

The Limits of Teaching Literary Discourse: A Stylistic Approach

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Abstract: Some scholars take it for granted that literature and linguistics are detached areas of education. Stylistics, however, as the study will show, is the field where literary criticism and linguistics could overlap and thus contribute to ameliorating the strategies of teaching literature. There are two streams of literary criticism: the textual approaches, such as Formalism and New Criticism, which highlight close reading of the given text. On the other hand, there are contextual disciplines, for instance, Marxist Criticism and Feminist Criticism, which draw on socio-political and ideological movements. Consequently, teachers vary in the way they interpret and instruct their students. Stylistics, nonetheless, is a field where different approaches could converge. It is not only a theory describing how one could read and understand a literary discourse but also a pedagogical method that could help students appreciate literature and encourage them to be involved in the interpretation procedure. The study will illustrate these points through the discussion of “foregrounding”—a stylistic device—in Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem: “Pied Beauty”. Yet, however efficient in stylistics a teacher could be, he/she should respect certain limits.

Keywords: Teaching, literature, stylistics, foregrounding, limits.

1. Introduction

Traditionally, a teacher of literature often strives to relate a literary work to the author’s personal, historical, social, political or cultural background. The students then are required to accumulate and memorise an amalgam of information, which they have to take as ultimate facts. A number of educators did not fail to notice that “the traditional classroom allows students to paraphrase and summarise while at the college level a student must learn to critically appreciate a literary work” (Verma, 2015)

Yet, in the progress of linguistic studies and critical theories such as Formalism and New Criticism, some teachers have become more interested in form rather than content. That is to say, they draw the students’ attention to how a literary text confines to or deviates from linguistic norms and conventions. The course, therefore, turns to be limited to textual analysis ignoring any external influence. Essa Al-Wadani confirms this issue in his research, saying that “most linguists have gone some distance towards turning themselves into machines and more or less computers alike when analysing style in a linguistic way...like a scientific experiment.”(2014).

As a compromising factor, a stylistic approach could shed light on the points where the linguistic and literary methods may overlap; it underlines linguistic deviations so as to analyse their aesthetic function in the text. The instructor, therefore, treats a literary work not only as a text but as

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an aesthetic discourse. That is to say “stylistics is the study of language as art; it seeks to examine the expressive and suggestive devices which have been invented in order to enforce the power... of speech.” (Verma, 2015). Besides, stylistic analysis encourages creative feedbacks. “A creative response...,” says Detosil-Alimen, confirming Abraham’s view, “is one that is determined to be both original and relevant”. (2021). Originality, as this study will illustrate, stems from the reader’s own imagination and experiences or what Umberto Eco calls cultural “encyclopaedia”, whereas, relevance refers to the linguistic structure and meaning of the text under scrutiny. “A reader-response analysis,” adds Wesam Ali El-Sayed, “can enrich the results of investigating the linguistic features of...fiction by involving the actual reader in the process of analysis rather than the implied or ideal one.” (2021). To justify and illustrate the points raised in this paper, this study will be divided into two parts: the theoretical section that presents a discussion of stylistics and its main contributions to the teaching of poetry. To be practical, Hopkins’ poem “Pied Beauty” will be examined in the light of this framework. Meanwhile, the study will underline certain limits that instructors ought to take into consideration.

2. Stylistics and the Teaching of Poetry

Literary criticism and linguistics are two different fields of inquiry; whereas, the former is mainly an impressionistic, intuitive and evaluative approach to literary texts, the latter is a systematic and structural study of language. On the other hand, stylistics is the field of study that attempts to make an amendment to this division and track down the area where they overlap. Richard Bradford, Henry Widdowson and Geoffrey Leech refer to the compromising role of stylistics.

Richard Bradford (1997) has this to say: Modern stylistics is caught between two disciplinary imperatives. On the one hand it raises questions regarding the relation between the way language is used—language as an active element of the real world. On the other, it seeks to define the peculiar use of linguistic structure to create facsimiles, models or distortion of the real world—literary language.

