APPRECIATING AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY’S POEMS THROUGH BINARY OPPOSITION

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Abstract

From all of literature genre, mostly poem is the most difficult literary work to appreciate. It is caused by the ambiguity, imagery, metaphor, and symbolic words inside it. Even, in contemporary poems, the problems will be raised due to the history of their creative process and cultural background. Like, in Adrienne Rich’s poems, it is almost impossible for the reader to appreciate and understand her poems without understanding her cultural and historical background. Thus, this paper will observe how to appreciate American contemporary poems, such as Rich’s poems through the easiest way by using binary opposition and link it with Rich’s historical and cultural background. It is very important to carry out the writer’s historical and cultural background, because it will be determined the whole content of the poems. Contemporary poems usually has weird form that make it differ from the traditional poems. Sometimes, the form is prosaic, the combination between poetry and prose, and sometimes it likes long dialogs. Therefore, the method by using the binary opposition and link it with writer’s background is one of the effective way to appreciate American contemporary’s poems.

Keywords: American contemporary poems, binary opposition, writer’s background

Introduction

Appreciating contemporary poems is not simple way to do. The complexity in the diction, form, and writer’s intension will contribute the difficulties to interpret the deep meaning that is hidden inside of the poem. Such as the diction, it really needs cross culture understanding to comprehend some of the dictions in the contemporary poems because some of the words used are quite unfamiliar especially for the “eastern person”, like Indonesia. While the form in contemporary poem usually do not follow the traditional form of the poem, there is no rules in the contemporary poem. It means that the writers are free to make the poem according their way of expression. In Contemporary poems, there do not follow the rules of rhyme, style, symbolic, and meter like in traditional poems, but the most interesting notion in contemporary poems are “interesting”. Therefore, the poems are not always beautiful, but “interesting”.

The concept of “interesting” in contemporary poems refer to the theme, diction, ambiguity, and the form of the poems. There is no appropriate and fixed form in contemporary poems. Symbolic, poetic words, and style are not important elements in contemporary poems. The strenght of these poems that make them “interesting” are the form and the meaning inside of these poems. Sometimes, the form is prosaic, it is the combination
form of poem and prose, such as in Jeffrey Skinner’s poems. This type of poem is long like narrative poem and sometimes without the title. Contemporary poems are tried not to tie with the several forms of traditional poems, because contemporary poems are the reflection of the contemporary art, such as free in its style, not beautiful but interesting, no rules, and free in its form. Although the contemporary poems are free in the way of expression and style, but most of the writers/ poets are influenced by the previous poets in their creative process. W.H Audens, John Donne, T.S. Elliot gives much influence to contemporary poets. For example, Adrienne Rich’s works are much influenced by Tennyson, Keats, Arnold, Blake, and Rosetti because such poets are Rich’s favorite poets.

Due to their weird forms and diction, the contemporary poems are hard to interpret and appreciate. Thus, one of the simplest way to overcome such problem is using binary opposition in the poem to search the deep meaning of the poem. Usually this concept is used by the deconstructionist as a method to analyze the text. Searle in Madison (1993) tells that primarily, a deconstructionist should identify the binary oppositions that have been established as a construct in Western intellectual history. Binary opposition takes an important role to appreciate the poem because by searching the opposition of words inside the poems, the elements and meaning will be uncovered. Shafieyan (2011) defines Binary Opposition, as the third kind, contains two absolute oppositions; that is to say, the existence of one means the non-existence of the other.

The next, Searle in Madison (1993) defines binary oppositions as pairs of opposites (e.g. light/darkness) in which the left-hand term is considered superior to the right-hand term. After identifying the binary opposition, the deconstructionist reverses the hierarchy inherent in the binary opposition by proving that the right-hand term is superior and prior to the left-hand term. According to the definition above, the binary opposition can be happened on its symbol, metaphor, entity, two different beings, and two different matters.

Furthermore, by listing the opposite words it will make the understanding much easier, because the people can compare such as positive and the negative, the male and female, and categorized them based on its binary. In relation with the binary opposition, Fromkin (2003) states that people understand a word only because they can understand the opposite of that word. It means that it is too hard too know the meaning of the poem directly. Or, sometimes it is too difficult to interpret and comprehend the symbolic words in the poem directly. Therefore, it uses binary opposition to make it simple to appreciate and understand the poem. In addition, Berthens (2001) states that a very basic mental operation consists in the creation of opposites: some things are edible, others are not, some creatures are dangerous, others are not. For the structuralist, the binary opposition is universal and it is sourced from the primitive thinking in the human’s mind (Levi – Strauss in Berthens, 2001).

