

## A Possible World Approach to Modality in Andrew Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress'

Dr. Adel A. Al-Thamery  
Dept. of Translation/ University of Basra

### 1. Introduction:

Fictional worlds may possess complex modal structures, in which an 'actual' domain is surrounded by a number of alternative subworlds corresponding to the characters' beliefs, wishes, moral obligations, dreams, hypotheses, fantasies and so on. Such unrealized alternatives to the actual domain can be related to the systems of epistemic, deontic, axiological and alethic modality (Dolezel, 1976 & Ryan, 1985, 1991). Generally speaking, poetry has not been receiving due attention within possible-world approaches to the study of fiction. Poems do tend to be mentioned among the types of texts that fall within the scope of a possible-world semantics of fictionality (e.g. Dolezel, 1989: 235-6 & Maitre 1983: 10), but they are rarely selected as the object of analysis. The main reason for this sort of neglect can be identified in the closeness of the link between possible-worlds approaches to fiction and narrative analysis, which leads to attention being devoted to texts with a strong narrative element, such as stories and novels.

Actually, some possible-world theorists have gone as far as arguing that, unlike prose fiction and drama, poetry does not involve the projection of fictional worlds, but rather the expression of moods, themes and atmospheres, which are not amenable to possible-world analysis. In such cases it is lyric poetry in particular that is singled out as the mode of literary discourse that falls outside the boundaries of fictionality (Ryan, 1991: 83-87). This clearly goes against the more general tendency in literary studies to talk about the 'worlds' of poems, and to regard such worlds as, at least potentially, fictional (e.g. Leech, 1969, Levin, 1976).

ISSN-1994-697X

The extension of possible-world models to the analysis of poetry is not simply a matter of practical expediency. On the contrary, it is theoretically unsatisfactory to limit the applicability of analytical concepts and frameworks to some literary genres and to exclude others. Ryan, for example, suggests that narrative and nonsense poetry are fictional genres that can be approached in possible-world terms alongside stories and novels, while lyric poetry is nonfictional and cannot be analysed in the same way (Ryan, 1991: 37-39; 83-87). This results in the imposition of an awkward ontological and descriptive boundary within the limits of a single overarching genre. More positively, it is difficult to see why poetry, like novelistic prose, cannot be regarded as displaying a wide range of relationships between text worlds and actuality, from a high to a low degree of overlap. Saying that poems may project fictional worlds does not imply that Wordsworth's 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' cannot be treated as a representation of an autobiographical experience, in the same way as the fictionality of Orwell's 1984 does not detract from the claims to historical accuracy of Balzac's novels. In this regard, Leech (1969: 196) argues that "it would be more accurate to say, not that all poems are fictitious, but that they leave the choice between fact and fiction open".

In individual cases, a variety of factors has to do with the text, the world it projects, the poetic genre it belongs to, the availability of historical or biographical information, and so on, may lead the reader to make a more definite decision in one direction or the other.

The aim of the present paper is to examine how such notions as systems of epistemic, deontic, axiological and alethic modality can be applied to the analysis of non-narrative worlds, such as that projected by "To His coy Mistress" by Andrew Marvell.

## **2. Possible Worlds: An Overview**

The idea of possible worlds came from the philosophical assumptions of Leibniz concerning the "infinite of possible worlds." These worlds are the logical

characteristics of sentences of "works of fiction, the ontological status of fictional entities, the definition of fiction, and the nature of the worlds projected by different types of fictional and/or literary text" (Semino, 1997:58). Plantinga (1977:245) defines possible world as "a state of affairs of some kind – one which either obtains, is real, is actual, or else could have obtained."

