

# Critical Discourse Analysis: Morality Debate in the Works of Shel Silverstein

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## Abstract

Silverstein is a children's writer who is able to convey controversies toward his young readers. This fact directly intrigues many questions and explanations. This type of discourse contains much information, which is possible to be analysed. Van Dijk as an expert in critical discourse offers methods in exploring controversial issues. Text and context are the main object of analysis. They were analysed thoroughly by applying macro and micro structure. At the end there are two important findings, which are humour and acceptance

**Keywords:** Morality, Discourse, Children's Literature

## Introduction

Talking about morality according to Cane "...Law and morality are both concerned with practical reasoning - that is, with reasoning about what to do, what goals to aim for and what sort of person to be. In this sense, both law and morality are about right and wrong, good and bad, virtue and vice. These contrasts are "normative": they express value judgments. Sometimes the terms "moral" and "morality" are used in contrast to "immoral" and "immorality" to distinguish normatively between right and wrong, good and bad, virtue and vice. In a similar way, what is "legal" may be contrasted with what is "illegal", "legality" with "illegality". On the other hand, the terms "morality" and "law" may also be used to distinguish between different aspects of social life and different domains of practical reasoning. Thus, morality may be contrasted with tradition or etiquette or custom and, of course, with law. We may, that is, use the words descriptively, contrasting the moral not with the immoral but with the non-moral."

Based on the quotation above, there are interrelations among law, morality, socio culture, norms and value. For people that has an occupation of a writers every event is possible to be written in their works. Concerning the relationship between law and morality it may be difficult to find its ground because philosophers

such as Aristotle, Plato and their friends talk more about human characters in conceptualizing their perspective of values. In spite of the absurdity of morality, based on many discussions on children's texts, morality has become a prominent topic and source for the establishment of children's literature.

Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson stated "...Children's books in the 17th, 18th, and early 19th centuries were mostly didactic and moralistic, a reflection of society's general view that children should be quiet, hardworking, and intent on learning to be good. The purpose of this early literature was to provide edification and to teach morals to young people." Eventually, this perception continuous until now. Many assumptions or interpretations are strictly based on good and bad.

In line with the philosopher, writers who explores humanity through their predecessors describe good and bad by inventing ideal characters. Rogers and Schaenen stated "...people as designers of meaning and highlighted the existence of multiple literacies embedded within and constructed by sociocultural practices, each with a history and network of norms and values." They refer people as designer and able to produce literacies. At the same time deals with sociocultural practices, norms and values. This shows the

complexity of a work of literature that researcher could gain.

These characters are embedded in most of children's books to give a model or example for young readers. They become continuously introduced for generations as forms of instructional designs or values. The development of children's literature not only extend in classrooms but also record social expectations through messages. This appears when moralities are being questioned whether is appropriate or not.

Gert states that "Since moral judgments can be made about all rational persons, it follows that morality is universal and that what seems to be different moral systems are simply specifications or variations of a universal morality or moral system." It is explained that the existence of moral values can be created in a system because morality is initially universal but, in its development, morality can be defined and derived in theories. In line with this, morality can be used as an approach to human problems.

Sources explain that in the late 1950s, the United States was in a crisis situation. Many of its citizens have lost their jobs and in poor health conditions, so people flock to cities to improve their lives. This creates heterogeneity in urban life as reflected in culture and moral values. Popular terms are also popping up a lot to signify the majority's interest in things like casual clothes, jazz genres and exotic food.

The United States is an example of how moral values are integrated with law as proposed by John Rawls. Lobo and Smole stated "There exists a small body of literature in which the relationship between economic growth and the manner by which people are distributed throughout society according to their human capital characteristics is considered..." After declaration of winning war with soviet union, society have heterogeneity in ideas and perspectives. To obtain synchronicity, the government has been able to combine law and morality in practice. By merging justice and moral values, there are restricted rules that manages the work of morality and law. When this happens, controversial issues occur, which cause conflicts in society. American society as a liberal society and protects every citizen's rights, the emergence of issues like this will be

important information which is then analysed by experts.

Insofar, American history contributes a lot of contemporary thoughts to academia. Some popular examples are thoughts on Feminism, LGBTQ, and children's literature. Children's literature appears simultaneously with literary trends in the world and introduces values to its readers. Shel Silverstein is an American poet who has gained public attention because his works effortlessly construct unusual meanings. Not only that, critics categorize his writing as a vulgar and controversial message.

