

## **THEME-RHEME ANALYSIS: EXPLORING THE THEMATIC STRUCTURE OF EDGAR ALLAN POE'S DREAM-THEMED POEMS**

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### **Abstract**

*This study investigates the realisation of textual meaning through theme-rheme structures of four dream-themed poems by Poe. This study has analysed these poems by studying the themes and rhemes in a unitary clause and identifying the role different kinds of themes play in establishing textual metafunctions of the language. The results illustrated the poems exhibited simple, multiple, topical, interpersonal, and textual, along with marked and unmarked themes. Unmarked topical themes contributed to a clear, easy-to-understand experience and dominated three of the four poems. Where the poet desired to create cohesion and flow of language, multiple themes were prevalent, and with a higher percentage of textual themes. Furthermore, the deviations in thematic structure of the poems also indicated the development of Poe's poetic style and intent. The thematic analysis of the poems showed how the thematic structure contributes to creating meaning and unification of ideas in the text through cohesion, coherence, and emphasis. In terms of teaching pedagogy, the use of theme-rheme structure as an analytical tool for poetry will lead students and teachers to a more profound understanding of the poet's intent and attitude, and the shared beliefs being evoked in poetic texts.*

**Keywords:** SFL, Theme-Rheme structure, marked and unmarked themes, textual metafunctions

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## **Introduction**

The theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) revolves around the functional notion of language. Language is not a network of structures but a set of systems and interlinked options for creating meanings. In this regard, 'clause' is the meaningful, grammatical unit of analysis, and it combines with other clauses to give a larger message in the form of 'text'. For the realisation of the language, three meta-functions are identified at the lexico-grammatical level within the clause by Halliday (1994): ideational, interpersonal, and textual. In ideational metafunction, the speaker/writer constructs his experiences through lexico-grammatical choices to represent the world. In interpersonal metafunction, social relations are enacted and conveyed to the listener/reader. The textual metafunction organises the presentation of the message by creating the relevant context. It constitutes the thematic system of the clause, composed of theme and rheme, and is concerned with a clause as a message. The textual metafunctions help both the reader and listener to understand the ideational and interpersonal features present in the text (Matthiessen, 1995). These three metafunctions are the fundamental principles of language and also act as tools that help linguists to understand, analyse, and discuss the linguistic choices presented in a text.

Poe wrote some 57 poems, of which around 30 poems are dedicated to a womanly presence in his life including his mother, foster mother, and romantic interests (Morisi, 2005). A bulk of poems deal with death and gothic influences; childhood also figures as a recurring theme in his poetry. Another important theme is dreams - he has written four poems with very similar titles, all including the word 'dream'. These four poems present his view of life as a transient, fleeting phenomenon similar to our dreams. He approaches the same subject and the same theme repeatedly at different times in his life from 1827 to 1849, over a span of 22 years. For this purpose, the dream poems have been selected to investigate the language used in his poetry whilst expanding on similar themes and ideas. The texts chosen for thematic analysis include "A Dream" (1827), "Dreams" (1827), "Dreamland" (1844), and "A Dream Within a Dream" (1849). In these poems, Poe questions the nature of human existence and reality, with recurring themes of hopelessness and the temporary nature of life. The focus of the present study is on textual metafunction wherein clause acts as a message, manifested in thematic structure.

## **Research Problem**

A large number of researchers have thematically analysed blogs, tweets and speeches but inside the poetic genre, it is not so common. The themes of Poe's poems have been analysed stylistically (Xiaoling, 2005; Whissel, 2011; Renaud, 2013; Fletcher, 2018; Syafitri & Marlinton, 2018), but there was no instance of thematic analysis using theme-rheme structure. The

present study, therefore, focuses on the textual metafunctions of the language and aims to study theme-rheme structure of the language used in Poe's poetry, especially in his dream poems.

