

## Exploration of the Theory of Conversational Implicature in the Poems “Coal” and “Hanging Fire” by Audre Lorde.

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### Abstract

*A number of works have been done by scholars on the study and interpretation of Audre Lorde’s poems, especially through the lens of literary and critical analysis. However, Lorde’s poems have not been analyzed pragmatically. A lot may have been written about Lorde’s poetry, but there is absolutely no evidence of a pragmatics study of her work. Lorde is the author of many poems that have been studied in various theoretical dimensions, but none have been done with reference to their pragmatics implications. The problem which this research recognizes, therefore, is that Lorde’s poems, especially the those under the present study, have not been studied and interpreted using Grice’s theory of Conversational Implicature (Cooperative Principle) which comprised the four maxims: the maxims of Quantity, Quality, Manner and Relation. This study seeks to discover the extent to which these maxims could be applied to the reading of these selected poems of Lorde. It also seeks to ascertain the degree to which Lorde’s selected poems violate or adhere to these maxims. The study has found that Audre Lorde in some of her poems, violates the maxims as well as adheres to it both in the same breath.*

**Keywords:** Conversational Implicature, Pragmatics, Grice, Poems, Maxims, Cooperative Principles, Audre Lorde, Context

### Introduction

Experiences have shown that what people say or write is not always what they actually mean. Quite often, speakers’ or authors’ utterances or writings mean much more than what they actually literally say or write. For instance, a speaker who sends someone on an errand might say, “If you like, don’t come back today.” This statement might have the implied meaning of, “Return as soon as possible or come back very quickly.” This is in line with the view of Jenny Thomas (1995, p. 1) who posits that “people do not always or even usually say what they mean.” He illustrates this with these examples: “it’s hot in here.” This statement is open to varying interpretations. For someone who came into a room with the windows shut, this might mean ‘please open the window.’ Or it might mean, ‘Is it alright if I open the window?’ Or ‘You’re wasting electricity.’ What someone says at times

can be the complete opposite of what he or she means. Thomas suggests that people can mean something quite different from what their words suggest.

The preceding exposition lays out the problem of meaning in context, specifically how context contributes to meaning. Grice, writing on the same subject, studies a sort of talk-in-interaction, raising questions such as: do speakers mean what they say, or say what they mean? In other words, he studies context-dependent aspects of meaning. We will return to Grice momentarily. Meanwhile the present study seeks to investigate the features of the speech context embedded in the poetic lines in Audre Lorde’s poems, arguing that context helps determine which proposition is expressed by a given poetic line. The meaning of those lines can be regarded as a function from a context, including time, place, and possible worlds shared by both poet and



readers, into a proposition, where, as Robert C. Stalnaker (1972, p. 383) argues, a proposition is a function from a possible world into a truth value. In other words, the study investigates aspects of meaning involved in the interaction between a poetic expression's context of utterance and the interpretation of elements within that expression.. An important aspect of Audre Lorde's language use in her poetry is one that takes context into account as an essential part in the construction of meaning.

Returning to Grice, one of his two most influential contributions to the study of language and communication is his theory of meaning, which he began to develop in his article "Meaning," written in 1948 but published only in 1957 at the prodding of his colleague, P. F. Strawson (Wikipedia) Grice further develop his theory of meaning in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> of his William James lectures on "Logic and Conversation," delivered at Harvard in 1967. These two lectures were initially published as "Utterer's Meaning and Intentions" in 1969 and "Utterer's Meaning, Sentence Meaning, and Word Meaning" in 1968, and were later collected with the other lectures as the first section of *Studies in the Way of Words* in 1989. But Grice's most groundbreaking contribution to philosophy and linguistics is his theory of implicature which started in his 1961 article, "The Causal Theory of Perception," and is most fully developed in his 1967 "Logic and Conversation." According to Grice (1967), what a speaker means by an utterance can be divided into what the speaker "says" and what the speaker thereby "implicates." This results in what Grice calls Conversational Implicature.

To conversationally implicate something, according to Grice, is to mean something that goes beyond what one says in such a way that it must be inferred from non-linguistic features of a conversational situation

together with general principles of communication and cooperation. To Grice, a conversational implicature, is, therefore, something which is implied in conversation, that is, something which is left implicit in actual language use. In other words, implicature provides some explicit account of how it is possible to mean more than what is actually said. Grice then goes on to propound his theory of implicature which he calls the Cooperative Principle. The Cooperative Principle, according to Grice is a norm governing all cooperative interactions among humans and it consists of four conversational maxims.