Stylistics, therefore, is concerned with the “defamiliarisation” or the “literariness” that marks literary style and which violates linguistic norms. A stylistician, then, has to be aware of linguistic norms as well as with aesthetic and rhetoric devices that characterise most literary works. That is, the critic’s and the linguist’s values could overlap as Henry Widdowson’s words confirm:

Stylistics is to link two approaches [linguistics and literature] by extending the linguist’s literary intuitions and the critic’s linguistic observation and making their relation explicit. (1975).

To put it in other words, a stylistician, while describing linguistic elements in a given text, he/she could allow his imagination to flow into an infinite realm of thought in order to find the link between the structure of these elements and meaning; yet any of his/her interpretive suggestions should be restricted to the textual context.

Eventually, though stylisticians vary in defining the mechanisms of the interpretive interaction between linguistics and literary criticism, most of them admit that the linguist’s approach to a poem helps designate the foregrounded elements in the text. In so doing, he/she underlines the key expressions that guide the critic to select the most accurate interpretation. Geoffrey Leech reiterates this interaction:

Stylistics is indeed the area in which they [linguistics and literary criticism] overlap.

The linguist is the man who identifies what features in a poem need interpretation i.e. what features are foregrounded... the literary critic is the man who weighs up the different possible interpretations. (1969).

Yet, how could a feature in a poem be classified as foregrounded? Jan Mukarovsky provides an answer in his essay “Standard Language and Poetic Language”:

The foregrounding of the component implies precisely its being placed in the foreground; the unit in the foreground, however, occupies this position by comparison with another unit or units that remain in the background. (Mukarovsky, 1964).

That is to say, an element is said to be in the foreground when it is placed where it can easily be noticed as distinctive and outstanding in comparison with other constituents that are left in the background. For instance, the norms are the background against which any violation is a process of foregrounding. This is exactly what Leech tries to define: “Any deviation from linguistic or other socially accepted norms has been given the special name of foregrounding.” (Leech, 1969).

Additionally, linguistic norms are not the only standard to designate foregrounding, because a poem, from a stylistic perspective, is more than a text; it is “a piece of communication, a discourse of one kind or another.” (Widdowson, 1975). Nonetheless, a poem, indeed, deviates from some sociolinguistic and pragmatic codes; for instance, in real communication, a discourse necessitates the addressee and the addresser; whereas, a poem violates this communicative convention as, most of the time, the participants are not explicitly indicated in a text. Consequently, some critics take it for granted that the poet himself is the addresser and readers are the addressees, while others refer to the speaker as a persona within the text and who addresses a particular listener. The third group combines these two assumptions as E. A Levenston claims:

For any...poem, two situations exist simultaneously and both must be described and taken into account when seeking to interpret the poem: a)-the poet himself addresses a reader/listener. This situation is general for all lyric poems by a given poet; b)-the persona addresses a particular listener. This situation is inferred from the text. This duality of situation is sometimes described...as a situation within a situation. (Levenston, 1976).

However, not all that is foregrounded for a linguist or sociolinguist is so for a critic, as Leech points out in the following quotation:

The rules of the English language as a unity are not the only standard of normality...The English poetry has its sets of norms, so that “routine licences” which are added in the context of English as a whole are not foregrounded, but rather expected, when they occur in a poem. (Leech, 1969).

Consequently, most of the poetic devices, which a linguist could add to the list of deviations, are, nevertheless, valid from a critic’s perspective, since they are “routine licences”, that is accepted by poetic conventions. Being aware of literary techniques and literary theories, a stylistician manages to suggest possible interpretations to what, linguistically speaking, could be underlined as violations of norms.

