

A Stylistic Approach to Teaching Shakespeare's Sonnets

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Abstract

Reading poetry has always been a great source of pleasure. Poetry, being an indispensable genre of literature, occupies a special place in educational curriculum as well as in our real life. It has been defined by many literary critics and scholars through the ages with the view of determining its aim and function. Of course the aim of this paper is not to define poetry or mention its aim and function, but to highlight the effectiveness of teaching-learning process of literature, especially poetry, focusing on the foregrounded linguistic features of a given poem. Here, an attempt is made to analyse a few sonnets of Shakespeare from stylistic perspectives that would definitely help a learner to apprehend the essence of poetry. This paper aims at finding out the effectiveness of the implementation of stylistics in teaching Shakespearean sonnets highlighting some linguistic aspects that can be discussed in the class-room of undergraduate level.

Key words: Poetry, Shakespeare, Sonnets, Stylistics, Foregrounding.

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Introduction: Poetry, being an indispensable genre of literature, occupies a special place in educational curriculum as well as in our real life. It has been defined by many literary critics and scholars through the ages with the view of determining its aim and function. *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (1997) defines “a poem as a composition written for performance by the human voice” (1103). W. H. Auden is preoccupied with style above the intentions in any poem and declares in his reference to poetry: “All my life I have been more interested in technique than anything else (1103)”. Eliot, T. S. (1997) considers music to be central to the composition and reading of poetry. Eliot’s exposition about the place of music above ideas exonerates poets from what Nashe (1589) considers being a mere amplification of tales in poetry. Therefore, some poems are to be enjoyed for their musicality and others for their tales. Above all, poetry is a representation of both ideas and music, laced with a high degree of imagination in the quest to address the subject matter. Poetry is a metrical composition; the art of uniting pleasure with truth by calling imagination with the help of reason, the essence is invention—Samuel Johnson.

Above definitions make it clear that poetry comprises a special language different from the standard form with variations in different linguistic levels. A poet intentionally deviates from the standard norms to foreground special linguistic features to draw immediate attention of a reader. A student of literature must be aware of the fact that the literary language, especially in poetry, is a deviation from the ordinary language that we use in our day to day life. A literary artist can deviate from the standard norm to foreground the linguistic features that he really wants to highlight. As observed by Leech (1989, p. 5), the creative writer, and more particularly the poet, enjoys a unique freedom, amongst users of the language, to range over all its communicative resources, without respect to the social or historical contexts to which they belong. It will be noteworthy to mention the concept of

'poetic licence' to define the unique freedom that a literary artist enjoys. With the help of 'poetic licence' (Leech 1989, p. 36) a poet may transcend the limits of language to explore and communicate new areas of experience. Such 'deviations' from the standard norm in literary language have been defined as 'foregrounding' which involves the analogy of a figure seen against a background. The literary artist intentionally and deliberately thrust the foregrounded element into the reader's vision and intends to make it the most important and meaningful against a background. In fact, poets are unique in their employment of language. This may be seen in the arrangement of the words, lines and stanzas. Language, therefore, becomes a tool, an amenable one for that matter that poets may bend in the quest for an individualised world. This world may not be reached except salient images are decoded. Thus, a poetic licence is usually associated with poets as a result of the fact that they may break the rules of grammar with impunity.

Aim of teaching poetry in academic curriculum is not to meet its aesthetic pleasure merely dealing with the content of the poem but to unlock the foregrounded linguistic features that help the students grasp its total meaning. A teacher competent on the language makes the classroom more effective and enjoyable highlighting the linguistic aspects of a poem along with its content. The form of the poem and its linguistic variations should be analysed to make the students aware of the difference between poetic language and ordinary language. It will definitely help a teacher to provide the students with information of the accepted norms of the concerned language too. Generally in a conventional class-room, more emphasis is given on the content of the poem than its linguistic aspects. It will be incomplete and boring if the linguistic features are ignored.