### **Significance of the Study**

The above-stated research problem indicates the need for analysing poetic works foregrounding Halliday's model of SFL to understand the form and functions of the language used, to identify the trailing context with it, to deduce the context in which the language was produced, to study the purpose for which it was produced, and the reasons why it was expressed in the way it was. There is less research which uses theme-rheme analysis to analyse the poetry of a particular theme by the same poet. The purpose of conducting thematic structure analysis on four of Poe's poems with similar themes was to establish how the poet organises language to fit in the selected context by choosing between themes even though the content remained similar. By imbuing themes with value as the poet's deliberate choices carrying the quantum of information, the intent and attitude of the poet reveal themselves. Ideological representation refers to the 'socially shared meanings, beliefs and opinions' (Potter, 2016). Thematic structure analysis can be used to access these socially shared meanings by exploring the thematic structure and observing the type of themes that emerge. An understanding can be reached about the textual characteristics that play a role in creating meaning through cohesion and coherence, by linking ideas together into a cohesive whole and emphasising what is at the root of the message to convey the complete meaning of the clause. This study shows how thematic analysis of poetic verses sheds light on the significance of the arrangement of verses and the purpose behind the choice of themes enacting the point of departure, adding a deeper dimension of meaning and understanding.

### **Literature Review**

#### **SFL: A Theory of Language Study**

Founded and explained at length by Halliday in his many published works, SFL visualises language as a social semiotic system; a meaning-making process enacting in a certain context. Within this meaning-making process, textual metafunction enables the speaker to construct the text and the listener to deconstruct and distinguish it from other random sentences (Fang, 2005). It enables the speaker and addressee to share the information that is constructed through the interpersonal and ideational meanings; it provides the resources that guide the meanings to be exchanged in the text (Halliday, 2007; Matthiessen, 1995).

The effectiveness of the discourse flow is realised by the organisation of clause, as a message, in a certain way (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014;

Schleppegrell, 2013). This organisation is composed of theme and rheme. Theme acquires a significant place in the clause and serves as a point of departure of the message (Halliday, 1994), and locates and orients the clause within the context. That is, it incorporates the position of the clause and correlates it with the unfolding text. It carries and delivers the portion of the meaning of a clause, maintains the coherence, and contributes to the accomplishment of the message (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Haratyan, 2011). The remaining part of the message is rheme, which conflates the theme to create a message. Potter (2016) has discussed how, by observing how certain words are thematised, the succession of themes and rhemes also sheds light on how certain ideas are propagated or permeated throughout a text.

### **Use of Thematic Analysis**

Alamiri (2018) applied the SFL analysis to the Arabic text of the Holy Quran. His study was based on textual analysis, focusing primarily on the thematic structure of the few verses of chapter 19. His results showed the usage of multiple themes in the text i.e., interpersonal, topical and textual. Each of the themes provided significant importance in the unfolding of the text message and building semantic relationships between parts of the text. The majority of the themes were found to be unmarked, maintaining the same central topic around which the story revolved. Moreover, the verbal group was thematised in the study based on bound pronominal markers, which expressed participants of the clause, attached with the verbal group.

Denardi et al. (2007) analysed academic abstracts on the basis of SFL. Their results revealed the presence of a majority of topical unmarked themes in the abstracts. Thematic development showed the involvement of new information with the beginning of every new clause. Finally, theme and rheme followed each other among the clauses. It contributed positively and promoted cohesion and coherence in the abstracts.

Fernandez (2018) analysed the qualitative interview of a student in the light of SFL. The study carried thematic analysis, interpersonal analysis and ergative analysis. In thematic analysis, the uniformity of themes was noticed in the series of utterances, with different rhemes linking it. Most of the clauses of the interview carried unmarked themes which referred to the first-person pronoun of the interviewee.

