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The Application of Text World Theory in Identifying Abstract Meanings in Sepehri's Poetry

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Abstract:

The Text World Theory Gavins, utilizing a cognitive poetics approach, opens a new window to discourse processing and comprehension through the mental representations of participants in communication. This theory aims to uncover the mental functions during the moments of text production and reception and to examine how these cognitive processes influence the text's impact. From this perspective, participants' mental representations, aligned with situational context and personal and cultural experiences, help in processing meanings and achieving a deeper understanding of the text. This study, using a descriptive-analytical method, analyzes the text world within Sohrab Sepehri's poem collection: *The Sound of Water's Footsteps*. The analysis seeks to identify the core elements, driving propositions, and sub-worlds utilized in the poem to convey meanings and concepts. Findings indicate that the poet extensively uses references to the past and natural elements such as water, sky, and earth. These elements significantly contribute not only to the creation of mental and emotional atmospheres, but also to the poem's narrative and descriptive structure. The analysis also reveals that the repetition of world-building elements—such as time, object, character, and place—alongside schematic and metaphorical symbols plays a major role in the poem's semantic structure. By creating diverse referential sub-worlds, Sepehri challenges the audience's general beliefs and stereotypical thoughts. Through these elements, he invites readers to transcend their mental limitations and view the world in a new way. These sub-worlds, skillfully crafted by the poet, create a space where readers encounter multiple, sometimes conflicting, meanings, allowing for the decoding and understanding of deeper semantic layers. Overall, the results of this study demonstrate that Sepehri, through the use of contextual and driving factors, effectively creates a complex, multi-layered network of meanings in his poetry. This approach not only adds depth and appeal to the poem but also provides a fresh and profound experience of engagement with the text for the reader.

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INTRODUCTION

Text World Theory is a model of human language processing designed to represent mental concepts and share the empirical principles of cognitive linguistics (Stockwell, 2014). In cognitive linguistics, it is believed that language reflects the structure of the conceptual system, or in other words, the structure of the human mind. Thus, differences between languages are thought to stem from the diversity

of conceptual structures in human minds (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). However, since these conceptual systems originate from shared conceptualization abilities, cognitive linguists focus on introducing common cognitive abilities rather than formulating linguistic universals (Rafaei Qadimi Mashhad & Gholamhoseinzade, 2020). Regardless of the language under examination, exploring linguistic competence from a cognitive perspective—just like any

other aspect of our daily lives—requires understanding the underlying processing mechanisms with all their psychological complexity. This involves recognizing the vital role of contextual factors inherent in all forms of communication, as well as the individual's prior knowledge and socio-cultural experiences. These cognitive and empirical assumptions formed the foundational basis for a cognitive psychological theory called Text World Theory (Barcelona, 2011). Individuals can simultaneously process the conceptual structure and detailed content of multiple mental representations in language as they speak, listen, read, and write, to form a coherent and meaningful whole (Gavins, 2001; Hosseini, 1988). The core idea of Text World Theory is that texts have the power to shape our perception of the world. According to this theory, the world is not a fixed reality independent of language but rather is constructed within the framework of language (Ashuri et al., 1992; Shamisan, 1991). In other words, we do not access or experience reality as it is, but rather as it is represented through language. In this respect, Text World Theory aligns with the constructivist approach and is based on the notion that our knowledge of the world is not a reflection of what is outside but rather a structure crafted through language (Whitely, 2020). Text World Theory has had a significant impact on psychology, social studies, and, notably, in literature and literary criticism, especially in cognitive poetics and stylistics (Barcelona, 2011). In literary and linguistic research, the view of literature as merely reflecting emotions and objective realities has been challenged. Instead, it is argued that literature enables and reproduces our perception and interpretation of the world. The question then arises: How can Text World Theory distinguish between automatic language and poetry, and how does it approach poetry analysis? This study seeks to answer this question by employing the theoretical tools of Text World Theory to explore how meaning is organized within the intricate literary themes expressed in poetry. By utilizing this approach, the study aims to delve into the underlying mechanisms by which poets construct textual meaning and how readers decode and comprehend it. To this end, selected sections from *The Sound of Water's Footsteps*, a poem by the renowned Iranian poet Sohrab Sepehri, will be analyzed. He wrote this poem after the death of his father as a means of comforting his mother. It is divided into three parts, containing vivid images: an introduction of his present self, an introduction of his past self, and a more detailed introduction with his thoughts and ideas, which reflect a kind of spiritual rebirth. Moreover, the poet's thoughts, revelatory teachings, and descriptive and artistic abilities are evident throughout the poem, with each stanza brimming with natural elements and ontological actions. As suggested by the title *The Sound of Footsteps of Water*, Sohrab creates a mental space and animates water, presenting a vivid image of flowing water before the reader's eyes.

