



## Intersectionality in Audre Lorde’s A Woman Speaks and Coal: A Case Study in Structural-Hermeneutic Approach

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**Abstract:** This research was aimed to determine intersectionality which has been discussed within academic fields such as psychology, gender analysis, human rights, political sciences, and many more include literature. In literary studies, intersectionality is discussed as a social phenomenon to show that multiple categories can overlap to create compounding experiences of discrimination in a text. The current paper works by using the structural-hermeneutics approach by Ricoeur (1981) to analyze the portrayal of the intersectionality issue in Audre Lorde’s poem (*A Woman Speaks and Coal*) and categorized as descriptive qualitative research. The results reveal that gender, racial identity, and sexuality are objectified categories that triggered intersectionality in the selected poems. The extent of intersectionality affected the society as the poems broadly conveyed both self-declaration and struggle of blacks, women, and men underneath the patriarchal society and fragile masculinity. The implication of this research suggested that the gender factors affected the society of in two different poems.

**Keywords:** A Woman Speaks, Audre Lorde, Coal, Intersectionality, Poems, Structural-Hermeneutics.

### INTRODUCTION

The significant impact of literature on society is undeniable. It reflects human nature and is a way we can learn and relate to others. As a social product, authors use literary works to record the social facts and history so literature contains a reflection of society. This occurs to Plato’s idea stated that poetry is a mirror. Related to Plato, Aristotle (1961), in his *Poetics*, also defines poetry as an imitation. Besides, the Mimetic Theory by (Abrams, 1971). Puts literary works as the reflection or imitation of reality by showing how literary works clearly illustrate whatever existed in society, such as how interaction with each other, lifestyle and all the problems, as well as the

solutions to all kinds of the problems and even the values, Saleh, *et al.*, (2021).

Some books imitate society and allow us to have a better clear idea about the world we live in. The readers are easily connected to the psyche of the authors above through their stories. Despite that, literature also enhances the need to understand modern-day issues like intersectionality as a part of social phenomena, Rahman, & Weda, (2019).

Intersectionality is an analytical approach to understanding social relations by examining the overlapping system of discrimination. This defines that the social system is complicated due to several forms of oppression that might be active at the same time in a person’s life. Intersectionality claims that classic conceptualized oppressions in a society like racism, sexism, classism, biphobia, homophobia, transphobia, or even religious fanaticism, do not work independently, but rather relate and combine each other to compound and transform the experience of intersecting forms of discrimination. Meanwhile, Grillo (1995) reveals that the power of intersectionality forms the potential to give voice to individuals, but women’s multidimensional subjects are unable to speak with the paradigm of thinking that identity is an individual subject. Grillo reveals women sit at the crossroads in many categories; for instance, she may be Latin, female, short, mother, lesbian, daughter, blue-eyed, long-haired, working, and stubborn. Intersectionality acknowledges that unique oppressions exist but it is also dedicated to understanding how change is in combination. Furthermore, according to Hancock (2016), intersectionality is related to social media which has now become global. Then, intersectionality is also related to politics and other social aspects.

As time goes by, Intersectionality has been recognized and involved as a theory, concept, approach, and tool within academic fields such as psychology, gender analysis, human rights, and political science. It is discussed in various disciplines and therefore often used in inter-/transdisciplinary research. The emerging of intersectionality, both of the idea and awareness, inside the literary works is a shred of evidence that shows the way that people's social identities can overlap to create compounding experiences of discrimination. Recently, the intersectional theory has found its way into literary studies; especially narratology, dealing with the structure and function of narrative, has expressed interest in an intersectional approach (Klein & Schnickle, 2014).

The emerging of intersectionality issues inside the literary works becomes evidence of social phenomena that happens and they are constructed unconsciously within our society's consciousness, (Rahman, *et al.*, 2019). This term becomes more challenging and crucial to be discovered in literary works since a few activists and authors developed their ideas about intersectionality inside their writings. In this study, the researcher decides to reveal the intersectionality inside the selected poems of one of the influential female authors, Audre Lorde. Some of her poems are going to be used as the source of data. One of the reasons to choose the works from the author is that she is concerned with her works on gender, class, race, and other significant social categories whilst those things are supposed as sensitive problems nowadays in a multi-cultural place. The researcher also thinks that those works made to offer important and necessary nuances for our better understanding of intersectionality in order to promote equality for groups and individuals. The subject of Intersectionality in Lorde's *A Woman Speaks and Coal: A Case Study in Structural-Hermeneutic Approach* is the study of the structural-hermeneutics approach which is significant and suggestive to be discovered. There have been some previous researchers who wrote about the related topic of intersectionality or intend to reveal the same objects either.

