which he is bombarded in this age of mass media. That is to say, a person must develop a critical attitude towards language. A man must be literate and "knowledge of the mechanical means alone" is not sufficient (Pattison, 1982). To speak and to hear is learned without formal instruction; the critical attitude must be taught formally. This is tantamount to saying that the understanding of a piece of discourse (that is, its meaning)

is of crucial importance to the reader or hearer. And, as Hirsch (1967) posits quite reasonably:

Understanding (and therefore interpretation in the strict sense of the word) is both logically and psychologically prior to what is generally called criticism. (209)

The approach advocated for literary interpretation in the classroom is now evident. The student should not be presented with the teacher's interpretation of a literary work (a poem, say). Instead he should be aided in approaching a poem after a heuristic fashion where he comes to see his interpretation as one among a number of interpretations made possible by the polysemic quality of words chosen by the author. He must have a knowledge of the conventions which aid the valid interpretation of the specific genre. He must not be subjected to hunting out figures of speech and allusions, to classifying literature, or to studying unduly the biography of the poet. He must see what the poet had to say about the human condition and become conscious of emotions and feelings. Put simply the student must be taught to approach the study of literature, in the first instance, as a communication -- as a speech act. He will, by this route, come to realize that poets do say what they say and mean it. After the understanding will come the analytic criticism which characterizes literary education as so many of us know it.

The philosophy of instruction for literature in the Reorganized High School Program offers these directives:

Provide indepth and intensive teaching for the minimum program requirements but also lead students away from intensive, teacher-directed study to extensive independent study and reading. In so doing, direct students in their search for meaning - help them become increasingly skilled and independent ...

This is, indeed, an admirable goal. However, if we, as teachers, persist in teaching the interpretations of particular poems, at the expense of teaching our students to employ methods of interpretation, methinks our charges will have immense difficulty in arriving at the independent state referred to in the above philosophy of instruction. To approach the interpretation of literature from the perspective of speech act would go far in aiding students not only in the interpretation of literature, but all other disciplines, and indeed help them to make more sense of life itself.

## Epilogue

### Interpretation in the Classroom

All that being said, does the prospect of treating literature as discourse offer any pragmatic or practical means to interpretation? Of what significance is shared background knowledge? Does poetry really aim to give pleasure and instruction at the same time? Is it beneficial to read literature as literature, and poetry as poetry? Is it necessary to understand what the poem is saying, or indeed, what the writer is saying in the poem before one begins to examine the poem as an artifact? Or, to put it another way, is the understanding of the literary work a prerequisite to the study of the literary work as a work of art? Many questions, answerable to a greater or lesser degree, arise concerning a literary work. To be entirely pragmatic, how does one, a teacher, for instance, approach a particular literary work?

#### Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

Whose woods these are I think I know  
His house is in the village though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer  
To stop without a farmhouse near  
Between the woods and frozen lake  
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake.  
The only other sound's the sweep  
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.  
 But I have promises to keep,  
 And miles to go before I sleep.  
 And miles to go before I sleep.

Robert Frost

To approach this poem from a speech act position is first of all to place the poem in a context. That context would place the speaker of the poem in a situation - a dramatic situation if you will - which appears readily accessible to the reader. The speaker in the poem is pausing at a particular time, at a particular location, and is contemplating the situation in which he finds himself. The speaker in this particular poem could well be the author, but not necessarily so. In any case it doesn't really matter so far as the dramatic (or action) context is concerned since the poem is presented from the "I" point of view and thereby the speech act "I" - "you" situation is operational. That is a communicative mode is evident in which a listener is suggested even though that listener doesn't actively participate in the communication act. It may well be argued that the speaker in the poem is simply musing or thinking aloud. In that case, then, the speaker and listener merge, but the speech act situation of speaker and listener is not lost, however, since the speaker may be constructed as talking to himself. Such speech, in whichever position we view the speaker, is involved in a linguistic act that is beyond the process of thought and is being presented in language as the externalization of the thought and is better understood if a listener is assumed to be present. The conversational tone



of this piece, as well, indicates a speech act is in progress and supplements the idea of a second person - a hearer of the discourse.

