

# Relevance Theory in Literature: Inferential Analysis of Audre Lorde's Poem 'From the House of Yemanjá'

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Keywords:</b> <i>Relevance Theory, Inferential Analysis, Pragmatics, From the House of Yemanjá Poetry, Audre Lorde</i></p> <p><b>How to cite:</b> Kyaw, Ei Mon. (2023). Relevance Theory in Literature: Inferential Analysis of Audre Lorde's Poem "From the House of Yemanjá". <i>English Education, Linguistics, and Literature Journal</i>, 2(1), 15-24.</p>	<p><i>In order to perform an inferential analysis using a relevance theory, this study pragmatically analyzes the poetry "From the House of Yemanjá" by Audre Lorde. Audre Lorde's poetry entitled 'From the House of Yemanjá' is the subject of this study. An inferential analysis based on the relevance theory is employed in this study together with a qualitative methodology. The researcher served as the main analytical tool. The analysis's findings demonstrated how Audre Lorde's poetry "From the House of Yemanjá" used contextual inferences and poetic effects to highlight the physical settings, addressee, and characters. The researcher comes to the conclusion that Lorde created beautiful language by using contextual elements to symbolize poetry.</i></p>

## 1. Introduction

Poetry, in particular, is often described as being vague and polysemic, but how can people truly interpret poetry? How is it possible that the same text could elicit various, even differing views? This paper explores how pragmatics—relevance theory—offers a cognitively-scientific foundation to comprehend how interpretations are built on an inference that the reader may not be aware of at first. The poem "From the House of Yemanjá" by American poet Audre Lorde (1934-1992) is approached as a case study to ensure.

First, the link between relevance theory in literature is emphasized. Second, some inferences about the poem's physical setting, the poet's addressee, and the poet's identification with the characters will be analyzed. Overall, the inferential analysis may articulate inferences in the poem and serve as a helpful guideline for other poetic and aesthetic effects. What is striking in the reader's thoughts must be considered to comprehend the various ways that poetry is interpreted. In certain words, literary interpretation pragmatics must be cultivated.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

Audre Lorde's writings become a major driver in the progression of postcolonial and cultural studies. Several studies of Audre Lorde's poem 'From the House of Yemanjá' have been done by scholars, especially through literary/critical analysis. The poem 'From the House of Yemanjá' has rich pragmatic implications that can be better understood with a deep

contextual analysis. However, a pragmatics analysis based on relevance theory has not explored this poem. The requisite to solve this problem has led the researcher to study the poem 'From the House of Yemanjá' with relevance theory.

## **1.2 Purpose of the Study**

The general purpose of this study is to undertake an inferential analysis of Audre Lorde's poem 'From the House of Yemanjá' based on the relevance theory.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Review of Related Studies**

To explore the creation of narrative character and voice, MacMahon adopted the relevance theory viewpoint, which emphasizes the interplay of decoded linguistic form with context. She outlined why it is essential to have communication and interpretation pragmatics. Without such a theory, stylistic approaches that focus solely on form invariably run into problems when attempting to explain why a specific form should have a particular effect in a given context (MacMahon, 2014, p. 90). When investigating other genres, these ideas can be helpful. The term "pragmatics in poetry" refers to the process through which a poem's linguistic content is converted into its intended meaning. According to the relevance theory, this broadens the reader's understanding. The majority of the studies relating relevance theory to literature have emphasized narrative. Dyah's analysis leaves a void that has to be bridged since it does not contain any pragmatics interpretation of Audre Lorde's poetry (Rochmawati, 2013).

### **2.2 Relevance Theory in Literature**

Since its initial publication in 1986, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* has received almost equal amounts of approval and criticism over its potential implications for literary interpretation. It seems logical to anticipate a theory like relevance theory, which is mainly related to the interpretation of common utterances, to also yield insight into the inference of literary utterances. A fundamental aspect of the interpretation process is a relevance-guided comprehension heuristic, according to the relevance theory, which holds that communication and cognition are regulated by the search for relevance and that relevance can be defined in terms of cognitive effects and processing effort. It should be a literary critique, rejecting inclusion into unrelated agendas for which literature would just serve as demonstrative instances, but at relevant places inflected by frames of reference, terminology, conjectures, and the cognitive disciplines (Wilson, 2018, pp. 185-186).