Rich’s as one of an outstanding American Contemporary poet also uses binary opposition in her poems. Such binary opposition in Rich’s poems uses to strengthen the characters in her poem. In addition, many of the words that are used as binary opposition in her poems are a kind of contrasted words between man and woman characteristics. It is not surprised on account of her poems telling about the feminism. Adrienne Rich is the feminist
writer, thus her works such as her poems use the feminism themes, like motherhood, woman’s oppression, and sexuality. Rich’s poems like *Of Woman Born’s* (1976) tells about the feminism movement and her notion in line with her experiences as the mother and the woman’s experiences in motherhood. Most of her poem illustrates the woman who struggle to be independence and describes woman as the strong figure.

**Discussion**

To understand and appreciate the poem is not the simple things, mostly the contemporary poems that have the different characteristics. To interpret it, absolutely it needs not only to comprehend the poems but also it is very important to search the history of writer’s background and the social condition and situation at that time. Such as Ginsberg poems have close relation with his life and belief as the jewish and also much influenced by the transcendentalism movement, especially Walt Whitman. Thus, American contemporary poems are not interested materials in literature class, because such the reasons above. Moreover, for the learners from non English Speaking Countries, this poems are hard to understand. Therefore, before these poems are given as the material in the classroom, it is better to give the general understanding about American culture and art including the historical background of the writer.

The understanding of American culture and art and the historical background of the writer will enable the learners to have the better poem’s appreciation. They will be able to get the deep meaning by learning such elements above. This is also happened while trying to appreciate Rich’s poems. Adrienne Rich is one of the outstanding American contemporary poet. All of her poems show her real accomplishment and thought. Her poems are described and shown her journey of life and her evolution in her life since she began the creative process in 1955 while she was giving birth her first baby, David Conrad. Her life process is much affected to her poems, like before and after the death of her husband Alfred Conrad. Before the death of her husband, her poems are not too much telling about feminism, but after the death of her husband in 1970, she has changed her poems’ themes into feminism. Because in 1971, she kept in touch with the Women’s Liberation Movement. She indentifies herself as a part of this movement. Consequently, her ideology of her poems will be changed. This changing is symbolized by her work, *The Will to Change*. Clearly, from the title of her poem, it is reflected her life orientation changing.

**The Binary Opposition Leading to the finding of meaning in Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers**

Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers
Aunt Jennifer’s tigers prance across a screen,
Bright topaz denizens of a world of green,
They do not fear the men beneath the tree,
They pace in the sleek chivalric certainty.

Aunt jennifer’s tigers fingers fluttering through her wool
Find even the ivory needle hard to pull
The massive weight of uncle wedding band
Sit heavily upon Aunt Jennifer’s hand

When Aunt is dead, her terrified hand will lie
Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by
The tigers in the panel that she made
Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid

*Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers* is one of earlier Rich’s poems that telling about the woman’s life. The form of this poem is couplet, it will be different with other Rich’s poems that have the free form. It means that this poem follows the traditional form like sonnet in Shakespeare era. It is weird, because mostly the contemporary poems form is free form. This poem also uses Iambic pentameter as its consequences of the couplet. Because the form is couplet, thus *Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers* is easily to analyze using binary opposition to search the deep meaning of the poem. The way that can be used firstly, it must be identified the opposition or contrast. Then, listing the contrasting things inside the poem. As it has been discussed before, the binary opposition can use as the way to understand and appreciate the contemporary poems. The binary opposition is also to show the level of relationship between the left and the right hand of binary opposition, it means that the binary opposition will show the superiority and inferiority of power.

After identifying the poem, it can be found several of binary opposition inside of this poem. Here the list of binary opposition inside of the poem, *Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers*

- Aunt/Uncle
- Not fear/ terrified
- Tigers/aunt fingers
- Tigers/men
- Mortal/immortal
- Death/created
- Creator/created
- Dominator/dominated

From the list of binary opposition above it shows the opposition between the left and the right hand, the next it can be searched the deep meaning inside of the poem, like the opposition between aunt and uncle. The word aunt is put in the left side to show the superiority of the character, Aunt to uncle. Aunt is represented as “the woman” thus it will describe the spirit of feminism inside of this poem. The left side of binary opposition such as not fear, tigers, mortal, creator, and dominator are used to show the strength of the main character, Aunt Jennifer as the woman who struggle for her life and try to survive around the man domination. Aunt Jennifer is analogized as the tiger, the wild animal that can survive in the jungle and combine it with the word not fear.
In the right hand, the aunt is opposite with uncle. It means that the woman character is in binary opposition with the man/uncle. It indicates the dichotomy that will be created by the poet between male and female and surely the poet focuses to the woman as the heroine in this poem. Then in the right hand, it is also mentioned the word “terrified”. This word is to describe the condition and the condition of man who is afraid of the tiger (woman strength). The uncle is seen as the inferior creature who is just giving the burden to the aunt Jennifer’s life. Thus, in her death, Aunt Jennifer still holds her burden of life in her hand, the diction “ordeals” show the heavy burden, it means she has experienced bad things in her life which is caused by the man/uncle. While the binary opposition tiger/aunt fingers is used to show the woman’s side of aunt Jennifer. It indicates that, although in one time she has strong characteristics to face her hard and heavy life, but in another side she is still a woman who has many weaknesses. The word aunt fingers can be contrasted with tiger. The word fingers for aunt shows her side as woman, her softness too. On the other hand, the tiger shows her strength to struggle, to reach her life’s aim.

