

Stylistics Analysis of Psalm of Life

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Abstract: The stylistics analysis of Psalm of Life by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, a famous American poet, endeavors to demonstrate the ways levels of stylistics is structured in relationship to the linguistic element to meaning and to provide an account of initial interpretation of poem objectively. Stylistics analysis is based on facts and much more objective and delved into detail thus, digging deep into the thoughts and feeling of the poet. The aim is to explain how the words of a poem evoke the feelings and responses that readers get when they read it.

Index terms: graphology, poetry, stylistics, syntactical

I. Introduction

Writers aim to communicate their ideas to express themselves in a unique, imaginative and poetic form to capture readers attention. Numerous literary devices are employed by are writers to enhance word choice, to clarify meanings and present their message creatively and artistically. The purpose is not just to communicate but to communicate effectively. As Leech (2003) puts it, to achieve beauty in the text and writers who achieve this can touch not only the minds of the readers but their hearts as well. The written word will have an emotional impact and influence on the thought processes of the readers as proven by history. One prime example is the Magna Carta written in 1215 which became the basis for the constitutional law we have today. Then and now, the power of the written word has not diminished.

Writers used various means to present creativity aesthetically by employing devices to enhance word choice, to articulate clear meanings and to organize artistic messages. Literary devices are employed to enhance beauty and to extend relevance of the poems. Writers write not only to “encode and disseminate vision and message, but to achieve beauty in the texts.” Leech (2003.5)

Style

Beyond the elements of grammar, composition, punctuation and spelling, style refers to the choice of words, sentence construction and paragraph structure by which a writer communicates his/her messages. Style is the writer’s unique way of presenting his ideas so that readers will have a vivid picture and the clear words will evoke the expected mood. Riffaterre (1959) defines style as the manner by which the writer guarantees that concepts, ideas and thoughts in a literary work are absorbed by the readers not only the information furnished but appreciate the author’s belief and sentiments towards it. Stephen (1994;52) affirmed “An author’s style is usually individual, his literary fingerprint”.

Style are the ways the author present ideas in writing. The unique fashion a writer uses words to communicate his message, to sustain the mood and show images. Style is the poet’s unique way of sending messages across and using semantics, rhetoric and syntactic or lexical items to express the abstract thoughts and feelings. It consists of meticulous and careful use of words in any shape and form. Riffaterre (1959) defines style as the manner by which the writer guarantees that concepts, ideas and thoughts in a literary work are absorbed by the readers not only the information furnished but appreciate the author’s belief and sentiment towards it. Stephen (1994;52) affirmed “An author’s style is usually individual, his literary fingerprint”.

Stylistics Analysis

Stylistics is part of the study of language that focus on the diverse versions of simple to complex utilization of language in literature. Turner (1975). The analysis is based on quantifiable and concrete data and idea that ultimately guide to a higher level of comprehension. Stylistics aims to present the development of meaning by probing the multifarious interplay of literary feature to deliver the intended message of the literary piece. (Hanif, A. et. Al, 2015). Then, stylistics analysis sharpen the understanding and deep appreciation of literary composition and according to Carter (1996) it is a “way in” to a text as it ushers the means to a detailed and insightful interpretation texts.

Poetry

Poetry is one form of writing or literary work where special intensity is given to the interplay of words and rhythm. Lines and stanzas are the graphic structures of a literary piece the provide a visual cues that it is a poem. Putting punctuation in the right location helps in understanding the messages and aids in conveying emotions of the poem. It can be better appreciated and understood when stylistics analysis is done. Edgar Allan Poe defined poetry as “the rhythmical creation of beauty in words” and the expression of literary creativity and holds language to higher level. Rhythm is the heartbeat of poetry and applied in various element and lends poetry an emotional and musical experience.

II. Stylistic Analysis

Graphology is the linguistic level of stylistic analysis which deals with the graphic aspects of language. Crystal and Davy (1969) stressed that the “main graphological devices one can make use of are paragraphing, spacing, and capitalization, alongside the normal range of other punctuation marks”. The roles of these devices are to facilitate the interpretation of poem and to contribute to the process of identifying meanings of the poem.

Phonology According to Ofuya (2007), as the etymology of the words suggest, phonology is the arrangement of sounds in English and is defined as a literary device in which speech sounds interact with each other and what happens to speech sounds in a word or a sentence. Phonology is focused on how speech sounds change and behave when in a syllable, word, or sentence, as opposed to when spoken in isolation.

