



Stylistics Approach to Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard"

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Abstract:

Stylistics is an approach which concerned with styles and techniques used in literary text. It deals literature with an artistic and aesthetic point of view. This paper attempts a stylistics approach to Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" and explores some foregrounded features. Moreover, this paper studies the different levels of stylistics analysis which include the level of phonology, semantic, syntax and graphology and identifies the various devices used at different level.

Keywords: Style, Stylistics Approach, Thomas Gray, Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.

Introduction

Stylistics is the scientific study which investigates how the readers interact with the language of the text in order to explain it or how we understand any literary piece. The stylistics approach is a method for examining literary works, that emphasizes the linguistic characteristics of the text, including word selection, sentence organization, and the application of literary devices. Stylistics is essential in teaching literature as it aims to enhance the reader's interpretative skills rather than to rely solely on the explicit meaning (<https://www.coursesidekick.com/linguistics/3718198>).

Stylistics examines language as more than just symbols by analysing those symbols to uncover various layers of meaning and how this meaning is communicated most effectively. Essentially, it can be regarded as the analysis of literature through the lens of language. Stylistics aids in understanding the function of language within literature, serving as a thorough approach for analysing the text (Tahmasebi, 2019).

Poetry within literature is composed of verse stanzas, defined by its concentrated language where carefully selected words possess suggestive power and meaning, incorporating metre, rhyme, and various figures of speech (Ufot, 2013). The usage of figurative language aims to enhance the beauty of expressions or phrases in poetry. In other words, figurative language consists of techniques that produce effects which exceed the limitations of literal language (Adha, 2024). "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" by Thomas Gray employs literary devices to illustrate the central themes of mortality and social status of the poem and

establishes the contemplative tone throughout the poem (<https://www.studysmarter.co.uk/explanations/english-literature/american-poetry/elegy-written-in-a-country-churchyard/>).

The stylistics analysis of the poem, “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” can be done through various level:

- a. Phonological level
- b. Semantic level
- c. Syntactic level
- d. Graphological level

A. Phonological Level

Phonology is a branch of linguistics that concerned with the structure of sounds and sound system. In stylistics the phonological level covers the analysis of style of sounds in literary text which include rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, anaphora etc.

Rhyme is the repetition of identical or similar sound in combination of words. Dissevering and consolidating are two main functions of rhyme. Gray’s “Elegy Written in Country Churchyard” consists of 32 alternating rhymed four-lined stanzas or heroic quatrains on ABAB rhyme scheme (<https://faculty.uobasrah.edu.iq/uploads/teaching/1683794755.pdf>).

Meter is the recurrence, in regular units, of a prominent feature in the sequence of speech sounds of a language. Iambic pentameter quatrains are used in the poem which means five iambs (an iamb is a two-syllable foot where an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed syllable) per line (Abrams & Harpham, 2015).

Alliteration is the recurrence of an initial consonant sound in two or more words. Functions of alliteration are to consolidate effect to impact a melodic effect to the utterance (Abrams & Harpham, 2015). The mood created with the repetition of certain sounds shifts throughout the poem:

- a. The repetition of both the /p/ and /w/ sounds (in line 3): “The plowman homeward plods his wearway.”
 - b. The repetition of the /s/ sound in “And all the air a solemn stillness” (line 6).
 - c. The repetition of the plosive /p/ and /g/ in “The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow’r” (line 33)
 - d. “The paths of glory lead but to the grave” (line 36),
 - e. The sound of /l/ in “Or wak’d to ecstasy the living lyre”. (line 48)
- (<https://www.thomasgray.org/texts/poems/elcc>)

Onomatopoeia refers to words that sound exactly or almost exactly like the thing they represent. Many words that we use for animal or machine noises are onomatopoeia. This type of word helps us to imagine the story or scene that happening in the poem. Onomatopoeia is used primarily to depict the active state of nature and

the way it intersects with human life (Ufot, 2013). The following line is an example from the poem that shows use of onomatopoeia:

- a. “The swallow twitt’ring from the straw-built shed,
The cock’s shrill clarion, or the echoing horn” (line 19–20). (<https://www.thomasgray.org/texts/poems/elcc>)

B. Semantic Level

Semantics is the study of the meaning of the language, such as sentence meaning or phrase meaning. Semantic level of stylistics analysis examines the meaning of the text which goes beyond the words, phrases, sentences, or even paragraphs towards an entire idea (Manquosh & Al-Wadhaf). The stylistics analysis of the poem at semantic level include:

Personification describes inanimate objects and abstract notions are spoken of as having life and intelligence (Abrams & Harpham, 2015). In the following examples, it can be found in the underlined words that inanimate object and abstract notions are spoken of as having life:

