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Stylistic Analysis Of Alfred Lord Tennyson's Poem 'Home they Brought Her Warrior Dead'

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Abstract

Stylistics is the study of style of written or spoken texts. More specifically, stylistics attempts to study the style or language of literary texts. It examines the language of literary text systematically and arrives at an interpretation of those texts. It does so by applying the insights and methods of linguistics to analyse the language of literary texts and to offer interpretations of those texts on the basis of that analysis. In *Stylistics and the Teaching of Literature* (1975) H.G. Widdowson defines stylistics as the 'study of literary discourse from a linguistic orientation'. He denies stylistics an autonomous domain of its own, and states that stylistics is an intermediary between literary criticism and linguistics. Indeed, stylistics is a bridge between the literary critic and the linguist and makes a synthesis of the literary critic's observations and the linguist's literary intuitions. Recently it has established itself as a distinct discipline with the help of its objective, the methodological approach to the study of language.

This research paper is an attempt to study a very famous and much-read poem of Victorian literature, namely Alfred's Tennyson's 'Home they brought her warrior dead' by applying the norms of stylistics. In this regard the tools of stylistics which can also be regarded as the constitutive elements such as title, mode of narration, phonological patterning, syntax, lexis and finally overall structure of a literary text are taken into consideration. The foregrounding concept and various techniques of foregrounding like deviation, repetition etc. are also dealt with while analyzing the said poem from stylistics point of view.

Key words: stylistics, foregrounding, title, phonology, syntax, lexis etc.

Introduction:

Stylistics is basically a method of textual interpretation based on a systematic analysis of the different linguistic features of the text. These features are sometimes quite explicit but in some others the reader needs to have grasp on the stylistics to go into the heart of things. In all these literary types, the patterns of the language, its grammatical structures, the large vocabulary, different types of discourses and numerous contexts in which these discourse take place make it a very daunting task for stylistic study. However stylistics takes a close look at the text and analyses its significant language forms for the sake of interpretation. Here it attempts to make an analysis of a literary text through certain tools such as sounds (alliteration, combination of sounds), lexis (words, word structure and interrelation), semantics (meaning relationships), discourse (structure of linguistic interaction), context (situational constraints) and syntax (sentence structure).

But before starting the stylistic analysis of the selected poem the researcher here considers it pertinent to bring the attention to one of the important terms in stylistics, which is called foregrounding. Indeed, any piece of literary work becomes a valid stylistic study if it contains foregrounding elements. By definition, foregrounding is a technique for emphasizing or highlighting something. It is a technique which is effectively employed in the language of literature. In short it is an attention-calling device. In literary language, it is systematically and purposefully employed to achieve thematic effects. There are various means or devices through which the technique of foregrounding operates. These are deviation, repetition and parallelism. All these in turn are further classified into some more types. For instance- deviation is classified under the following heads:

- (1) Graphological deviation: this deviation refers to a departure from conventional modes of arrangement of letters into words and of words into lines and into sentences.
- (2) Orthographic deviation: this type of deviation involves breaking the rules of punctuation, line arrangement, capitalization etc.
- (3) Morphological deviation: it is an intentional deviation from the ordinary spelling, formation, construction, or application of words.
- (4) Syntactic deviation: this deviation involves defamiliarization which means the violation of the rules of sentence-formation.
- (5) Lexical deviation: this deviation is created by the poets by using words in a special way differs from its ordinary usage i.e. giving words a deeper value to express meaning and to show an aesthetic value in the poem.
- (6) Semantic deviation: this is the deviation that shows how an ordinary simple word can have a surprising meaning.

Repetition is another foregrounding device employed by all of us to emphasize something, to express wonder, amazement, irritation, disapproval and so on. This is also subdivided into –phonological repetition, lexical repetition and syntactic repetition. Parallelism is one more foregrounding device which is the occurrence of two or more structures which are identical in some respects but different in some. To be precise, parallelism is repetition with a difference.