From the foregoing, one could simply ask the question as to why the speakers' utterance can mean different things at different times on different occasions. Another question is how do we interpret what the words actually mean on a certain specific occasion? And why don't people just say what they mean? According to Thomas (1995, p. 1-3), several interesting questions arise from observations. He asserts: "If speakers regularly mean something other than what they say, how is it that people manage to understand one another if a single group of words such as "it's hot in here" could mean so many different things at different times, [in different contexts], how do we work out what it actually does mean on one occasion as opposed to the other? And why don't people just say what they mean? To him, these and many other similar issues are addressed within the area of linguistics known as pragmatics. Simply put, pragmatics is a field of study that shows how language is used to send messages that are not directly related to the additive value of the raw linguistic data of the utterance. Thomas (1995, p. 1-2) posits that "in the early 1980s, when it became common to discuss pragmatics in general textbooks on linguistics, the most common definition of



pragmatics was: meaning in use or meaning in context, in other words, contextualized meaning.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Audre Lorde's writing apparently constitutes a major propelling force in the growth of postcolonial and cultural studies. Several works have been done by scholars on the study and interpretation of Lorde's poems, especially through literary/critical analysis. It is quite obvious that Lorde's poems have not been subjected to a pragmatics analysis. A lot may have been done or said about Lorde's poems, but to the knowledge of this researcher, there is absolutely no evidence of the aspect of pragmatics in this regard. Poems are supposed to be studied and interpreted using suitable apparatuses. Lorde's poems have rich pragmatics implications and potentialities that can be better understood when subjected to a deep contextual analysis. The problem which this research recognizes, therefore, is that Lorde's poems have not been studied and interpreted using pragmatics principles. The need to solve this problem has led the researcher to embark on the study of these poems based on the theory of Conversational Implicature.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The general objective of this study is to undertake a pragmatics interpretation of Lorde's poems based on the principles of conversational implicature. In specific terms, the study is designed to:

1. Examine the degree to which AudreLorde's selected poems violate or adhere to the Maxims of Quantity, Quality, Manner and Relation.
2. Provide possible interpretation of selected poems based on the violation of Grice's Cooperative Principles.

### **Review of Relevant Literature in the Field**

A pragmatics account of literature makes

it clear that in literary communication we not only have a literary text, but also the emotive effects of literary interpretation which include the needs, wishes, desires likings and feelings of the author. Pragmatics, as we know it, is that level of linguistic analysis which studies meaning in context. Yule (as cited by Osisanwo, 2003, p. 55), asserts that pragmatics is "concerned with the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker (or writer) and interpreted by the listener (or reader)." When one talks about pragmatics, one is simply talking about meaning beyond the linguistic data, that is to say, that pragmatics takes care of the implied meaning of an utterance which could only be inferred within the context.

The pragmatics of literary communication deals with the kinds of problems, such as the kinds of actions accomplished by the production of the literary text (i.e. the poem), the appropriate conditions of those actions, and the relationships between the actions and their contexts (Van Dijk, 1981, p. 13-16). A text induces its interpreter to construct an image, or maybe a set of alternative images. While the image construction and image revision are going on, the interpreter also tries to figure out what the creator of the text is doing — what the nature of the communication situation is all about. For any successful interpretation, then, the reader has to draw up a set of inferences from where the contextual implication can be derived. Understanding and interpreting poetry requires understanding and appreciating of historical and social conditions and ideological factors under which the writers find themselves. Therefore, the pragmatics impact of the poem embraces the totality of the poem, combined with its emotional, intellectual and imaginative appeal (Indede, 2009, p. 107).

Different scholars and critics of literary works have introduced important notions which



either oppose or consent with the theory of pragmatics. Among these critics is Emmanuel Ngara who considers literary works as communicative utterances produced by the author and received by the reader (or hearer), especially when the poem is read aloud. He clearly maintains that a poem is not like everyday speech in that it is patterned in order to give its communicative effects a greater impact. He goes further to say that the impact of a poem could be derived from the totality of the poem, from the weight of its message combined with its emotional, intellectual and imaginative appeal (p. 14-15). These views intelligibly coincide with Van Dijk's (1981, 246-247) who observes that not only are the structures of literary texts important, but also their functions as well as their conditions, their production, processing and reception. The fact remains that poor attention to cognitive analysis of literary communication can bring about poor insight into the emotive effects of literary interpretation which involve our needs, wishes, desires, likings and feelings.