- a. “The curfew tolls the knell of parting day” (line 1)
b. “And all the air solemn stillness holds” (line 6)
c. “Let not Ambition mock their useful toil” (line 29)
d. “The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow’r, (line 33-36)
And all that beauty, all that wealth e’er gave,
Awaits alike th’ inevitable hour
The paths of glory lead but to the grave”
e. “Chill Penury repress’d their noble age.” (line 51)
f. “Fair science frown’d not on his humble birth, (line 119-120)
And Melancholy mark’d him for her own” (<https://www.thomasgray.org/texts/poems/elcc>)

Hyperbole is a statement which made emphatic by overstatement (Abrams & Harpham, 2015). The following lines show overstatement:

- a. “He gave to Mis’ry all he had, a tear’ (line 123)
b. “Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire” (line 46) (<https://www.thomasgray.org/texts/poems/elcc>)

Euphemism is a figure of speech that uses polite expressions with the aim of not offending people (Abrams & Harpham, 2015). In the poem, euphemism can be found in:

- a. “Each in his narrow cell for ever laid” (line 15)
b. “No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed” (line 20)
c. “Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth” (line 117) (<https://www.thomasgray.org/texts/poems/elcc>)

Metaphor is “a word or expression that in literal usage denotes one kind of thing is applied to a distinctly different kind of thing, without asserting a comparison” (Abrams & Harpham, 2015). The following lines are few examples which show the use of metaphor:

- a. “No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.” (line 20)
- b. “Along the cool sequester'd vale of life” (line 75)
- c. “The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.” (line 16)
- d. “Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
Nor cast one longing, ling'ring look behind?” (line 87-88)
- e. “Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.” (line 55-56)

Allusion is “a passing reference, without explicit identification, to a literary or historical person, place, or event, or to another literary work or passage” (Abrams & Harpham, 2015). The main allusions in “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” appear:

- a. “Some village-Hampden, that with dauntless breast
The little tyrant of his fields withstood;
Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,
Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood.” (lines 57-60)

Here, the speaker alludes to three historical figures involved in the English Civil War: the statesman John Hampden, the poet John Milton, and the authoritarian ruler Oliver Cromwell (<https://faculty.uobasrah.edu.iq/uploads/teaching/1683794755.pdf>).

C. Grammatical/Syntactic Level

Syntax is a branch of linguistics that studies the combination of words and morphemes to form larger units such as phrases and sentences. In other words, it deals with the internal structure of sentences and the interrelationships among the internal parts. It is concerned with grammar and how words are arranged to form sentences. When analyzing the syntax, readers must focus on the devices: through the use of elliptical construction (ellipsis), through the use of inversion and detachment, repetition by using anaphora etc. (Manquosh & Al-Wadhaf).

Inversion is reversing of subject and predicate and it can be found in the following lines of the poem:

- a. “How jocund did they drive their team afield!” (line 27)
- b. “Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest” (line 59)
- c. “Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth” (line 117)
- d. “Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere” (line 121)
- e. “Now fades the glimm'ring landscape on the sight” (line 5)
- f. “Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield” (line 25)
- g. “Oft have we seen him at the peep of dawn” (line 98) (<https://www.thomasgray.org/texts/poems/elcc>)

Enjambment is a literary device where a sentence or phrase runs over from one line to the next without a terminal punctuation mark. This technique creates a sense of continuation and fluidity, drawing readers to the next line to complete the thought and it enhances the flow of thoughts and reflects the uninterrupted

continuation of natural processes (<https://litdevices.com/enjambment/>). In the following line enjambment is used by the poet:

- a. “The next with dirges due in sad array
Slow thro’ the church-way path we saw him borne.” (line 113-114)

Repetition—the repetition of “How”—conveys the speaker's admiration for the forefathers' lives in:

- a. “How jocund did they drive their team afield!
How bow'd the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!” (line 27-28)
(<https://www.thomasgray.org/texts/poems/elcc>)

D. Graphological Level

Graphological level of stylistics analysis plays an important role in directing the meaning of the text. It deals with spelling, punctuation marks, capitalization, italicization, paragraphing, spacing etc. (Murad & Amin, 2020 & Manquosh & Al-Wadhaf, 2021). Some of the lines for this level from Gray's “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” are:

- a. “Let not Ambition mock their useful toil” (capitalization, line 29)
b. “Or heap the shrine of Luxury and Pride” (capitalization, line 71)
c. “And read their history in a nation's eyes,
Their lot forbade: nor circumscribed alone” (paragraphing, line 64-65)
(<https://www.thomasgray.org/texts/poems/elcc>)

Conclusion

Stylistics is an area where literary texts can be understood and interpreted. It can be done through graphological to grammatical and to phonological to semantic realm of literary text. Unlike many other poets, Gray has a different way of using words and style of writing to express his emotions in his poem, “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (Sharma, 2019). After analysing the poem at different stylistics level and quoting sample lines from the poem for each style, it is needless to say that the tools and techniques used by the poet did more to express the theme than the external form of the poem. The foregrounded features of the poem are largely appropriate to its themes and these activities make Gray's “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” ‘more of a contemplative poem rather than a traditional elegy’ (Ufot, 2013).

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