

# Are There Any Students in this Literature Classroom? From the Teacher's House of Wisdom to the Threshold of Students' Minds

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## ABSTRACT

A multitude of linguistic applications to literature have been made to show the relevance of stylistic analysis to the teaching of literature. Yet, such a linguistic approach to literature continues to be met with reservation and even antagonism from literary scholars and educationists in many universities around the world. The present paper adopts the point of view of a literary man concerned with such linguistic processes and aims to show how the solid theoretical premises and the set of tools of analysis offered by *Critical Linguistics* are likely to yield interesting clues useful in interpreting poems. The essence of this research is that in order to achieve a "healthy" exploration of poems, there is a need for the perspective of a linguist. Such a perspective will likely to lead to fresh inferences by pointing to potentially seminal areas in the poem and allowing students to improve their linguistic competence as well as their overall appreciation of and delight in poetry.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the publication of Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures* (1957), the incorporation of linguistics into literature pedagogy has notoriously been a battleground of much disagreement and continues to provide room for controversy. On the one hand, a conventional humanist scholar would focus on interpreting strategies leading to a final act of interpretation or appreciation (Benamou, 1971). A critical linguist, on the other hand, would look upon the poem as discourse that can be studied to unveil the processes whereby its author has encoded meaning (Short, 1989).

The paper offers an overview of two dominant approaches of relevance to the present context and explores the tenets, aims, and processes of conventional humanist criticism. Concepts such as intuitive response, intrinsic interpretation, and intentionality are discussed. Critical linguistics is introduced as a second stage, with a special focus on foregrounding, deviation, and parallelism. Through this discussion, illustrative passages from Blake's "London" are scrutinized.

### 1.1 The Humanistic Approach to the Teaching of Poetry

Prior to proposing what I consider to be an effective strategy to teaching poetry, I shall begin by refuting the pedagogical method that implicitly equates the meaning of a poem with its paraphrase or disregards individual response to the text in favor of definitive explanations sanctioned by critical authority (Widdowson, 1975). The humanistic approach, for instance, suggests that literature has a special status not accessible through the application of the "meta-language" of linguistics.

The humanistic tradition opposes any linguistic analysis of literary texts, argues that they have an "ineradicable subjective core" (Bateson, 1971), that they are not amenable to linguistic analysis and that there is something at the centre of literary texts that resists scientific or objective analysis by the linguist or the stylistician. Humanist critics also maintain that reading a poem is an entirely passive process, that "The state of reading is a state in which the text works on us and not we on it" and that students should accordingly be taught "To love what we have loved" and be satisfied with their teachers' intuitive interpretations. (Vendler, 1988, p. 14-16).

One of the limitations of this approach to teaching poetry is that it assumes the students are being taught homogeneously and have an ability to read, understand, and respond sensitively and critically to a poem.

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This approach, as observed in my own teaching experience, is erroneous because with very few exceptions, most students/advanced learners of EFL are not competent enough to study a poem; they learn only to manipulate critical terms and to repeat for examination purposes the received opinion of teachers or critics. Thus, for a large number of students, the study of poetry means the wholesale concentration on lecture notes and books written by critics who see through the spectacles of other critics or books. For many students, the shift from text to interpretation and criticism is a blind one. Without a systematic and disciplined interpretive model, the best students can do is to rephrase or paraphrase, showing little or no capacity for a personal, independent, and critical reading of or response to the poem.

### **1.2 Illustration: Analysis of William Blake's "London" Based on a Humanistic Pedagogy**

By way of demonstrating how a humanist critic may approach the teaching of a poem, I chose Blake's "London," which a considerable number of my students found most problematic and difficult to disentangle. The framework within which I explored this poem with the students runs counter to the analytic tools offered by literary stylisticians and is based on the traditional critical practice.

It is important to point out, however, that the framework I employed is in no sense exhaustive. It is simply a working model I used in my own practice. In my teaching of Blake's "London" to my students, I drew on the humanist critics and I based my interpretation on an approach which is topic-based and teacher-centred.

I presented Blake's poem as a powerful denunciation of the social inequities that are the consequences of the "regimentation" of people's lives within the social system. In this poem, Blake criticizes social abuses such as the employment of little boys as chimney-sweeps and he attacks poverty and the sad fate of soldiers. I concluded that this poem is also an indictment of the Church and the State for allowing such evils as exploitation and war, while doing nothing to relieve poverty.

With this approach, students confronted the poem and had little to say due in part to the "cultural situation" in which the instructor is the authority and the students willing receptacles and the absence of a personal and systematic strategy of analysis. It is apparent that instead of attempting to suggest to my students ways in which they could look for the meaning of the poem on their own, I was handing over a pre-digested and ready-made meaning of the poem which students accepted quite uncritically. Although I was unaware of it at the time, the new interpretive models offered by the linguistic discipline of literary stylistics could and would have offered an alternative means of interpretation and teaching of the poem.