Semantics is a branch of linguistics that intends to study the meaning of language. In stylistics, it is the meaning is implicit and depends on the literary context on how the language is being used. Meanings are judged through the analysis of context, social and individual point of views. Hidden meanings can be judged by the reader through the environment created by the poet in a poem.

III. ANALYSIS

The stylistics analysis of “Psalm of Life” by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow is undertaken. Meticulous study of sounds, punctuations, patterns, words, sentences and meanings are basis of investigation in order to discover the poet’s thoughts, feeling and purpose. The poem is didactic, intended to give advice and counsel to the young men and women who needs guidance how to live a fruitful ephemeral life. (Osborne-Bartucca, 2016)

Graphology. Psalm of Life is composed of nine (9) stanzas and each stanza has four (4) lines. The poem has 215 words, 162 of which or 75% are one-syllable words. Every beginning letter of words of each line is capitalized and five words within the lines are capitalized. Punctuations used include period (.), comma (,), semi-colon (;), dash (-), apostrophe (‘) and exclamation point (!). Simpson (1997:28) stated that graphology has the capacity to “exert a psycholinguistic influence on the reading process” (Simpson, 1997: 28) because visual elements are as significant as the text. According to Harmer (2004) punctuations help in communicating real messages in an appropriate manner.

Capitalization and Exclamation. Life in second and fifth stanza are capitalized. In the 4th stanza, the words Time, Future, Past, Present and God are also capitalized. Capitalization impacts readability and comprehension because it emphasize the importance of the words. To capitalize words, even the first letter of the words is to give visual prominence with the intent to focus attention on particular elements within any group of people, places, or things. Further, capitalization indicates the significance of the words in the ideas and messages of the poem.

The word psalm in the title is a sacred song of worship to celebrate life and all its possibilities and it is also the prominent message of the poem. Time is of the essence in living a life. The Future is filled with the unknown and anticipation, its uncertainties can lead to desperation and wasteful use of time. Past is gone and all its pains and joys. The experiences of the past are lessons or blessings.

Hence, no time is wasted. The Future is unborn - avoid the worries and the Past is dead - evade the regrets. Carnegie (p. 5) admonished, "The load of yesterday added to that of tomorrow, carried today, makes the most falter". The Present "lie all the verities and realities of existence". Words and deeds are acted now, live in the moment, seize the day.

Exclamation point ends the line of the stanza, indicating emphasis of the message of the entire poem. Grammatically, the exclamation point is used to express surprise, amazement and excitement and other powerful emotions. This punctuation can turn expression of simple mental calmness to strong emotional contemplation.

The use of capitalization and exclamation highlight valuable attitude of those who are here and now should possess in reference to time and life. The messages of the poem is not to be sure of the future though it may seem pleasant now because change happen anytime. The past and the future are unknown, hence it is wise to live for today with kindness the heart can bring and faith that God can inspire.

Comma. The poem is composed of 36 lines and 21 lines have commas with a total of 33 commas. Ten (10) lines have two (2) commas, , eleven (11) have one (1) commas and one (1) have three (3) commas. The comma is used primarily for grammatical correctness and more importantly for contextual coherence. Both aid in creating drama, emphasizing feelings and adding meaning. Commas are appropriately placed to connect two (2) contrasting or continuing ideas or a series of ideas. The punctuation allows a pause to think about the ideas and to place an emphasis to both ideas that are separated by the comma.

Caesuras in the poem indicate an abrupt pause in the middle line of poem and in this poem a comma is used for that purpose. The pause allows the reader to reflect on phrase after the caesura and produces a compelling effect. This punctuation mark is placed on a significant location for a valuable purpose of expressing specific, relevant and strong messages or thoughts.

Hyphen and Dash. The hyphen is used in the words to-day and to-morrow in the 3rd stanza to emphasize time duration. For example, when a person dies his lifetime is measured from birth year to death year 1990-1989. Hyphen is used to represent a life lived here on earth from today to tomorrow.

The dash can be found on the 6th stanza between the repeated word "act". This punctuation suggests an afterthought for forceful information and to reiterate an advice in the line.

Period. Period is used specifically at the end of the last line of sin (6) out of nine (9) stanzas to mark full stop to show finality and completeness of statement. Period is appropriately used to articulate a direct counsel expressed the stanza. (Ali, et al, 2016) and should not be subject further interpretation.

Semi-colon. Four (4) lines end with semi-colon. One of the functions of semicolon is to separate independent clauses that are related in terms of ideas. In this poem, the semi colon is used as a half full stop compared to the period which is a full stop. Swan (2003) explains that semicolon joins two related thoughts to establish a link that are grammatically independent but the implications are closely connected.

