

## Teaching stylistics through E. E. Cummings poetry

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### **Abstract**

Teaching stylistics is both enchanting and challenging. Many students come to stylistics having studied English and American literature, but it demands a very different set of skills. Analyzing a text stylistically is unlike doing a 'literary' analysis, as it needs to be much more objective and rooted in fact. The main aim of a stylistics analysis is to explain how the literary structure of a text creates the feelings and responses that we get when we read it.

I have chosen E. E Cummings poetry since it is considered as interesting as tricky at the same time. One of the most important stylistics techniques used there is foregrounding and, moreover internal foregrounding. Foregrounding refers to a form of textual patterning which is motivated specifically for literary-aesthetic purposes. The aim of this paper is to introduce a model of a stylistics analysis as already being discussed with the students who I teach stylistics. We will focus on the results we reached by the use of the interesting techniques of foregrounding and inner foregrounding.

**Keywords:** *stylistics, poetry, analysis, foregrounding, inner foregrounding.*

### **Introduction**

Thinking and rethinking several times about the way to start this paper, I came across this remark of Widdowson (Stylistics contemporary criticism: An Anthology, 1989, pp. 156-157):

*The purpose of literary stylistics is to investigate how the resources of a language code are put to be used in the production of actual messages. It is concerned with patterns of use in given texts... it aims to characterize texts as pieces of communication.*

In this way, it is stylistics, which treats literature as discourse or as a form of communication. This approach specifically shows how the use of language patterns in the text creates a form of communication that conveys a certain message.

When trying to interpret or to critically evaluate a piece of poetry, certain stylistics devices are used. One of the latest developments when talking about stylistics devices is foregrounding, as defamiliarisation or deviation from the norms. The most important examples of this kind of illustration are E. E. Cummings poems, one of which will be the object of analysis of this paper.

## **Review of Stylistics**

Simpson described stylistics as the practice of using linguistics for the study of literature. “Stylistics evolved from practical criticism as a methodology which attempted to bring about objectivity and rigor in the analysis of literature” (Simpson, 2004, p. 3). He also, extended the notion by stating that stylistics was a method of enquiry, which was “rigorous,” “replicable,” and “retrievable” (ibid). In other words, stylistic analysis is precise and objective; it can be taught and learnt.

Stylistics brought about a democratization of principles of analysis along with intellectual vigor thereby ensuring that all students of literature had access not just to the aesthetics of the literary form but also to the hermeneutics of interpretation. The essential difference between literary stylistics and linguistic stylistics lies in the shift on emphasis on different aspects of the text. With literary stylistics, it is the literary element that takes primacy of place; on the other hand, with linguistic stylistics, the text becomes a model of language amenable to linguistic analysis for the furtherance of linguistic theory (Carter & Simpson, 1989, p. 4).

For Fish (Is there a text in this class?: The authority of interpretive communities., 1980, p. 28), stylistics is the means of making the effect of literature on the reader explicit and he calls the examining of the transformation of experience “affective stylistics.” It is interesting to note that for Fish, the reader response is an integral element in engaging with a literary text and that a text, in and of itself, does not exist per se without being read, imposing several variations in the reading and interpretations of texts.

For Short (Exploring the language of poems, plays, and prose. , 1996, p. 61), precisely because of its attention to detail and its linguistic rigor, stylistics proves to be complementary to literary criticism. The blurred and inexact nature of literary criticism is injected with a healthy dose of stylistic analysis to bring about an enrichment and insight into a text and its interpretation. In order to comprehend and evaluate the success of instruction of/in stylistics, it is found necessary to conduct an empirical

study. I chose foregrounding and inner foregrounding, as nice stylistic devices for the interpretation of literary texts of a special type. The best representative for the analysis concerning these two devices is e. E. E. Cummings and his poetry. By no surprise, he prefers and uses small letters to write his name and surname, a fact, which he repeats in his poems, which lack capitalization, punctuation and deviate from grammatical and lexical norms.