To be able to know more about his works, researches do not need to go further back because he portrayed a different perspective about the time and place. The author's perspective in his writings opens insight or enriches culture and moral values. Literature as a form of text that records history is not only found in adult works but also in children's poetry. Critics also argue that the author cannot be separated from context. Juchartz also added "Whenever a book becomes a living text rather than a static artifact, a hunger can form for the pleasures and rewards of active meaning making rather than passive information reception" This proven that Silverstein works are acceptable for young readers.

Important events with the emergence of Silverstein's works coincided with the cessation of the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union and the emergence of urban culture as a form of freedom of speech. Urban culture has plurality because immigrants from various countries and regions gather in urban areas. One of the highlights is the existence of classical culture such as classical music, feudal values and new cultures such as black songs, football and regional food which have parallel existences. This term was introduced to popular culture, namely the values produced by urban communities.

Silverstein's background is widely associated with his writing because Silverstein is closed to his personal life. On the other hand, the mass media provides a biography of this writer who has been involved in the liberal world and has even become close friends with the owner of an adult magazine. From a broad perspective, this kind of life has become commonplace because there have been many changes in people's

thoughts and perspectives in the world of transformation from being closed to being open and free. Of course, there are many debates and conflicts that arise in everyday life.

Georgis and Johnson stated “One of life's biggest challenges is accepting that there are numerous interpretations and that there is rarely one right way to view the world. The literature can introduce characters who have learned to accept that different viewpoints exist, demonstrating how they persevere when faced with difficulties. Books can also change readers' perspectives about what they already know and extend their knowledge through new ways of seeing familiar things” Literature and interpretation have opened up horizons without dividing them into good and bad. By literature, the characters in the text are able to convey various kinds of messages, both good and bad.

As a children's book this becomes both clear and challenging. Two of Silverstein's works, namely *Hug O War* and *Ridiculous Rose*, represent a picture of the late 1970s and mid-1980s. This period is a combination of a rigid society due to the cold war between America and the Soviet Union, then a period of transition and the euphoria of American society towards changes in 'pop culture' which is characterized by freedom of expression and opinion. Values undergo changes and transitions as well as people's way of thinking.

This is interesting to discuss because children's poetry can have complex meanings about trends and society. But when examined further, Silverstein has quite a lot of children's poetry works with characteristics for young readers. One of the themes that has become a public discussion is the values introduced by Silverstein which are considered controversial. The period between 1970-1982 in the history of the United States was a turning point in history. Changes have occurred because the cold war of the United States and the Soviet Union has ended and an urban culture has been created, namely 'pop culture'. Freedom of expression is very visible in everyday life, from the expression of clothes to the understanding of values.

Killen and Risso explain "Sociality (and morality) is constructed through a process of interactions, reflections, and evaluation." Moral values continue to develop along with the

development of society so that the information contained in children's stories also adjusts. Like Silverstein's works, when studied and interpreted, values that were not found before and even contradicted with current values will emerge.

To be able to explore and interpret texts and discourses about the transition and euphoria of American society, Teun Van A. Dijk's interpretation is the right choice. Van Dijk, like other Critical Discourse experts, talks about conflicts in society. By being applied using the Van Dijk method, new meanings and concepts emerge that can be analysed. Several aspects that explain morality and conflicts are rich data to be developed. To obtain targeted and measurable information, a suitable approach is needed in this regard

The two important stages in this method are “...macro-structures, referring only indirectly to cognitive evidence which has been provided in the last few years for the hypothesis that macro-structures constitute a separate level of linguistic analysis.” (130) and “It will be assumed therefore that macro-structures are related to micro-structures — as we may briefly call the semantic structure of the sequence of sentences — by sets of SEMANTIC MAPPINGS.” (143). This stage opens the text and context so that the text which is a written record can be described through understanding the details of the context that cannot be separated from the creation of a text.

Two main elements that will continue to be processed are diction and figure of speech. Both are often tools for interpreting poetry

In the analysis described further, it is to describe the meaning of the text and the context to collect as much data as possible. To limit the data, it focuses more on moral values. Moral values are generally understood universally and are often associated with the background of the text. By using CDA, we can find values that are contrary to the context and even forbidden because they show provocation toward the reader.

