



STYLE IN LITERATURE: A STYLISTICS STUDY OF A POEM

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Abstract:

This paper attempts a stylistic study of a poem. It targets to unveil the deeper underpinnings of semanticity in condensed literary pieces, particularly in poetry, as a consequence of the style employed by an author. Among other findings, the study uncovered the peculiar use of lexis and the features embedded in such peculiar use. It brings to the fore, the heavy use of deviation and parallelism in drumming home the theme of the poem. And finally, a fundamental literary feature used which is worthy of note and which the study has clearly drawn attention to in the analysis, is the foregrounding of the entire literary piece, which gives it a unique outlook. On the surface, one might not notice the effect of this literary technique but the study has meticulously pointed this out.

Keywords: stylistic, poetry, parallelism, foregrounding, literary technique, deviation

1. Introduction

The focus of this write-up is to bridge the lock between language and literature and wed the two gems by using the analytical technique referred to as stylistics. There have been disparities between linguists and literary critics. These strives came out as a result of the introduction of English language as a subject of its own in the university in the 1960s. So Dan McIntyre uses the analysis of the poem '(listen)' written by the American poet, E. E. Cummings discussing how linguistic form relates to literary effects. According to Dan McIntyre, a literary work can be interpreted by the use of language and by so doing, the artistry becomes visible. He indicates that Stylistics elucidates a particular literary text so that it becomes highly considered. He further explains that stylistics recognizes the skills of

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the writer through the assumption that every decision that an author makes in the production of a text is deliberate whether the decisions were made consciously or unconsciously. In effect, stylistics aspires to explain the link between linguistic form and literary effect, and to describe what we are responding to when we praise the quality of a particular piece of writing. Under focus, the following items shall be brought to the fore to achieve the aim of this piece of writing; the poem, '(listen)' by E. E. Cummings, the interpretation of the poem, the analysis of the poem, lexical features, deviation and parallelism and the congruence of foregrounding in the final stanza.

2. Background of the Poet

As one of the most innovative poets of his time, E. E. Cummings experimented with poetic form and language to create a distinct personal style. A typical Cummings poem is spare and precise, employing a few key words eccentrically placed on the page. Some of these words were invented by Cummings, often by combining two common words into a new synthesis. He also revised grammatical and linguistic rules to suit his own purposes, using such words as "if," "am," and "because" as nouns, for example, or assigning his own private meanings to words. Despite their nontraditional form, Cummings' poems came to be popular with many readers. "No one else," Randall Jarrell claimed in his *The Third Book of Criticism*, "has ever made avant-garde, experimental poems so attractive to the general and the special reader." By the time of his death in 1962, Cummings held a prominent position in 20th-century poetry. John Logan in *Modern American Poetry: Essays in Criticism* called him "one of the greatest lyric poets in our language." Stanley Edgar Hyman wrote in *Standards: A Chronicle of Books for Our Time*: "Cummings has written at least a dozen poems that seem to me matchless. Three are among the great love poems of our time or any time." Malcolm Cowley admitted in the *Yale Review* that Cummings "suffers from comparison with those [poets] who built on a larger scale—Eliot, Aiken, Crane, Auden among others—but still he is unsurpassed in his special field, one of the masters."

Cummings decided to become a poet when he was still a child. Between the ages of eight and twenty-two, he wrote a poem a day, exploring many traditional poetic forms. By the time he was in Harvard in 1916, modern poetry had caught his interest. He began to write avant-garde poems in which conventional punctuation and syntax were ignored in favor of a dynamic use of language. Cummings also experimented with poems as visual objects on the page. These early efforts were included in *Eight Harvard Poets*, a collection of poems by members of the Harvard Poetry Society.

After graduating from Harvard, Cummings spent a month working for a mail order book dealer. He left the job because of the tedium. In April of 1917, with the First World War

raging in Europe and the United States not yet involved, he volunteered for the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Service in France. Ambulance work was a popular choice with those who, like Cummings, considered themselves to be pacifists. He was soon stationed on the French-German border with fellow American William Slater Brown, and the two young men became fast friends. To relieve the boredom of their assignment, they inserted veiled and provocative comments into their letters back home, trying to outwit and baffle the French censors. They also befriended soldiers in nearby units. Such activities led in September of 1917 to their being held on suspicion of treason and sent to an internment camp in Normandy for questioning. Cummings and Brown were housed in a large, one-room holding area along with other suspicious foreigners. Only outraged protests from his father finally secured Cummings' release in December of 1917; Brown was not released until April of the following year. In July of 1918, with the United States entering the war, Cummings was drafted into the U.S. Army and spent some six months at a training camp in Massachusetts.