Interpretation:

Keeping in view the above points, the researcher here attempts to look into the said poem from a stylistics point of view. Various levels of analysis like phonological, syntactic, lexical and semantic are taken into consideration and an attempt is made to arrive at an analysis of the poem through an examination of its constitutive element- title, mode of narration, phonological patterning, syntax, lexis and overall structure. A detailed description of these elements is mentioned below:

Title:

Alfred Tennyson's poem 'Home they brought her warrior dead' is a fit study for stylistic analysis. First the title of the poem needs to be given a moment's consideration before we delve into the text. In a stylistic analysis, title is always viewed as a linguistic structure and unit in itself. Regarding the title of the poem 'Home they brought her warrior dead', we first notice that it is a declarative sentence with inversion of word order. Relatively the title is long and is suggestive of sad and tragic news of a dead warrior. Apparently the death of warrior in the battlefield is a shock to the wife at home. By bringing the word 'home' at the initial position the poet makes it the 'theme' of the line. We can gauge that the inversion of this word order and the thematisation of 'home' is surely a shift from an outside world of nature to the world of home that is blessed with family bonding and well-wishers.

Mode of address or narration:

Moving from the title to the text of the poem, we can next look at the mode of address or narration in the poem. First we notice that the poem is written in the third person narrative. The poem objectively portrays the reaction of a wife who is numbed by the shock and trauma of the death of her warrior husband in the battle. This kind of third person narrative allows the reader to see the widow's reaction from an outside perspective. The reader, therefore, identifies with the rest of the crowd assembled outside and experiences the same concern for the widow and confusion at her reaction.

Phonological patterning or stylistic analysis at the phonological level:

'Home they brought her warrior dead' has a distinctive metrical pattern of seven syllables in each line except third line of second stanza and third line of fourth stanza which have six syllables and eight syllables respectively. The rhyme scheme in each of the four stanzas is ABAB which gives the rhythm of the poem a musical quality. The poem also has some figurative use of language like alliteration, consonance, simile etc. First let us have a look at the employment of alliteration.

Alliteration in line2: she, swooned

line4: weep, will

line7: friend, foe

line 11: face-cloth, from, face

line 12: neither, nor

line 13: nurse, ninety

line 15: tempest, tears

Consonance which is another part of phonology is also noticeable in the following way:

Consonance: line2: /n/ in nor, swooned

line2:/r/ in nor, uttered, cry

line 6: /l/ in called, loved

line 7: /t/ in truest, noblest

line 9: /m/ in maiden, from

line 10:/t/ in lightly, to, stepped

line 15: /m/ in summer, tempest, came

Another figure of speech used by Tennyson that greatly enriches this poem is simile. By definition, it is a figure of speech that makes a comparison, showing similarities between two different things with the help of words 'like' or 'as'. In the poem simile is used in the third line of the last stanza when the poet says 'like summer tempest came her tears.' The poet through this simile compares the widow's tears with storms that occur in summertime.

Syntax or analysis at the syntactic level:

Syntactic study is very much crucial for a through understanding of a poem. The syntax of 'Home they brought her Warrior Dead' deserves a lot of attention as it sincerely parallels with the subject matter of the poem which is one of deep melancholy on the part of the lady. First we notice that there are syntactic inversion in the first line of the first, third and fourth stanza of the poem. In the first line of the first stanza the word 'home' is brought forward to sentence initial position and thereby is thematised. Similarly, 'stole' in third stanza and 'rose' in fourth stanza are foregrounded and thus cause syntactic deviation. The deviation is again obvious in the second line. The normal syntactic pattern 'Neither did she swoon nor uttered cry' is deviated into 'She nor swooned, nor uttered cry' to show the unusual reaction of the grief-stricken wife. The syntax of the poem also heightens the tension generated in the poem. The last line of the second stanza and the last line of the stanza bring out the sense of helplessness and despair of the maidens:

Yet she neither spoke nor moved line 8

Yet she neither moved nor wept line 12

These two lines show the failure of the efforts by the maidens to rouse the sense of grief in the lady. Semantically the above lines are quite similar to the second line of the first stanza- 'She nor swooned, nor uttered cry' though syntactically this line is deviant from the above lines. This kind of syntactic system can also be called a syntactic repetition.