The selected texts are children's poems written by Shel Silverstein. For observers of children's literature, this may be familiar. Shel Silverstein is a poet from the United States who expresses ideas with a touch of humour. The content of humor has been responded to differently by local critics and one of the criticisms is that the

messages conveyed are contrary to moral values. Besides that, there are many backgrounds of writers who are considered as one of the originators of this humorous writing style.

The emergence of differences in moral values is an interesting study because morality by society is based on things that are good and bad or black and white. The problem raised in this research is the background or context of the transition when people accept different values. Silverstein, which is declared a forbidden work, still gets public attention. Critics can identify the poet's courage in conveying his ideas even though the selected text is for young readers. To be able to describe this problem, it is necessary to divide such as:

1. How to understand the debates/polemics by Shel Silverstein in critical discourse analysis?
2. How is Shel Silverstein's superstructure construction in interpreting the morality debate?
3. How is Shel Silverstein's super micro construction in interpreting the morality debate?

For the first question, the data used are two of Shel Silverstein's poems, namely *Hug O' War* and *Ridiculous*.

## METHOD

Hirsch asserted that “This 'rule' is of course a description of what every interpreter has always done, whether he knew the rule or not, since in order to construe a word at all he has to construe its function, and that cannot be done in isolation from the larger sense which is the word conveys in alliance with the surrounding words. In his explanation, the first step taken by an interpreter is to identify vocabulary related to the background. The meaning of word choice cannot be separated from context

Hirsch stated that “...verbal meaning of an author can only be a meaning which his audience could possibly share”. For the initial stage in understanding a text, the reader comes from the verbal opinion of the author. For example, Silverstein wrote his poetry based on his knowledge of the world around children so as to provide comfort to his readers. Thacker and Webb further explain “By engaging with the conditions of children in contemporary society, many writers make playful use of postmodern

strategies that place children as readers in a powerful position.” They emphasize adaptation in urban society by using playful ways to protect their young readers.

The next stage touches the structure of language such as figure of speech and humor. The existence of hyperbole and paradox figure of speech indirectly raises the presence of humor in its meaning. The tingling feeling of the alternation of 'tug' and 'hug' causes a change in meaning that is contradictory and excessive because the message conveyed is inappropriate for the reader.

## ANALYSIS

To describe the analysis and categorized data, Van Dijk's critical discourse is the right choice to be applied. Van Dijk describes two main elements in practicing critical discourse theory, namely text and context. Both have divided the object of study into two clear and firm parts, namely between the writing and the setting. The events that exist cannot be separated from both things so that space and time can be adjusted according to the reader's interpretation. Context was explained as “Contexts are courses of events and thus are defined by an ordered set of 'here-now' pairs <t o , lo > , ... >: the context changes from moment to moment. This change must affect (or effect) objects in the successive states of context.

Silverstein includes complementary text and context. They complement each other because critics can deduce the meaning of their poems. Silverstein briefly describes the common events that occur in the lives of children. On the other hand, the adult environment finds meanings that are not suitable for its young readers. Eventually critics in the state of Florida banned the use of Shel Silverstein's poems in schools.

For the analysis stage there are two divisions, namely Hirsch explained that “This 'rule' is of course a description of what every interpreter has always done, whether he knew the rule or not, since in order to construe a word at all he has to construe its function, and that cannot be done in isolation from the larger sense which is the word conveys in alliance with the surrounding words. Hirsch states that “...verbal meaning of an author can only be a meaning which his audience could possibly share”

recognize the function of the word, sentence or phrase that is analyzed and interpreted based on the background that can be associated with the analyzed text.

The first stage in critical discourse analysis is usually concerned with the structure of the text. By describing the structure, the functions and rules contained in the text can become a pattern for the author's thinking. For example, the diction of both poems uses simple words. Simplicity indicates the ease of reading and understanding the message in the story. Characters like this are commonly identified in children's books. Domico explained that "...there is also evidence to suggest that poetry can help students engender under-standings about complex social issues"

Hug O' War is a poem with simple and general diction so that it is easy to interpret or develop its meaning. I will not play at tug o' war, I'd rather play at tug o'war if translated literally, the difference in meaning is in the words 'tug' and 'hug' which means 'pull' and 'hug'. When the context is applied, it means that the two sentences are interpreted as 'I want to play tug of war' and 'I want to play hug war'. This has an interesting side because the word playing hugs is not commonly found in children's games. Sometimes the knowledge of young readers also has a different background so that this meaning can develop again and touch on vulgarity. Other dictions, such as giggles, kisses, cuddles, etc., make it clearer towards which interpretation is meant.