Furthermore, foregrounding refers not only to unconventional constructions but also to some regular patterns in a poem that aim at striking the reader’s attention. Geoffrey Leech discusses this point in what follows:

Linguistic deviation...is not the only mechanism of linguistic foregrounding. The effect of obtrusion of some part of the message being thrust into the foreground of attention may be attained by other means. A pun, for instance, is a type of foregrounding. (Leech, 1969).

In fact, there are components of a poem that are foregrounded either due to their irregularities or to their particular structures such as parallelism, repetition, figurative language, sound pattern and so forth.

Hence, to discuss a poem in a classroom, the instructor could orient students, first, towards scrutinizing the language of the given literary text and trace the foregrounded expressions and structures at both levels: the linguistic and the pragmatic. Second, he/she could help them deduce the possible interpretations and communicative roles from the foregrounded elements and their interaction with other components of the given poem. This guidance will be more fruitful if the teacher stimulates the students’ imagination and their repertoire of

knowledge with questions related to both language and literary devices and their functionality in the poem. To present samples of foregrounded items, I shall briefly analyse Hopkins's poem: "Pied Beauty"

Foregrounding in "Pied Beauty":

Glory be to God for dappled things—
For skies of couple-colour as brindled cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut—falls; finches' wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.
All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise Him. (1980, p. 380).

Selected as a title, the phrase "Pied Beauty" is structurally foregrounded to enhance the reader with a sense of a systematically composed beauty; its components are different in colour and shape, yet harmonious as a whole. The first image that exemplifies this natural design is the "skies of couple-colour as a brindled [brindled] cow." The couple-colour is due to the dark or grey clouds that are artistically fused with the brightness or blueness of the sky, performing infinite beautiful *tableaux*. The poet compares these celestial scenes to a brindled cow. This simile could refer to the vertical dimension of paradoxical colours and forms, from "skies" to earth. The trout, too, has a double colour: "rose moles". The fish activity of swimming probably suggests a horizontal spread of multi-colours. More earthly examples are depicted: "Fresh-firecoal chestnut—falls; finches' wings:" Things fall; others could fly, yet all of them are adorned with various hues. Such natural phenomena could be familiar to readers; still the voice in the poem implicitly invites the recipients to re-consider them and contemplate meticulously their different constituents. This is to bring to the reader's consciousness that there is a Power that brings uniformity despite the diversity.

Peoples' works appear to echo this pattern of diversity: fields are structured in various forms: "Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, and plough." The same is with artisans, workers and their various implements: "And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim." To sum up, the world is marked with changeability and paradoxes: "swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;" all that God has created is "fickle" and "freckled", yet He transcends change: "He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change." The verb "Fathers-forth" is an example of neologism—a technique of lexical foregrounding. Adding the value of fatherhood to God's act of creating implies that the creatures' beauty flashes out of God's beauty. His, however, is "past change." The notion of multi-coloured beauty is highlighted via the melody of various sound patterns—including rhythm, rhyme, alliterations, assonance and so forth.

What has been discussed so far is an example of how a teacher, based on stylistic approach, could guide students to detect textual techniques of foregrounding such as paradoxes, neologism, repetition, and musicality. Yet, the instructor's own interpretation and analysis should not be an end in themselves but a means to train the students to trace foregrounded elements in a poem and to trigger their individual responses. As Widdowson says: "The value of stylistic analysis is that it can provide the means whereby the learner can relate a piece of literary writing to his own experience of language and so extend that experience" (1975).

In addition to its being a text, "Pied Beauty" could be analysed as a foregrounded discourse; in this case, one has to raise the following question: to what extent does the poem differ from a normal discourse? To answer the question one has to discuss the communicative

factors in the poem and how they deviate from everyday language. The main factor to be pinpointed in this case is the participants and the possible conditions of their interaction. One may consider that the speaker in “Pied Beauty” is a persona and the addressee is a person within the context of the poem. One may also take for granted that Hopkins is himself the speaker and the recipient is any reader. This double interpretation is indeed a violation of the usual communicative norms; for in real life the speaker and the listener are clearly identified. This double situation results in what Ursula Oomen calls “the multiplication and extension of roles.” (1975).