In linguistics, the term possible world appeared in semantic analysis, especially in the study of reference; wherein the possible worlds include all referents and their properties. Semantics in this regard is considered as the study of links between linguistic forms and universes of possible worlds. Possible-world semantics of fictionality accommodates the existence of fictional entities, and accounts for our intuitive attributions of truth and falsity to sentences about fictional objects and situations. This approach was originally developed by philosophers and logicians to deal with logical problems, such as the truth values of propositions and the ontological status of non-actual entities (Bradley and Schwartz, 1979). After that, narratologists and semioticians used the approach to deal with fictional texts. According to Semino (2003:85), this approach "provides a useful framework for the definition of fiction, the description of the internal structure of fictional worlds, and the differentiation between genres".

The traditional approach was mostly concerned with the logic of non-fictional discourse, and therefore tended to regard fiction as an anomalous and marginal domain. On the other hand, the possible world approach reflects the need for a framework where fiction can be explored as a central and pervasive cultural phenomenon (Semino, 1997:63-4).

As far as the relationship of possible worlds to works of fiction is concerned, Semino (1997:66) maintains that adopting the framework of possible worlds would provide interesting potentials in the semantics of fictionality.

Stockwell (2002:93) believes that there is a difference between a possible world and the everyday world that men experience around them. It is a philosophical

notion constituted by a set of propositions that describe the state of affair in which a sentence can exist. The possible world approach according to Stockwell (2002:93) can be adapted to speak about discourse world that can be understood as dynamic readerly interactions with possible worlds.

#### 4. Modality in Andrew Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress'

Marvell's poetic persona is one of the most famous representatives of a tradition of frustrated lovers attempting to persuade a reluctant addressee to surrender to the pleasures of sexual love. In this particular poem, the conventional carpe diem exhortation to enjoy the present moment is combined with a macabre reminder of the inevitability of death and decay (Partrides, 1978). The rhetorical organisation of the speaker's argument involves the projection of a complex world structure involving three main domains, each roughly corresponding to one of the three paragraphs into which the poem is divided:

- (a) a hypothetical domain representing the kind of scenario in which, according to the speaker, the coyness of the addressee would constitute legitimate behaviour (first paragraph);
- (b) the domain of the poetic persona's knowledge and beliefs, which functions as the actual domain of the world projected by the text (second paragraph);
- (c) the domain of the speaker's wishes, in which his sexual desires are realized (third paragraph).

The force of the argument lies in the contrast between the hypothetical and actual domains, which provides support for the speaker's claim that the realization of his wish world is the most appropriate course of action.

The poem opens with a declarative sentence with subject-verb inversion, Had we but world enough and time, where the past tense of the verb to have is used hypothetically to introduce what the speaker regards as a counterfactual state of

affairs (Quirk et.al, 1985: 108, 1006). This results in the projection of what Ryan calls an alternate or fantasy world (Ryan, 1991: 111, 119), which is governed by a different system of alethic modality from what counts as the actual domain (Dolezel, 1976a: 9ff). According to Ryan (1985: 730), “these creations comprise dreams, hallucinations, fantasies, games of pretense, fictions read or composed by the characters, and worlds created through counterfactual statements.” Ryan (1985: 730) points out that constructs of this kind are better seen as complete universes, i.e. systems made up of a world counting as actual and a variety of unrealised possible worlds.

The nature of the fantasy world is only briefly sketched in the first line: we are invited to contemplate a scenario where the persona and his addressee enjoy a life-span and freedom of movement beyond the constraints of the actual world. From line 3 to the end of the paragraph, the speaker explores and specifies in more detail the opportunities that are available to the two lovers in a world, where the proposition expressed in the first line is true. The modal auxiliaries *would* and *should* are here used to mark the unreal nature of the hypothesis and its consequences (Quirk et.al 1985: 234):

Thou by the Indian Ganges’ side  
Shouldst rubies find; I by the tide  
 Of Humber would complain (lines 5-7);  
 I would love you ten years before the Flood;  
 And you should, if you please, refuse  
     Till the conversion of the Jews (lines 7-10);  
     My vegetable love should grow  
     Vaster than empires (lines 11-12);  
     An hundred years should go to praise  
     Thine eyes (lines 13-14), and so on.