The first is Nagah, & Abo, (2015) wrote *Anger, Resistance and the Reclamation of Nature in Audre Lorde's Eco-poetics*. Audre Lorde's poetics is examined here based on Lawrence Buell's ethical concern for the environment together with Lynes' concept of reclamation. The next is Igwedibia, (2017) wrote *Grice's Conversational Implicature: A Pragmatics Analysis of Selected Poems of Audre Lorde*. The article attempts to study the four maxims in Grice's theory of conversational implicature: the maxims of Quantity, Quality, Manner, and Relation.

The fourth is Hummadi, (2020) with a study entitled *Audre Lorde's Who Said It Was Simple Characterized as a Confessional Mode*. The research discloses the confessional aspects contained in Lorde's poem, *Who Said It Was Simple*, by dealing with the Confessional Poetry concept by M.L Rosenthal. By studying the related theses above, the researcher got an idea to

represent this research entitled *Intersectionality in Lorde's A Woman Speaks and Coal: A Case Study in Structural-Hermeneutic Approach* with various works, points of view, and methods. Therefore, the researcher concerning this research on analyzing the poems and elaborating the analysis by using the structural-hermeneutics approach to get the objective of this research, the portrait of intersectionality issue.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Etymologically derived from the word "structura" in Latin, structure means 'form' or 'building' and "hermeneutin", which means 'to interpret'. Literary work is a structure that can be interpreted. The structure here means the literary work contains the systematic elements which there are mutual relationships among them, determine each other. Thus, the unity of the elements in literature is not just a collection or pile of things, but they are interrelated and interdependent. Therefore, the nature of each element in the structure has no meaning by itself, but that meaning is interpreted by the relationship between all the elements contained in that structure (Hawkes, 1977). On the other hand, hermeneutics is broadly defined as a theory or philosophy about the interpretation of meaning. Hermeneutics is the study of understanding, especially the understanding of texts. With this understanding, the structural-hermeneutic analysis of poetry is an analysis that focuses on the elements and their functions in the structure of poetry and illustrates that each element has an interpreted meaning.

Paul Ricoeur in his book entitled *Hermeneutics and The Human Sciences* (1981), links his contemporary hermeneutic perspective with structural aspects. In understanding literary works and to reach interpretations, the structure in the work will correlate with the context that is built outside of it, in this case, the symbolic meaning. In addition, Paul Ricoeur also shows the existence of objectification through the structure as an effort to show internal relations in the structure or text. Literary texts always stand vis-à-vis between structural explanations and hermeneutic comprehension. Structural explanations are objective, while hermeneutic comprehension gives the impression that we are subjective. This implies that hermeneutics is closely related to structural analysis. Structural analysis is a logical means to decipher the text (interpreted object). The purpose of hermeneutics is to interpret meanings and messages as objectively as possible according to what the text wants. Paul Ricoeur claims that the text itself is not limited to written autonomous facts (*sens apparent*), but is always related to the context (*sens cache*). In this context, various aspects can support the integrity of meaning. The aspects mentioned are also related to the author's biography, socio-cultural facts, and various matters related to it. However, the selection of things outside the text must always be in the text guide. It means that the analysis must always come from the text, not the other way around. The most

important thing of all is that the process of interpretation is always a dialogue between the text and the interpreter.

## METHOD

### Research Design

This research is categorized as descriptive qualitative research and for the analysis of this work the researcher used the semiotic-structuralism approach by Paul Ricoeur. By using this approach, the research will be dealt with the poetical devices as the structure that occurred in the poems by collecting the whole data in detail which in this case are diction, imageries, figurative language, and tone. They are going to be processed by using the hermeneutics reading method as a part of the semiotic-structural approach to get the meaning based on the literature convention or the semiotics' system convention in the next level. Therefore, this research is going to elaborate on the result to see the types of categories that trigger the intersectionality issues and how the intersectionality issues affected the society in the selected poems. The data are presented in the descriptive qualitative method.