Biography of Sohrab Sepehri

Sohrab Sepehri (1928–1980) was one of the most prominent contemporary Iranian poets and a pioneer of modern

Persian poetry. He was born in Kashan and, in addition to poetry, was also an accomplished painter. His works combine Eastern mysticism, naturalism, and philosophical themes. Sepehri's poetic style was influenced by classical Persian literature as well as modern artistic movements. His poetry is characterized by simplicity in language while conveying profound meanings. Besides studying fine arts, he traveled extensively to countries such as India, Japan, and France, experiences that played a significant role in shaping his worldview.

Introduction to a Well-Known Poem

One of Sohrab Sepehri's most famous poems is "The Sound of Water's Footsteps", published in the collection *The Green Volume*. This poem reflects the poet's perspective on nature, spirituality, and existence, using vivid imagery and a philosophical tone. Sepehri employs natural symbols and elements such as water, trees, and sunlight to express his unique vision of life and the world. With a simple yet profound language, he invites the reader to adopt a fresh and unfiltered perspective on existence, encouraging deep contemplation of life's true values.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in Text World Theory (TWT), a cognitive-linguistic framework developed by Werth (1999) and later expanded by scholars such as Gavins (2007). TWT offers a powerful means of analyzing how readers construct mental representations of discourse through language. Central to the theory is the idea that readers create "text-worlds"—mental spaces that encompass the spatiotemporal, perceptual, and epistemic dimensions introduced by a text. These worlds are structured hierarchically, allowing for the embedding of subordinate worlds within larger narrative contexts. In the context of poetry, particularly that of Sohrab Sepehri, the abstract and metaphorical nature of language presents unique challenges and opportunities for interpretation. Sepehri's poetry is deeply philosophical and symbolic, often transcending concrete referents and relying heavily on figurative language to evoke meaning. Through the lens of Text World Theory, this study explores how readers navigate these abstract layers of meaning and how world-building mechanisms in the text facilitate cognitive access to intangible concepts. By mapping Sepehri's linguistic choices—such as deixis, modality, nominalization, and metaphor—onto the text-world model, the study reveals how cognitive structures guide readers toward interpreting abstract spiritual, existential, and philosophical ideas. The framework enables the analysis of how multiple layers of meaning are activated, maintained, and shifted throughout the poetic discourse, and how readers mentally simulate these complex conceptual spaces. Ultimately, TWT serves as a bridge between linguistic form and cognitive process, offering a systematic way to explore how abstract meanings emerge from the interplay between text, context, and reader cognition in Sepehri's poetry.

Empirical studies

Most foreign studies on emotions in discourse have focused on Text World Theory, emphasizing how readers construct a world-like experience while engaging with a text. Werth (1999) argued that, readers actively shape their understanding using prior knowledge, values, and emotions, making the reading experience dynamic. Gavins (2011) and Gavins and Lahey (2016) expanded this theory by highlighting metaphorical mapping, where readers create cognitive maps to interpret texts. Stockwell (2005, 2020) explored the emotional impact of poetic and narrative texts, suggesting that stronger reader engagement occurs when they identify closely with the text's discourse world.