A central claim of relevance theory is that an utterance's semantic content underdetermines its interpretation and is insufficient for communication. As a result, even the most basic utterances require inferences from the hearer or addressee. The challenge for relevance theorists is to explain how the closed formal system of language provides effective pieces of evidence that, when combined with contextual information, enable successful comprehension occurs. Utterance comprehension is regarded as essentially a practice in mind-reading (Wilson, 2014, p. 131).

In order to comprehend the utterance, the hearer or addressee must complete a set of tasks, including reference assignment, disambiguation, or the recovery of propositional attitudes, figurative interpretations, and implicit import (Sperber and Wilson, 1995, p. 11). The first, second, and third lines of the third stanza of Audre Lorde's poem — "All this has been/ before" — illustrate these tasks (Lorde, lines 21, 22). To begin with, reference

assignment has to be offered on the deictic 'this,' which is understood to refer to all of the behaviors that the communicator informed and the addressee observed at the moment; then, disambiguation occurs in the word 'before,' which is grasped to describe to the behaviors that the communicator outlined earlier, rather than in the alternate sense of 'above,' as it is in fact used further on, in the lines "and my sisters are cruel/ Mother I need"; Last but not least, the speaker's literal attitude is emphatic rather than speculative or interrogative (Lorde, lines 26, 27).

The questions that relevance theorists set out to answer include, for instance, 'What is communication?', 'How is communication achieved?', 'What role do contexts play in communication, and how are they constructed in the course of comprehension?', 'How are metaphorical, metonymic, and ironical uses of language understood?', 'What are stylistic and poetic effects?', and so on (Wilson, 2018, pp. 185-186).

The most attractive aspect of relevance theory is its analysis of figurative utterances and their role in the creation of stylistic and poetic effects. The aspect of relevance theory has been its treatment of 'non-propositional' phenomena—images, emotions, sensorimotor processes—and their role in the interpretation of literary works (Wilson, 2018, p. 187).

Central to relevance theory's account of communication is the notion of an ostensive act, designed to attract the addressee's attention and convey a certain import. The notion of an import is broader than the notion of a meaning or a message in two main respects. In the first place, the import of an ostensive act consists not of a single proposition (or small set of propositions) but of an array of propositions, which may amount to a simple meaning or message at one extreme, but be indefinitely rich and complex at the other. In the second place, the propositions in this array may not all be equally manifest to the individual: that is, some of them may be more salient or strongly evidenced than others, and hence more likely to be entertained and accepted as true. By rejecting the idea that what is communicated must be a simple meaning or message, we can account for the fact that not all the import of a literary work may be equally manifest to both writer and reader at a given time, that different parts of it may become more or less manifest to different readers at different times, and that some of the responsibility for constructing a satisfactory overall interpretation may lie with the reader as well as the writer. The most basic claim of relevance theory is that although human cognition and communication are both geared to the search for relevance, ostensive acts raise expectations of relevance not raised by other stimuli. The addressee of an ostensive act is therefore entitled to presume that it will yield enough implications (and other cognitive effects), at a low enough processing cost, to satisfy the expectations of relevance it has raised. The relevance-guided comprehension heuristic is an automatic procedure for identifying the intended import of an ostensive act (Wilson, 2018, pp. 187-188).

Since identifying the intended import of an utterance involves following a path of least effort, the outcome of the comprehension procedure depends on which disambiguations and reference assignments, which lexical narrowings and broadenings, which contextual assumptions and implications are most salient at the point where the addressee has to make a choice. The communicator is responsible for structuring the utterance or discourse so as to raise the right expectations of relevance and make the intended import salient enough to be selected by an addressee using the comprehension heuristic. If the resulting overall interpretation is relevant in an expected way, the addressee is entitled to assume that this is the one the communicator intended. As Sperber and Wilson put it, what the

theory of relevance implies is one of the speaker's intentions. The hearer, by recognizing the speaker's intentions, should be capable of establishing the relevance of the utterance for himself. This general intention of being relevant gives the crucial guide to the recovery of the meaning, references, and inferences intended by the speaker (Wilson, 2018, pp. 188-189).

In two types of pragmatic mechanism: one properly inferential used to construct messages or meanings and the other non-inferential used to create non-propositional effects, relevance theorists have moved towards a broader conception of inference, allowing for a much wider range of inferential procedures, both conscious and unconscious. As Sperber and Wilson put it, not all inferences involve step by logical step derivations of explicit conclusions from explicit premises. The vast majority of inferences made by humans and other animals do not involve such derivations. Perception and memory both involve a substantial element of inference, the sensorimotor mechanisms are themselves inferential, and the recognition of a communicator's intentions using the relevance-guided comprehension heuristic is an inferential process par excellence (Wilson, 2018, p. 200).