## **2. Stylistic Analysis in Literature Pedagogy**

What I have sought to do in the preceding pages is argue against the conventional pedagogical and critical approaches to the examination of poetry that diminish its effect and deny its mystery. My view is that the stylistic analysis of a poem increases its effect and makes students more engaged and appreciative of the "untold" meanings. This method of literary criticism involves a recognition that literary texts are amenable to linguistic analysis. Such a linguistic approach to literature, which in my view is gaining more currency today, has taken the findings of discourse analysis from linguistics and applied them to the study and the teaching of literature.

Among the various linguistic disciplines, one of the most appropriate approaches to literature pedagogy is, I think, *Literary Stylistics* which operates in respect to both the object of the text and the creativity of the student without transforming the students into "unfeeling" linguists. This linguistic analytical technique tends to make them less alienated from linguistic study and more motivated to use the tools of linguistic examination in a way that is relevant to their understanding of literary texts (Short, 1989; Breen, 1988; Widdowson, 1975; Fowler, 1986).

Stylistics is "a means of linking literary Criticism and linguistics" (Widdowson, 1975, p. 3) with an attempt to develop an awareness of language and the role it plays in literary texts. Widdowson's proposed approach seeks to stimulate individual interpretation and personal engagement with poems. In Widdowson's paradigm, the process of accessing the meaning of the poem is more important than the implacability of interpretation and its effect. What Widdowson's assumption entails, therefore, is that the stylistic exploration of texts should be assigned an important role and a contributive function and that if we mean to develop the capacity in our students for independent reading and response, we must find means of engaging

them actively in the exploration of poems; this does not involve simply telling them what to do. To this end, an inclusion of stylistic analysis in literature pedagogy is necessary.

From this perspective, *Literary Stylistics*, with its precision of analysis, offers a challenge to established methods of close reading of texts and provides students with a basis—a disciplined and systematic method—to achieve a personal understanding, appreciation, and interpretation of literary texts (Short, 1989).

In this sense, stylistic analysis is intended to help determine interpretation through a text-based approach. It is worth noting, however, that stylistic analysis, according to stylisticians, does not entail the conviction that the linguistic approach to poetry can or should replace traditional criticism. The primary goal of a stylistician is to highlight certain features that are missing in traditional criticism so as to contribute to our understanding and appreciation of a poem, and "to point to us, in poems we already know well, significant features we have missed because of our amateurish ignorance of the workings of language" (Vendler, 1988, as cited in Ching, et al., 1980, p.8).

### **2.1 Aims and Methods of Stylistic Analysis**

In the stylistic approach to the teaching of poetry, linguistic elucidation and description precedes interpretation. In other words, the focus is on literature as a text. This approach, in contrast to the traditional method, starts from marks on paper and goes on to make textual discoveries leading to descriptions in terms of stylistic tools upon which interpretations may be based (Short, 1989; Leech, 1977). Methodologically, this process-centred pedagogy for literature means that the emphasis falls on student-centred activities that aim to facilitate student-text engagement. Such student-centred pedagogy entails that students are not manipulated in the process of interpretation and subscribes to the premise that "our task as English teachers is [...] not to hand over pre-digested meanings, but to teach our students to read and interpret for themselves... to be reasonably skilled and sensitive readers, able to feel and judge for themselves, with fidelity to the textual facts, in response to any work or literature they may choose to read" (Rodger, 1969, p. 89).

### **2.2. Illustration: A Stylistic Analysis of Blake's "London" Based on a Model Proposed by Mick Short**

My preference for Short's (1989) model can be justified by a number of reasons. First, Short's model is accessible to readers with little or no previous knowledge of stylistic analysis, upon which stylistics is based. Second, Short starts from scratch and offers his readers brief and simple explanatory descriptions of both his approach and approaches of other stylisticians. Third, Short helps his readers gain a systematic understanding of stylistics by offering them a "check-sheet" they can use to analyse other literary texts.

This section presents a brief description of Short's stylistic model and proposes an exercise in literary stylistics as a method for accumulating linguistic evidence students can draw upon either to advance support or modify their responses to the poem. In this process, I shall also—as far as my competence in linguistics allows—shift from linguistic investigation to intuitive responses, and vice-versa.

Employing the model of analysis proposed by Mick Short in the exploration of Blake's "London," I noticed that the most fundamental stylistic feature is foregrounding. According to Short, foregrounding—a form of linguistic deviation—is a basic key to our understanding of poems. Mick Short refers to foregrounding as "a medium to De-Automatize what was normally taken for granted ... the throwing into relief of the linguistic sign against the background of the norms of ordinary language" (as cited in Wales, 1989, p. 182). In other words, foregrounding in a poem consists of the linguistic features that are highlighted or made prominent for specific effects. Foregrounding, Short continues, is achieved by a variety of means which can be grouped under two main types: paradigmatic foregrounding or deviation and syntagmatic foregrounding or repetition.