### Source of Data

The source of the data was classified into two types. The primary source of the data in research is taken from *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (1997) reprinted with the permission of Charlotte Sheedy Literary Agency and W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. The secondary source must be related to poetry, intersectional theory, and movement, the author's life, or other subject matter of this research. The researcher also needs any relevant information to support this research. The data are obtained from books, articles, journals, encyclopedias, the internet, theses, and other resources.

### Method of Collecting Data

Data collection is a significant process to achieve research objectives. Three steps of data collection were found in this study, as follows:

#### Close-reading

This first step involves the researcher as a reader of Lorde's selected poems. This activity must be done many times. The reader spends as much time reading and re-reading the poems to gain the first level of comprehension.

#### Note-taking

After reading the poem multiple times, some significant things will be highlighted and this step is called note-taking. Note-taking is the way to collect or have a note of several particular aspects that matter in this research. They conclude figurative languages, imagery, diction, and tone in the selected poem of Audre Lorde.

### Method of Analyzing Data

After the process of collecting data, the researcher analyzed it. The process of analyzing data was divided into three steps, they are: 1) Overviewing is connecting one data to another to find relevant relationships as a whole and to concern the structures that construct the poems and 2) Interpreting refers to the process of giving meaning to the collected data which is elaborated by using hermeneutic reading. The poetic device is correlated with reliable interpretation.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

### Categories Triggered Intersectionality Issue Include Gender, Racial Identity, Age, and Sexuality

#### ➤ Gender

Gender involves social norms, attitudes, and activities that society deems more appropriate for one sex over another. Gender is also determined by what an individual feels and does. *A Woman Speaks* is one of Lorde's works concerned with it. The significance of the poem *A Woman Speaks* is the image of black women in the United States and their battle to disclose their identities despite society's norms. This poem is a way to express the difficulties experienced by black women at the time. Actually, it was a way for the author to discover the discrimination and injustices 1900's women faced in general and do not get the respect they deserve. The poem, overall, is such an anthem for the black women in the challenging place where they lived as the minority.

This stanza portrays the theme throughout the tone of the poem she brought that implicated to the bizarre position of colored women as both powerful and also underestimated. She claims her strength as a human being without any despair of her destiny as she writes in "I do not dwell /within my birth nor my divinities", and followed out with the oxymoron in the next line, "who am ageless and half-grown". Then, an important reference of allusion is made in the line "witches in Dahomey". Dahomey is another iconic piece by the same author, inspired by the 14th-century African kingdom located in West African States and was infamous for its fierce women warriors. As a metaphor, calling them 'witches' is meant to illustrate how their strength is seen as evil, otherworldly and positions them as outsiders. She connects herself to this history of warrior women by stating that they "wear me inside their coiled clothes". As come to the end of this stanza, the author shares her emotional tone due to organic imagery, "as our mother did /mourning.". She bends time, camouflaging the timeline to settle herself in the world of Dahomey, then back again to her mother, and then to her own experience. This is a portrayal of the connection and unity Lorde feels with her ancestors and her elders. After all, this stanza reflects the memory of generations of strong women who continue to seek a balance between strength and vulnerability.

I have been woman for a long time beware my smile I am treacherous with old magic and the noon's new fury with all your wide futures promised	25     30
I am woman and not white.	

The first two lines in the last stanza are already fraught with the feminist notion. The author declares her consciousness as a woman within “I have been woman /for a long time”. The pattern of femme fatale is used in the last stanza, “Beware my smile /I am treacherous with old magic”, affirms the subtle idea between the common feminist critique of patriarchal society and what Lorde views as a missing piece of the feminist movement; its uplifting of black women. The dictions, ‘my smile’ is a synecdoche for the stereotypes of women attitudes in society as friendly and submissive characters. Rather than a true warning, she states these lines as a declaration of mysterious power with a hint of sarcasm to dismantle the idea of the black woman as dangerous. Her last six words, “I am /Woman /and not white”, she puts her statement in meiosis to create the effect of her dissimilarity with the surrounding society she lives. She keeps emphasizing her general identity with the capital letter of ‘Woman’

in case she acts to boldly present herself as different but and still a woman, engaged in similar struggles for equality, yet to be realized.