Consequently, scholars such as Austin and Searle, in their theories of speech acts, excluded literary language from their analysis on the grounds that, from a pragmatic standpoint, it is void. According to Austin, literary speech is void because it does not link up with a situational context that can stabilize the meaning of its utterances:

A performative utterance will be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem...Language in such circumstances is in spatial ways—intelligibly—used not seriously, but in ways parasitic upon its normal use. (Austin, 1962).

Indeed, Austin claims that the “illocutionary acts”, that is the “utterances such as informing, ordering and warning which have a certain force in reality and which are to be uttered in a certain context, under certain conditions and with a certain intention” are empty when used in a poem because of the absence of real context. (Austin, 1962).

Yet, there are scholars who did argue against Austin’s standpoint. Wolfgang Iser is a case in point. He confirms that speech acts in a literary text are also pragmatically functional, for the text is a message that requires a recipient:

The speech act theory derived from ordinary language philosophy is an attempt to describe those factors that condition the success or failure of linguistic communication. These factors also pertain to the reading of fiction, which is a linguistic action in the sense that it involves an understanding of the text, or of what text seeks to convey, by establishing a relationship between text and reader. (Iser, 1978).

Therefore, though a poem deviates from the conventional pragmatic functions, it has its textual devices and patterns that pertain to the pragmatic roles. As Iser says: “[fictional language] depragmatizes the conventions it has selected, and herein lies its pragmatic function”. Let us take for instance, the expression “who knows how?” It is an imitation of a speech act—a question, for the utterance neither takes place in a real situation nor does it address a specific person; the speaker, therefore, is interrogating any reader wherever he/she is and whenever he/she reads the poem. Thus, the question is subject to various responses. On the one hand, the students’ feedbacks could draw on scientific inquiries such as Darwin’s Theory of Evolution or the Big Bang Theory. On the other, “who knows how?” could be interpreted as a rhetorical question; that is a question asked without expecting an answer; still, it tends to produce a metaphysical effect: how mysterious the world is, full of paradoxes yet systematically harmonious! This spiritual epiphany culminates in another speech act: “Praise Him”. As the latter is not communicated to a particular person, it ultimately invites people whoever they are and wherever they are to praise God who created multi-coloured, multi-shaped, and multi-natured things in a systematically harmonious universe. To respect the universality and multi-dimensionality of the poem, the teacher should not impose on it any external information such as the poet’s religious experience or the Victorian historical background. Students have the right to interact with the text from their individual and cultural standpoint.

Actually, in the light of literary theories, particularly Reception Theory and Reader Response Criticism, and influenced by advanced learning methods such as constructivism,

many research scholars are convinced that a student, being a reader, ought to have an active role in class:

In class, activities should be structured to start the students' creativity in relation to a text. The active role of the learners should be encouraged. Literature, when published, is the "property" of the reader. We as readers should become involved, as co-writers of the text... The many ways of interpreting multi-levelled literature will create a meeting place in class for views and opinions to be exchanged. (Ibsen, 1990, p.3).

Conclusion:

Indeed, stylistic approach to teaching is the meeting ground where linguistics and literary criticism could converge in directing learners to exercise textual and discursive analysis. As illustrated, the "foregrounding" techniques in Hopkins' "Pied Beauty": paradoxes, antonyms, neologism... and the discursive deviations are used as tools to evoke the main themes in the poem. In fact, the given analysis is just a sample of applied stylistics to initiate students to the process of deciphering the meaning of a poem through digging out its linguistic patterns, literary techniques and discursive devices. Through this activity, students could gain the autonomy of interpretation and express their individual reactions. The moment the teacher transcends his/her instructive limits: when he goes further to consider his interpretation and analysis as a final source of information, ignoring the learner's suggestions and responses, the students would, consequently, tend to slip back into their accustomed roles as passive recipients of knowledge.

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