Carpe Diem: **A Semiotic Metaphorical Representation of LOVE, SEX, and SEDUCTION in Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress"**

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Article Info	Abstract
*Corresponding author: (P. O. Makinde) Corresponding Author email po.makinde@unizik.edu.ng **Keywords:** *Carpe diem,* *semiotic metaphor,* *metaphorical representation,* *poetic devices,* *lexical density,* *social semiotics,* *SFL*	Studies have shown that the use of metaphor as a poetic device, which allows writers to convey vivid imagery that transcends literal meanings, plays a vital role in the representation of meaning-making employed by poets to create images in their minds to convey their ideals. As Baake (2003) notes, metaphor plays an essential role in a mysterious person's knowledge process. This paper explores a semiotic metaphorical representation of Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress". It examines its use of symbols, language choice, allusion, lexical items, and allegories and how they are recontextualized as semiotic resources to create a multi-layered representation of these concepts. The study relies on Halliday's notion of Social Semiotics and Matthiessen's concept of *applicability* in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Via this framework, the study sheds light on the poem's complex representation of love, sex, and seduction through the use of semiotics and metaphor. Findings from the study show a deeper understanding of how linguistic clues contribute to the teaching and learning of literary text. The study, therefore, provides insights into the complex relationship between linguistics and literary analysis and reveals how such a relationship enhances the teaching of stylistics from an SFL perspective. The study is significant in providing a resource for teachers and students of linguistic stylistics in teaching and learning literary discourse.

Introduction

Studies have shown that the use of metaphor as a poetic device, which allows writers to convey vivid imagery that transcends literal meanings, plays a vital role in the representation of meaning employed by poets to create images in their minds to convey their ideals. Also, the application of metaphor as a tool for the analysis of texts in language has long been examined for a variety of different purposes, semiotic metaphorical representation being just one such. There have also been notable works on metaphor that apply the systemic-functional approach to studying metaphor. Such studies among others include semiotic metaphor (O'Halloran, 1999a, 1999b, 2005), grammatical metaphor (Melrose, 2003), and conceptual metaphor (Forceville, 2006). More recent studies have also examined metaphor from visual as well as multimodal perspectives (Omar and Fayyadh, 2018; Amundrud, 2020, Makinde, 2024a, 2024b) with limited study focusing on semiotic metaphorical representation of poetic texts. A study by Moya-Guijarro (2016), his research focuses on the role of semiotic metaphor in the verbal-visual interplay of three children's picture books. Using the frameworks of Systemic Functional Linguistics and Systemic-Functional Multimodal Discourse analysis, the study draws on the concept of semiotic metaphor as a tool to create ideational meaning. Findings from the study show that semiotic metaphors are essentially used in children's tales to facilitate young children's understanding of the story. In another study, Condon (1999) investigates a semiotic approach to the use of metaphor in human-computer interfaces. Though this study is domiciled within interface metaphor, a domain in computer interaction, the study shows that a cognitive approach based on mental models offers a more successful model of the process. The limited study on the semiotic metaphorical representation of poetic texts, which this study investigates, creates a gap in literature. Given the foregoing, our study examines how Marvell in "To His Coy Mistress" effectively utilizes semiotic metaphorical representation to encapsulate the themes of love, sex, and seduction through the lens of Social Semiotics

and Systemic Functional Linguistics.

Literature Review
Semiotic Metaphor

Semiotic metaphor refers to how meaning is constructed and communicated through signs and symbols in various forms of media. This concept is grounded in semiotics, the study of signs and symbols as elements of communicative behavior. A semiotic metaphor works by drawing a comparison between two different domains, where one domain (the source) informs the understanding of another (the target) through a shared characteristic. From an SFL perspective, semiotic metaphor involves a shift in the function and the grammatical class of an element, or the introduction of new functional elements. This process, as O'Halloran (2003) posits, does not take place intra-semiotically when compared with grammatical metaphor in language; rather, it takes place inter-semiotically when a functional element is reconstructed using another semiotic code. With such re construal, there is a semantic shift in the function of that element (O'Halloran 2003, 357).