According to relevance theory, the inferential process is crucial to comprehending an utterance. An inferential process begins with a collection of premises and produces a set of conclusions that follow logically from or are at least warranted by the premises, according to Sperber and Wilson (Sperber and Wilson, 1995, pp. 12-13).

Instead of developing a set of guidelines for understanding literary texts, relevance theory's inferential analysis explains how, in Wilson's words, "linguistically encoded-word meanings are regulated in usage" (Wilson, 2014, p. 139). This "usage" serves to interpret the poem in this study.

Sperber & Wilson favor an inferential model in which decoding plays an ancillary role with respect to the inferential activity of the interpreter. Within this approach, the decoding of utterances underdetermines their interpretation and serves rather as a piece of evidence about the speaker's meaning. Verbal communication does involve the use of a code (i.e., the grammar of the language), but inference plays a major role in turning the schematic coded input into fully propositional interpretations (Yus, 2006, p. 2).

### **2.3 Biography of Audre Lorde**

As a "black, lesbian, mother, fighter, and poet," Audre Lorde (1934–1992) dedicated her life and artistic talent to addressing and fixing the injustices of race, gender, class, and homosexuality. Lorde was born in New York City to West Indian parents. Indeed, Lorde's contributions to feminist theory, critical racial studies, and queer theory combine her personal experiences with larger overarching political goals. Lorde was the first to address the connections between race, class, and gender in canonical works. Lorde ran an anti-marginalization campaign against labels like "black woman" and "gay" (Poetry Foundation, 2022).

In several activist groups and liberation movements, including second-wave feminism, Black cultural and civil rights organizations, and the struggle for LGBTQ equality, Audre Lorde was a key figure. Lorde's poetry is particularly well-known for its forceful advocacy for social and racial justice as well as its portrayals of the LGBT experience and sexuality. The *Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* were published in 1997. The black lesbian feminist poet and activist warns her audience not to deny differences between individuals since doing so

puts their safety at risk. According to Lorde, distinctions in race or class are a "cause for celebration and growth" (Poetry Foundation, 2022).

Lorde was a gifted child narrator who drew on her own life experiences throughout her career. In "Hanging Fire," for instance, Lorde uses the voice of her 14-year-old self to make the past present tense. Her autobiographical compositions frequently have a stunning feeling of immediacy. The title of this poem from *The Black Unicorn* (1978) describes the author's mother as having "two faces" and "cooking up her daughters / into girls / before she fixed our dinner," comparing her to the Yoruba goddess of rivers and oceans, mother Orisha. Lorde's mother, a light-skinned immigrant who instilled tenacity in Lorde but loathed her daughter's darker skin tone, comes up when observing her duality (Voigt, 2022).

### **3. Research Methodology**

#### **3.1 Subject**

The subject of the study is Audre Lorde's poetry entitled 'From the House of Yemanjá'.

#### **3.2 Instruments**

An inferential analysis of Audre Lorde's poem "From the House of Yemanjá" is being conducted in this study using Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory as a theoretical framework. The analysis with a qualitative method is conducted to pinpoint the relevant and contextual elements of "From the House of Yemanjá". Qualitative research is the understanding of social phenomena based on the participant's point of view, to increase information about a particular phenomenon, such as an environment, a process, or even a belief (Gay, 2006).

#### **3.3 Data Analysis Procedures**

The researcher read the poetry line by line to look for relevant and contextual elements. The researcher then categorizes them using an inferential analysis based on the relevance theory. The researcher applies a qualitative method by Miles & Huberman (1994). Three steps used in this qualitative strategy are data reduction, data representation, and conclusion affirmation.

For the reduction process, the researcher used Audre Lorde's poem "From the House of Yemanjá," which may be obtained on the website <https://www.poetryfoundation.org>. The researcher carefully analyzed the words, phrases, and sentences line by line to look for any element. The information was subsequently placed into a checklist table with contextual elements as a sort of data representation. The data is arranged by describing purposes that are based on each contextual element. The researcher draws a conclusion from Audre Lorde's poetry "From the House of Yemanjá" regarding the physical setting, the poet's addressee, and the poet's identification with the characters.