Dewi (2016) carried out a thematic analysis of the exposition texts written by pre-service teachers as teaching materials. Thematic progression and theme revealed the coherence in the text made by pre-service teachers. All of the teachers were mostly observed to use unmarked themes in their texts. Rarely did they use marked themes to shift the focus of the text. Results also revealed textual themes for linking functions and indicating coordination of the clauses. Rahayu, Laila and Hum (2017) thematically analysed the lyrics of 10 songs by Taylor Swift. The study revealed the presence of textual, interpersonal and

topical themes, both marked and unmarked. In all the songs, the most frequently occurring theme was unmarked topical theme with 59.6% frequency. Next was textual theme with 24.8% frequency, marked topical theme at 8.5%, and interpersonal theme at 7.2%.

A study, “Theme in Robert Frost Poems” authored by Sayuthi (2019) depicted theme structures in Robert Frost’s poems. The instruments of data collection were 10 selected sonnets from “Complete Poems of Robert Frost”. The examination uncovered that unmarked multiple themes were overwhelmingly utilised with a frequency of 44.44%. Unmarked simple themes were second most frequent at 40.48%, while frequency of marked multiple themes was 13.49% and marked simple themes was 1.59%. The investigation additionally uncovered that nature was acknowledged and realised through the thematic structure in the sonnets since the sonnets utilised nature terms to unfold the message.

Emily Dickinson's poems have been studied by many researchers from different perspectives. Working inside the framework of thematic structure, a paper conducted by Qiao (2019) on the thematic interpretation of “Because I Could Not Stop for Death” by Dickinson gives a detailed analysis of the poem with the aim of exploring Dickinson's attitude towards death. The study shows that the thematic structure can give important suggestions for discourse analysis and literary studies by interpreting the discourse on thematic lines.

Based on these studies, the present research focuses on identifying textual metafunction, mainly thematic structures, of the language used in four of Poe’s dream-themed poems. There is a void of systemic functional analysis in the poetic genre; with no study using SFL tools of analysis for Poe’s poetry. This study is conducted to fill the gap and explore the thematic patterns which are manifested in the respective genre. The present study, therefore, focuses on the theme-rheme structure of the language used in Poe’s dream poems, and aims to answer the following research questions:

- What are the eminent themes found in Poes’ dream poems?
- How does thematic structure realise the textual meaning of the poems?

## **Research Methodology**

This study is conducted to analyse different types of prevalent themes and meanings realised in four similarly themed poems by Poe. SFL model of textual analysis, using theme-rheme structure, has been adopted to conduct the analysis, which has been further dilated upon and discussed through qualitative analysis.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Thematic analysis is one way of analysing clauses according to SFL parameters and addresses one line of meaning in the clause, construed from

the clause as a message. Messages in all languages are identifiable by giving a distinguishable designation to the thematic structure and become characteristic as such (Fawcett, 2000; Martin, 2014)). This can be achieved in English by word order: theme, usually the subject of the clause, is first-placed, followed by rheme. It is the reference point for communications, and the remainder of the message is used to create the message. The speaker, at that point, chooses the ideal theme contingent upon their inclination (Halliday & Webster, 2009).

By analysing the verses of the poems according to their thematic structure, and observing the type of themes that emerge, an understanding of how the text is held together can be created, and how meaning is created through the successive themes and rhemes (Eggins, 2004). This understanding is significant for learning about the textual characteristics that play a role in creating meaning through cohesion and coherence, linking ideas together into cohesive 'waves of information' to ensure that the train of thought is followed properly and the message is understood. Types of themes to be analysed include marked, unmarked, simple, multiple, topical, interpersonal and textual themes.

### **Data Source**

The data source is a document belonging to the poetry genre, in the form of four poems written by Poe namely: *A Dream*, *Dreams*, *Dreamland*, *A Dream within a Dream*.

In SFL, the clause is the grammatical unit of analysis so the data of the research is required to be in the form of clauses, not verses. For this purpose, the verses of the poems have been arranged into clauses, yielding some 80 clauses in total. The next section presents an analysis of the different types of themes prevalent in the poems and the different meanings realised through these themes.

### **Data Analysis**

Based on a clause by clause analysis, the different types of themes that were found in the analysis have been discussed below, followed by a summary of the frequency of each type of theme in the four poems.