In Iran, few studies have applied Text World Theory to Persian literature. Sadeghi (2010) analyzed Khayyam's poetry using cognitive poetry analysis, while Golfam et al. (2014) examined the narrative elements of *Shazdeh Ehtajab*. Afrashi (2016) studied Jalal Al Ahmad's *Veda'* and identified conceptual layers influencing meaning. Ghanbari Abdolmaleki (2024) analyzed the linguistic and semiotic structure of Sohrab Sepehri's poem "*Be Bagh-e Hamsafaran*" based on Peirce's semiotic theory. The findings revealed that iconic images such as "*sabzineh*" (greenness) and "*shaghayeq*" (poppy) not only reflect sensory and visual qualities, but also convey complex layers of meaning that communicate the poet's inner and spiritual experiences to the audience. At the indexical level, signs like "*aqrabak-haye fowareh*" (the hands of the fountain) and "*baran va biaban*" (rain and desert) represent Sepehri's lived experiences through causal and temporal associations, linking them to natural elements and the passage of time. Finally, at the symbolic level, images such as "*vajeh dar satr-e khamooshi*" (a word in the line of silence) indicate a transcendence beyond linguistic limitations and a search for deeper meaning. This semiotic analysis demonstrates that Sepehri, by integrating different semiotic layers and utilizing linguistic potential, creates a multi-layered and contemplative poem that, beyond its visual and linguistic beauty, reflects concepts such as the spiritual connection between humans and nature, the philosophy of love, and the quest for existential truth. Aghababayi and Zamani (2023) examined linguistic metafunctions in the elegies of Ahmad Shamlu and Sohrab Sepehri. The results indicated that Shamlu tends to represent the external world, while Sepehri focuses on the inner world in their elegies. Shamlu addresses his audience, Forough Farrokhzad, as if she were present, which explains his use of present-tense verbs. In contrast, Sepehri perceives his audience as absent and, consequently, uses only past-tense verbs in his elegy. Text World Theory serves as a cognitive model for discourse processing, integrating stylistic and contextual analysis. It involves world-builders (time, place, characters, objects) and sub-worlds (referential, attitudinal, epistemological), shaping how readers mentally construct and engage with texts. The theory provides a structured approach to understanding meaning-making in both literary and non-literary texts.

Despite previous research on Text World Theory in Persian

literature, limited studies have applied it to analyzing abstract meanings in Sepehri's poetry. Most existing works focus on narrative structures, semiotic aspects, or linguistic metafunctions, without addressing how readers mentally construct and engage with Sepehri's poetic world. While some studies have examined his use of imagery and symbolism, they do not explore how his language and stylistic choices contribute to the cognitive process of meaning-making. This study fills the gap by applying Text World Theory to uncover how Sepehri's poetry invites readers to construct multilayered mental worlds, facilitating a deeper engagement with philosophical and emotional themes.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a cognitive poetics approach within the framework of the theory of textual worlds and is conducted qualitatively using a descriptive-analytical method. The study focuses on a poem by the contemporary poet Sohrab Sepehri, titled *The Sound of Footsteps of Water*. In this poem, Sohrab delves into profound issues concerning life and is one of the rare works among both classical and modern Persian literature that establishes such a strong connection with the reader. Initially, using the theoretical tools of Gavins's (2007) textual worlds theory, such as primary world-builders (time, place, characters, and objects), propositional drivers (descriptive and event-driven), and sub-elements (referential, attitudinal, and epistemological), selected stanzas from Sohrab Sepehri's *the Sound of Footsteps of Water* were analyzed, and the data was described quantitatively. The data of this research are composed of words that are intelligible with inherent understanding and a combination of the writer's beliefs and thoughts. It seems that in this poem, Sohrab attempts to empower the audience to break free from the conventional mental frameworks, both in terms of sensory and abstract matters as well as small and large phenomena in the material world. Therefore, both descriptive phrases and event-driven/action-based propositions are frequently employed.

RESULTS

First, elements of the primary world-building tools used in the analyzed verses are presented based on frequency in Table 1. The statistical analysis of the data shows that the poet, by using tangible concepts and artistic spatialization, keeps the reader's mind highly engaged with the text. This attention to detail and the use of sensory and concrete elements in the text create a dynamic and lively atmosphere, drawing the reader along throughout the poem and immersing them in deeper layers of meaning. In other words, this style of spatialization effectively keeps the reader engaged with the poem, preventing mental passivity. The high frequency of role-expanding and forward-driving propositions indicates that these propositions, in addition to spatialization, play a fundamental role in the narrative structure of the text, acting as the driving force of the narrative. Through these propositions, Sohrab connects the primary world of the text to broader and subsidiary