Describing Life Condition through the Contrasting Words in Darklight

This is another Rich’s poem, that is written in the end of 1980’s era. Like other Rich’s poems that are written after 1970”s, Darklight does not follow the certain rule of poetic forms like in Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers. In this poem, it can not find the meter, well arranged rhyme, and couplet, because this poem follows the free form like most of American contemporary poems. Although Rich does not use the traditional poetic elements, but she uses another poetic device, such as binary opposition. In this poem below, the binary opposition uses as the strength to deliver the idea and the aim of this poem. Two contrasting words are used to give the strong effects to lead the reader searching the inside meaning of this poem. Here the full version of Rich’s poem, Darklight

Darklight

When heat leaves the walls at last
And the breeze comes
Or seems to come, off water
Or off the half – finished moon
Her silver roughened by a darkblue rag
This is the ancient hour
Between light and dark, work and rest
Earthly tracks and star – trails
The last willed act of the day
And the night first dream

If you could have this hour
For the last hour of your life
Since the beginning, this poem has shown its binary opposition, it shows through the title of this poem *Darklight*. This title clearly is a kind of binary opposition. The elements of binary opposition are dominant in this poem, one word will be contrasted with another in order to compare the condition of life, like the comparison between dark and light. Here all of the list of binary opposition that can be found inside of this poem,

- Light/dark
- Leaves/ comes
- Heat/breeze
- Silver/darkblue rag
- Work/rest
- Earthly track/star trail
- Day/night

According to the poem above, at least there are seven pairs of binary opposition. The usage of the binary opposition in *Darklight* has several aims. First, it is to describe the transformation of the situation and condition of life. The using of the word “heat” symbolizes the oppression, hard life, miserable condition, tortured situation, and burdened life. On contrary, this word opposites with “breeze”. This word connotates as the comfortable situation, calm condition, something fresh, easy life, and happy situation. The two contrast words”heat” and “breeze” are followed by two opposite verbs, leave and come. Thus, the transformation of the situation from the hard condition to the comfortable and easy situation is described from the beginning of the poem. Clearly, This poem wants to tell about the moving of situation from bad into good, from dark into light, from hard into easy. The using of the binary opposition really will help to catch the message that will be delivered by the writer through her opposing words.

Furthermore, “silver” and “darkblue rag” are in the different position too. “silver” here to describe the color of moonlight, it is soft and beautiful. Then, this word is contrasted with “darkblue rag” which is indicated with rough things, something bad, and ugly, “darkblue rag” is to describe the sky, the color of the sky. The line “her silver roughened by a darkblue rag” represents the beauty that is contaminated with the ugliness. Or, it can be said that in the past, the happiness is covered by the sadness. But, it is not happened in this time anymore, because it has been left and the “breeze’” has come. The next line, “this is the ancient hour” indicates that the sadness, something bad, hard life, and the bad situation are happened in the past time, it is represented by the word “ancient”.

While the other binary opposition such as light/dark, work/rest, earthly tracks/star-trails, day/night are supported to illustrate the transformation of time, situation, and condition that is described in this poem. The binary opposition light, work, day, and star – trails are in the right hand. It indicates that such positive elements are emerged to replace the negative
elements, like dark, rest, night, and earthly tracks. Such binary opposition above also illustrates the best chance, the best time in life. The word “work”, and “day” describes the time when the person has activity, the time when the people involve with many people to do something useful and meaningful. Because at night the people will take a “rest”, it means that there is no activity, or at least the mobility of the people will be slower than in the day. In addition, the contrast situation between earthly tracks and star – trails is also to show the different situation between to things. It uses to strengthen the time transformation and the changing of the situation, condition, and time.

Conclusion

From the two of Rich’s poem above, it can be concluded that the use of binary opposition takes an important role in analyzing the contemporary poems. Due to contemporary poems have free form, it is hard for the readers to appreciate using all of poetic’s devices such as meter, rhyme, couplet, and etc. Not all of contemporary poems have such devices, they use their own form which are made them differ from the traditional poems. Therefore, the binary opposition can be used as one of the way to understand and appreciate contemporary poems. Because by contrasting two different words in the poems, it will lead to the deep meaning and the content of the poems. Like Understanding Rich’s background of life is also important to get the deeper illustration such as in Aunt Jennifers Tigers. This poem is much influenced by Rich’s involvement in feminism, thus this poem telling about feminism or woman’s struggle. While in the second poem, The Darklight, the form of this poem differs from the frist one. It does not follow the traditional rules of traditional poems. It has free form, because it is created in 1988 – 1990. This poem uses many binary opposition to illustrate the content inside the poem.

References


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