

## A Stylistic Approach to Teaching Literature at the College Level

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### Abstract

The paper studies the importance and relevance of the stylistic approach to analyze a literary text at the college level. Our classrooms are based on the lecture method where teachers play the main role and the students sit merely as listeners. Whereas, if we adopt a stylistic approach to the teaching of literature, the students will get the participatory role as they will be taught to interact, examine and evaluate the language of the text to interpret the meaning acquired intuitively using the linguistic features and literary theories. This will help them understand the role of language in literature and they will be able to appreciate the artistic use of language from their own point of view. A stylistic analysis of a literary text would help the students enhance their communicative competence as they would be directly working on the foreign language which is a method far apart from the traditional ways of memorization and reproduction. When the students will learn to analyze the text from their own point of view, they will also learn to experiment with the language in everyday life. The paper concludes with suggestions how stylistic approach can be introduced in a literature class where students do not have a formal study of linguistic and stylistics.

**Key words:** Stylistics, Literary, Approach, Criticism, Pedagogy, Literature.

### Introduction

Literary criticism is an important aspect of literary studies. A post graduate students who is called a master in subject, must know how to analyse a piece of literature. Stylistics provides a student a systematic and logical approach. The traditional classroom allows students to paraphrase and summarise while at the college level a student must learn to critically appreciate a literary work. Stylistic functions as a tool to study various perspectives of the author and

analyzes the features of literary language to develop students' sensitivity to literature. Stylistics is concerned with the choices that are available to a writer, and the reasons why particular forms and expressions are used rather than others (Tungesh, 2011). Stylistic is a language based approach. Stylistics is part of a language-based approach to using literature to make meaningful interpretations. Roshan stated that Stylistics, having to do largely with style, is a discipline concerned with the study of language of literature. It is the study of language as art. As the study of style, it seeks to examine the expressive and suggestive devices which have been invented in order to enforce the power and penetration of speech. In words of Shibu Simon, Stylistics by defining literary studies as a linguistic subject provides a way of integrating the two subjects, English Language and English Literature which are commonly taught in isolation one from the other. It studies literary works as kinds of discourse and enquires into the communicative potential of the language concerned.

### **Pedagogical Aspects of Stylistics**

A Stylistics approach teaches students how to look for and interpret stylistic dimensions of a text. Students are made to learn how what is said is said and how meanings are made. They are taught to know what makes the language of literature different from everyday language, if it really is. The environment of our classes at the college level is lecture-based where teacher remains at the helm of affairs and students are demanded to be patient listeners, which makes them hardly participative.

### **Advantages of the Stylistic Approach**

If we adopt the stylistic approach to teach literature at the college level, it will help the students understand the role of language in literature. Language is made up of words, structures and sentences and literature is made up of these words, structures and sentences. Literature is language in its applied form and prepares a basis for the study of language through various points of view. Every piece of literary writing is different from the other. They have similarities but are never identical. Every piece of literature is unique with own peculiarities. Therefore, literature offers as many models or varieties of language just as we many writers. How the writers use the same limited set of sounds with a variety of words, structures, syntax and collocations – set the platform for the stylistic analysis of a particular task.

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Students at the college level must be taught to recognize and focus on the style markers used by the authors in their works which contribute to the effect of the work. A style marker may be recognized intuitively, or with the help of critics who have analyzed the text and identified various style markers used by the authors. Thus stylistics offers some critical and *creative* ways of looking at a work under study. Students will develop a sense of appreciation as well as acumen.

Students should be motivated to recognize intuitive responses to a text which are central to the process of reading and re-reading the text, thus helping them develop their own communicative competence as reading is the silent exposure of the self to the language. Intensive and extensive reading of a literary text enables the students infer more than one meaning and it helps them to understand how to make the use of the target language in everyday contexts. It is very much essential for the learners learning English as a second or a foreign language who most of the time remain less informed of the culture and practices of the native speakers/writers of the target language. Our students remain busy in merely memorizing answers for the questions based on the works or the authors to reproduce them in their examination rather than learning how to bring out the aesthetic element of a particular piece of art. It has become a malpractice among the college students to pick up readymade material available in the form of guidebooks in the market. These guidebooks may not provide the students with the authentic material, yet these are very popular among a large number of college students. The stylistic approach will make learning of language an interesting task as students work upon their own intuition, background knowledge and experience of the language. They will learn to appreciate the artistic use of language and enhance their own communicative competence.