#### **Simple and Multiple Themes**

Simple themes are those which consist of a single thematic element: topical, interpersonal or textual. Such themes are used to keep the language simple and straightforward; often the effect obtained is blunt and unambiguous (Hassanpour & Hashim, 2012).

**Table 1. “I stand amid the roar of a surf-tormented shore,”**

I	stand amid the roar of a surf-tormented shore,
Theme, topical	Rheme

Here, the theme is unmarked and simple. However, Poe’s use of simple themes in the poem *Dreamland* creates the opposite effect; the textual meaning provides a confusing and unsettling effect due to the recurrent use of simple marked themes in the form of circumstantial adjuncts.

**Table 2. “By a route obscure and lonely, haunted by ill angels only,”**

By a route obscure and lonely	haunted by ill angels only
Theme: Topical, Circumstantial	Rheme
Adjunct	

In this verse, theme is simple and marked, as a circumstantial adjunct is marked theme in this declarative clause.

**Table 3. “Is all that we see or seem but a dream within a dream?”**

Is	all that we see or seem	but a dream within a
Theme: Interpersonal,	Theme: Topical,	dream
finite op.	participant	Rheme

The theme is multiple and unmarked, with a finite operator and a nominal group as the theme. Multiple themes are common in Poe’s poetry to create a seamless flow within the limited parameters of verse.

### Marked and Unmarked Themes

Themes can further be sub-categorised as marked or unmarked themes. Unmarked themes are elements that are typically chosen as themes in a clause, while marked themes are not usually chosen (Eggins, 2004; Wang, 2014). In simple declarative sentences, an unmarked theme is one that serves as the subject of the clause; marked themes are elements other than the subject presenting themselves as the theme, such as circumstances or complements. In imperative clauses, verbal processes are unmarked; in exclamative, the wh- elements *what* and *how* are unmarked. Yes/no interrogatives usually contain the finite operator and subject as the unmarked theme whereas wh- elements are unmarked themes of wh- interrogative clauses. Unmarked themes make a clause easy to understand and remember; whereas marked themes contribute to the ambiguity of the text, they call for more attention as the meaning is not as easily accessible as in unmarked themes (Green, Christopher & Mei, 2000). Thematic structure of the text is conveyed by the choices made between marked and unmarked Themes (Eggins, 1994). The four poems contain both marked and unmarked themes, but predominantly unmarked themes.

**Table 4. “Take this kiss upon the brow!”**

Take	this kiss upon the brow!
Theme: Topical, process	Rheme

The theme is simple and unmarked as the verbal group acting as predicator usually acts as theme in imperative clauses.

**Table 5. “In visions of the dark night I have dreamed of joy departed”**

In visions of the dark night	I have dreamed of joy departed
Theme: Topical, Circumstance	Rheme

The theme is simple and marked, with circumstantial adjunct acting as the theme. As the theme is not the subject in this declarative clause, it is a marked theme.

**Topical Themes**

A topical theme may be a participant, process or a circumstance. The last theme in a multiple theme is usually the topical theme. It is very common as almost all clauses have a nominal group, verbal process, an adverbial or prepositional phrase in the theme position. Many examples were found in the four poems, which had very few clauses without topical themes.

**Table 6. “My spirit not awakening,”**

My spirit	not awakening,
Theme: Topical, participant	Rheme

Theme is simple and unmarked as the subject nominal group is acting as theme in this clause.

**Table 7. “For the heart whose woes are legion ’t is a peaceful, soothing region-”**

For the heart whose woes are legion	’t is a peaceful, soothing region- Rheme
Theme: topical, circumstantial adjunct	

Here, the theme is simple and marked.

**Interpersonal Themes**

The interpersonal theme realises meaning in enacting social relationships. As such, it could be mood adjunct, vocative or finite verbal operator. These were not very common in the four poems under analysis; however, they were present in all but one poem.