The field that especially deals with the styles of writers is called stylistics, a branch of applied linguistics, and that can be applied in the teaching-learning process for better effects, since stylistics is interested in what writers do with and through language. Carter (1996:5) argues on the relevance of stylistics for literature teaching stating that stylistic analysis helps to foster interpretative skills and to encourage reading between the lines. He further posits the advantages of stylistics stating that it provides students with a method of scrutinizing texts, 'a way in' to a text, opening up starting points for fuller interpretation. Stylistics is a critical model through which a work of art may be examined. It dwells on the examination of the language as it yields the intended meanings of the poem. In stylistics, the style that makes the poet unique is examined. This endeavour may also lead to an analysis of the creative ingredients that may be achieved through language or its domestication. 'The aim of stylistics is to analyse language habits with the main purpose of identifying from the general mass of linguistic features...those features which are restricted to certain kinds of social context, to explain where possible why such features have been used as opposed to other alternatives, and to classify those features into categories based upon a view of their function in the social context.' (Crystal, et al, 1969:10)

Stylistics is an examination of the peculiar style in a work of art. It is, therefore, an attempt at revealing the unique nature of language. In this direction, the linguistic style of an author may consequently be unveiled. This paper aims at finding out the effectiveness of the implementation of stylistics in teaching poetry highlighting some linguistic aspects that can be discussed in a class-room of poetry.

As a particular form of poetry, the sonnet is characterized by a special arrangement of verse lines with a unique rhyme scheme. The sonnet is derived from an Italian word 'sonnetto' meaning a little sound or song. The sonnet, in a general sense, means a short poem of fourteen lines, usually in iambic pentameters, with considerable variation in rhyme scheme, and generally, it treats one thought or emotion. Three basic forms are found in the sonnet. They are the Petrarchal form, the Spenserian form and the Shakespearian form. The Petrarchan form comprises an octave, rhyming: abbaabba and a sestet that rhymes cdecde. The Spenserian form has three quatrains and a couplet that rhymes abab, cdcd, efef, gg. Philip Sidney's sonnet entitled 'Astrophel and Stella' was the first known sonnet ever published in English.

As a sonneteer, Shakespeare is unique in style and treatment of themes in his sonnets. Indeed, Shakespeare's sonnets are mysterious and invite countless opinions and observations. They reveal the mystery of his creative mind – the wonder of his artistic genius. Coleridge's description that the sonnets show the 'myriad-minded Shakespeare is a befitting assessment of their importance in Shakespeare's literary production. Published first, in its completed form in 1609, Thomas Thorpe, Shakespeare's sonnets can be divided into two series. The first series, sonnets 1 – 126, is addressed to a young man, highborn and lovely, with an inherited beauty. In these 126 sonnets, the idealization of masculine friendship is the theme of the poet. The second series, sonnets 127 –

154, is addressed to a woman, whose actual identity has remained yet unknown. In these 26 sonnets, the poet expresses his yearning for and frustration about the dark lady. Hazlitt (1988) declares that the sonnets of Shakespeare can be divided into different sections. The most apparent in this division involves sonnets 1-126. Here, the poet seems to be involved in a relationship with a young man. In sonnets 127-154, a relationship seems to be involved between the poet and a woman. This woman is at times referred to as the Dark Lady or Mistress (25). Two other sonnets are addressed to Cupid.

Shakespeare's sonnets are units of fourteen pentameter lines rhyming according to the English or Surrey form. Every line contains ten syllables. The first twelve lines, in three quatrains, rhyme in cross meter and the last two lines rhyming together conclude the whole. The rhyme scheme is abab cdcd efef gg. Time and mortality are major themes in the sonnets of Shakespeare and the poet's concern is to salvage love from the ravages of time. One way to attain immortality is marriage and procreation. Sonnets 1 – 17 all take the form persuasions. The poet is trying to persuade the fair youth to marry and procreate. From Sonnet 18, a new perspective opens up. The poet stakes a claim of rival creation by way of immortalizing the beauty of the fair youth in poetry. his devotion to the youth and determination to immortalize the poet's love for the beauty of the fair youth constitutes the major theme up to sonnet 126. In the last sequence, the temperate beauty of the fair youth which is above seasonal and cyclical changes is sharply contrasted with the strong, turbulent and corrupting physical passions of the 'dark lady'.