#### 4. Findings

Table 1: Purposes of Contextual Elements Used in the Lines

Lines	Sentences	Types of Contextual Elements	Purposes
Title	From the House of Yemanjá		
1	My mother had two faces and a frying pot	Personal items	The utter desolation of the setting. Mental monologue. The bad image of the mother.
2	where she cooked up her daughters	Deixis	Physical setting. Mental monologue.
3	into girls		Mental monologue.
4	before she fixed our dinner.		Physical setting. Mental monologue.
5	My mother had two faces		The utter desolation of the setting. Mental monologue. The bad image of the mother.
6	and a broken pot	The inferior thing	An unimpressive implicature. Mental monologue. Bad manner of the mother.
7	where she hid out a perfect daughter	Deixis	Physical setting. Mental monologue.
8	who was not me		The utter desolation of the setting. Mental monologue.
9	I am the sun and moon and forever hungry		The utter desolation of the setting. Mental monologue.
10	for her eyes.		The utter desolation of the setting. Mental monologue.
11	I bear two women upon my back		The utter desolation of the setting. Mental monologue.
12	one dark and rich and hidden		Mental monologue.
13	in the ivory hungers of the other		Mental monologue.
14	mother		Mental monologue.
15	pale as a witch		The utter desolation of the setting. Mental monologue. The bad image of the mother.
16	yet steady and familiar		
17	brings me bread and terror		The utter desolation of the setting. Mental monologue. The bad image of the mother.
18	in my sleep		Physical setting. Mental monologue.
19	her breasts are huge exciting anchors	Possessive adjectives that make mother appear terrible.	The utter desolation of the setting. Mental monologue. The bad image of the mother.
20	in the midnight storm.		Physical setting. Mental monologue.
21	All this has been		Mental monologue.

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22	before		Mental monologue.
23	in my mother's bed		Physical setting. Mental monologue.
24	time has no sense		The utter desolation of the setting. Mental monologue.
25	I have no brothers		Mental monologue.
26	and my sisters are cruel.		The utter desolation of the setting. Mental monologue.
27	Mother I need		The utter desolation of the setting. Mental monologue.
28	mother I need		The utter desolation of the setting. Mental monologue.
29	mother I need your blackness now	A possessive adjective that reveals 'addressee'	The utter desolation of the setting. Mental monologue.
30	as the august earth needs rain.		The utter desolation of the setting. Mental monologue.
31	I am		Mental monologue.
32	the sun and moon and forever hungry		The utter desolation of the setting. Mental monologue.
33	the sharpened edge		The utter desolation of the setting. Mental monologue.
34	where day and night shall meet		Mental monologue.
35	and not be		Mental monologue.
36	one.		Mental monologue.

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## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Physical Setting

The second line of the first stanza begins with deixis "where she cooked up her daughters" (Lorde, line 2). Then, she described the physical setting. She mentioned that the place is where the speaker's mother fixed their dinner: that is to say, she communicates this supposition willingly and purposefully, though she does not state it explicitly. The unimpressive implicature is first conveyed by the inferior thing: 'a broken pot' (Lorde, line 6). Line seven of the first stanza also uses deixis "where she hid out a perfect daughter".

The speaker engages the readers through the use of the relevant and related physical setting in the poem: "My mother had two faces and a frying pot/ where she cooked up her daughters ... My mother had two faces/ and a broken pot/ where she hid out a perfect daughter/ who was not me ... her breasts are huge exciting anchors/ in the midnight storm/ in my mother's bed/ time has no sense ... the sharpened edge" to highlight the speaker's sorrow and the utter desolation of the setting (Lorde, lines 1-36).

An assumption is manifest to an individual 'if the environment provides sufficient evidence for its adoption' (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, p. 39). It means conveying a psychological likelihood to the reader through the environment if the physical setting is well depicted with appropriate words. In order to assist the reader to comprehend the physical setting in which

the events depicted take place, the speaker is conveying to the reader the physical environment through the use of the relevant terms.

## 5.2 The Poet's Addressee

Each line of the poem suggests a part of a mental monologue. A poet or someone else may deliver such a monologue (i.e., the speaker). As the story of the poem moves, it becomes obvious. This composition illustrates that the speaker is talking to someone whose identity and traits are her mother or maybe people who oppress her as she is a black woman. The reader is invited into a mental monologue as the ongoing monologue gradually reveals the story of the poem.