**Table 8. “O God! Can I not grasp them with a tighter clasp?”**

O God!	Can	I	not grasp them with a tighter clasp?
Theme: Interpersonal, vocative	Theme: Interpersonal, finite op.	Theme: Topical, participant	Rheme

The theme is unmarked, with finite operators and nominal groups. Moreover, multiple themes combining interpersonal and topical theme types are also present.

**Table 9. “Never its mysteries exposed to the weak human eye unclosed;”**

Never	its mysteries	exposed to the weak human eye
Theme: Interpersonal, mood adjunct	Theme: Topical, participant	Rheme unclosed;

The theme, here, is simple and unmarked.

### Textual Themes

Textual themes realise meaning by creating cohesion and relevance to the context. These can be continuatives, conjunctions and conjunctive adjuncts.

**Table 10. “Till the beam of an eternity should bring the morrow”**

Till	the beam of an eternity	should bring the morrow
Theme: Textual, conjunctive adjunct	Theme: topical, participant	Rheme

The theme is multiple and unmarked as conjunctive adjunct and subject nominal group are acting as theme in this embedded clause.

**Table 11. “Or the moon shone on my slumbers in her lofty noon too coldly”**

Or	the moon	shone on my slumbers in her lofty noon too coldly
Theme: Textual, conj.	Theme: topical, participant	Rheme

Here again, the theme is multiple and unmarked.

### Circumstantial Adjunct

Circumstantial adjuncts contribute to the gloomy, harrowing imagery in Poe’s dream-themed poems.

**Table 12. Circumstantial Adjunct as Marked Theme**

By a route obscure and lonely	haunted by ill angels only
Theme: Topical, Circumstantial	Rheme
Adjunct	

Theme is simple and marked, a circumstantial adjunct is a marked theme in a declarative clause.

**Summary of Thematic Analysis**

The thematic analysis of all four poems can be summarised in the table below:

**Table 13. Frequency of Theme Types**

Theme	A Dream	Dreams	Dreamland	A Dream within a Dream
Simple themes	56%	55.5%	80%	46.7%
Multiple themes	44%	44.5%	20%	53.2%
Marked themes	11%	7.5%	48%	13.3%
Unmarked themes	89%	92.5%	52%	86.7%
Topical themes	89%	92.5%	96%	86.7%
Interpersonal themes	0	7.5%	4%	40%
Textual themes	44%	51.8%	16%	33.3%

**Discussion**

Written in the same year of 1827, the two poems *A Dream* and *Dreams* have much in common; not only do they share the same themes, but also have an almost identical thematic structure. *Dream* is the common theme in both poems, appearing as theme 3 times in *A Dream* and 7 times in *Dreams*. In addition to the word dreams, the word “it” acting as a referent to dreams is a common theme. The second prominent theme in both is *I*. These themes represent the poet’s own immersion in dreams, the fleeting bliss and reprieve that is snatched away as he wakes and wallows in despair when the dream ends. The main theme is *dream*, but the conflation of the second most prominent theme *I* shows the dream experience in terms of the poet’s subjective interpretation. The poems reflect the transient, deceptive nature of human life with glimpses of the poet’s experiences through use of *I* and *my* themes. This choice of theme words is significant in creating and sharing social experience, in inviting the reader to share the writer’s world as has been shown by Potter (2016) and Leung (2018). The predominant use of unmarked topical themes (89% and 92%) is indicative of constructing a direct, relatable model of experience. Textual themes (44% and 51%) create cohesion and relevance to the context.

Written some 17 years later, *Dreamland* (1844) is a more experimental, confident poem. In this poem, the poet paints a dark, frightening picture of a far-off land where after the initial confusion and fear, the traveller finds peace and familiarity. Prominent themes are natural landmarks such as *mountains*, *swamps*, *lakes*, etc. which contribute to the imagery of this dreamland. The poem has a very different thematic structure with heavy use of marked (48%) and simple themes (80%). Multiple themes are commonly used to create cohesion and flow in a small space (Ebrahimi & Khedri, 2013); the use of simple themes in this poem indicates the poet's intention to create a stark picture, which is made further confusing and unsettling by the sparing use of textual themes (16%). Circumstantial adjuncts (40%) make a marked presence and contribute to the gloomy, harrowing imagery as shown in Table 12 above.