Apostrophe. Apostrophe (') is used to indicate possession the words world's (stanza 5, line 1) and life's (stanza 8, line 2). These two words are singular as a rule, the possession is marked with 's and is written right after the owner. The world and life are the owners challenges, hopelessness and helplessness though temporary as indicated by the word bivouac.

The apostrophe is used in words with letter v such however, overhead, over. Apostrophe replaces when letter v is omitted in those words to adhere to the established meter and foot which is trochaic tetrameter.

Phonology

Meter and foot. Meter in poetry is defined by Port (2003) as the alternating accented and unaccented syllable. The poem is composed of nine quatrains, each stanza has four lines. Trochee is applied, the first syllable in each line is stressed and followed by unstressed. The pattern is trochee. The metrical pattern of every line of the poem is tetrameter, 4 trochees.

But the second and fourth lines of every stanza have four stressed syllables and only four (4) complete trochee. Notably, eight (8) out nine (9) of the last foot of the second line of every stanza is only one syllable word while here (3) out of the nine (9) last foot of the fourth line are two (2) syllables. Eliminating the final unstressed syllable is called catalexis, purposely for brief pause, to slow the pace to add a somber tone.

It important to note that in order to maintain this pattern, words with letter “v” are replaced with apostrophe (‘) such as howe’er (stanza 6, line 1), o’erhead (stanza 6,line 4) and o’er (stanza 8,line 2). The regular rhyme pattern ensures the reassuring predictability of the poem and reinforces the its message that life is meaningful and purposeful

Rhyme. Fabb (1997) identified rhyme as pairs of words that are phonologically similar from the last vowel sound to the end of a word. For examples, numbers, dream, slumbers and seem, The rhyme scheme of Psalm of Life is abab. The first and third sound of the last word are the same and so are the second and the fourth in every stanza. Rhyming words supports retention and comprehension (Lea, et al, 2008).

Meter and rhyme constitute patterns that enhance familiarity and symmetry can intensify cognitive processing and facilitate positive emotional responses. (Kramer etal 1987). Hence, understanding the message is clear and effortless.

SYNTACTICAL

One-syllable words. Notably, most of the words in the poem are one syllable words. The editorial of The Economist that used one syllable words, quoted Churchill “ Short words are best, and old words, when short, are best of all”. Then, he continued “AND, not for the first time, he was right, short words are best. Plain they may be, but that is their strength. They are clear, sharp and to the point. You can get your tongue round them. You can spell them. Eye, brain and mouth work as one to greet them as friends, not foes. For that is what they are. Then, Michener confirms “good writing consists of trying to use ordinary words to achieve extraordinary results.”

Parallelism. Short (2007) stressed that in poetry the aesthetic value cannot be detached from the artful manipulation of the linguistic code. Parallelism, the construction of sentences or parts of sentences with the same grammatical structures in successive line, often repeating specific word or phrase in a style can potentially facilitate retention and sharpen the message. This repetition of the structure and words create balance of sound, expression and rhythm that can result to make the message forceful and effective.

J. J. Thwala (2017) abstracted that in parallelism, meticulous selection of words and phrases in layered succession is constructed around the central theme. The style advance the equality of ideas, the similarities and differences, fact or opinion or possible or impossible, still maintaining the unity and coherence in the poem.

Parallelism is employed in the same lines in the 6 lines of the poem.(1) Life is real, Life is earnest, (2) Dust thou art, to dust returnest, (3) Not enjoyment and not sorrow, (4)Art is long and Time is fleeting, (5)Heart within and God o’erhead, (6) Still achieving, still pursuing.

Parallel structured phrases or clauses in poetry, according to Gregoriou (2009) in terms of similarity of sound, same grammatical structure or difference in meaning can still harmonize equal and contrasting semantic relationship of words.

Parallelism or not, the sentences are expressed in statement or command. Imperative sentences are used in eight (8) out of thirty six (36) lines and begins with a verb. These are Tell, Be, Be, Trust, Learn, Act, Learn and Let. Birjulin & Xrakovski (2001) explain that these imperative sentences semantically tell that an action needed to be accomplished by the very information provided.

All the rest of the lines, twenty eight (28) out of thirty six (36) lines are declarative sentences. Generally declarative sentences state a fact and chiefly to make an assertion. Some of declarative sentences (Brezgunova, 1968) are sentences that are beckoning, engaging and promising. Finally, Malik (2017) continues these sentences have informative function and declare unyielding counsel. (Malik, 2017)

Religious and war attributes. Stanza one (1) has a religious reference with the words numbers and soul. Numbers is the 5th book of the bible and it contains countless statistics, population counts, tribal and priestly figure and other numerical data. Merrill (1985) stated that the book follows the Israelites in their forty years of wandering in the desert. The phrase “mournful numbers” indicates that life is a series difficult countless journeys.