Lexis or analysis at the morphological level:

Ronald Carter (1982) states that the study of lexis of a text may be the starting point of a stylistic analysis of a text. Truly, a study of the ways that lexical items are patterned in a poem gives the reader valuable clues to the meaning of the poem. As the poem 'Home they brought her warrior dead' centres round the wife of the dead warrior, a number of lexical items refer to the warrior's wife. For example lexical items- 'her warrior', 'she', 'her maidens', 'her knee', 'her tears' directly address the wife of the dead warrior. Another important feature is the use of pronoun 'she' which is used five times in the poem. Such kind of repetition of same lexical item has always an auditory as well as visual effect on the reader or the listener. However, there is a change of focus from the lady in the first stanza to the dead warrior in the second stanza. Accordingly we have lexical items relating to the warrior. For example-

'they praised him
Call'd him worthy
Truest friend
Noblest foe.'

Again, in the case of the presentation of maidens, there is noticed a distinctive pattern. In the third and fifth lines, there is a collective presentation of the maidens which is changed to individual presentation in the ninth and the thirteenth lines of the poem. For example the lexical items 'All her maidens', 'they' are replaced by singular noun 'a maiden', 'a nurse'. The activities of the maidens also form a lexical chain. But here it is to be noted that verbs that denote these activities present a sense of contrast and opposition. We can call some verbs as +movement and others as --movement. The verbs in the first two stanzas like 'swooned', 'uttered', 'cry', 'watching', 'said', 'weep', 'die', 'praised', 'called' do not show any sign of movement and so are rightly called --- movement verbs. While there is a sudden shift in the remaining stanzas and thus there are used some +movement verbs like 'stole', 'took', 'stept', 'set', 'came'. Thus there is an opposition of lexical items between the first two stanzas and the last two stanzas of the poem. There are also two important verbs of action which are foregrounded in the third and the fourth stanzas of the poem and thereby cause lexical deviation. These two lexical items are 'stole' and 'rose'. By foregrounding and putting them in a thematic position, the poet focuses on the importance of these two verbs of action and movement in the overall atmosphere of inaction of the poem.

Cohesion:

It is an important device through which meaning relations in a text are combined intersententially. It suggests a semantic relation between an element in a text and some other element that is crucial to its interpretation. In 'Home they brought her warrior dead' some cohesive devices are employed to achieve cohesion. First is anaphoric reference which basically includes the use of possessive pronouns. In the poem the lexical item 'him' in the line-

'Then they praised him, soft and low'

does not make any sense unless it refers back to 'her warrior' in the opening line. The pronoun 'him' makes an anaphoric reference to 'her warrior' of the first line of the poem. Cohesion is also built by cohesive conjunctions. These conjunctions fall into various clusters like additive, adversative, causal, temporal and continuation. In this poem the prominent cohesive conjunction is 'yet' (adversative) and 'then (temporal).

Overall structure and organization:

The poem is very well structured with sixteen lines in total which have a definite rhyming pattern. It presents a plethora of activities of the maidens to rouse the feeling of the lady for her dead warrior. The first three stanzas exquisitely demonstrate their efforts with no desired result. The final victory comes at the last stanza when an old lady of ninety years old put the child of the lady on her knee. The moment she comes into contact with her child, she burst into tears which are a great sigh of relief for the maidens. Here the poem is organized at a symbolical level as the death of the warrior and the associated/related images of immobility, grief on the part of the lady are eventually overtaken by a gleam of light and hope for the lady at the sight of the child.

Conclusion:

Stylistics unfolds the intricate relationship between language and its artistic and communicative functions. It always tries to account objectively for the meaning of a text through a systematic study of the language of a text. A true stylistician uses linguistic as well as extra-linguistic parameters to study a discourse in its proper perspective. Sounds, lexis, semantics, syntax etc are some of the tools generally used by stylisticians to interpret the communicative value of discourse. And such stylistic study of any kind of literary piece definitely assists a reader in decoding or deconstructing the inherent meaning of the text. It always enables readers to enhance their appreciation of literature and their own communicative competence.

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