The key concepts of semiotic metaphor are the domain of metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), signifier and signified (Saussure, 1916), Cultural Context (Nöth, 1990), and visual metaphor (Forceville, 2006). As Saussure (1916) reiterates, the signifier is the form that the sign takes, while the signified is the concept it represents. In a metaphor, the relationship between the signifier and the signified can shift, leading to new interpretations. This provides room for the link between the source domain (signifier) which provides a framework for understanding the target domain (the signified). Thus, describing time as "money" (e.g., "spending time"), for instance, allows us to view time through the lens of economic value, emphasizing its scarcity and manageability (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Also, semiotic metaphors are often influenced by cultural contexts. Different cultures may utilize different metaphors to express similar concepts, reflecting varying values and worldviews (Nöth, 1990). Another concept in the discussion on semiotic metaphor is that it can be conveyed via imagery (visual concept). For instance, a broken chain in an advertisement may symbolize freedom from constraints, employing visual elements to evoke emotional responses and associations (Forceville, 2006). In the same way, the adoption of visual images in literary works can evoke a sense of belonging as the author engages in the use of imagery that evokes the reader's sense (Makinde, 2024c).

Theoretical Framework

Appliable linguistics is a kind of linguistics where theory is designed to have the ***potential*** to be applied to solve problems that arise in communities around the world, involving both reflection and action (Halliday, 1985, 2002a; Matthiesen, 2012). It represents a way of relating theory and application as complementary pursuits rather than as a thesis-&-antithesis pair destined to be in constant opposition and thus constitutes the synthesis position bringing theory and application together in dialogue (Matthiesen, 2012). For this purpose, the current study investigates the application of linguistic cues as resources for making meaning in literary works as depicted in the poem under analysis.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design. A secondary source of data backup with a literature review is used. Data for this study is drawn from **Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress"**. The choice of this poem stems from the poet's peculiarity in employing metaphorical conceit as resources for depicting social issues. Thus, the poem serves as data for exploring semiotic metaphorical representation from a Systemic Functional Linguistic lens.

Discussion on the representation of love, sex, and seduction in Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress"

Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" is a classic example of the use of semiotic representation, particularly in its depiction of love, sex, and seduction. Through the use of imagery, metaphor, and rhetorical strategies, Marvell presents a nuanced commentary on the themes of desire, time, and the pursuit of physical intimacy. Via the semiotic signs - symbols, metaphors, and language - Marvell constructs and conveys complex cultural meanings of love and seduction while commenting on societal perceptions of these themes in the 17th century. Marvell through his *carpe diem* lens presents the portrayal of love and desire as temporal constructs. While highlighting seduction and the urgency of physical desire, he presents the role of agency and the body in his representation of gender and power.

First, the poet begins with an idealized representation of love in which the speaker imagines a world without constraints on time or social expectations. The poem opens with the famous lines: *Had we but world enough and time,/This **coyness**, lady, were no crime* to depict the brevity of time. He stresses further in lines 8 – 10 thus:

Love you ten years before the Flood,
And you should, if you please, refuse

Till the conversion of the Jews.

The first semiotic sign here is the reference to the biblical Flood, which symbolizes an eternal, unbroken love. The hyperbole in the phrase "ten years before the Flood" implies a love that transcends the constraints of time and mortality, but it also implies the absurdity of such a proposition. Marvell uses the Flood to signify the impossibility of such eternal love in a world where time is limited. This is further emphasized by the reference to the "conversion of the Jews," which carries cultural and religious weight, suggesting that even religious history is subordinate to the natural flow of time. In this way, Marvell uses these biblical allusions to highlight the tension between eternal love and the constraints of human temporality.