H. P Grice was the first scholar to make a distinction between what the speaker says and what he implies. The idea of "say" is closely tied to the words actually uttered and their ordinary meanings, but more so it includes all the references and predictions that result from that utterance, and whatever force, direct or indirect, it might have (Martinich, 2008, p. 508). It is important to note that most of the poems displayed by the composers are metaphorically expressed. Metaphorical meaning is therefore not explicit in utterance. In line with this, John Searle (1969, p. 502) differentiates speaker's meaning when he utters words from sentence and expression meanings. For the poet to communicate using metaphorical, ironical, and allegorical sentiments, there must be principles according to which he is able to have more than

one meaning, or something different from what he says, whereby the reader using them can understand what he or she means.

This paper is designed to comprehend the pragmatics of the poetry of AudreLorde. The study, therefore, employs the Cooperative Principle developed by Grice whose Conversational Implicature is central to the discussion. Even though Grice's fundamental explanations deal with natural conversations, one should not neglect the fact that the general display of his approach to discourse gives room for the analysis of literary texts. The conversational strategies in literature and more so in poetry as will be discussed in this study invite an open-ended world in which the reader acts creatively, just like the author, if both of them have to share the meaning and meet communication goals (Indede, 2009, p. 108). The literature review in this study is designed to accommodate the pragmatics analysis of poetry of and critical works on AudreLorde

In her essay entitled "A Pragma-Stylistic Analysis of Robert Frost's Poem '*the Road Not Taken*,'" DyahRochmawati attempts an analysis of Robert Frost's poem, *the Road Not Taken* from the perspective of pragmatics and stylistics. He asserts that a pragmatics account of literature assumes that in literary communication we do not only have a text, but also the emotive effects of literary interpretation involving needs, wishes, desires, likings and feelings of the author by using Grice's Cooperation Principle. Rochmawati's analysis does not include any pragmatics analysis of Audre Lorde's poetry, and so creates a gap that needs to be filled.

Florence Indede (2009) in her article entitled "The Pragmatics of Kiswahili Literary Political Discourse" attempt a pragmatics analysis of Kiswahili literary political discourse using Grice's Cooperative Principle. She bases



her analysis on the following poetic texts: Chembe cha Moyo by Alamin Mazrui, Sautiya Dhiki by Abdilatif Abdala and Jiho la Ndani by Said Ahmed Mohamed. She maintains that her article employs the Cooperative Principle developed by Grice whose Conversational Implicature is central to her discussion. She argues that the interpretation of meaning requires high level of application of the Cooperative Principle by both the reader and the author. Indede avers that the poetic dialogic understanding of the author's theme or message involves recognizing his rationale for using an utterance in context. Indede's analysis, as in Rochmawati's, provides a robust pragmatics analysis of selected Kiswahili political discourse poetry, but once again no reference to diaspora poetry in general nor to Audre Lorde's poetry in particular. Hence, there is an existing lacuna that my study will address.

The reviews that follow are purely literary and critical analyses with no evidence of pragmatic reading of Lorde's poetry. In her brilliant essay, "Living on the Line: Audre Lorde and *Our Dead Behind Us*," Gloria T. Hull avers that Lorde's seemingly essentialist definitions of herself as black/lesbian/mother/woman are not simple, fixed terms. Rather, she argues that they represent her ceaseless negotiations of a position from which she can speak. Hull proffers examples of these ceaseless negotiations to the effect that almost as soon as she achieves a place of connection, she becomes uneasy at the comfortableness (which is, to her, a signal that something critical is being glossed over) and proceeds to rub athwart the smooth grain to find the roughness and the slant she needs to maintain her difference-defined, complexly constructed self. Secondly, Hull focuses specifically on Lorde's poetry volume *Our Dead Behind Us* which she suggests is in constant motion, with

poem after poem enacting a series of displacements. Third, Hull zeroes in on the cover of *Our Dead Behind Us* which consists of "a snapshot of the last Dahomean Amazons," and "three old Black women in draped clothes," superimposed upon a sea of dark and passionate South Africans at a protest demonstration. This image, Hull contends, projects Lorde's membership in a community of struggle which stretches from ancient to modern times, speaking into exclusionary space a transcendent black woman power "released/from the prism of dreaming." . . .

Rachel A Dudley (2006, p.16-39) follows suit in her equally illuminating article ("Confronting the Concept of Intersectionality: The Legacy of Audre Lorde and Contemporary Feminist Organizations,") by asserting that Audre Lorde is one of many women to criticize second wave feminism for overlooking issues of intersectionality. In specific terms, she critically examines the ways in which Lorde introduced intersectionality into feminist discourse and how feminist organizations embrace this concept today. The question Dudley poses is this: have feminist organizations confronted the concept of intersectionality within their work; in other words, do they account for the multidimensionality of women's lives while fighting for economic, political and social equality; and do they see inter-sectionality as a central tenet of feminist organizing. All these questions, argues Dudley, bring us closer to an understanding of how concepts deemed important by a small group can become permanently relevant within feminism and by extension within society.