This is interesting to elaborate. The dictions and phrases in the table have clear meanings and functions. The word 'tug' is a vocabulary in English which means interesting. It can also be developed into a game of tug of war with a rope. This game was introduced through the western world, especially the United States. This game requires two large groups for both ends of the rope and if the cue is started both ends are pulled together until the first person near the center line crosses it then the group will lose <https://thegeniusofplay.org/genius/play-ideas-tips/play-ideas/tug-of-war.aspx#.YdWmv2BBY5c>. This competition is named 'war' or war so that it shows the battle that must be carried out so that the picture of war is clearer. because children's poetry like this is not commonly found in children's story collections. Children's literature is rooted in education by

enriching library collections in the classroom. The habit of reading is an activity that continues to be given since kindergarten. The importance of children's books in the development of students is of particular concern and is even able to encourage readers to be creative and informative.

The second poem is entitled Ridiculous Rose. This poem is not very long but the message conveyed is clear. Educational messages contain high humor. The meaning indicates the existence of contradictory alternatives. This meaning can be seen from the use of 'fingers' and 'toes' where it is impossible for people to eat with their toes. Ridiculous or silly has a direct meaning that Rose, the maiden's name, has done what she shouldn't have done.

In addition to simple diction, Silverstein also uses figures of speech commonly used in poetry or fiction such as hyperbole and paradox. As a text for young readers, the media should be interesting and easy to understand. Silverstein's two poems describe events in the world of children, the first is a game of tug of war which teaches about group work and struggle with a touch of play. The second poem is an event of an instruction for children who are not familiar with good behavior. If this instruction in the form of a rigid command does not reflect life or the environment then it becomes a sarcasm that causes discomfort.

The first poem describes the choice of activities for children, namely a tug of war game which is inserted with 'war' because someone has to win. This fight by Silverstein is defined as two choices, namely war or love. Young readers are more interested in the choice of words where they have the freedom to imagine. On the other hand, messages like this for local communities create conflicts or controversial issues because of the mismatch of messages to their readers.

The description of the two poems above cannot be separated from the values that are or are not known to the young readers. Values such as togetherness, courtesy, happiness and prohibitions. Themes like this give rise to different perspectives. Rorty explained

"...That being said, there is much more to be said about claims to morality, about the use and abuse of the rhetoric of morality, its exhortations and condemnations. Notoriously, Nietzsche said that morality begins in disgust (Ekel) and

admiration ( Bewunderung ), disgust with what seems humanly odious and deformed, admiration for what seems shining and glorious.<sup>2</sup> That basic contrast distinguishes what is - and is regarded as - deformed and vulnerable from an exuberant excellence that disdains comparison. The pathetic mark of weakness is a sense of powerlessness, a powerlessness whose energies are expressed in resentment and in constraining the strong. And so, according to Nietzsche, begins the dialectical history of the claims to morality..."

He explained that morality always has two sides, namely conformity and transgression. Values are a concern for readers and create conflict in society.

If there is a prohibition to understand more deeply about these poems requires knowledge of the background or history of the United States between 1970 and 1982. Silverstein wrote these poems after the end of the cold war between the Soviet Union and the United States so that these situations and conditions opened up other trends in literature including children's literature. The historical context of the United States in those years is interesting because society underwent a transition in perspective. Previously the political influence of the cold war affected the atmosphere.

## Conclusion

Interpreting texts using a critical discourse approach is a contemporary method and can reveal important information in both the text and the background. Information in the form of raw data from the meanings collected in a structured manner.

Both of Shel Silverstein's poems have clear characteristics, namely providing 'entertaining' education and more specifically incorporating an element of humor in how to understand their meanings. The latter requires further analysis but the presence of hyperbole and paradox arouses a sense of tingle in the reader. Humor has various functions, such as for education and entertainment, but it can also be in the form of propaganda.

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