The length of the list and the size of the exaggerations serve to highlight the distant and improbable nature of the world where the woman's coyness would be no crime. In the fantasy world the two lovers' courting ground extends across different continents, and their lives span over past and future history.

At the beginning of the second paragraph, the adversative conjunction *But* marks a transition to the domain of actuality, where time is short and death certain. This domain is governed by the system of epistemic modality - expressing what the speaker knows or believes to be the case - and consists of two parts:

- (a) the current state of the speaker's actual world, described by means of present tenses, as in *at my back I always hear* (line 21) and *yonder all before us lie* (line 23);
- (b) a future state of the speaker's actual world, where both he and his beloved are dead (in fact he emphasizes the consequences of her death as part of his persuasive strategy); this is introduced by means of the modal auxiliary *shall*, which in Early Modern English (more than today) was used to express future predictions with an element of fatal necessity independent of human will, as in *Thy beauty shall no more be found* (line 25), *worms shall try/ That long preserved virginity* (lines 27-28), and so on (Jespersen, 1954: 267).

Indeed, these states of affairs correspond, respectively, to the speaker's knowledge world and to a prospective extension of that knowledge world (Ryan 1985: 722-725; 1991: 114-116). The reader, however, has no difficulty in recognizing the uncomfortable actuality of the persona's description of his present and future predicament. The strength of the images of decay (lines 27 to 30) reinforce the contrast between what is presented as real and the carefree fantasy world of the first paragraph.

At the beginning of the third paragraph, the adverb *now* indicates another transition, this time to the speaker's wish world, whose realization depends on the success of his attempt at persuasion. Before the transition is complete, however, the

speaker lingers on those aspects of the current state of the actual domain that are absent from the future projection of the previous paragraph, i.e. the living and youthful state of his addressee:

While the youthful hue  
Sits on thy skin like morning dew,  
And while thy willing soul transpires  
At every pore with instant fires (lines 33-36).

This clearly contrasts with the horrific description of her dead body in lines 25-30. From line 37 onwards, the use of imperatives introduced by the verbal particle *let* outlines an axiological world governed by the realization of what the speaker regards as desirable for himself and his beloved:

let us sport us while we may (line 37);  
Let us roll all our strength, and all  
Our sweetness, up into one ball (lines 41-42).

The actualization of the speaker's desires will not, however, free the lovers from the constraints of time. On the contrary, they would speed up their perception of the passing of time by engaging in pleasurable activities: Thus, though we cannot make our sun/Stand still, yet we will make him run (lines 45-46). Here lies the paradoxical nature of the poem:

If the sun runs, then time reasserts itself even in our command of it. We declare ourselves only in what we can accomplish; but the accomplishment is always a betrayal of the intention (Rajan 1978: 163).

The speaker's position, however, is clear: given that there no escape from time, he prefers a situation where he and his addressee actively take charge of their own destinies and enjoy a transient period of happiness, rather than passively and unenjoyably awaiting the inevitable end. In the last line, the realization of the persona's wish world is described by means of the auxiliary *will*, which, unlike *shall*, carried strong volitional overtones (Jespersen, 1954: 244). This is a future that



is brought about by the individual's initiative, not one that inevitably results from the human condition.

Of the four modal systems considered by Dolezel (1976a, 1976b) and Ryan (1985, 1991), the only one that is absent from the world structure of the poem is that of deontic modality, which would produce an obligation world governed by moral principles and social conventions (Ryan, 1991: 116-17). In fact, it is not difficult to imagine that the addressee's coyness derives, at least in part, from the pressures of her own obligation world, which presumably prohibits the pursuit of sexual pleasure outside wedlock and for its own sake. It is therefore consistent with the persona's objectives that such a domain of permission and obligation is excluded from the world structure of the poem, since it would undermine the conclusion that the actualization of his wish world is not only the most pleasurable, but also the most sensible and dignified option. In fact, the use of the word crime in reference to the woman's attitudes (line 2) seems to suggest that, in the speaker's world-view, the deontic system of conventional morality and external authority has been replaced by the axiological system of the individual's personal wishes and desires. A deontic world of moral rules and obligation does nevertheless act as a backdrop to the poem, since, without it, the speaking persona's attempt at persuasion would not be needed.