Robina Josephine Khalid (2008, p.3-4) in her essay ("Demilitarizing Disease: Ambivalent Warfare and Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*,") presents literary criticism for the



1980 nonfiction work *The Cancer Journals* by Audre Lorde and offers a discussion of the power and difficulty surrounding the issue of breast cancer for women in general and Audre Lorde in particular. She describes in detail how the disease ravages the body and Lorde's physical and psychological struggle against it. Khalid focuses on Lorde's nonfiction work, *The Cancer Journals*. There is absolutely no reference to pragmatics.

Consuelo Rivera-Fuentes, a Chilean poet, activist, and lecturer (in "*Sister Outsider: An Enduring Vision: Embracing Myself, My Sister and the 'Other,'*") reflects on and reacts to Audre Lorde's critique of racism within lesbian communities. Her purpose is to honour and rescue Lorde's wonderful insight into the power of words when uttered and shared by women, as well as her ideas about differences and connections that exist between black and white feminisms. Grounded in her own experience of alienation and racism in the European context of Women's Studies, Rivera-Fuentes then asserts that Lorde's insistence on a 'sisterhood' embraces the 'other' and ourselves at the same time.

Pracheta Bakshi (2014, p.8-13) (in "Audre Lorde's Exploration of Her Multiple Selves in Her Biomythography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*") argues that Eurocentrism, or to be specific, Eurocentric feminism has always disregarded the female experience of the "Other"— be it the socio-political context or the philosophical undercurrent or the mythological projections of African. Therefore, Bakshi asserts that Audre Lorde in her life writing has radically endeavoured to explore her multiple selves, her radical female subjectivity, insisting that the African Orisha, i.e. the androgynus, ambiguous, trickster, mythological figure is re-invoked in her writings, especially in her poems

and her "Biomythography." Bakshi then concludes by saying that Lorde has successfully established her Afro-centric female identity by discarding the Graeco-Roman mythological tradition as a totalizing telos.

Eric SipyinyuNjeng ((2007, p.23-36) (in "Lesbian Poetics and Poetry of AudreLorde") makes an ontological diagnosis of lesbian experience. Using Audre Lorde as a prime example, Njeng argues that for Lorde, lesbianism is natural, liberating, political and ultimately creative. Lesbianism is natural because, for Audre Lorde, it springs from the primal desire for the mother. Viewing heterosexuality as oppressive, lesbianism frees the woman from the inexorable strictures of patriarchy. Politically speaking, Njeng contends that even heterosexual women can and do resort to lesbian acts when they are asphyxiated with patriarchy.

The literature review gives vital insight into the pragmatics analysis of poetry and others that focus specifically on the critical interpretation of Audre Lorde's writings, especially her poetry. The literature review shows that no research has been carried out to pragmatically interpret and analyze Audre Lorde's poetry. This observation has provided a fresh impetus for the researcher to continue the study so as to fill the existing lacuna.

### **Methodology**

In this work, pragmatics principles, specifically, Grice's Cooperative Principle which include the four Maxims, have been applied to the study of Audre Lorde's selected poems. The method involves the analysis of Lorde's poems using Grice's theory of Conversational Implicature to see how the maxims could be applied to a reading of meaning in the two poems.



### **Design of the study**

The study is a pragmatics analysis of Audre Lorde's poems. The design the researcher employs is analytic survey. Analytic survey or what is known as cross-sectional study involves the testing out of two hypotheses. The first is ascertaining if Lorde in these poems violates the four maxims of Grice; and the second involves whether she adheres in this poem to the four maxims of Grice. The target population or the sampling group comprises the poems, "Coal" and "Hanging Fire." It is involved with the collection and analysis of these poems with special reference to its pragmatic implications in relationship to the explanatory variables.

### **Population for the study**

According to Nworgu (2006, p. 94), a population refers to the "limits within which the research findings are applicable." In other words, a population has to do with the elements to which the results or the outcomes of investigation are generalizable. The population for this study is, therefore, Audre Lorde's poems under this study.

### **Sampling**

Sampling is the selection of some members or elements from the population for actual investigation. This selection is necessitated by the impracticability of studying the entire population in most cases (Ohaja, 2003, p. 20). In this work, the "Coal" and "Hanging Fire" are selected since all the poems of Lorde could not be handled in a study of this nature.

The selection is based on the fact that these poems invariably cut across the major sensitive areas of societal life such as race, politics, education, economy and religion. Purposive sampling technique is used to do the selection. Purposive sampling technique simply means the selection of specific elements for research investigations. According to Nworgu (2006), "in purposive sampling, specific

elements, which satisfy some predetermined criteria, are selected."