Analysis of Sonnet 30

Sonnet 30 is a typical example of Shakespearean sonnets written in the individualized style of the poet. It shows his love of beauty of the fair youth and how he tries to preserve that beauty against the ravages of time. In a state of loneliness and depression, the poet takes stock of the past losses, failures and grievances. In such a state of mind, the poet summons up past grievances for a fresh, formal investigation. As the fresh investigation begins, his eyes, not used to shedding tears, are drowned by them. By weeping once again for sorrows already mourned for, he wastes time that is valuable to him. Using a legal term, the poet says that woes are 'long since cancelled' and are like bonds which are no longer valid. The poet does not owe anything to the grievances already mourned for, but this logic does not work. Sorrow caused by the death of dear friends cannot be reduced to measurable terms. Now the poet thinks of his dear friend. When the poet thinks of the fair youth, all the losses are compensated for.

Graphological Analysis:

Graphology studies the orthography of language. According to Atewologun (2003), graphology is the study of a language's writing system as seen in both hand-written and typographical forms (43). Graphological analysis is concerned with a consideration of language in the areas of punctuation, italicization, capitalization, and spacing in order to explore the intentions of the poet. Shakespeare's Sonnet 30 is characterized with capitalization of each line and it is a reflection of the versification that was salient to poetry in its earliest form. The first part of the sonnet has twelve lines and it follows a graphological design. The last two lines constitute the couplets and are meant to reinforce the preceding claims. The tempo of the poem is sustained through punctuation marks in their appropriate positions and is clearly composed and readable as a result of the insertion of commas, colon, semi-colons and full stops at the end of the poem. There is a full stop at the end of the eighth line. This is a reflection of the summation that Shakespeare intends to make:

And moan th'expense of many a vanished sight.

The next line sets in motion the argument of the poet about the need for lamenting the past losses and sorrows with a question. The third quatrain reflects the poet's justification of recalling past grievances and his attempt to come to a conclusion. Then with a pause, marked by a semi-colon, the poet arrives at his conclusion:

But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,

All losses are restored, and sorrows end.

On the whole, sonnet 30 has two full stops, one after eight lines and the other at the end, and they are meant to isolate the tempo of each argument.

Phonological Analysis:

An effective sound-patterning has always been one of the main sources of literary effect since ancient times. A sharp ear for sound is the basic qualification for a poet. As observed by Marjorie Boulton (1995), 'rhythm obviously helps a great deal in supporting the meaning of words of a poem; but sometimes the sound of the words also gives great support to the sense.' Rhythm is the measured movement or musical flow of language. It consists in the periodical recurrence of pauses and accents that produces a harmonious effect. Metre may be defined as a harmonic dispensation of syllables. It consists in the succession of regularly accented groups of syllables arranged according to certain recognized standards in lines of determinate length. Rhyme is another important phonetic effect in sound-patterning of a poem. It can be defined as the recurrence of similar sounds in the closing syllables of different verse lines. Use of various types of figures of speech based on sound like 'alliteration', 'onomatopoeia', 'pun' etc. and 'phonemic repetition' are also noteworthy to mention as far as the sound effect of a poem is concerned. Leech (1989) pointed out a few irregularities of pronunciation that can be termed as conventional licences of verse composition – 'elision' (o'er), 'aphesis' ('tis), 'apocope' (oft) etc. Besides, certain nineteenth century poets placed word stresses in unusual places for greater poetic effects.

Sonnet 30 is a typical Shakespearean sonnet that consists of three quatrains with a concluding couplet. Each line comprises ten syllables which can be divided into five iambic feet, with a few variations. The rhyme scheme is abab cdcd efef gg. Use of alliteration and assonance contributes a lot to the musical quality of the poem. For instance, the very first line repeats the 's' sound in successive words such as – *sessions of sweet silent* (line 1). Other examples are to be found in: *death's dateless, love's long* etc. In line 4, the poet deliberately uses assonance to refer to the past losses: *old woes new wail*. Examples of Elision are to be found in : *th'expense* (line 8), *o'er* (line 10).

