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Metaphor and its Interpretation Process in Dystopian Fiction

Abstract

This paper explores creative metaphors in dystopian narration. In addition, the implementation of a dystopian creative metaphor by an author and its interpretation process by an audience are examined. The empirical data employed for analysis were taken from "The Handmaid's Tale" by M. Atwood and the comparative method was used to analyze the findings. Theoretical analysis was based on "Pictorial and Multimodal Metaphor" by Forceville (2006), "Metaphor, Simile, Analogy, and the Brain" by Riddel (2016), and "Reading Utopia, Reading Utopian Readers" by Roemer (2003).

The goals of the paper are as follows:

1. To show the significance and role of metaphor in dystopian narration.
2. To discuss linguistic characteristics of dystopian narration.
3. To reveal the subcategories of dystopian creative metaphors explored in the study and define the specific characteristics of their creating process, expressive forms, and interpretation features.

The empirical data of this paper embrace the relevant examples from the novel and the TV show.

Keywords: metaphor, dystopian narration, dystopian creative metaphor, decoder

1. Introduction

Dystopian fiction has emerged as a response to Utopian fiction. Utopian fiction delivers messages about progress and promising possibilities, whereas dystopian fiction is more about pessimistic perspectives and warnings. Still, deep sleep is the basic issue of dystopian fiction. "I was asleep before. That's how we let it happen." Says the protagonist of "The Handmaid's Tale" (Atwood, 1986).

The main themes of "Handmaid's Tale" include women's rights, emancipation, civil rights, and general disappointment.

Dystopian fiction gives a plot description via apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic background. Frequently, dystopian fiction, as a genre, is considered to belong to science fiction. Although the nature and the expressive forms of dystopian and science fiction are similar, they have a significant borderline: the narration in dystopian fiction is based on a fictional reality that might, someday, become real. Utopian fiction, on the contrary, is based on narration that represents an imaginary reality.

The perception of dystopian fiction by a reader and the interpretation process is also worth considering. The possible effectiveness of a dystopian text depends on the capability of the interpretation of a reader. The ideal reader is an individual, who decodes the text message and gives reasoned judgments. Furthermore, the didactics of narration are what trigger the effective outcomes among readers as the interpretation process is based on some logical assumptions. Thus, it is the

reader who builds up specific boundaries between a social fact and a dystopian, imaginary story. Still, due to the difference in values, viewpoints, and ideologies of various readers, the same dystopian text can be interpreted diversely. As dystopia includes wider alternatives, the dystopian text is a construction that has to be built up by the reader.

A specifically interesting study was conducted on the cognitive-reflective function of a reader before, during, and after reading a dystopian text (Groeben, 1986). The results of the study demonstrated that a reader embraces an aesthetic text as a model of the universe and interprets it in a constructive and determined manner. As a result, readers widen their perception of the universe, and their life experience changes dramatically. Therefore, change in the readers' behavior depends on the cognitive-reflective function. The fact that "The Handmaid's Tale", as a TV show, gained popularity and increased the demand for its written text, demonstrates the significance of the above-mentioned findings regarding the interpretation characteristics.

Besides, the phrases as well as terms that are used in "The Handmaid's Tale" are transformed from creative metaphors into social metaphors. i.e. frequently, Gilead, as a metaphor is used when it comes to criticizing patriarchal, theocratic, or militaristic regimes in real life. Moreover, the costumes in the TV show as well as in the novel itself represent some symbolic concepts along with metaphoric significance as they reflect our existing reality.

A conceptual metaphor might transform into several varieties: visual, creative, and social. More specifically, the handmaids' uniform is red. Red color can be interpreted as an ideology of Gilead or a perception of a reader. Red, as a color, in Gilead, is a symbol of fertility. Besides, red forms a contrast dark blue, the color that the commanders' wives wear. Red can also be decoded as the symbol of a sin reminding the citizens of Gilead that despite their pure function, handmaids' are still sinners. For the TV show audience as well as readers, the red color is associated with violence and the brutality of the regime. Moreover, the costumes and colors of Gilead, as metaphors, can be decoded as an exposition of some theocratic regimes existing in a very reality of an audience.

Thus, costumes as visual metaphors have their specific function in the narration. However, on account of the plot, the visual metaphor transforms into a creative one. Additionally, due to the target aim, the creative metaphor turns into a social metaphor and demonstrates the narrator's further message.

Another example demonstrating the transformation process of a creative metaphor into a social one is given in the article: "Gilead, where the war cannot intrude except on television" (The Handmaid's Tale, 1986, 32).