### **Instruments for Data Collection**

The researcher makes use of documented poems of AudreLorde, especially those that concern race, politics, religion, education and economy. Also used are some published and unpublished materials on the activities of public and private organizations. Library material

### **Analysis**

#### **"Coal"**

In her essay "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," Lorde argues that poetry, as a revelatory distillation of experience, provides the illumination by which people scrutinize their lives and give substance to their unformed ideas. She also believes that each woman's being holds a dark place where her true spirit grows hidden, forming a reservoir of creativity, power, and unexamined and unrecorded feeling. Lorde has written that the woman's place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep. It is not surprising, then, that one of Lorde's most frequently anthologized poems is "Coal," with its final two lines independently declaring "I am black because I come from the earth's inside/now take my word for jewel in your open light." This self-assertion and her awareness of the power of words are not merely themes but a necessity and a way of living for Lorde. In form, "Coal" is a discussion of the many different forms that Lorde's words can take, "colored/ by who pays what for speaking." Lorde's imagery is as skillful as ever, as in such phrases as "singing out within the passing crash of sun," an "ill-pulled tooth with a ragged edge," or "seeking like gypsies over my tongue/ to explode through my lips/ like young sparrows bursting from shell." The words that she analyzes, however, are both servant and served. The phrasing she employs seems to imply



that Lorde herself is trapped by her words: “Some words live in my throat/breeding like adders . . ./ Some words/ bedevil me.”

One of Lorde’s principal themes concerns her reaction to racist attitudes and acts; her response to racism is, in a word, anger. Lorde lived with that anger for her entire life; and she once remarked that it “has eaten clefts into my living only when it remained unspoken, useless to anyone.” For Lorde, the expression and use of anger is not destructive, but rather suggests the strength through which she can transform rage at racism into triumphant self-assertion.”

Audre Lorde’s “Coal” is full of metaphors. The metaphors give more strength to the meaning of the message. It is also a means of explanation when there are no other words to explain. Metaphors are also used to describe a condition in an exploded and exaggerated way. Lorde first starts off with describing herself as a natural element that exists within the earth itself—coal. Coal starts off as one element and changes through the course of time depending on where it is located and what treatments it is exposed to. It may start off as a worthless chunk of earth, but when the conditions are right, the coal has the possibility of turning into a valuable diamond. So the speaker is saying that there are some things that are closed but can be opened, just like coal. Another example in the poem is the perfect combination of sounds that make words that can make or break the situation. There are words and thoughts that boggle your mind in a good way. Then there are words that make you cringe and think bad thoughts. Lorde’s metaphors are also alive and fun. This makes the poem interesting and easier to read. “Others know sun/Seeking like gypsies over my tongue/ To explode through my lips like young sparrows bursting from shell” is an example of a metaphor that brings the reader in with strength. The use of

imagery of coming into the world and dancing in the sun has positive effect on the reader. Use of words is like a diamond, if the cut is correct and held into the light, it will shine with great brilliance. But if cut poorly, there will be a dull shine that is not pleasing. This is easily applied to diction used in poetry.

Audre Lorde organizes “Coal” into five separate sections. Each section emphasizes an aspect of race and gender, which the poem demonstrates. The poem as a whole carries Audre Lorde’s perspective and experience as a black lesbian as she works for political equality. According to Beverly Threatt Kullii, author of *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, many of Lorde’s poems in *Coal* are also an indictment of an unjust society that allows women to be treated unfairly, sometimes brutally, and this acknowledgment by Lorde intensifies her plea for cooperation and sisterhood among women. “Coal,” the poem that lends itself to the book’s title, is a reflection of Audre Lorde’s personal relationship with society and herself as she understands them.

This poem is from later in her life. The idea of the title is a reflection of the imagery of the poem. “Coal” is one of Lorde’s less formulaic poems and is written in the first person, free verse and spoken in the voice of the poet. The racial context and content of this poem as well as the personal pleas found throughout make it reflective more of a prayer than a dramatic monologue. Its purpose is to create the image of the progression from the darkness of the coal to the illumination of the diamond that is held within. This also shows Lorde’s life story as she struggles with her own self-image and discovers her power within her. The poem is composed of three stanzas, much like the body of a standard letter. It contains a short opening and conclusion, and the focus or the discovery occurs in the body



or middle stanza.