worlds, moving the reader from a specific temporal and spatial setting to other locations. Based on the creation of subsidiary worlds, they can be divided into two categories: participatory-access worlds, which are created by the author or the reader, and character-access worlds, which are created by the characters within the text. According to the data in Table 1, 120 instances of illusionary and subsidiary worlds have been identified, reflecting the numerous temporal and spatial shifts that the poet uses to encourage the reader to move through various mental and sensory spaces. Additionally, one type of subsidiary world is the perspectival world, where Sohrab conveys his own specific viewpoints and ideas in an artistic manner, without direct insistence. These worlds, through indirect invitations, prompt the reader to reconsider their perspective and thought. For example, with the sentence “do not read a book in which the wind does not blow,” he invites the reader to re-evaluate their standards.

In contrast, the fewest number of subsidiary worlds in this poem are of the epistemological type, where guidance, advice, and probabilities are discussed. The data suggests that Sohrab, through allusions and descriptions, presents his worldview and ideas in a non-direct way, without issuing commands or prohibitions to the reader. For instance, in the phrase “The eyes must be washed, a different way must be seen,” the words “eyes” and “washing” are not used in their literal sense; rather, they refer to changing mindsets and perspectives. Sohrab uses this to invite the reader to view the world differently. This approach indicates that the poet seeks to convey deeper meanings beyond the literal level of words and aims to free the reader from stereotypical mental frameworks, leading them to a deeper understanding of the world and human experiences. In line with the qualitative aspect of

the research, the first stanza of the poem will be analyzed and discussed in detail to explore the relationships among the participants.

“I am from Kashan.

My time is not bad.

I have a piece of bread, a bit of intellect, a thread of talent.”

Based on Tables 2 to 5, the poet initially introduces himself as an ordinary human being in a real and tangible space. However, as the poem progresses, Sohrab gradually introduces characters and images that are marked by innovation and a unique kind of creativity. These descriptions confront the reader with a fresh and unprecedented perspective of the world. For instance, he uses a phrase that deeply resonates with any audience: “I have a mother better than the leaf of a tree.” Such an expression transforms the reader’s conventional and clichéd mental expectations, offering them an opportunity to experience the world with a different and deeper understanding. This invitation to see things differently, or “to see in another way,” continues like an invisible thread throughout the poem. Through simple yet profound expressions, Sohrab attempts to evoke a sense of intellectual freedom and liberation in the reader. By sharing personal experiences and distancing himself from clichés, he seeks to free the reader from mental and intellectual constraints. This thought process culminates in the poet’s statement: “I am from Kashan, but Kashan is not my city.” This sentence marks a transition towards intellectual freedom, where Sohrab liberates himself from geographic and identity-based limitations. In doing so, he brings himself closer to everyone, regardless of time or place, transforming his poetic experience from a local and confined concept into a universal and boundless

Table 1. Frequency of Textual Elements in the Poem “The Sound of Water’s Footsteps” by Sohrab Sepehri.

	Time	379
World-Building Elements	Place	195
	Characters	221
	Objects	299
Expansive Propositions	Descriptive	122
	Event-Action	116
Subworlds	Referential	120
	Attitudinal	53
	Epistemological	51

Table 2. World-building Elements in the First Line

Element	Description
Time	Present, first-person singular
Place	Kashan
Objects	-
Participants	“I” (first-person character), implicit pronoun “me”

Table 3. World-building Elements in the Second Line.

Element	Description
Time	Present, third-person singular
Place	-
Objects	“Day” (conceptual, mental concept)
Participants	-

Table 4. World-building Elements in the Third Line

Element	Description
Time	Present, first-person singular
Place	-
Objects	Bread, needle
Participants	“I” (first-person character), implicit pronoun “me,” implicit verb “have”

Table 5. World-building Elements in the Sentence.

Element	Description
Time	Present, first-person singular
Place	-
Objects	Leaf
Participants	“Mother” (first-person character), implicit pronoun “me”

idea. This perspective in Sohrab’s poetry challenges the reader to reevaluate their understanding of the world, liberating their mental dependencies from the constraints of current conditions. Sohrab leads the reader into a new world, one shaped not by space and time but by vision, feeling, and imagination.