Also, while the poem's first part idealizes love, the tone shifts significantly in the second stanza, where the speaker moves from the abstract to the physical, urging the mistress to seize the moment thereby portraying the idea of *carpe diem* as depicted in line 22: *Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near.* The seduction becomes more explicit as the speaker appeals to her desires:

Thy beauty shall no more be found;
Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound
My echoing song; then worms shall try
That long-preserved virginity,
And your quaint honor turn to dust,
And into ashes all my lust;

Evidence in the above text is its use of end rhyme scheme as in *found* and *sound*, *try* and *virginity* as well as *dust* and *lust* (a a b b c c) as a technique for creating sound patterns. Also by borrowing discourse from metaphysical conceit, Marvell explores the relationship between lovers as he draws a comparison between the mistress' acceptance and rejection, and the consequence of not accepting his proposal via such expressions as *Thy beauty shall no more be found;/…/then worms shall try/That long-preserved virginity,/And into ashes all my lust;* to lure the mistress. In his appeal to her, Marvell uses the "sickle" of Time, traditionally a symbol of death, to represent the inevitability of aging and decay. Yet, he counters this by claiming that love itself remains unaffected by time's ravages, emphasizing its enduring quality, but also suggesting that love, in a physical sense, should be acted upon before the ravages of time diminish physical beauty.

In the third stanza, the speaker pushes for physical intimacy, emphasizing the urgency of their desires through the metaphor of "sport." This is a semiotic representation of seduction, where the language of pleasure is intertwined with the notion of time running out:

Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run.

Here, the metaphor of the "sun" running refers to the swift passage of time, and the seduction becomes an attempt to gain mastery over time through sexual consummation. Marvell's use of the word "sport" in this context not only appeals to physical pleasure but also serves to dehumanize the interaction, reducing it to something to be won or lost. The language here aligns with a more *carpe diem* ethos, one that encourages the pursuit of physical pleasure before death or decay intervenes.

Thus, the poem's semiotic representations of love, sex, and seduction also interact with contemporary views on gender and power. Marvell's speaker adopts a position of agency, attempting to persuade the mistress through a series of rhetorical strategies, but the mistress herself is portrayed as resisting his advances—at least at first. The speaker's plea suggests a dynamic of power and control, where he seeks to dictate the course of their relationship, framing it as one of mutual benefit. Yet, the mistress is positioned as the gatekeeper of her desires and body.

The shifting dynamics of the agency are most apparent in the transition from idealized love to physical seduction. In this sense, Marvell's poem reflects broader cultural attitudes toward female agency in sexual relationships. By framing the speaker's desire as urgent and the mistress's hesitation as coyness, Marvell both reinforces and critiques contemporary gender norms regarding love and sex.

Semiotic metaphorical representation of love, sex, and seduction in Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress"

Semiotic metaphors are prevalent in literature, advertising, and everyday language. In literature, authors use metaphors to deepen thematic elements and character development (McQuarrie & Mick, 1999) as evidenced in the work under discussion. In the poem, the concept of *carpe diem* is intricately woven into the fabric of love, sex, and

seduction through semiotic metaphorical representation. The poet employs various metaphors that frame the urgency of seizing the moment, particularly in the context of romantic and physical relationships. Instances of Semiotic Metaphors in "To His Coy Mistress" include **time as a commodity** ("… Love you ten years before the Flood" line 8), **metaphor of nature** ("… vegetable love," line 11), **mortality and decay** ("the grave's a fine and private place" – line 31), and **seductive imagery**.

1. Time as a Commodity: Marvell metaphorically portrays time as a valuable resource. The poet's persona suggests that if he had all the time in the world, he would dedicate endless hours to wooing his mistress. Expressions such as "Love you ten years before the Flood" emphasize the vastness of time, yet they also highlight its finitude. **The metaphor of time as a scarce commodity evokes urgency, encouraging the mistress to embrace love and physical intimacy now rather than later.**

    A hundred years should go to praise Thine eyes and on thy forehead gaze;
    Two hundred to adore each breast,
    But thirty thousand to the rest;
    An age at least to every part,
    And the last age should show your heart.