Soul is a reference to physical body that should deal with life in its reality, not in a fantasy. The lines suggest when life is a product of imagination and become worthless, when it is lived as a dream. Life after death, a Judeo-Christian pivotal essence of living and dying.

“Dust thou art, to dust returnest”, is expressed in archaic words taken from the Bible, Genesis 3:16. This line creates spiritual value and historical beginnings. This kind of writing impresses a flavor of antiquity and having the wisdom and authority of

our ancestors and reverence to tradition. When employed in poetry, indicate that ancient language are more precise, more eloquent, more meaningful and more truthful.

War terms are used in the stanza five (5) “battle”, “bivouac”, “hero” and ‘strife’. Words imply life has challenges, is temporary, be courageous and with conflict. Despite the overwhelming circumstances of living, those terms are used indicate that there so much can be done in life like in war. Negotiation and strategies are possible ways to rise above conflict life can bring. When faced with adversity, difficulty and chaos like in a war zone, the best reaction is not be a part of a cattle, a herd or crowd where behaviors are described by collective thought of defenseless and dependence.

To be a hero is an individual act of fortitude. Reach for inner strength, steadfast determination and unfailing faith to move forward and not to yield, when life is paralyzed with the burden of worry, misery and perplexity.

Litotes: The dictionary defines litotes as ideas expressed in affirmative and stated by the negative of the contrary. (Oxford English Dictionary). Six (6) lines conform with this definition with the negative word no and not. These are: (1) Tell me NOT in mournful numbers (2) And things are NOT what they seem (3) Was NOT spoken of the soul (4) NOT enjoyment and NOT sorrow (5) Be NOT like driven cattle (6) Trust NO future howe’ver pleasant.

Articulating the negative of the contradicting idea seemingly decreases its importance but actually increases the significance. The reason Pontier (2013) disclosed is that negative words replaces the clear positive expression for depth and strength because of the ironic outcome created by negation. Irony is a peculiar way of capturing attention to ideas using concealed statements.

Repetition. A rhetorical device repetition is applied in the poem. It is recurrence in succession of sounds, words and clauses in with no specific location to enhance emphasis of expression and meaning. Kemertelidze, & Manjavidze (2003).

The poem Psalm of Life has three (3) pairs of lines of anaphora, the repetition of a word or a phrase is at the beginning of subsequent lines. The words or phrases repeated are in the following lines:

- In the world’s broad field of battle,
- In the bivouac of Life,
- Be not like dumb, driven cattle!
- Be a hero in the strife!
- Footprints on the sands of time;
- Footprints, that perhaps another,

Mesodiplosis, the repetition of words in the same line in the middle of the line is utilized in the poem. These words are: life, dust, not, dead, act and still and appear in these six (6) lines:

- Life is real! Life is earnest!
- Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
- Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,
- Let the dead Past bury its dead!
- Act,— act in the living Present!
- Still achieving, still pursuing,

Croft (2007:57) “the technique of repeating or listing several words with the same or similar meaning (sometimes called cumulation) is often used to add emphasis or a persuasive quality to the poem such repetition of a word or words can add force and power to the subject or it can be used to work towards a dramatic climax”

IV. Conclusion:

After analyzing Psalm of Life stylistically, our initial interpretation deepened and was able to account for some of its features which the author haven’t recognized

The stylistics analysis of highlight elements of the poem that the authors might otherwise have missed like the relevance of repetition and punctuation. Knowing the rationale or the reason behind each element gave the authors a deeper understanding of the meaning of the poem and appreciation to its form and language.

The analysis also provided the author clarity on the reasons the poet uses what is usually considered deviant language which is not used in everyday communication. The authors would have misconstrued this as using archaic language which does not have a place in modern literature. However, with this analysis, the authors came to the conclusion that a poem written ages before is still relevant today if we take the time to study and find its true meaning

In conclusion, stylistics analysis can show how the linguistic features of a poem are directly related to meaning and in doing will uphold the initial interpretation of the poem. Of course, there can be more interpretation that could be given to the poem. However, stylistics can provide a systematic analytical technique that greatly ensures that the interpretation is as explicit and grounded in fact as it can be. It is the author's hope that she has shown that stylistics is a useful tool for interpreting literary texts.

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