DISCUSSION

In light of the findings and within the framework of Text World Theory, the present study reveals that Sohrab Sepehri’s poetry—particularly *The Sound of Water’s Footsteps*—operates on multiple cognitive and semantic levels that challenge conventional reading patterns. Sepehri constructs a poetic world that, while grounded in temporal and spatial references, transcends literal meaning through rich metaphorical and symbolic language. By doing so, he invites readers to engage not merely with words, but with mental representations that evoke deeper emotional and philosophical responses. As Gavins (2007) posited, readers build mental models of discourse by drawing on prior knowledge, cultural schemas, and emotional dispositions. Sepehri’s deliberate use of imagery such as “rain,” “desert,” and “the hands of the fountain” operates as world-building tools that allow readers to create complex referential and attitudinal sub-worlds. These textual cues not only shape the temporal and spatial dimensions of the poem but also activate symbolic interpretations that reflect internal states and universal experiences. The interplay between descriptive propositions (e.g., imagery and scene

setting) and event-based structures (e.g., temporal shifts) forces readers to oscillate between outer realities and inner contemplations, prompting a dynamic interpretive process. This aligns with Werth’s (1999) assertion that textual engagement is not passive but inherently cognitive and creative. Readers actively generate meaning by navigating between embedded sub-worlds, often switching between epistemic (knowledge-based) and attitudinal (emotion-based) interpretations. In Sepehri’s case, the frequent use of past-tense verbs and metaphysical language points toward a poetic strategy that removes the immediacy of events and instead fosters reflective distance—thereby deepening emotional engagement. The study also finds that Sepehri’s poetic discourse operates heavily within the referential sub-world structure of TWT, using external objects and natural phenomena as gateways to abstract thought. These references often carry iconic, indexical, and symbolic weight—echoing Ghanbari Abdolmaleki’s (2024) semiotic analysis of Sepehri’s visual and conceptual metaphors. The repetition of natural symbols such as “greenness” and “poppy” not only enhances visual imagery but also creates metaphysical associations tied to spiritual and existential contemplation. Moreover, when compared to other Persian poets, Sepehri’s focus on the *inner world* becomes especially prominent. As Aghababayi and Zamani (2023) demonstrated, unlike Shamlu who linguistically constructs presence and external confrontation, Sepehri chooses linguistic forms that reflect solitude, memory, and metaphysical reflection. This internal focus is mirrored in the structure of his text-worlds, where the absence of direct

address and the dominance of temporal distancing verbs (past tense) position the reader as a silent observer of a contemplative inner journey. Finally, this study highlights a significant gap in Iranian literary scholarship: the limited application of cognitive stylistic frameworks such as Text World Theory in analyzing Persian poetry. While previous studies (e.g., Afrashi, 2016; Golfam et al., 2014; Sadeghi, 2012) have examined narrative and conceptual structures in Persian literature, few have employed a fully cognitive-linguistic approach to unpack abstract meaning. This research thus contributes to filling this gap, showing that TWT can serve as an effective tool for interpreting the philosophical depth and emotional resonance embedded in Persian poetic texts. In conclusion, the application of Text World Theory to Sepehri's poetry illustrates how mental representations, shaped by linguistic cues and reader cognition, facilitate a deeper understanding of abstract meaning. Sepehri's poetic technique—rooted in symbolic language, emotional subtlety, and metaphysical exploration—demonstrates the power of literary discourse to construct immersive, multi-layered cognitive worlds

CONCLUSION

Sohrab Sepehri's poem *The Sound of Water's Footsteps* serves as a powerful example of how *Text World Theory* can be applied to explore the cognitive and emotional engagement between the reader and the text. Sepehri's use of time, space, and objects, particularly through temporal and metaphorical language, creates a multi-layered mental world that invites readers to move beyond surface-level meanings. The frequent use of referential elements, combined with emotional and sensory appeals, encourages readers to question their assumptions and broaden their understanding. Ultimately, Sepehri's poetry aims to challenge the reader's mental frameworks and enhance their emotional and intellectual perceptions, providing an opportunity for personal transformation and a deeper connection to the world around them.

Availability of Data and Materials:

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

Conflict of Interest:

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Authors' Contributions:

All authors have contributed equally to prepare the paper.

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