Television, as a metaphor, once again, represents our existing reality. A war can be militaristic and informational. The basic information warfare or control mechanism in Gilead is a television as it creates an information vacuum. Television, as a metaphor, on the other hand, can be decoded as the only possibility resulting in the downfall of the Gilead regime as it is the only source that could reflect the true reality. Based on the examples of some theocratic, totalitarian, or dictatorial regimes throughout the history of mankind as well as in our reality, the interpretation process of the television, as a social metaphor is an easy task for an audience.

2. Dystopian narration and its linguistic characteristics

Language in dystopian narration is based on the beliefs of an author as the existing lexis is not enough to provide a concept more accurately, triggering the necessity to seek some alternatives beyond the language. Authors of dystopian fiction consider the verbalization of concepts or abstractions inefficient. Thus, they create conceptions beyond the present, far into the future world, and provide those conceptions via the language of a future world. The authors of dystopian fiction are aware that language is a source to express ideas, while the scale of the source is limited. Thus, a narrator goes far beyond the boundaries of the existing lexis. The dystopian narration transforms the existing world and its language into an unknown world via narration. It describes the present via the verbalization of nonverbal conceptions.

Language interpretation is a significant part of “The Handmaid’s Tale”. Offred’s narration manner shows that the reinterpretation of the existing reality serves to perceive the aspects of the Gilead regime more accurately. The reinterpretation of theology is worth mentioning to emphasize that a new elite administrative system has emerged. Moreover, Offred uses a different language means to narrate her past and present life. Past is described via the future perspective, i.e., the prologue of “The Handmaid’s Tale” starts with Professor James Pieixoto’s findings, who investigates the past as a historical discipline and discusses the possibility of the existence of the Gilead regime.

Margaret Atwood builds an introspective and indirect narration. Remembering her past, Offred uses the language of the past. On the other hand, while speaking in the present, she uses the language of the present. Besides, the language of the past is less academic; it includes dialects, slang, and everyday English, whereas, for the language of the present, Offred speaks the academic language full of theological terms.

The following examples demonstrate the significance of narration language in “The Handmaid’s Tale” more specifically.

Example 2.1. Scrabble

As a conceptual, monomodal metaphor, Scrabble in “The Handmaid’s Tale” is significant. It is the game that Offred and the Commander play as a routine. The two dramatically different characters compete against each other via words in the existing language. The winner is the one who is more talented at creating words. The given metaphor underlines the power of a word generally as well as against the regime. The regime of Gilead is based on language manipulation. Some theological terms are used to spread biblical ideology among the citizens of Gilead. Language in Gilead is used to create a social and political ideology. Handmaids are given names after their commanders to emphasize the fact that they are their owners' belongings. For example, June's name in Gilead becomes Offred as she is given as a handmaid to Commander Fred. Besides, the terms, such as unwomen, unhaby etc., represent the social status and functional significance in Gilead.

Also, it is the scrabble that allows Offred to gain power over the commander in a way and change his attitude towards her.

Thus, scrabble might seem like a harmless game, but still in the real world, language can have a huge influence on a society. Although, it is the language that turns into one of the basic tools to break down any regime.

Example 2.2.

A conceptual, monomodal metaphor can gain some allusive functions in the narration. As a result, it might transform into an allusive metaphor. Offred says: „The car is a very expensive one, a Whirlwind; better than the Chariot, much better than the chunky, practical Behemoth.“ (The Handmaid’s Tale, Chapter 4, p. 17).

From one perspective, Chariot and Behemoth are both vehicle models. Alternatively, they somehow make up biblical allusions. Still, Whirlwind, Chariot, and Behemoth are not used as merely allusions in the given episode, rather the three of them are metaphors as the author's message aims to create some associations with biblical facts simultaneously reflecting the reality of the protagonist.

Whirlwind is a monomodal metaphor that specifies the high speed of the commander's car.

A **chariot** might mean a car model or a cart. Therefore, the chariot as an allusive metaphor includes two functional significances: it keeps the reader connected to the contemporary reality: the era of technology. Somehow, it creates an ironic atmosphere as the ideology in Gilead is built on biblical teaching and condemns mankind's strive for civilization. Still, the citizens of Gilead do not resist taking advantage of those achievements that it has brought and use them daily. And that is how the commander is speeding his high-performance car. Also, the chariot as a biblical cart, represents the biblical episode, when Elijah went up to heaven after a chariot of fire and horses of fire had appeared. Here the given metaphor also creates an ironic mood as despite the commander's ambition to be like the biblical character, such as Elijah, the only performance he can fulfil is possible by using the benefits of the civilization that he is determined to fight so vigorously.

Behemoth, as a metaphor, includes two messages. It is both a car model and a biblical allusion. According to the Bible, a behemoth is a very powerful mythological land animal capable of drinking up the Jordan River. The given metaphor demonstrates the fact that, just like the biblical behemoth that deprived people of using water and doomed them to death, the commander has taken away such a vital functioning source to survive life, as freedom.