It seems equally safe to suppose in the case of this poem, that Frost is writing for an audience which he assumes has background experiences similar to his own. If a reader is to make any realistic attempt at a re-creation of the experience of this poem, he must be familiar with the winter season in a temperate to sub-arctic climate. In no other way can one begin to sense the stillness and tranquility of that quiet snowfall of a late evening in December which is hinted at in the line "the darkest evening of the year". Except for the shake of the harness bells, the silence of the scene is broken only by the gentle murmur of the wind and the negligible sound of the falling snow. For practical pedagogical purposes the classroom teacher may well have to create vicariously this essential background knowledge for his students in order to elicit successfully an understanding of this poem. In the Canadian situation, however, such a possibility is unlikely as far as the snow is concerned. Yet to some inner city children the idea of horses and sleighs and woodlots could be unfamiliar enough to warrant such an activity. In any case this background experience is necessary to the sharing of the experience rendered in the poem. It seems Frost intended that his audience recognize the scene he was experiencing and partake of it with him.

Even a cursory reading of this poem will indicate to the most elementary reader that this is a narrative of a very brief period of time. The speaker has apparently taken time out on his journey to spend a few quiet and peaceful moments observing the snow falling on a wooded area. Some inferences are readily accessible to the reader if he is aware of the tone the writer has his speaker use in the first stanza. The musing over the land owner who resides in the city and who will therefore not see the speaker stopping by the woods seems to indicate that perhaps the owner doesn't have much appreciation for the woods - since he doesn't live near them - yet may perhaps object to others' trespassing on them. Else why would the speaker show any concern for the owner's seeing him? The ability to draw inferences is one of the most general of discursive skills and is the skill that is assumed by the writer of any discourse. Without the dual skills of implying and inferencing, discourse would tend to be quite literal in its presentation. Using this ability to infer the reader may deduce from the second stanza that this event of stopping "in the middle of nowhere", so to speak, is not a usual occurrence. As well, in the last stanza the only reason for ending this visit with nature is the hunt that the journey was intended for purposes which have not yet been achieved and which involve travelling a considerable distance.

Another point to consider is that the writer chose to express himself in the poetic genre. As such the reader:

quite reasonably expects that the discourse may also be processed as metaphor. It is in this light that the final stanza takes on some significance. Once again the background experiences of the reader are brought into play with those of the writer and the generally accepted metaphors common to our culture. One of these is that of life being viewed as a journey with certain responsibilities and obligations involved in the process. From this vantage point the final stanza evokes the message - the instruction that the poem provides for the reader. Even though it is pleasurable and worthwhile to spend time in the contemplation of nature's handiwork, life dictates that one must fulfill the responsibilities of his occupation and that this must be done all the way through to the end of the journey - to that "sleep" which is so often used as a metaphor for death. However, one is safe in saying that unless the poem can first be understood at the literal or utterance level and unless the reader's background experience sufficiently matches that which the speaker/writer assumes it to be, the metaphorical or speaker's utterance meaning is not readily attainable.

The final stanza of this poem by Frost is the one which seems to present the greatest allegorical possibilities. It is sufficiently vague that even at the narrative level the reader has difficulty in deciding just what happens. It is probably fair to say that most readers are not in agreement as to what happens. Does the speaker continue on to the town or does he stay at the woods? The

hypnotic quality of the rhyme and the complete repetition in the final two lines hint at the speaker's wanting to stay and commune with nature - yet there is the note of responsibility to the town. For French (1982) the answer is simple - though "darkness appeals to him" there is a "turning way from nature, he chooses the world of humanity (161)". French sees the traditional interpretation - the lesson of the allegory - that obligations and responsibilities must take precedence over the attractions of nature since the natural scene offers no revelations but only "a cessation of activity suggestive of death (162)".

Boroff (1976) sees the man torn between the weariness that makes darkneses welcome and his knowledge of his obligations before sleeping as "a tacit analogy between the end of one day ..., and the end of all the tasks of a man's life (88)". She appears to be dwelling upon the challenge of the decision to be madg rather than the actual choice. This view is shared by Greiner (1982), who feels that the poem's greatness lies in the ambiguity which results from the speaker's status. We do not really know at the end of the poem which direction the speaker chooses. "The lure of the woods balances the promises in the town, and the speaker himself is frozen with indecision (233)". Camichael (1974) sees a self-role split wherein the speaker is torn between his own sense of value and a social role. Camichael feels this split depends upon the "maintenance of tension between subject and object". If the speaker yields to the

enticement of the woods, as is suggested in the last stanza - "if he lapses completely into the object and finds all value in the woods, he will die" (162).