Out of the numerous numbers of time frames specified above, only a year "**the last age**" is devoted to the heart which constitutes the domain of feeling, love, and emotion. The idea of "**the last age**" neutralizes and contrasts the expression "Love you ten years before the Flood" and portrays the confessed love as unreal, selfish, and self-aggrandizement.

2. The Metaphor of Nature: Marvell uses natural imagery, comparing his desire to the elements of nature. He speaks of "vegetable love," which implies a slow, organic growth. This metaphor contrasts with the more immediate and passionate elements he later emphasizes. **By juxtaposing the slow and the urgent, Marvell highlights the tension between prolonged courtship and the need for immediate action.**

    let us sport ourselves while we may
    Let us roll all our strength and all
    Our sweetness up into one ball,
    And tear our pleasures with rough strife

The above excerpt portrays elements of a metaphysical conceit whereby the mistress is persuaded to hurry up and seize the moment while it lasts.

3. Mortality and Decay: The poem reflects on mortality through vivid imagery of decay and death. Phrases such as "the grave's a fine and private place" serve as a stark reminder of life's brevity. This semiotic representation of mortality compels the mistress to recognize that life is fleeting, thus reinforcing the urgency of embracing love and desire in the present moment. Semiotic representation of mortality portrayed in *carpe diem* as in seizing the time is depicted via such expressions as:

    Thy beauty shall no more be found;
    Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound My echoing song;
    then worms shall try
    That long-preserved virginity,

4. Seductive Imagery: Marvell employs sensual imagery to represent love and seduction. His assertion that "we should sit down, and think which way to walk" suggests a more intimate connection. **This metaphorical invitation implies that they should explore both emotional and physical realms together, reinforcing the theme of seizing the day.**

    At every pore with instant fires,
    Now let us sport us while we may,
    And tear our pleasures with rough strife

In the excerpt above, Marvell uses such lexical items as *pore*, *instant fires*, *sport*, *tear our pleasures,* and

rough strife to portray the idea of sensual imagery. Thus, the expression "And **tear our pleasures with rough strife**" implies exploring all our pleasure in sexual relationships as a depiction of love and mutual bonding.

Discussion on WordCloud Result

As part of the discussion on the semiotic metaphorical representation of LOVE, SEX, and SEDUCTION in **Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress"**, we highlight the various lexical items that contribute to the metaphorical representation via the WordCloud result presented below:
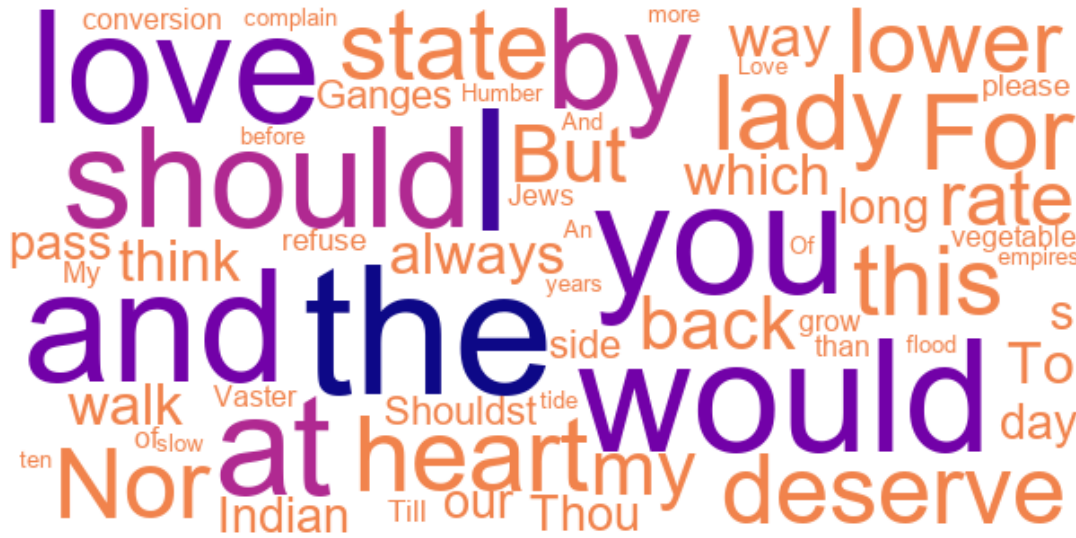
Fig. 1: Showing Wordcloud Result of the Text – The Flea