➤ **Racial Identity**

Racial identity is a term that refers broadly to how individuals define themselves concerning race and/or ethnicity. Sellers et al. (1998) defined racial identity as the personal significance and meaning of the race to one's self-concept. As a black woman of West Indian heritage, Audre Lorde knew the struggles of Black Americans to claim their place and voice in American society. Raised in Harlem during the 1930s and 1940s, Lorde became aware of racism at an early age and Coal is her reaction towards racist attitudes and acts. The significance of the poem Coal is the representation of stereotyping culture and the glory of prideful blackness.

I Is the total black, being spoken From the earth's inside. There are many kinds of open. How a diamond comes into a knot of flame How a sound comes into a word, colored	5
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Lorde begins to both describe and distinguish with an “I”, and continues in the second line with visual and auditory imageries to say “is the total black, being spoken”. Here, she separates herself from the total black, indicating that her true self is not necessarily relying on ‘total black’. In these lines, the ‘I’ she states have a double-consciousness; the author asserts that our self is not colored and how the society considers the Blacks with the constructed stereotypes. Lorde also describes that the ‘I’ is come “From the earth’s inside”, as she associated where the coal from (‘the earth’s

inside’) and the womb where she came from. She continues to narrating “There are many kinds of open” as followed by the kinaesthetic and auditory imageries of “How a diamond comes into a knot of flame /?”. In the first stanza, Lorde first starts by describing herself as a natural element that exists within the earth itself, coal. In this poem, ‘coal’ sets out as one element and changes over time depending on where it is located and what treatment it is exposed to. It may come out as a worthless chunk of earth, but it has the possibility of turning into a valuable diamond.

I am black because I come from the earth's inside Take my word for jewel in your open light.	25
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At the end of the poem, she celebrates and defines her identity by saying by correlating herself with coal “I am black because I come from the earth’s inside”. She declares self-assertion that her blackness may become somewhat valuable essence inline “Take my word for jewel in your open light”.

**The Intersectionality Issue that Affected Society in the Selected Poems**

As a post-colonial writer, academic, activist, Audre Lorde voiced the intellectual significance and political concept of intersectionality that developed significantly in the 1970s to 80s through several works she published. Based on the analysis of four of Audre

Lorde's poems, the researcher found that there are complex challenges experienced by individuals or groups with certain categories, especially several categories that intersect with each other. Therefore, these poems reject the simplification of general ideas about the universal experience to all identities, such as the essence of womanhood and black pride.

The first poem entitled *A Woman Speaks* focuses on the ideas of black women's image as the minority in American society and their battle to be viewed as equal, powerful, and influential as men. The author uses allusion which is a part of figurative language as the dominant element in this work to transform her idea of identity into women's self-consciousness despite the negative sentiments. Lorde as the author tries to expand readers' perspectives and stereotypes of black women. Moreover, she also declared independence and black pride.

In the second poem, *Coal*, the author reflects her personal views with patriarchal ideology in the society she witnesses as a Black. Similar to the first poem above, this poem is also a way for her to celebrate her identity and by declaring self-assertion that her blackness may become somewhat valuable essence proudly. Moreover, imageries become the most often used element in this poem for giving a vivid portrays to the reader.

## CONCLUSION

The selected poems of Audre Lorde's are intriguing subjects to discuss, especially when it related to analyzing poetical devices as the structure. Figurative language, imagery, diction, and tone become the main substances in the poetical devices. The researcher is using the structuralism approach to define the interpretation of each poem before elaborating them with the external aspects—during the hermeneutics reading to reveal what are the categories that triggered the intersectionality issue. This paper shows two categories as the triggers in *A Woman Speaks* and *Coal*. Meanwhile, each of these poems is not only portraying a category itself but some of them contain multiple categories. Here, the researcher conducted the poem analysis based on the dominant category that each poem can capture: *A Woman Speaks* portrays the category of gender and *Coal* portrays the category of racial identity.

After analyzing the categories, the researcher discusses the intersectionality issue that has been triggered from those categories above which affected society in Lorde's *A Woman Speaks* and *Coal*. The intersectionality issue shows that the oppression does not contribute by a single category—in this case; it is not distinctly due to race or gender but more due to the combination of those two factors. The first poem entitled *A Woman Speaks* focuses on the ideas of black

women's image as the minority in American society and their battle to be viewed as equal, powerful, and influential as men. In the second poem, *Coal*, the author reflects her personal views with patriarchal ideology in the society she witnesses as a Black.

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