This somewhat ambiguous final stanza, then, depends for meaning not only on the woods themselves and the shared notion of their meanings by author and reader. As well, there is the music, the rhythm of the lines themselves which produce a drowsy, pensive feeling which is made trancelike by the repetition of the rhyme. As suggested, this stanza involves itself with the dialectic of obligation to humanity and to self. The object seems to be the difficulty of making a particular decision. The reader with his knowledge of the way things operate can readily share in the decision facing the speaker in the poem and can, as a sharer of the common language conventions of our culture, easily make the transference away from the particular situation to the general or universal one. He can, in Searle's terms, go from sentence utterance meaning to the speaker utterance meaning. Thus it is not overly difficult to see, as Rechnittz (1974) does, that the communication of the poem is:

man must learn both to accept and to resist the pull of nature ... He must retain the ability to contemplate which exercising the ability to act. (143)

#### The Limerick

The poetry form most favoured by school children is, perhaps, the limerick. This is so, one would suspect, in that first of all, the limerick tells a story, albeit a brief

one. The matter is usually humorous with an ironic twist at the end. It is also true that very often, along with providing entertainment, the limerick does offer some instruction to the reader. Apart from these purely discursive considerations, the very structured rhythm and rhyme scheme of this particular form adds to its pleasurable qualities.

An accident really uncanny  
 Occurred to my elderly granny  
 She sat down in her chair  
 While her false teeth lay there,  
 And bit herself right in the fanny!  
 (Hughes, p. 88)

The narrative line is easily followed - Granny, an elderly lady, accidentally sat on her false teeth which were lying in the chair she chose to sit in. This is the dramatic situation of the poem - the dramatic context of the action. Now the reader is on the watch for the ironic but impossible twist at the end. When one examines this closely, in other words, one sees it is not possible, especially for an elderly lady, to bite one's self in the fanny - which is what the concluding line says. Nor is it possible for the inert and lifeless false teeth to do any biting. How, then, does a reader accept such absurdity? The pleasure must come from the contemplation of such an incongruous event itself. The reader, as well, is aware of the principle of the comic mode in that the humour is in the action and not in the person. Now if any lesson is to be communicated through this poem it could be that one should take care what one does with valuable possessions. As well, this limerick could be viewed as a reiteration of the proverbial dictum of looking before

leaping. As long as the reader knows the creative process of the limerick and views it in such light as a formalized discourse aiming to give pleasure he will manage to share this experience with the writer as intended. To use Reichert's (1977) terminology: "everything is read as". Thus limerick is read as limerick.

#### "The Tell Tale Heart"

Grice's (1967) cooperative principle as outlined in Pratt (1977, p. 130) consists of four sets of maxims that are observed in conversation. They are, in brief:

##### I. Maxims of Quantity

1. "Make your contribution as informative as is required".
2. "Do not make your contribution more informative than is required".

##### II. Maxims of Quality

Supermaxim: "Make your contribution one that is true".

- Maxims: 1. "Do not say what you believe to be false".
2. "Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence".

##### III. Maxim of Relation

1. "Be relevant".

##### IV. Maxims of Manner

Supermaxim: "Be perspicuous"

- Maxims: 1. "Avoid obscurity of expression"
2. "Avoid ambiguity"
  3. "Be brief"
  4. "Be orderly"

These maxims or rules can be generally understood to be appropriateness conditions that participants in a speech act situation assume to be operative. Each partner in the speech takes it for granted that the other knows these rules, is trying to carry them out in his conversation and is expecting the same conditions in return. Grice's rules are sufficiently general to all speech acts that the "conversation" can be understood from either the observance or non-observance of the rules.

"The Tell-Tale Heart" by Edgar Allan Poe begins:

True! - nervous - very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses - not destroyed - not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily - how calmly I can tell you the whole story.

Clearly the reader realizes he is involved in a speech act - a literary speech act which Pratt (1977) describes as a speaker having "unique access to the floor" and the reader is relegated to the role of listener with no opportunity for active participation in the event. The mode chosen for this story is very much of a natural narrative which can be detected from the reference "you" which implies a recognized listener which could be - but need not necessarily be - the reader. The form could well be classified as "dramatic monologue" in which a participant - though silent - is assumed to be present.