E. E. Cummings (1894–1962)

3. The poem (listen) by E. E. Cummings

[1] (listen)

this a dog barks and
how crazily houses
eyes people smiles

[5] faces streets

steeple are eagerly

tumbl

Ing through wonder
ful sunlight

[10] - look –
selves, stir: writhe
o-p-e-n-i-n-g

are(leaves; flowers) dreams

[15] come quickly come
run run
with me now
jump shout(laugh
dance cry

sing) for it's Spring

[20] - irrevocably;
and in
earth sky trees
:every
where a miracle arrives

[25] (yes)

you and I may not
hurry it with
a thousand poems
my darling
[30] but nobody will stop it

With All The Policemen In The World

4. Interpretation of the poem

According to Dan McIntyre, the reader's initial thoughts and feelings of a text you are going to analyze is good. This will make you see if you were right or wrong in interpretation after your actual analysis. The structure of a text could inhibit your interpretation. Therefore, stylistics is useful as a method of interpreting text. Without much ado we will look into the poem '(listen)' which is E. E. Cummings' 1964 collection of 73 poems of which it is number 63. None of the poems has a title but rather referred to by numbers. Dan McIntyre gives the poem numbered 63 a title '(listen)' as it is in the first line of the poem.

The poem contains some forms of irregularities in comparison to traditional poetry. One can notice the lack of capitalization where you might expect it, the strange use of punctuations, and the odd structure of particular phrases. These are Cummings desire to break with more conventional poetic traditions. His use of deviation and linguistic choices are by no means arbitrary. R. P. Blackmur (1954) had disregarded this odd use of language. Blackmur contends that extensive consideration of these peculiarities today has very little importance but with the use of stylistics, he has been proven wrong. Another researcher, Van Peer (1980; 1986) mentioned that readers do pick up smallest details of a text and use them to construct a meaningful interpretation. A stylistic analysis of our poem will enable us to explain the foregrounding within it. It will also show how stylistics can be a valuable tool for reconciling literary critic and linguistic.

(listen) appears to be a celebration of the imminent arrival of Spring and all the joy and newness this brings. The poem also seems to be an invitation to a lover to share the persona's happiness, and to acknowledge the inevitability of the natural world and all that this encompasses. The themes of Spring and sex, and nature and man are intertwined to create a quirk of humour. The poem is not overtly descriptive in its treatment of Spring. Instead, we seem to be presented with a set of random images like *houses, smiles, people, streets and actions*. Here, the speaker appears to be saying that, just like the arrival of Spring, his love is inevitable and cannot be stopped.

The poem is not difficult in terms of the complexity of the subject matter. What is more difficult is to relate the numerous 'strange' stylistic features that Cummings has chosen to use to our general interpretation.

We will look at the foregrounded features of the poem that make it unusual and attempt a thorough linguistic analysis of it.

5. Analysis

We begin the initial analysis through the analysis of the lexical features, then we look at deviation and parallelism and finally we look at the stylistic display of foregrounding in the poem.

6. Lexical features

There are open class words such as *dog, houses, spring, sunlight, streets, dreams*, etc which carry the majority of meaning in the language of the poem as opposed to the closed class words. The poem consists mainly of nouns and verbs. The nouns are mostly concrete objects. Two of the nouns *dreams and miracle* are abstract. We can divide the nouns into two areas of meaning or semantic fields. These are nouns related to nature and nouns related to humans. The mixture of nouns in two semantic classes accounts for an interconnection between nature and man.

The verbs in the poem create a sense of immediacy; they also contribute to our understanding of it as an address to another person. All the verbs which are marked for tense are in the present tense. For example '*barks*' in line 2, '*is*' in line 19 and '*arrives*' in line 24. There are also present progressive forms such as '*are (eagerly) tumbling*' in lines (6/7/8) and '*o-p-e-n-i-n-g/lare*' (12/13). The progressive present participles ('*tumbling*' and '*opening*') indicate the stretched character of the actions. It contributes to the idea of the inevitability of nature. This is also reinforced by the use of adverbs; '*quickly*', '*crazily*', '*eagerly*', '*irrevocably*', which convey a sense of speed and inevitability.