### **The Stylistic Approach**

The stylistic approach incorporates a close reading of its literature contrary to the traditional ways of memorization and reproduction. It can prove to be the best method to learn a foreign language through stylistic approach as it would give a close view of the target language. They will learn to relate a piece of literary writing to their own experience of language and consequently extend their experience. Literary analysis through stylistic approach encourages in

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students the ability to infer meanings by interacting with the text. The stylistic approach demands a close reading and re-reading of a literary text by the students. A close reading and re-readings of a literary text would help the students internalize the rules of the grammar of the target language indirectly. They would be learning language through literature and this is basic aim of teaching literature of any language.

T.S. Eliot advocated that the ‘form’ of the literary text should itself interpret its ‘content’. Following this view, one could interpret the content without any reference or context. This can only be achieved if the students are taught how to study the ‘form’ of the literary text. A study of the ‘form’ of the literary text would intimate the student about the diction of the author. The knowledge of the selection of words, punctuation, parenthesis, or metrical patterns would enable students to study the work in depth and give an individual interpretation. Such an analysis would invite the creativity on the part of the students and studying literature would no longer be mindless memorizing exercises to pass the examination.

### **Stylistics as Applied Linguistics**

Stylistics is regarded as applied linguistics and teaching of literature at the college/university level can be regarded as applied stylistics as students are basically taught to interpret or analyze a literary text using stylistic features. The stylistic approach provides an objective basis for interpretation of a literary text. It works like a scientific tool and fixes some standards on which the students can test any piece of literature. The learners when study the text from the stylistic approach, experience the work with a totally new insight as they work on their intuition. They build their own hypotheses based on certain facts or features related to the particular text and may reach to new findings or a new interpretation. This approach helps them to know how the language works and transmit arbitrary meanings. The literary work becomes the only object to experiment with and find out more than one meaning using their own intuition. The benefit of this approach is that the teacher becomes a facilitator whereas the text and the students become the prominent elements of research/analysis which provides new results.

### **Different from the Traditional Approach**

Thus, the stylistic approach establishes the stylistic character of the text, as a result of which 'stylistic method of analyzing the text and metalanguage used for the purpose become more powerful, precise and brighter in many respects than we do in the traditional frame'. Through the stylistic approach, students can identify the discursive and expressive language. Discursive language is code-centered, identified in terms of relationships between components of the text, while literary language is message-centered, understood strictly in terms of the relationship between components of the message. Denotative as well as connotative meanings are brought to light by using the stylistic method.

Teaching language through literature to second or foreign language learners through stylistic approach presents the teachers and the students as dynamic and informed readers.

### **Problems:**

#### **The Students' Perspective**

Lecture-based classrooms leave little room for the students to participate and play an active role in the classroom. In the traditional literature classroom, teachers still love to talk more of the literature or the author or the critics than of the text. The aim of studying literature is thus lost. Students try to comprehend the literary works as their teachers understood them and do not become independent learners. They do not get an opportunity to interact with the piece of art and study it from innovative perspectives to find new meanings. Every piece of art should be presented to them as an independent case study so that students can learn to experiment with the language.

#### **The Teachers' Perspective**

The biggest problem the teacher faces in an English literature class is that most of the students lack required exposure to English language. They can neither speak nor read English fluently. This results in poor reading and lack of reading habit. They remain totally indifferent from the learning aspect of the language. At the same time, most of the teachers are not equipped to adopt this approach to teach literature in the class. They lack competence as they are also coming from the same system where they have not studied linguistics and phonetics.

## Examination and Evaluation Procedure

In most of our universities, the old pattern of asking detailed questions ( any five out of 10-12 questions) is continue, which is obsolete and should have been discarded by now. This system only encourages them to run to the unauthentic study material available on every nook and corner in the market reading of which is just like killing the soul of an artistic piece. These guide books help them to clear their examination with good percentage. That is why they deliberately remain indifferent from serious study of literature for the sake of language learning or interpretation of a literary work. Literature cannot be taken for granted. This attitude and practice needs immediate reformation as has already been adopted by many renowned universities.

## How Can We Do It

Of course, it is a difficult task to teach students a stylistic analysis of literary text, because they do not have any background in linguistic, phonetics or metrical patterning, but it is not impossible. This approach can be brought to the classroom by using the technique of foregrounding, a technique effectively used in advertisements. Foregrounding is aesthetically purposeful when it vitally influences interpretation. The foregrounding can be applied to a literary text through various methods such as Linguistic Deviation and Parallelism.