This opening paragraph serves as an orientation to the story which is to follow. If we assume that the Maxim of Relation is being observed we are forced to focus on the mental state of the narrator. The relevant information is that he is and has been in a "dreadfully" nervous state. This statement also satisfied the Maxim of Quality as there is no reason for us to view this statement as being other than true. The following references to madness, and the hearing of things in heaven, in earth, and in hell, however, lead the reader to look for more than a nervous condition. Thus, the maxim of quality is being broken at the same time as it is being observed - adequate evidence is not provided but by breaching the maxim of manner, the speaker, by being somewhat ambiguous about the meaning of nervousness, madness, and disease, causes the reader to associate all three as one, and conclude from this that the narrator here is indeed mad. In this manner, then, the reader is set up to expect the narrative to be an unusual anecdote. The question "How, then, am I mad?" and the blurting of "Hearken!" tend to focus the reader's attention on the mental state of the narrator and the reader will indeed judge as to how "calmly" the whole story is told.

And so this opening paragraph of the story, the orientation, establishes the dramatic situation of the speech act - the context in which the story in question is to be narrated. The situation appears to be that the narrator at some specific point in his life is looking back upon an event

- and from the agitated tone of the opening paragraph, a traumatic event - which has involved him at some earlier point in his life. Based upon his experience of this type of recounting the reader can reasonably expect that this narrative will not be a chronology of happenings or episodes comprising the event but rather, a focusing on the most salient feature of the event. Once again, from the examination of the first paragraph, one expects the sheer madness of the anecdote to surface, coloured as it needs must be by the very subjective point of view of the protagonist-narrator. Such an expectation derives from a knowledge of the manner in which discourse, as short story, is processed.

That being said, and relating back to our previous assertion that everything is "read as", is this short story to be read as distinct from ordinary discourse? We do expect narrative works to deal with people in unusual conflicts and stress and we do acknowledge that the author presents his narrative as a display text which enables the reader to contemplate the state of affairs being presented and make an interpretation of them. Pratt (1977) sees such display texts as belonging by definition "to the representative world describing class" (143). To say it another way, the text being presented to the reader is the speaker's expression of the way things are as he sees them - his world view. The speaker in "The Tell Tale Heart" is positing with his hearer that he is quite calm, rational and indeed clever. The truth conditions of this representation are violated by the very

rhythm of the text with its irregular movements, the rhetorical questions, and such crescendo-like repetitions as "louder! louder! louder! louder" - these imply anything but calmness and rationality. Thus the reader is able to see inside the utterances and is able to recognize and appreciate the tellability of the story.

Pratt (1977) sums up the notion of discourse as it applies to literature when she says:

The kind of relation that holds between reader and literary work need not and cannot be viewed as resulting from a suspension of or an immunity to the rules governing other discourse; rather it is a relationship that commonly characterizes discourse outside literature and that must be accounted for by the general rules for talk, rather than by special rules for literary discourse. (149)

For the reader to understand and derive meaning from "The Tell Tale Heart" or any other literary work the rules of ordinary discourse must apply to it.

#### Conclusion

The foregoing was not intended in any way to resemble a full analysis of the works cited. It was instead an attempt to show that speech act theory as applied to literary discourse is an enabling factor in deriving meaning from the literary text. It is further maintained that the text must be understood after this fashion before any other analysis can usefully be attempted. Certainly any

aesthetic appreciation of a literary work is dependent upon a meaningful reading of this kind. Reichert (1977) states that though it is beneficial to study the system or structure "the system will never be sufficient by itself to explain the actual meaning of what somebody says or writes" (69). This type of initial analysis remains close to the way language actually works where the text is treated as a process, and in this way the reading itself becomes an interpretive process and what we read is a composition of words arranged by an author. To use Reichert's (1977) words:

We assume that he arranged them as he did for some purpose, though we acknowledge that his reasons may not always be apparent or recoverable, nor his aims achieved. (125)

Yet the reader's initial task with a literary text has to be an attempt to discover what the author meant when he composed his arrangement and what he intended to achieve by doing so. This view point is reaffirmed, as indicated earlier, by Beebe et al. (1983) in their observation that those who comprehended most are the ones who most closely approximate the intention of the author.

Altieri (1981) takes all - dramatic situation, interpretation and evaluation - into account when he describes a literary text as typically blending two levels of action:

a dramatic course of events and a process of interpretation and judgment carried on by an implicit author. ∴ There are always allegorical possibilities arising on the

expressive level that can be satisfactorily and coherently applied to the events of the story. (236)

It is the reader's primary task to elicit first the "literal" meaning of the events of the story, and from there derive any metaphorical meanings which can be applied to this initial understanding.

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