### **Foregrounding and inner foregrounding.**

Foreground is a term usually used in art, having opposite meaning to background. It's a very general principle of artistic communication that a work of art in some way deviates from norms which we, as members of society, have learnt to expect in the medium used and that anyone who wishes to investigate the significance and value of a work of art must concentrate on the element of interest and surprise, rather than on the automatic pattern. Such deviations from linguistic or other socially accepted norms are labeled foregrounding, which invokes the analogy of a figure seen against a background (Leech G. N., *Linguistics*, p. 57).

In stylistics, the notion of foregrounding, Leech and Short use a term borrowed from the Prague School of Linguistics, (Leech & Short, 1981, p. 48) to refer to 'artistically motivated deviation'. The term foregrounding has its origin with the Czech theorist Jan Mukarovsky: it is how Mukarovsky's original term, *aktualisace*, was rendered in English by his first translator (Mukarovsky, 1932/1964). It refers to the range of stylistic effects that occur in literature, whether at the phonetic level (e.g., alliteration, rhyme), the grammatical level (e.g., inversion, ellipsis), or the semantic level (e.g., metaphor, irony). As Mukarovsky pointed out, foregrounding may occur in normal, everyday language, such as spoken discourse or journalistic prose, but it occurs at random with no systematic design. In literary texts, on the other hand, foregrounding is structured: it tends to be both systematic and hierarchical. That is, similar features may recur, such as a pattern of assonance or a related group of metaphors, and one set of features will dominate the others (Mukarovsky, 1964, p. 20), a phenomenon that Jakobson termed "the dominant."

On the other hand, inner foregrounding, also named as "deviation within deviation" is concerned with the writer's preference to disobey his own rules and forms. Generally speaking, at some point of his creative work, the writer tends not to respect his deviating from normal grammar, lexis,

punctuation, but instead he shows he knows how to use well-structured forms and techniques.

### **Foregrounding analysis of E. E. Cummings poem.**

*“next to of course god america i”* by E. E. Cummings

*next to of course god America i  
love you land of the pilgrims' and so forth oh  
say can you see by the dawn's early my  
country 'tis of centuries come and go  
and are no more what of it we should worry  
in every language even deaf and dumb  
thy sons acclaim your glorious name by gorry  
by jingo by gee by gosh by gum  
why talk of beauty what could be more beaut-  
iful than these heroic happy dead  
who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter  
they did not stop to think they died instead  
then shall the voice of liberty be mute?  
He spoke. And drank rapidly a glass of water*

The poem "next to of course god America i" alludes to the patriotism, the war, and sacrifice of a nation, namely the United States. It brings up the issues of what is a patriot and what is actually the norm of the average American citizen's response is to war and fighting? The writings style displays sort of a mocking tone of the patriotism of the United States. Analyzing the poem, one may understand that this poem is a satire; and this is clearly shown by a new satirical device...namely the use of allusive quotations or fragments of quotations, a technique that he learned from T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. But unlike Eliot or Pound he does not employ this technique for general cultural criticism, rather, he aims to produce real laughter by ridiculing his subjects (Kennedy, 1994, p. 71)

E. E. Cummings wrote the poem specifically in sonnet form so that he could emphasize the satire and mockery within the content because sonnets are mostly used for love poems. **The lack of punctuation marks and capitalization** with the exception of a single period, question mark and quotation marks from line one to thirteen pertains that the speaker is somewhat delivering a speech without restraint of words "spontaneous". Cummings leaves out all punctuation except the question mark at the end. Another interesting graphology problem is the adjective beautiful that is

divided in the middle between two verses, actually verses 9 and 10. Moreover, in the last line he also uses capitalization, different from all the previous lines. This is what is called "inner foregrounding," deviation within deviation or deviation from his own rules. The reader finds out who the speaker is in the last line. In other words, the absence of punctuation delivers a sense of rushness and excitement of the speaker to spontaneously express himself until line fourteen, when he drank a glass of water. Thus, the lack of punctuation that flows throughout the poem, and this line, which marks "his own deviation from his rules," is realized for the aim of making the frustration and tiredness of the reader end.

