TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF A THAI POEM

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In approaching any new text, written or oral, in English or in a foreign language, we are confronted with a whole new series of relations to clarify before we can understand and appreciate that text. In a text, a primary consideration is the structure and how that structure highlights the thematic content. A second area of importance includes cultural references, values, and metaphors. These references and values, often referred to as prior texts, derive from themes and ideas important to the culture. For a native speaker, these references are generally clear and interpretation easy, although footnotes often become necessary to explicate older texts. For a foreign speaker, on the other hand, interpretation, if not understanding, may be jeopardized because of these same references. A third area of consideration is the relation between the creator of the text and the text itself. Within this area, the propositional content of the text and the presentation of that content are examined. A final relation is the one between the text and nonliterary events. More specifically, a clarification of this relation illustrates the references the text provides for the outside world.

The intent of this paper is to analyze a Thai poem and through this analysis learn to understand and appreciate it. The analysis will examine the following relations in the poem: (1) the relation of the textural units to each other within the text, for these units establish hierarchy and coherence in the work; (2) the relation of the textural units to other themes and ideas (prior texts) in the culture, for part of the text is derived from all previous themes in the culture; (3) the relation of the units of the text to the intention of the speaker; and (4) the relation of the text to nonliterary events (Becker 1979:212, 216).

Taken from the third or fourth reign of the Chakri dynasty (1824–68), the poem is an example of verbal repartee typical of the era:
Thomas J. Hudak

1. câw ch̀òo makòk
   you classifier, cluster a type of fruit
2. câw dòk mafay
   you classifier, flower a type of flower
3. câw hǹn khǹw ǹaam
   you see he beautiful
4. câw taam khǹw pay
   you follow he go
5. khǹw tham câw yáp
   he make you ruin
6. câw klòp maa yay
   you return come question word, why
7. khǹw sǹ ?aalay
   he end, terminate long for, think about
8. câw lècw rǹw ?ɔɔy
   you already question word particle

You flirtatious flower!
You saw his beauty and pursued him.
Then he ruined you.
Why do you return?
He has exhausted your desire, hasn’t he?

The Relation of the Textural Units To Each Other

The structural arrangement of the poem, the relation of the textural units to each other within the text, can be examined on at least three different levels: (1) the basic components of the poem, which include the wák, the bàat, the bòt, and the external rhyme; (2) the syntactic units within the wák and the bàat; and (3) the internal patterns among the syntactic units. Linked to one another, all of these structural levels produce a meaningful and aesthetically pleasing work.
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The basic arrangement of the poem is eight lines (wâk), with four syllables or monosyllabic words (kham) per wâk. Two wâk equal one bâat, and four bâat comprise one bôt or stanza. The external rhyme pattern, the rhyme between bâat, or between wâk, is also a part of the basic arrangement. In the following schematic representation, each circle represents one kham, each number–line one wâk, and each lettered group of lines one bâat. The solid line connecting the kham represents the external rhyme pattern. To save space, Thai books are generally printed with two wâk per printed line. This convention has been abandoned in figure 1 so that the basic structural arrangement can be seen more clearly.

![FIGURE 1](image)

In most forms of Thai poetry, the number of kham per wâk, the number of wâk per bâat, the number of bâat per bôt, and the external rhyme pattern are specified in versification textbooks known as chânthálâk. Generally these prescriptions are strictly followed, although the number of bôt is determined by each poet individually.

Examining the syntactic units in the poem in terms of the structural units described in the preceding paragraph provides further divisions.

1. câw | châo | makâok  
   you | classifier | a type of fruit  
   Head | Classifier | Modifier

2. câw | dôok | mafay  
   you | classifier | a type of flower  
   Head | Classifier | Modifier
Wák 1 and wák 2 are structurally parallel because each wák has four kham. These two wák are further unified through parallel syntactic units. Both wák consist of a vocative frame with the arrangement Head–Classifier–Modifier.

Repetition of lexical items and rhyme patterns adds still other forms of structural cohesion between the wák. The second-person pronoun, câw, is repeated in the first kham position of both wák, as is the syllable ma– in the third kham position. External rhyme, a requirement for all forms of Thai poetry, appears as the rhyme between wák. In this case, the rhyming syllables are the fourth kham position in the first wák and the second kham position in the second wák, kōok and dōok, respectively. Identical tones on the rhyming syllables add another dimension to the rhyme.

All of these aspects of structural cohesion bind the two wák aurally into a single tight unit of sound. This unit, moreover, emphasizes the semantic content of the two wák, a vocative that succinctly describes the addressee. Because of the structural similarities and the semantic content, wák 1 and wák 2 form a subset within the poem.

Wák 3 and wák 4 comprise a second subset, unified by the same forms of structural cohesion found in wák 1 and wák 2:

3. câw  hën  khāw  ñaam
you  see  he  beautiful
Action Initiator  Action Word  Action Recipient

4. câw  taam  khāw  pay
you  follow  he  go
Action Initiator  Action Word  Action Recipient

Both wák contain four kham and consist of the same syntactic arrangement: Action Initiator–Action Word–Action Recipient. As in the first subset, lexical repetition and rhyme patterns provide unity through sound. Câw is repeated in the first kham position and khāw in the third. The same external rhyme pattern that appears in the first subset, the fourth kham position in the first wák with the second in the second wák, occurs in this second subset. Again, the two rhyming syllables, ñaam and taam, have the same tone. These repetitions and rhymes, combined with the different syntactic patterns, create a second subset that is aurally distinct from the first. Thematically, this subset is also distinct, describing the actions of the addressee.