In the above figure, we are presented with the Wordcloud result of the text under analysis. This gives a visualize the results generated by the KWIC, File, Cluster, and N-Gram, showing patterns of the most frequently occurring words, thus providing an accessible overview of the frequent words that appear in the poem. The most frequently used words are projected via silence, color, and size and are thus made prominent in the cloud. As indicated above, such commonly used words always rank highly, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table *1*: Showing token and plot distributions of the most frequently used linguistic items
Table 1 here represents the plot distribution of the most frequently used items in the text under analysis.

Row	FileID	FilePath	FileTokens	Freq	NormFreq	Dispersion	Plot
1	1	To His Coy Mistress.txt	305	15	49180.328	0.795	and
1	1	To His Coy Mistress.txt	305	4	13114.754	0.592	love
1	1	To His Coy Mistress.txt	305	2	6557.377	0	by
1	1	To His Coy Mistress.txt	305	4	13114.754	0.447	You
1	1	To His Coy Mistress.txt	305	4	13114.754	0.447	The
1	1	To His Coy Mistress.txt	305	4	13114.754	0.447	Would
1	1	To His Coy Mistress.txt	305	5	16393.443	0.469	I
1	1	To His Coy Mistress.txt	305	4	13114.754	0.447	Us
1	1	To His Coy Mistress.txt	305	5	16393.443	0.469	We
1	1	To His Coy Mistress.txt	305	5	16393.443	0.669	Of
1	1	To His Coy Mistress.txt	305	6	19672.131	0.491	To
1	1	To His Coy Mistress.txt	305	4	13114.754	0.447	You
1	1	To His Coy Mistress.txt	305	5	16393.443	0.469	At
1	1	To His Coy Mistress.txt	305	5	16393.443	0.469	Thy

Table 1 above represents a plot distribution of the most frequently used lexical items in the text under analysis. Out of the 305 tokens, the table shows that *and* is the most frequently used token with Freq of 15, NormFreq of 49180.328, and dispersion of 0.795. The second most frequently used token is *to* with Freq of 6, NormFreq of 19672.131, and dispersion of 0.491; this is followed by *I*, *we*, *of*, *at* and *thy* with Freq of 5, NormFreq of 16393.443 and dispersion of 0.469. Also, the table further shows that the tokens *love*, *you*, *thee*, *would*, *us,* and *you* with Freq of 5, NormFreq of 13114.754 and dispersion of 0.447. This is further shown in the fourteen tables presented in the appendix showing various hits of the KWIC represented in the corpus under analysis. These tables show how these selected most frequently used tokens are positioned within the context where such are used.

Conclusion

Understanding semiotic metaphor in the analysis of Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" has been shown in this study to enhance readers' comprehension of how meaning is constructed by the writer as we examine the interplay between signifiers and signifieds and consider cultural contexts. This contributes to better appreciating the richness of metaphorical language and its impact on the reader's perception. Our discussion in the introductory part as well as the review of literature lends credence to the significance of this study. Thus, the study's findings show a deeper understanding of how linguistic clues contribute to the teaching and learning of literary text. The analysis also provides insights into the complex relationship between linguistic and literary analysis, revealing how such a relationship enhances the teaching of stylistics from an SFL perspective. Also, the study is significant in that it provides a resource for teachers and students of linguistic and literary stylistics in teaching and learning literary discourse.

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