Therefore, allusive metaphors in dystopian fiction maintain the bond between the author’s contemporary reality and indirect reference. Moreover, they emphasize the narrator’s intention while delivering a particular message to the reader/audience.

3. Metaphor and its role in dystopian narration

Metaphor in dystopian narration functions as a tool of manoeuvrability and manipulation. Dystopian metaphoric language creates a connection between the language and readers. Despite given reality and language standards, readers can realize that it is the story of a future they read. Thus, the given language gains some other formations. The authors of dystopian metaphors give dystopian creative metaphors as if they had existed in the language before. Although, the given metaphors in the narration can be new for readers who, unlike the characters in the text, need to decode them for the first time. Dystopian creative metaphors are natural for characters in the text as

they are part of their everyday routine. Readers, on the other hand, have to interpret the same dystopian creative metaphors based on their current language standards as well as the linguistic norms of the characters. Therefore, while decoding dystopian creative metaphors, real and fictional realities have to be taken into account to interpret particular linguistic construction properly. Thus we can claim that dystopian creative metaphor takes one of the crucial parts in the language of the future. Still, unlike neologism, dystopian creative metaphors maintain a connection with both current and fictional language realities.

Additionally, Riddel maintains that creating and interpreting a metaphor is connected to some neural imagination process (Riddel, 2016). Metaphor simultaneously activates various parts of the brain. Usually, two or more neural regions must be engaged to develop and interpret any fictional language. Besides, neural imaginative information activates the primary cortex of the brain that goes through sensorimotor processing while decoding.

The following examples demonstrate the varieties of dystopian creative metaphors based on the findings of this article.

Example 3.1. Transformed dystopian creative metaphor

Multimodal metaphors are “metaphors whose target and source are each represented exclusively or predominantly in different modes” (Forceville, 2006, 384). Due to some creative expressive features of dystopian narration, metaphors that carry the same concept can be given in different forms. Moreover, the relevant form of a specific metaphor is defined based on the narration technique and expressive tool. The particular expressive form of a metaphor might trigger the intended outcomes among the readers. Still, the same form of expression may not be that effective to express the identical concept in a visual expressive tool, such as a TV show. consequently, some relevant alternative forms have to be found. Those expressive forms fit the specific characteristics of the expressive form. Therefore, a monomodal metaphor in dystopian written narration can transform into a visual, multimodal metaphor in TV shows. Moreover, it might gain some allusive functions.

In "The Handmaid's Tale", a novel, June says: "I once had a garden. Sometimes the Commander's Wife has a chair brought out, and just sits in it, in her garden. From a distance it looks like peace." (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 1986, 17).

In the given episode, the garden as a metaphor represents different time dimensions (past and present) as well as the allusive concept of the lost paradise. As the protagonist of the novel finds it hard to differentiate between the real past and the unreal present, the metaphor of the garden unites the previous and current forms of dystopia and creates the form of an imaginary past and present. The garden as a metaphor also includes the concept of an individual comfort zone and freedom. On the contrary, compared to June's garden, the commander's wife's garden is radically different. Therefore, the garden as a metaphor is given as a form that includes various extremely different conceptions. The given metaphor is not an allusion as it includes more than one concept and association. Here, it is worth mentioning that while the garden represents the metaphor of freedom in the novel, the TV show replaces it with water. In the TV show instead of remembering her garden, Offred thinks dreams about water, the ocean. Particularly, she remembers her family who

are joyfully bathing in the ocean. Besides, water in the TV show shows the significance of purity. In that case, though direct biblical allusion emerges. Therefore, a written monomodal metaphor can be transformed into a visual monomodal metaphor gaining a different form of representation. Moreover, it can be allusive emphasizing the significance of the intended concept. Still, the message remains the same, in this case, the idea and the importance of freedom.

Example 3.2. Multimodal, transformed dystopian creative metaphor

On a TV show a multimodal metaphor can be represented in visual, audio, or written modes. In dystopian narration (written/visual), dystopian creative, multimodal metaphor is represented in different modes. In addition, it creates some associations between the written and visual narration forms and includes further allusive functions.

In one of the episodes of "The Handmaid's Tale", a TV show, while being transferred in a van, handmaids manage to escape. In the episode, the train represents the concept of freedom as a visual metaphor. The given visual metaphor is multimodal as its target and source are represented in different modes (Forceville, 2006). The handmaids are trying to escape beyond the train. Thus, the escape scene and the train as a visual metaphor are accompanied by music. The music includes lyric and melody that gives the other perspective of freedom. The lyric of the music is as follows:

“Cracked eggs

Dead birds, scream as they fight for life,

I can feel death, can see its beady eyes,

All these things into position all these things we'll one day swallow whole.” (Radiohead, Street Spirit)

The lyric responds to the given episode, moreover, to the whole story of "The Handmaid's Tale", its characters, and their separate existence.

