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**Within and Without the Workings of Language in Literary Text
Explication: RE-reading William Blake's 'London'**

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Within and Without the Workings of Language in Literary Text Explication: RE-reading William Blake's 'London'

Abstract

Current trends in the teaching of Literature in English to English as a Second Language Learners show that emphasis is now on the development of the student's ability to manipulate literary texts. This paper examines factors within and without the workings of language in bringing students to the awareness that texts are malleable and that they can be manipulated in the process of meaning making. A Literature teacher who has knowledge of a wide range of possibilities of literary interpretation is better placed to carry students from a literal to an inferential level of comprehension of a text. Stylistics and literary criticism are prerequisites for the teacher's knowledge base. In the discussion, it will be made apparent that stylistics alone cannot address and exhaust literary concerns in a text but that it clears linguistic obstacles for the application of other forms of literary interpretation. 'London', a poem by William Blake (see Appendix) will be used to facilitate this discussion. In achieving the objectives of this paper, the application of literary stylistics and literary criticism on the poem chosen for this discussion should also offer a different perspective of looking at the poem. First, the paper will attempt a conceptualisation of stylistics and how it relates to literary criticism and to factors inherent in the reader in the explication and illumination of literary texts. A simple demonstration of the utility of stylistics and a discussion of its limitations will then ensue.

Key terms: Stylistics, Literary Criticism, Literal Comprehension, Inferential Comprehension, Text Explication

Conceptualisation of stylistics

Leech (1969:1) views stylistics as the use of language in Literature. Typically, stylistics concerns itself with looking at the linguistic workings of a literary work. Meaning is within and not without the language of a text. In addition, Widdowson (1975:3) views stylistics as a 'study of literary discourse from a linguistic orientation.' Here, Widdowson's definition precludes text illumination outside its linguistic confines. For Carter (1982:26),

'practical stylistics is a process of literary text analysis which starts from a basic assumption that the primary interpretation procedures used in the reading of a literary text are linguistic procedures.' In a foreword to Cummins and Simons (1983: vii – ix) Halliday explains that stylistics is concerned with showing 'why and how the text means what it does'. Conspicuous in the definitions above is the trivialisation of the writer and the historical and social milieu, among other aspects, that would enable the reader to manipulate a text in meaning making.

In further contribution to the linguistic orientation of stylistics, Buckledee (2002:9) contends that stylistics is a 'detailed systematic attention given to the analysis of language' in the study of Literature. It is important to note that meaning making, within the confines of language only, will keep the reader unmindful of other possibilities of literary interpretation. In this vein, complementary approaches are required to build a gamut of paraphernalia needed for the explication of texts. A discussion of the compatibility of stylistics, literary criticism and other possibilities is an attempt to demonstrate the complementary nature of these aspects as they will help the reader to interact with the text.

Stylistics and literary criticism

The main role of stylistics in its applications with literary criticism in studying texts is preparatory. Literary criticism should function effectively when it precedes an engagement with stylistics. Leech (1969:225) substantiates this compatibility by explaining the artificiality of drawing a line between stylistics and literary criticism. He contends that it is artificial to draw a clean line between linguistics and critical exegesis. For him 'stylistics is indeed, the area in which they overlap'. If this line were to be drawn, Leech, (1965:225) explains that he would draw it as follows:

The linguist is the man [or woman] who identifies what features in a poem need interpretation [that is] what features are foregrounded: and the literary critic is the man [or woman] who weighs up the different possible interpretations [outside language].

Leech clearly emphasizes the complimentary nature of stylistics and literary criticism. The compatibility of stylistics and literary criticism is made obvious. According to Widdowson (1975:4), 'the linguist is primarily concerned with the codes of language and interests himself with finding out how the text exemplifies the language'. Linguists will also find out 'if the text contains curiosities [or deviations] of usage and how these curiosities might be accounted for in grammatical terms.' The literary critic 'explains, interprets and evaluates literary writings as works of art and explicates

individual messages of the writer in terms which make its significance clear.'

Thomas, in Leech (1969:227), helps us to encapsulate the mediating role of stylistics by arguing that:

You can tear a poem apart to see what makes it technically tick, and say to yourself, when the works are laid out before you, the vowels, the consonants, the rhythms, 'Yes, this is it. This is why the poem moves so. It is because of the craftsmanship.' But you are back again where you began. You are back with the mystery of having been moved by words. The best craftsmanship always leaves holes and gaps in the works of the poem, so that something that is in the poem can creep, crawl, flash, or thunder.

It can be observed from the above contribution that stylistics is handy as an initial step to literary interpretation in laying the ground for other possibilities of literary interpretation to be effectively used.

Stylistics, literary criticism and factors inherent in the reader

As has been explained above, stylistics makes the text malleable to literary criticism. It should be observed, however, that there are other variables inherent in the reader himself or herself that hinder or facilitate illumination of texts. Without interplay of stylistics, literary criticism and these inherent variables, inferential comprehension is not facilitated. The reader has to be aware of his/her own cultural background and the background of the text, in other words, there should be congruence. Congruency can be seen in the context of a continuum. The extremities of the continuum can be seen as shifting from a very low congruence to a very high congruence. Failure of the reader to identify and adjust to the required level of congruence will mean that the text is inaccessible to the reader. The reader also has to allow interplay of personal experiences and the experiences in the text. Low interplay inhibits a gainful encounter with the text and conversely high interplay implies a rich encounter with the text.