In the poem, the speaker creates an extended metaphor of herself as a piece of coal, also establishing herself in the power of love and self-acceptance, which is portrayed as openness and diamonds. The speaker states, "Some words are open like a diamond/on glass windows." Furthermore, the speaker describes her passions and emotions, "Others know sun/ seeking like gypsies over my tongue/ to explode through my lips." The idea of the coal/ diamond relationship becomes clear with the illusion to creation in that "I am black because I come from the earths inside/ take my word for jewel in your open light." While this line supports the creation of diamonds through fire and coal, it also reinforces the metaphor of the coal as darkness in that it references the coal coming from inside the earth, while reinforcing the light and pure imagery that is found in the diamond.

This poem functions much like the book as a whole. It uses perspective to create a better understanding of an individual and that individual's growth and realizations of self-worth: in this poem's case, the poet and her realization that she and her works are worth something because they are true and pure and should not be discounted because of her skin color. The poem, as a whole, portrays the struggle with social acceptance and self-value. The poem is saturated with the metaphor of coal as a representation of blackness. It is the symbol of a person's blackness, which comes from within the nurturing earth, and it is an essence that provides fuel and a substance that becomes a diamond of identity. In other words, coal is an assertion and celebration of blackness. Like a child coming from her mother's womb, like diamond from coal and like words coming out as sound, she emerges from her black self; she comes from earth's inside. Our true self is not colored, just like

diamond, it only shines. She goes on to explain and name words and how some words feel like an ill-pulled tooth with a ragged edge, and how some words feel like the crashing of the sun, how some words bedevil her.

These multiple imageries indicate her personal struggle as a black woman and how society with its power names someone black or white, and judges them and ties them to their origin of being. She delivers a perspective to create a better understanding of an individual and that individual's growth and realizations of self-worth. Because of her black color she is no less, her true self is as pure and beautiful like diamond which incidentally emanates from black coal. Even though society's labeling makes her angry, yet she loves herself all the same. In doing that, she celebrates her marginalized identity.

According to critic Sagri Dhairyam, "Coal" . . . is, widely read to be affirming an unself-conscious Black essence. . . . The controlling metaphor of coal, staple fuel, celebrates "the total black, being spoken/From the earth's inside," which becomes in its idealized form, the jewel, diamond . . . The poem's final visionary lines . . . claim their political identity precisely through an empowering biologism. . . . For Black American poets it means a call to a poetics of Blackness which emphasizes the role of the poet as activist and leader and the role of poetry as an expression of an intrinsically Black vision.

### **Grice's Maxims of Quantity and Quality to Audre Lorde's "Coal"**

With respect to the origins of diamond that emanates from the depths of black earth, the poet seems to provide accurate account of how diamonds are extracted from the earth: "How a diamond comes into a knot of flame/ As a diamond comes into a knot of flame." But the over-emphasis of that process of extraction in



stanzas one and three seems to have provided too much information about that natural process. In that sense, the Maxim of Quantity is being violated. But there is a justification for that intentional violation since it enables the poet-speaker to lay emphasis on the nature of the extraction which results in something profoundly beneficial beyond the fundament of the black earth. In other words, the poet-speaker's intention is to make the strongest statement ever on the extractable end product of the black earth. The end result is that the statement "how a diamond comes into a knot of flame" both violates and adheres to the Maxim of Quantity.

In other words, through its repetitiveness it makes the strongest statement about the extraction of diamond from the black earth, but at the same time seems to give redundant information. This redundancy is given its markedness by the line "An ill-pull tooth with a ragged edge." The redundancy (that is, giving too much information is also discernible in the statement: "I/ Is the total black, being spoken/ I am black because I come from the earth inside." All of these repeated statements are an attempt by the speaker to emphasize the truth-value of blackness.

The speaker in this poem has always been honest both with herself and with the rest of the world and has always called it the way it is. Her basic honesty does not lend herself to saying what she believes to be false or saying something for which she lacks adequate evidence. Blackness is integral to the depths of the earths inside. Also diamonds come from the very centre of the earths inside. These are all truisms, and therefore, the statements adhere to the Maxim of Quality.

#### **Grice's Maxim of Relation and Manner in Audre Lorde's "Coal"**

The very first stanza of the poem "Coal" introduces a problematic and that

problematic has to do with the complicated relationship between coal as a natural or mineral resource and the feminine self "I," on the one hand, and diamond and sound, on the other. This complicated relationship precipitates difficulty of reading the real intent of the speaker, and this fact raises the question of relevance, but on closer examination, there seems to be a linkage between all of those elements mentioned. The colour of coal is black, the speaker admits that she "is the total black" and the diamond that comes from the earth is encased in black earth. Diamond is the jewel of the earth and known around the world as a jewel of a woman's beauty. Taken together, therefore, elements that began as having no relation with each other turn out to have quintessential co-ordinance. All of them emanate from a deep black essence, as natural as ever. The speaker confirms this quintessential co-ordinance by asserting in the last stanza that: "I am black because I come from the earth's inside/ Take my word for jewel in your open light." So the poem adheres to the Maxim of Relation, even though, that element of relevance appears to have been initially compromised.