The thematic structure of the last poem, *A Dream within a Dream* (1849), shows a return to the original dream poems of 1827. The theme is again similar to the first two poems, the focal point being the futility of life, where everything good and worthwhile comes to an end. In the first stanza, the prominent themes are *you* and *hope* (4 times), in the second stanza, it is *I* (6 times). The poet is addressing a friend and as the poem progresses, it becomes more personal with notes of hopelessness and despair. Interpersonal themes (40%) contribute to the sense of despair as they realise the interaction between the poet and God – his rhetorical questions regarding the cruel passage of time and man's helplessness. The poem is dominated by unmarked topical themes (86.7%) and has the most multiple themes (53%) of all four poems. These multiple themes contribute to the ethereal beauty of the poem, with textual themes (33.3%) providing smooth linkage.

The thematic structure of these four poems sheds light on the poetic journey of Edgar Allan Poe over 22 years in terms of the same theme and idea. The initial two poems reflect the beginning of 18-year-old Poe's poetic journey. The thematic structure is cautious and similar to general poetic patterns with a high ratio of unmarked topical themes (Rahayu ,et al., 2017; Sayuthi, 2019, Qiao, 2019). *Dreamland* comes from a more established poet 17 years later with themes in contrast to what is generally found in his poetry. Marked topical themes and simple themes are prevalent to realise the stark, unsettling imagery of the poem. The last poem, *A Dream within a Dream* was written in the year of the poet's death and is the most renowned of his dream poems. The language has a beautiful flow, created by the generous use of textual themes and unmarked topical themes. The poet has used interpersonal themes to evoke despair, as an innovation from his previous poems, showcasing both creativity and experience.

## Conclusion

The analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's dream poems shows his masterful use of a variety of themes, built into an intricate structure to impart an impactful

impression. The reason behind this diversity in a relatively short text is the need to create and embellish a vast emotional landscape under a set measure of rhyme and metre. The results show predominant use of unmarked topical themes; this corroborates previous studies (Dewi, 2016; Rahayu et al., 2017; Sayuthi, 2019), which also showed a high percentage of unmarked themes, both simple and multiple. The findings also showed how the choice of theme influenced the message, by evoking socially shared experiences to enhance understanding as has been discussed by Porter (2016), Leung (2018) and Isti'anah (2019). The present study shows how the textual meaning is realised in Poe's dream poems through thematic structure, by analysing the types of themes used and the choice of words as a theme.

### **Implications of the Study**

Thematic structure analysis has pedagogical implications for language teaching and learning as the analysis of discourse using systemic functional tools introduces new perspectives of language and grammar. These tools can expose the metafunctions of language that may lead the recipients to a multidimensional understanding of poetry at a more comprehensive level. An understanding of the concept of theme as a value-laden choice rather than an arbitrary unit will be helpful for both students and teachers to reach a more profound understanding of the poet's intent and the 'shared beliefs' being evoked through textual metafunction. Using SFL to investigate poetry would help in revealing different layers of meaning in language through structural and contextual analysis.

### **Suggestion for Further Research**

SFL provides a comprehensive perspective of linguistic analysis covering the meaning of clauses on three parallel lines. As such, a study touching upon only one line of meaning is incapable of providing a complete insight into poetry; the whole picture can only emerge if the analysis includes exploration of all three lines of meaning as proposed by the theory of SFL: textual, ideational and interpersonal metafunctions. On this note, further research may be conducted on these poems on other two lines of meaning, that is the mood structure and transitivity to observe how interpersonal and ideational meanings are realised in these poems. Such an analysis would help to reveal how the lexicogrammatical choices on these three lines of meaning converge to provide a comprehensive understanding of the poet's craft.

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