## Linguistic Deviation

**‘A day Ago’ / ‘a week ago’ / ‘a month ago’** / show the normal paradigm. But when the poet uses **‘a grief ago’**, it shows an abnormal paradigm which has stylistic and semantic variations. **‘A’** the definite article shows that it is placed with a countable noun which can be pluralized. The post modifying adverb **‘ago’** would normally modify a noun which goes with **time**. **‘Grief’** is a word denoting to **emotion**. Thus by using this abnormal paradigm, the poet wants to stand out with a different and specific meaning which has a psychological appeal for the reader.

## Parallelism

Foregrounding is a stylistic device to study the literary texts and is achieved by the repetition of the lexical items or the grouping of words from the same area of association in a

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text. In this method, there is a great possibility that some linguistic features may vary, while others are constant. The following example can be studied for parallelism.

*I kissed thee ere I killed thee* (v, ii, 357, *Othello*)

The above line consists of two clauses linked by *ere*. These two clauses are parallel to each other. The words ‘I’ and ‘thee’ are repeated. The words ‘kissed’ and ‘killed’ are both verbs and have phonetic and orthographic similarity. The word initial sound /k/ in both the words is followed by the /i/ sound. The word final sound /t/ and /d/ share two out of three distinctive phonemic features – i) they are both plosives, ii) they are both alveolar sounds. Only one feature makes the difference: /t/ is voiceless and /d/ is voiced. Thus, we find phonetic parallelism via alliteration (repeated word initial sound and the similarity of the word final sound) and via assonance (the repeated /i/ vowel). Both are monosyllabic words with same structure, i.e., CVCC. These two, opposite to each other words, are specific to interpret the theme of *Othello* - *kissed* corresponds to the love theme of the play whereas *killed* corresponds to the hate or jealousy. *Kissed* and *killed* in English are not antonyms, but *love* and *hate* are. So, it can be interpreted that by using two clauses parallel to each other, Shakespeare tried to bring out two opposite themes.

### **Orthographic Deviation**

Orthographic Deviation includes spellings and punctuation as well. William Blake uses ‘Tyger’ from old English in place of the common spellings in modern English ‘Tiger’. This shows that his deviation from the norm is intentional. He wants to describe his animal different from others and as mysterious too. Mysterious in a sense that past is always full of mysteries.

Deviation in punctuation can be understood by reading the title of the essay by Virginia Woolf ‘How One Should Read A Book?’ Virginia Woolf has intentionally started her essay by using a question mark at the end of the title of the essay. The central idea of the essay is how one should read a book cannot be suggested and why one should read a book decides how he should read the book.

Besides, the author can use morphological deviations using various affixes or using unusual collocations.

### **Syntactic Deviation**

Syntactic Inversion is a common device used for foregrounding in a literary text. e.g.

*With candles and with lanterns  
Throwing giant scorpion shadows  
on the sun-baked walls  
they searched for him: he was not found.*  
(*Night of the Scorpion* by Nissim Ezekiel)

The normal structure would be ‘They searched for him with candles and with lanterns throwing giant scorpion shadows on the sun-baked walls.’ But the poet might have used the device of syntactic inversion for emphasis. By stating how the villagers are searching for the scorpion, he is able to create the visual imagery, which brings the reader nearer to the environment of the village. This sentence is followed by another sentence with the subject-verb-object structure. It shows that villagers were roaming here and there to look for the scorpion and returning to the same place and saying that ‘we looked for it all over but could not find him anywhere.’

### ***Repetition***

Repetition of sounds or of words and phrases is another technique used to produce emphasis. For example, in *The Rocking Horse Winner* (a short story by D.H. Lawrence), the sentence ‘There should be more money’ has been used repeatedly and while reading the story it leaves an impact on the mind of the reader and depicts the central theme also.

It is concluded that stylistic analysis of a literary text is valuable for students as it helps them relate a piece of literary writing to their own experience of language and consequently extend that experience. A stylistic approach, thus, suggests that the technical aspects of the language of a literary piece, for example, grammatical structures, should be analysed and on the

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basis of the data availed from the description, meaning/s of the text should be interpreted. These technical accounts help the students to know how meanings are made and he or she feels independent to make judgements himself or herself rather than believing on what the teacher says. But it should be restricted to be used as a contributing factor not as a controlling factor to analyse a text, else it can degenerate into mechanical listing of linguistic features. The data produced after the analysis should be used to show that literature is not mystical creation done by any writer which at times becomes ambiguous to be understood by the reader, rather it is a part of the common discourse usually taken by human beings for various communicative purposes.

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