As far as **lexical foregrounding** is concerned, E. E. Cummings blasts the reader with a seemingly meaningless jumble of words. He does so just to engage the reader, capture his/her attention, and force his/her brain to begin to think and interpret what he is trying to convey. It is not casual, the fact that he chose to use words such as "by gorry, by jingo by gee by gosh by gum," all Latin roots of the word that roughly means "toy with the opponent" and chants that Romans yelled when they disagreed with the final decision. In this way he makes a parallelism with the gladiator's arena in ancient Rome.

Another important lexical deviation occurs with the successive adjectives that describe the dead in line 10 "heroic happy dead," Cummings praises the country for being glorious, but he almost criticizes the soldiers who rush headlong into war to defend it. He says they think not of honoring their country by any means but through war and death. He does not put down the soldiers because he calls them "heroic happy dead," he is just saying they need to think straighter and more realistically.

As far as **syntactic foregrounding**, we may observe that the adverb "rapidly" in line 14 occurs in a most unlikely position in this sentence. If we eliminate the necessity for rhyming the final word of the poem with the final word of line eleven ("slaughter"), since clearly the necessary rhyme could have been achieved without inverting the syntax ("And rapidly drank a glass of water"), then Cummings must have had some other reason for the inverted syntax. In a poem which expresses a theme of "inverted" or confused philosophy, E. E. Cummings, as persona, inverts his apparently objective commentary on the situation and the words in which he reports his commentary.

In short then, this syntactical inversion here at the end of the poem serves to indicate the similar transformation of the sonnet form which Cummings has effected in terms of form and further serves to point to the "inverted" philosophy of the speaker of lines one through thirteen.

**Semantic foregrounding** is another important element of discussion in E. E. Cummings poetry. He used devices such as metaphors and symbolism and within their layers, he concealed a beautiful poetry of protest, a satire of patriotism, American Politics and Imperialism; the lives are shattered by these three concepts and how it is exercised for the sake of national interests and love of country, America. It is clearly a poem about hidden rhetorics and lost meaning of liberty. Politicians use this tactic often and e. e. Cummings is satirically mocking them while simultaneously confusing the readers to a point of making them think there is a deep meaning behind what is behind said when there really isn't. He seems to be given a political speech criticizing those who launch war that is unnecessary for the country. He got tired and thirsty and thus needed a drink. The meaning of the title "next to of course god america" means the hierarchy of importance of an American, that next to God, is America, and next to America is yourself your individuality. But because all of them are in lowercase, it connotes the idea that regardless of hierarchy, these three should be on equal terms with i america and even god , he wants to reflect the inner feelings of the politician who believes himself better than God , America ,and other human beings .

One could also argue that he is making a sarcastic reply to one of the politicians. Because Cummings capitalizes the "H" in he in line 14 and not the "I" in i, in line 1 .Cummings is forcing the reader to focus equally on the guy's character and what he says. By capitalizing the He .and not doing the same thing with i america and even god, he wants to reflect the inner feelings of the politician who believes himself better than God, America, and other human beings. Naturally, we tend to focus more on what the meaning is in writing than the composition and character of the speaker. It is very contrasting in of itself. At the end, it says "He spoke. And drank rapidly a glass of water." This makes it clearer who the speaker actually is. Because he spoke rapidly and drank a glass of water, he has got more to say. Who else but politicians talk rapidly seeming nonsense and always have more to say?

## Conclusions

To conclude, stylistic approach points to the possibility of representing literary works not as totally different ways of using language, but as extensions of the way language is used in ordinary kinds of communication. Unlike in ordinary kinds of communication, the literary writer consciously creates language patterns over and above those, which

are required by the language code. This is what happens with two interesting stylistics devices: foregrounding and internal foregrounding. The first considered as a method of defamiliarisation, deviation from norms and rules previously set by linguists, and the later as deviation within deviation, in other words the writer`s capacity to violate his own deviations from the already fixed ones.

In the above analysis of the poem “next to of course god America i” by e. e. Cummings, we tried to put into practice the beneficial use of these two stylistics devices, by rendering the analysis and interpretation of poetry into another point of view. However, my final comment on this would be for the students who should not try to write and speak the way e. e. Cummings did in his poetry. Instead, they need to use a certain type of language that has the necessary traits as to be academically correct and precise.

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