#### 4. Conclusion

The analysis conducted in this paper shows how possible-world frameworks can be made relevant to the study of poetry, particularly as regards the description of the internal structure of poetic worlds and the analysis of the different types of relationships that may exist between text worlds and actuality.

#### References:

Bradley, R. and Swartz, N. (1979) **Possible Worlds: An Introduction to Logic and its Philosophy**. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.



- Dolezel, L. (1976a) 'Narrative modalities', **Journal of Literary Semantics**, Vol. 1, 5-14.
- Dolezel, L. (1976b) 'Narrative semantics', **A Journal for Descriptive Poetics and Theory of Literature (PTL)**, 1, 129-151.
- Jespersen, O. (1954) **A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles: Syntax**, (Third Volume), London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Leech, G.N. (1969) **A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry**. London: Longman.
- Levin, S.R. (1976) 'Concerning what kind of speech act a poem is'. In van Dijk, T.A. (ed.) (1976) **Pragmatics of Language and Literature**, Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Corporation, 141-160.
- Plantinga, Alvin (1977) "Transworld Identity or Worldbound Individuals?" In Schwartz, Stephen P. (1977) **Naming, Necessity and Natural Kinds**. London: Cornell University Press, 245-66.
- Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G. and Svartvik, J. (1985) **A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language**. London: Longman.
- Ryan, M.L. (1985) 'The modal structure of narrative universes', **Poetics Today**, 6, 4, 717-55
- Ryan, M.L. (1991) **Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory**, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press
- Rajan, B. (1978) 'Andrew Marvell: the aesthetics of inconclusiveness'. In Partrides, C.A. (ed.) (1978) **Approaches to Marvell: the York Tercentenary Lectures**. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 155-173.
- Semino, Elena (1997) **Language and World Creation in Poems and Other Texts**. London: Longman.

Semino, Elena (2003) Possible worlds and Mental Spaces in Hemingway's 'A Very Short Story.' ” In Gavins, J. and Steen, Gerard (eds.) (2003) **Cognitive Poetics in Practice**. London: Routledge, 83-98.

### Appendix:

#### TO HIS COY MISTRESS

Andrew Marvell

Had we but world enough, and time,  
 This coyness, Lady were no crime.  
 We would sit down, and think which way  
 To walk and pass our long love's day.  
 Thou by the Indian Ganges' side  
 Should rubies find; I by the tide  
 Of Humber would complain. I would  
 Love you ten years before the Flood;  
 And you should, if you please, refuse  
 10Till the conversion of the Jews.  
 My vegetable love should grow  
 Vaster than empires, and more slow.  
 An hundred years should go to praise  
 Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze;  
 Two hundred years 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.  
 For, Lady, you deserve this state,  
 20Nor would I love at lower rate.  
 But at my back I always hear  
 Time's winged chariot hurrying near;  
 And yonder all before us lie  
 Deserts of vast eternity.  
 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 honour turn to dust,  
 30And into ashes all my lust:  
 The grave's a fine and private place,  
 But none, I think, do there embrace.

ISSN-1994-697X

Now, therefore, while the youthful hue  
Sits on thy skin like morning dew,  
And while thy willing soul transpires  
At every pore with instant fires,  
Now let us sport us while we may;  
And now, like amorous birds of prey,  
Rather at once our time devour,  
Than languish in his slow-chapped power.  
Let us roll all our strength, and all  
Our sweetness up into one ball:  
And tear our pleasures with rough strife  
Thorough the iron gates of life.  
Thus, though we cannot make our sun  
Stand still, yet we will make him run.