In line 29, the speaker explicitly reveals the addressee, who as yet remains unknown to the reader: "mother I need your blackness now". Her utterance recalls encyclopedic entries relevant to her demands and provides the reader with information they may have been wondering about from the start: Who or what is the speaker addressing? The situation is now sufficiently evident: the speaker talks to her mother, who ignores her and only cares about her other white children. In other words, the speaker as a black woman may mean the addressee as people who suppress her blackness. The use of a possessive adjective ('your blackness') implies such an attachment, and lines 2, 7, 8, 25, and 26 may lead the reader to believe that the voice belongs to a black woman: where she cooked up her daughters ... where she hid out a perfect daughter/ who was not me ... I have no brothers/ and my sisters are cruel. This tendency is predicated on the stereotypical—and hence the erroneous—belief that a black woman needs equality and doesn't want to be treated unfairly.

An encyclopedic entry in relevance theory contains data about its extension and denotation: the objects, events, and properties that instantiate it. For instance, the encyclopedic entry for the concept "Napoleon" would contain a set of assumptions about Napoleon, the encyclopedic entry for the concept "cat" would include a record of presumptions about cats, and the encyclopedic entry for the concept argue would contain an array of assertions about arguing (Sperber and Wilson, 1995, p. 87).

Sperber and Wilson claim that people are predisposed to form stereotyped beliefs and expectations regarding often-encountered things and situations. For instance, elephants and spiders are not considered to be normal pets, but dogs and cats are. It is assumed that these conceptual presumptions and predictions are held and retrieved as a single unit or "chunk," that they are very accessible, and that they will be used in place of any detailed information when processing utterances concerning related things or occurrences. Thus, unless given detailed information to the contrary, people will presume that when they hear that their neighbor has purchased a pet, it is something like a dog or a cat rather than an elephant or a spider (Sperber and Wilson, 1995, p. 88).

## 5.3 The Poet's Character Identification with 'From the House of Yemanjá'

At the entry of the poem, the speaker starts identifying the 'biased and unfair' image of her mother: "My mother had two faces and a frying pot" (Lorde, line 1). This identification goes on to utilize personal items such as 'a frying pot', 'a broken pot', and 'in my mother's bed' that she uses. The speaker reaches the point where she criticizes her mother's inequitable behaviors: "My mother had two faces ... cooked up her daughters/ into girls/ before she fixed our dinner ... where she hid out a perfect daughter/ who was not me" (Lorde, lines 1-8).



The speaker illustrates the bad image of her mother with relevant and explicit words, phrases, and possessive adjectives such as 'two faces', 'forever hungry/ for her eyes', 'pale as a witch', 'her breasts are huge ... storm', 'need your blackness' (Lorde, lines 1, 5, 9, 10, 15, 19, 20, 29). The speaker also exerts relevant things that portray the speaker's situation and isolation such as "I am the sun and moon and forever hungry", "brings me bread and terror", "huge exciting anchors/ in the midnight storm", "as the august earth needs rain", "the sharpened edge/ where day and night shall meet" (Lorde, lines 9, 17, 19, 20, 30, 33, 34).

How is this poem communicated to the reader? It can be implied as the speaker has demonstrated a deep knowledge of an emotional state attributed to the reader. Such knowledge signifies that the one who makes the attribution is actually one who experiences such emotions. According to Kolaiti, the interaction of emotional features and conceptual content is what defines literature: "conceptual effects in the art are merely part of a greater picture whose ultimate purpose is aesthetic experience" (Kolaiti, 2010, p. 182). The communicator skillfully crafts a picture of the speaker's tensions and feelings toward her mother and toward society.

## 6. Conclusion

This study explored Audre Lorde's "From the House of Yemanjá" poem using relevance theory. To create an interpretation that emphasizes the speaker's tensions and emotions, certain inferences that could be made from the semantic contents are determined. A greater comprehension of polysemy and poetic effects in poetry may be attained by inferential analysis based on relevance theory. The inferential analysis may be useful in various literary genres with the appropriate modifications. The divergent inferential analyses of the same poetic work could create a literary diagnosis. The analysis comes to an end when the concern goes to the affective, a crucial aspect of a reader's reaction to a poem. There is a stage where emotional reactions take over and have an unanticipated impact on how literature is interpreted. While the inferential analysis does not allow for the investigation of emotional reactions, it can be used to identify the areas and ways emotions affect readers' perceptions. Applying relevance theory to literature offers a way to give subjectivity and emotion a proper place in literary interpretation: disagreements between critics may be more fruitful if they acknowledge how emotions influence their reading, where cognition ceases for being dominant and where their discussion runs the risk of turning into a conflict between subjectivities (Martnez, 2018, p. 12). Therefore, the study's shortcoming is that it ignores the aesthetic pleasure the poem might create, which may be a related and complicated topic.

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