Grammatical/ Syntactic Features:

The language of poetry is a peculiar one for its variations in grammatical and syntactical levels. It is a departure from the traditional usage that may be found in subject, verb, object/complement in the standard norms. The arrangement of the sentences depends on the motive of the poet. This choice may reflect what he intends to achieve in the composition. The structure of the sentences is examined under the following groups: nominal groups, verbal groups, adjectival groups and adverbial groups. A group may be defined as consisting of one or more words that occupy a grammatical structure (Halliday, 1961:253). The verbal group (VG) may consist of one or more verbs in the construction. This may range from simple verbal groups to the complex verbal groups. The poet makes reference to both the present and past physique of the persona: *I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought* (line 3). This line reflects the poet's present state of sorrow for those things that he sought. The verbal groups are 'sigh' and 'sought'. Other examples of VG that states both the present and the past are to be found in: *Then can I drown an eye (unused to flow); And weep afresh love's long since cancelled woe; Which I new pay, as if not paid before* etc. These multiple sentences are, however, meaningful through the use of coordinating conjunctions such as: but, and, as well as pronouns, auxiliaries etc. Effective use of 'parallelism' is another syntactic feature of sonnet 30. For example, *Which I new pay, as if not paid before* (line 12); *All losses are restored, and sorrows end* (line 14).

Lexical Analysis

A poet is very much conscious in selecting words out of enormous stock to produce the desired effect. Poets can bind and break existing words and word formations, and create new ones even. So the study of lexis of a given poem, with the help of linguistic tools, is of great importance and a source of pleasure too. In this connection, 'stylistics of words' or lexical stylistics explores the expressive resources available in the vocabulary of a language. It will investigate the stylistic implications such phenomena as 'word-formation', 'synonymy', 'ambiguity', 'the contrast between vague and precise', 'abstract and concrete', 'rare and common terms', 'use of foreign words' etc. The study of imagery also will occupy a prominent place at this stage of style analysis.

Sonnet 30 is remarkable for the use of lexical items from different registers. It contains words from the register of law such as *sessions*, *summon up*, *cancelled* etc. A few financial terms like *loss*, *th'expense*, *pay* etc. are to be found effectively used by the poet to draw the immediate attention of the readers.

Semantic Analysis

Poets not only play with words but catch readers' attention with mesmerising effects in meaning too. They can create a world of wonder and unbelief with the words taken from common sources to make readers ponder for a while. At first sight, a reader may be shocked at the meaning of a phrase or a line or the whole poem that seems to be unnatural and absurd. But a close and careful interpretation of the same will take him to the deeper meaning where the aesthetic pleasure lies. According to W. B. Yeats, an irrational element was present in all great poetry.

The central theme of the sonnet is the poet's pervasive sense of loss: *I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,/And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste:/Then can I drown an eye, unused to flow,/For precious friends hid in death's dateless night. . .* Looking back on his life, the poet regrets his failure to achieve many things he wanted, including the loss of years in the attempt to achieve those things. In lamenting the loss of friends, he uses the fairly conventional metaphor comparing death to an endless night : *friends hid in death's dateless night* (line 6). The simple fact of remembering his losses, moreover, recalls them to his mind, which causes new torment--"and weep afresh love's long since cancell'd woe"--and, with the word *cancell'd*, the poet begins an extended metaphor comparing his loss of the past to monetary losses. The accounting metaphor is the more obvious comparison: "cancell'd woe," "expense of many a vanish'd sight," "woe to woe tell oe'r," "sad account," "which I new pay," and "all losses are restored." These are the terms of commerce, of banking, of accounting--as if the losses can be managed as one manages a monetary account. "Dear time's waste," an emphasized phrase because of its three consecutive accented syllables, may mean a single missed opportunity, a misspent lifetime, or a squandering of valuable time; the reader is left to decide whether time was wasted inside or out of the courtroom.

Conclusion: It is the role of a teacher to motivate students to enjoy the teaching-learning process by giving opportunities of active participation. Generally, students feel uninteresting in a class of poetry because of the absurdities and irregularities of the poetic language that contrast with the standard norms at all the linguistic levels. Hence, a teacher's success depends on his ability to help students to approach a poem with a critical frame of mind. New dimensions are being opened to literary critics through the application of stylistics in criticism. In fact, stylistics does help a reader to approach a literary text with a critical frame of mind. In the teaching-learning process of literature, particularly poetry, it is essential for a teacher to refer to the linguistic features, without better realization of which the aesthetic pleasure can never be achieved.

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