The meaning of the poem does not manifest easily; it is complicated by some incomprehensibly difficult expressions which do not lend themselves to easy interpretation. For instance, speaker says, The stub remains: An ill-pulled tooth with a ragged edge, Some words live in my throat, Breeding like adders. Others know sun, Seeking like gypsies over my tongue.

The whole thrust of the poem is about the speaker's blackness. These five lines make understanding difficult to attain. The question about one's blackness, one's



heritage and pride in that heritage is clear enough. What is not so clear, brought on by the expression itself, is the relationship between one's blackness which is celebrated in stanzas one and three and the "ill-pulled tooth with a ragged edge" with "some words [living] . . . in my throat/breeding like adders." That is an unnecessary obscurity and prolixity which calls into question the whole notion of brevity and relevance. This fact leaves the reader racking her brain as to what the speaker's intent is, and what she discovers is that without that second stanza, the meaning of the poem becomes supremely clear. It is a meaning anchored in one's ethnic heritage and unalloyed pride in and dignity of that heritage. So what it means is that the speaker violates the Maxim of Manner.

#### **"Hanging Fire"**

"Hanging Fire" by Audre Lorde concerns an African American girl who is experiencing growing pains and facing much insecurity about herself that have been bothering her. The speaker feels that people need to pay attention to her, because her mother is absent from her life. The girl needs this attention to fill the void that her mother has created by staying in the bedroom with the door closed. In each stanza, there is a refrain line, "and momma's in the bedroom/with the door closed" which repetition underscores the aloneness of this poor teenage girl, showing her mother as either callous or noncommittal in assisting her daughter through her struggles. The main problem in this poem is that the girl is growing up and she becomes insecure and very emotional because of this transaction. To make matters worse, the girl's mother is very distant from the girl and she feels like she is facing her insecurities on her own.

This poem can relate to the average

teenager who is growing up and facing many problems with their insecurities. The poem was probably written to connect to the teenage reader, or to inform parents that teenagers face problems as they grow up and need support. All teenagers have insecurities and problems like when the girl states "My room is too small for me... the one/wearing braces." Some teenagers face their insecurities all by themselves because they isolate themselves from others, but sometimes like in the girl's case the parent or parents do not interact with their children, and there is this cold distance. The meaning of the poem inheres in the title of the poem. "Hanging Fire" may be a reference to the insecurities and nightmarish thoughts which the girl entertains about herself and the self-doubt that seems inexorably to hang directly over her head. The fire burns her metaphorically and every time she has these nightmarish thoughts of herself the fire drops and burns her budding confidence. The girl needs someone to lean on and help her put out the fire over her head, but sadly enough no one is paying attention, not even her own dear mom.

It is as if she needs her mother to put out the flames, but the mother doesn't care a hoot about her daughter's pain or is merely lackadaisical. The poem implies that almost every teenager has some type of fire hanging over their heads and in their consciousness; it burns them until someone else can help put it out. The fact that her mother couldn't give a damn represents to her the greatest betrayal. When the girl laments "and momma's in the bedroom with the door closed," it symbolizes that the speaker's mother is not paying attention to the speaker. Although that is the symbolic message, it is unknown what the mother is actually doing in the bedroom. It seems that the father is absent, and the speaker is an only child living with a mother who doesn't support her. The speaker and her



mother could have money issues and could live in a bad neighborhood which could influence or spark some of her insecurities. The mother could be ill and stuck in the bedroom because she cannot get out of bed. Another explanation that could go along with the bad neighborhood would be that the mother is a prostitute, and she is just trying to raise money for her family. The real reason why she is in the bedroom with the door closed is not told, but some things can be implied. At first glance, the poem may appear to have no serious purpose other than a girl whining about her life, but as we go deep, this fourteen-year-old girl is making a distress call, calling for help as she goes through adolescence.

She needs care, love, and somebody to listen to her. The repetitive lines of 'and momma's in the bedroom with the door closed' indicates that she is in a desperate need of her mother to show some support and help her navigate her adolescence. She also complains about being excluded from the all-important Math Team despite the fact that her grades were better than some of the boys'. The complaint about the exclusion points up the gender bias in the school system when the girl was in school. The poem also stresses the importance of parental role in the growing up of a teenager. On the emotional side, the poem is serious as the girl insistently complains about her life, suggesting that she needs somebody urgently now to assist her in her growing pains. She is afraid to grow up because she has no role model and no support.