After this brief description of Short's stylistic model, I shall now suggest an interpretation of Blake's poem in the context of a linguistic analysis based on the principles and paradigms of *Literary Stylistics*. In my analysis of the poem and in the interest of space, I will restrict myself to linguistic features and analytical notions of foregrounding, parallelism, and deviation.

In this poem, there are many foregrounded groupings of lexical items as a result of deviant choices from the normal language code. The most obvious method of foregrounding in Blake's "London" is the repetition of the paradigm "in every" in three successive lines of stanza two:

*In every cry of every man  
In every infant's cry of fear,  
In every voice, in every ban,  
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.*

It should be obvious that the repetition of "in every" makes the contextual meaning stand out. The repetition of "in every" brings to the fore the socio-economic oppressiveness of London and emphasizes the ubiquitous nature of fear in the city.

Simple repetition, however, is only one method of producing foregrounding in Blake's poem. A much more interesting method of foregrounding is that of parallelism, where some structural features are held constant while other lexical items are varied. In stanza one, for instance, the structure and some of the words are repeated, giving us a parallel structure that is a repetition of "Marks of weakness, marks of woe." The focus on the words as parallels invites the students to search for meaningful connections and the close relationship between lexical items and semantic implications which are foregrounded or made prominent through parallelism.

In this example, the parallel meaning—promoted by the parallel structure, syntactic parallels, and metrical parallelisms in the poem—represents devices that Blake uses to control and direct our understanding. The antitheses and parallels of this poem can be attributed in part to a metrical motive. Repetitions like "Marks of weakness," "marks of woe," and "in every ... in every ... in every," enhance the regularity of the rhythm, restrict the vocabulary and emphasize the meaning of the poem. A further foregrounded paradigm in the poem is the auditory vocabulary of the vocal laments of the people whom Blake's narrator encounters. The prominence and frequency of the patterns "cry," "cry of fear," "cry," "sigh," and "curse" are highlighted by the poet to unveil the poem's meaning and the poet's desired intentions.

Another tool of foregrounding that may prompt students to infer the meaning of the poem is the rhyme scheme. In stanza one, for instance, "street" rhymes with "meet;" in stanza two, "fear" rhymes with "hear;" and in stanza three, "curse" rhymes with "hearse." The rhyme scheme reinforces the repetitive paradigm by connecting place, "street," with activity, "meet," with human response, "fear," "hear," and "curse," with the inevitable outcome of such socio-economic circumstances as Blake paints, death ("hearse"). The foregrounding of such phonetic parallelism is very likely to make students deduce that there are obvious phonetic connections among the words in the poem, and also suspect that "fear," "tear," "cry," and "sigh" might be alternative words for the people initially referred to as "every face."

It is my contention that a detailed interpretation of the poem that draws on the tools of *Literary Stylistics* may be a useful model for a student-centred analysis of other poems. My caveat, however, is that mine is not the only possible means of interpreting the poem. What I wished to achieve in this paper is to invite literature students and teachers to consider that any reasonable interpretation of a poem may usefully take into account the linguistic tools suggested by the linguistic discipline of *Literary Stylistics*.

### **2.3. Advantages of Stylistic Analysis: An Optimal Gain for the Students**

Despite some reservation about the aims and methods of stylistics, this linguistic discipline has many obvious benefits to students of literature and to language learners. One of the main advantages of stylistics is that it attends more systematically to language organization and aims to offer frameworks for analysis that are explicit enough to be used on other poems. Proponents of a stylistics approach argue that it supplies students with a systematic method, a starting point that enables them to overcome their reticence when faced with the need for comment on a poem. Another benefit of stylistic analysis is that it avoids unrelieved subjectivity when describing literary-linguistic effects. Hence, the more closely students attend to the language of a poem, the more confidently they are able to account for its meaning. A further advantage of stylistics is that it can help students to learn to account for their impressions about a poem and can provide a systematic and disciplined way for discussing those impressions.

#### **2.3.1 Reprise**

In this paper, my main contention has been that students are better equipped to interpret a poem and attain a level of competence in language when they employ the linguistic tools offered by *Literary Stylistics*. It would be dishonest to pretend that a stylistic approach solves all the problems of mutually exclusive interpretations of poems; however, I do not see this as the aim of this study. The overarching objective of

the paper is to renew the debate and enrich the dialogue rather than be a prescription or a conclusive argument. This paper is but an attempt to explore new ideas, concepts, and approaches to the teaching of poetry. It seems to me that the principal, and perhaps the only reason, for exploring a literary work is to never cease from exploration and research and that "the end of our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time" (Eliot, 1968, as cited in Widdowson, 1984, p. 1).

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