We could sense that the poem is an address to someone through the use of directive verbs like '*listen*', '*come*', '*run, jump*', '*shout*', '*laugh*', '*dance*', '*cry*', '*sing*' etc. The addressee is invited to join in, with the speaker's celebration of Spring, and to share in, and contribute to, his feelings of happiness. In the final stanza, there is a second person pronoun '*you*' in line 26. This addressee is referred to as '*my darling*', which suggests a romantic relationship between the speaker and whomever he/she is addressing.

There are no unusual words or neologisms in the poem. But, some of the words are arranged on the page in a seemingly strange order. '*Tumbling and Wonderful*', for instance run across two lines and as a result, they are highly foregrounded. Dividing the word across the morphemes (*wonder* and *ful*) allows us two interpretive effects. We first read the word as noun '*wonder*' and then as the adjective '*wonderful*'. The graphological deviation here foregrounds the word, and creates a double meaning. Deviation is an apparent feature in '(listen)' and therefore it is worth to examine it into detail by considering parallelism and the foreground effects that this also creates.

7. Deviation and Parallelism

It seems that the most striking aspect of deviation in '(listen)' is the almost constant use of lower case letters where one would normally expect capitals. Naturally, Cummings' works are without capitalization therefore instances of this is seen as foregrounding. We can infer that the word 'Spring' in line 19 is an important concept in the poem, since it is the first word we come across with initial capitalization. Again, the final line of the poem (31) is heavily foregrounded by each word beginning with a capital letter. This emphasizes the idea being expressed that nobody is able to stop the progression of Spring or the poet's love for the addressee not even conventionally powerful people such as policemen.

Furthermore, there is also some degree of possible geographical parallelism in the arrangement of the poem into stanzas. It may be seen as five 6-line stanzas, with a stand-alone line at the end of the poem. This seems to suggest that there is some order to the poem. Dixit (1977) indicates that a number of Cummings' poems suggest that graphological parallelism is a significant stylistic feature in his poetry. Dixit studied a corpus of E. E. Cummings poems in detail and concluded that the poems are systematically deviant.

Another instance of parallelism in the poem occurs at the phonological level where we find the repetition of particular sounds. The poem does not seem to have a rhyme scheme of any regularity. All that saves it from being defined as free verse is the regularity of its graphological organization on the page. Cummings does make use of internal rhyme at particular points within the poem. There is no strict pattern to its occurrence, yet there is some degree of phonological parallelism in each stanza except the last two. Often we find a repetition of vowel sounds in words in close proximity to each other, as in how crazily houses /*hau kreizili hauzðz*/, eyes people smiles /*aiz pi:pðl smailz*/, steeples are eagerly /*sti:pðl ðr i:gðli*/

8. Congruence of foregrounding in the final stanza

There is a strong element of foregrounding in the final stanza of '(listen)'. Leech (1969) describes this as 'congruence' of foregrounding, which is where we get lots of different types of foregrounding occurring at once. There is internal deviation where we notice the initial capitalization of each word in the last line. Again, unlike the other stanzas, there is a lack of any sort of phonological parallelism, and the grammatical ordering of the stanza follows conventional rules of syntax. All these come as a result of internal deviation, and all are foregrounded because they conform to our normal expectations of written language. What we have in the last stanza is a kind of 'reverse' deviation in addition to the numerous deviant features of the poem.

9. Conclusion

The analysis of the poem '(listen)' shows how we use stylistics to uphold an interpretation of a poem, and how it can also highlight elements of a poem that we might otherwise miss. It also enables us to speculate with more certainty on precisely why E. E. Cummings chooses to use such seemingly odd stylistic techniques in '(listen)'. Deviant punctuation is linked to the foregrounding of dynamic verbs, explaining why we perceive so much 'movement' in the poem. The analysis of the poem stylistically also highlights how the most internally deviant features of the poem are those which we would usually consider to be 'normal', non-deviant language in both everyday communication and within poetry, and suggest a reason as to why this might be. Stylistics, then, is helpful in explaining parts of a text which we might not otherwise understand.

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