This girl is definitely experiencing anxiety, confusion and frustration in a situation where she has no leverage. The line in the third stanza "suppose I die before graduation they will sing sad melodies" shows that she is lonely and feels utterly different. The poem has an interesting simple structure consisting of three stanzas. The language is simple and easy to

understand probably because she is just a fourteen-year-old girl and she wants us to understand in the simplest way what she is going through. We identify with the girl both sympathetically and empathetically because we can relate it to ourselves since we were at some point in our lives fourteen-year-old girls (and boys).

In conveying her distress, the poet-speaker employs a number of symbols or symbolic inscriptions. The first, "and my skin has betrayed me" suggests that she is different and that difference points to her blackness, and reminds us of a point in time when black people were often isolated from the rest of white society, when they felt unaccepted. In the line "suppose I die before graduation [and] they will sing sad melodies" shows that she is so lonely, sad and dejected. "And momma's in the bedroom with door closed" repeated several times symbolizes the need and hope that someday her mother will open the door to her heart in every situation which she faces. Aside from the symbolic, there is the rhythmical. For instance, the poem has a slow rhythm mimicking a person in a disconsolate condition.

### **Grice's Maxims of Quantity and Quality to Audre Lorde's "Hanging Fire"**

The speaker opens up about the pains of growing up in a home apparently without caring and without motherly love and warmth. In opening up, she bares her heart without holding back anything. In that sense, she exhausts her emotional burden, telling us almost everything about her life's experiences without divulging her innermost secrets. The overall impression is that she supplies information about her predicament without divulging her innermost secrets but at the same time without holding back aspects of her experience that would ensure our emotional empathetic involvement. To that end, the speaker



adheres perfectly to the Grice's maxim of Quantity. That is to say that the speaker gives the information as required. She doesn't say too much nor too little about her adolescence and so stays within the limit of Gricean principles.

With respect to the Gricean Maxim of Quality, the speaker's candour is unquestionable. The element of personal account introduces an intimacy that makes her story believable. And because many of the readers have also gone through similar pains of growing up through adolescence, they tend to believe the speaker. And because they believe her, they are comfortable with her story and do not perceive any disingenuousness about her pleas for help and understanding. Since adolescence is a universal experience, the reader is able to easily identify and even empathize with the speaker by placing themselves in her shoes. That kind of intimacy only comes from a feeling of someone you trust and what she utters. Because of apparent absolute believability between speaker and reader, there seems no way that the speaker would be making a false statement, even a false assumption. In reference to the second proviso of the Gricean Maxim of Quality, because of the autobiographical nature of the speaker's narrative, she tells it like it is without manufacturing it. Everything she says, she backs up without equivocation, without doctoring. Everything she rants about, she has experienced it. That is the greatest evidence anyone can adduce in support of one's story. Therefore, the speaker adheres to the Maxim of Quality.

### **Grice's Maxim of Relation and Manner in Audre Lorde's "Hanging Fire"**

When it comes to the Gricean Maxim of Relation, this poem makes a perfect case. Every circumstance the speaker cites is germane to her growing pains as an adolescent; every adolescent anywhere in

the world can identify, sympathize, and empathize with the speaker, and will see in the speaker's narrative of her predicament a neat reflection of her own growing pains. In other words, there are no digressions, no obscure expressions, no prolixity; everything that needs to be there is there; every fragment of her adolescent life is there woven together neatly and discretely. These fragments speak of pain, alienation and maternal neglect. The pain of rejection, the agony of being continually ignored by her mother "with the door closed" repeated three times in the poem, and the notion of being discriminated against on account of gender, all of that has left a searing mark on her memory and psyche. Therefore, the speaker resists the temptations of digression and so, adheres to the Gricean Maxims of Relation and Manner.

### **Conclusion**

This study has been an attempt to read Audre Lorde's selected poems as conversation between speaker and listener in terms of the speaker's intent beyond the literal level of meaning, in other words, the implied or pragmatics meaning of what the speaker says and the extent to which the listener understands the context of meaning. What the researcher is saying is that to understand Audre Lorde in her poetry, especially in the poems selected, one must go beyond the semantic or literal meaning of words, concentrating instead on the contextual level of meaning, in other words, the inference that listener and the reader construct. In Lorde's poetry, especially the ones under the present study. The researcher has incorporated conversational implicature of Grice by adopting the Cooperative Principle, specifically the four Maxims



which underpin the general rules we follow  
in conversation.

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