Cracked eggs and dead birds should be defined as metaphors conceptualizing the handmaids. A container is the source of reproduction. Still, the eggs in the lyric are cracked which must reveal the message that the handmaids decided to break the regime and stand up against it. Dead birds can also be the metaphor of the handmaids as those, who had been forced to lose their identities by losing even their real names. Dead is the metaphor of Gilead as well as the oncoming danger while escaping. As for the things into position and their swallowing, it represents the ostentatious order and harmony of Gilead, which is the hell more that will for sure be defeated someday, just like the handmaids do in the given episodes. They will be those, who will swallow this evil regime. Thus, the given episode demonstrates the concept of freedom via visual metaphor (train), audio (music), and verbal (lyric) metaphors.

Besides, the train, as a metaphor makes the connection from the TV show to the first chapter of the novel. In the first chapter, escaping, as a metaphor, is represented as suicide. Therefore, the metaphor in the novel has been transformed into a totally different form, concept, and mood in the TV show. While escaping in the novel is associated with suicide and death and contains a pessimistic mood, in the TV show the escaping, as a visual metaphor, represents the concept of freedom, therefore, is turned into an optimistic mood.

Thus, apart from demonstrating the ideas, concepts, and intentions of an author, metaphors include emotional modes and can be optimistic, pessimistic, manipulative, sentimental, etc.

Example 3.3. Personified dystopian creative metaphor

A dystopian creative metaphor can transform into a personified one. The dystopian creative personified metaphor is context-bound and its accurate interpretation is affected by the concept, moreover the analysis of characters in the story.

As I have already mentioned, the regime in Gilead has taken away the identities of the handmaids. However, the elite class members have also been given some titles. Thus, the social classification in “The Handmaid’s Tale” is demonstrated in the following manner: Handmaids, Marthas, Wives, Aunts, Unwomen, Guards, etc.

Each of these characters has got a specific function and significance. The names or titles are given to the groups of social classes rather than the individuals. The titles and the names make it easier to define the functions and significance of any particular social group. Consequently, the titles have gained the function of personified metaphors, i.e., Handmaid is the metaphor of fertility, Marthas-servants, Aunts-educators, Unwomen-infertility, Guards-protectors.

Therefore, in dystopian narration, dystopian creative metaphor, taking into consideration the context, can be transformed into personified metaphor as it simultaneously includes not only a sole concept, rather a concept, characters, and their function in the story.

4. Conclusions

This study has discussed the expressive forms of dystopian narration. The specific characteristics of dystopian narration have also been investigated. The study aimed to show the significance of dystopian creative metaphor as a tool in dystopian fiction and reveal various subcategories of metaphors. Moreover, the significance of the audience in the metaphor interpretation process has been investigated.

Based on the findings of the research, it can be claimed that the subcategories of dystopian creative metaphors are as follows:

1. Social dystopian creative metaphor;
2. Manipulative dystopian creative metaphor;
3. Allusive dystopian creative metaphor;
4. Transformed dystopian creative metaphor;
5. Transformed multimodal dystopian creative metaphor;
6. Personified dystopian creative metaphor.

A social dystopian creative metaphor that is shown in the imaginary world and belongs to the author's imagination, expresses real-life social issues, such as gender equality, government systems, etc.

Manipulative dystopian creative metaphor consists of some linguistic maneuvers that make the associations inside the text itself as well as the outside reality. Manipulative dystopian creative

metaphor is characterized by an ironic tone, warning messages, and a pessimistic description of the reality a particular society lives in.

Allusive dystopian creative metaphor allegedly confuses the audience as it shows some signs of allusions. However, while allusion includes one message only, allusive dystopian creative metaphor includes allusive connections to biblical or historical characters and at the same time responds to the text itself as well as the reality of the audience.

Transformed dystopian creative monomodal/multimodal metaphor demonstrates the transformation process of a concept from written text into a visual form. As the concept or an author's message remains all the same, it is the expressive form that changes during the transformation process. It creates expressive forms of associations that reflect the events and facts of the reality of society.

Personified dystopian creative metaphor includes a concept along with the characters of the story. So, personified dystopian creative metaphor delivers the author's message via the characters of the story. To decode personified dystopian creative metaphors more accurately, the context of a given text or visual work should be taken into consideration.

Besides, the role of the audience as one of the creators is also worth mentioning as together with the author, they are the ones who bring to life the significance of dystopian creative metaphors.

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