The reader is expected to believe in the creative possibilities of the imaginative function of language, the artfulness of the text or its aesthetic value. Here the reader should suspend the now and allow himself or herself passage into the creative imagination of the writer.

Demonstration of a stylistic analysis

A reader who has knowledge of stylistic analysis may start by **isolating unfamiliar words**. Words such as ‘wander’ (line:1), ‘chartered’(line:1), ‘mark’(line:3) and , ‘woe’(line:4) can be isolated for the first stanza (refer to poem in appendix on pg 10). The isolation of unfamiliar words should be done for the whole poem. The purpose would be to try and **remove any inhibitions** to understanding by working out the contextual meanings of isolated words. Context clues can be identified but due to the complex nature of poetry, this might not be possible. It becomes imperative on the reader where possible to look up the words from a dictionary. The reader then selects meanings that are synonymous to those in the poem. This activity is exemplified below.

Example 1

‘Wander’ (line: 1) - roam, drift, meander, rove, stray, stroll, depart, deviate, digress, aimlessly go off tangent, loiter, talk nonsense

‘Chartered’ (line: 1) - commissioned, bonded, authorized, rented, leased, with title deeds

‘Mark’ (line: 3) - blemish, blot, bruise, dent, impression, scar, stain, badge, Insignia, emblem, denote, distinguish, discern, detects

‘Woe’ (line: 3) - adversity, affliction, agony, anguish, depression, misery, pain, tribulation

The words above only pertain to the first stanza. The isolation of words and their subsequent contextual explanations or looking up of meanings should be done for all the stanzas to ensure that there are no inhibitions to meanings resulting from unfamiliar lexis.

A careful examination of the words that are synonymous to those isolated from the poem should facilitate some insight into what these

words connote. To exemplify this, the word ‘wander’ is suggestive of the persona moving aimlessly ‘through each chartered street’ (line: 1) and marks an absence of an itinerary. The word ‘chartered’, which is repeated twice in the first stanza implies ownership protected by some laws. The streets and the Thames are protected by laws that seem to cut off the man and the infants who are crying in fear. The word ‘mark’ (line: 3) is repeated thrice in the first stanza but takes a new semantic shift each time it is used. The persona detects emblems of ‘weakness’ and ‘woe’ (line: 4). ‘Woe’ is a word that is often associated with pain and tribulation. Finding out the contextual meanings of words should be done for all the stanzas in the poem to remove obstacles to meaning making. Once that has been done, the reader can go on to **come up with a general statement** of the poem. In this case, one can make out the statement that the persona in the poem is describing London- the subject of the poem- as an unpleasant place especially for those who are not part of the chartered streets and the chartered Thames- probably, the poor and the disenfranchised street urchins.

Further stylistic analysis may lead one to the verbs and their tenses as exemplified below.

Example 2

Verb	Tenses
I Wander	simple present
Does flow	“
I Mark	“
I Hear	”
Appalls	”
Runs	”
Blasts	“
Runs	”
blights	”

The observation that is made, regarding the verbs and the tenses, is that they are all in their

simple present tense form. The simple present tense form gives one the impression that the situations obtaining in the poem transcend over time and make no difference whether they are seen today or the day after, there is perpetual ordeal and despondency.

Meaning making can further be aided by **isolating subjects** (nouns) and what is said about them. See the example below.

Subjects	What is said about the subjects
Street	-chartered, located near the chartered Thames
Thames	- chartered, flows
In every face	-there are marks of weakness and woe
In every cry of every man	-the mind forged manacles are heard
In every infant's cry of fear	manacles are heard
In every voice	manacles are heard
In every ban	manacles are heard
Chimney sweeper's cry	- every blackening church appalls
The hapless soldier's sigh	- runs in blood down palace walls
The youthful harlot's curse	- blasts the new infant's tear - Blights with plagues the marriage hearse

It can be observed that all the subjects are singular and all of them are concrete. This suggests that the persona in the poem is not sentimentalizing the situation in the poem. The predicament of the people in the poem is concretized. The people are living in fetters many of which are creations of the mind as suggested by 'mind forged manacles'. What is also of interest is the harlot who symbolizes rot and decay. Paradoxically, she berates the child's unrest, her motherhood has been defiled by the impoverished situation she finds herself in.

After isolating unfamiliar words and checking them in the dictionary as well as identifying verbs, their tenses and what is said about them, a **resolution** about the poem can be reached using the gathered information. The poet is

describing a town or city called London. Overall, there is moral decadence and suffering. There is a lot of manipulation that is suggested in the poem since psychological plunder subjects one to accepting a deprived position. There is no doubt in the readers' mind, at this point, that the poet is indicting society and is calling for social reform that will result in sensitivity to the needs of the wretched.

What has been done above is an attempt at a stylistic analysis to 'London' by William Blake. What follows now is a discussion of the limitations of stylistic analysis if it were to be considered in isolation as a tool for explicating and illuminating a literary text.

Limitations of stylistic analysis

Gower (1985:126) claims that 'stylistic analysis, instead of aiding [the reading of a text], impedes it. The argument Gower proffers is that 'stylistics does not treat a text as something [a reader] reads and something which has an effect [on the reader]. He argues that it does not follow that 'the greater our detailed knowledge of the workings of the language system, the greater our capacity for insightful awareness of the effects produced by the literary work'. He also adds that it does not follow that a principled analysis of language can be used to make our commentary on the effects produced in a literary work less impressionistic.

Perhaps Gower's preoccupation is the inadequacy that might be displayed by an English as a Second Language learner to be 'burdened by a look at the nuts and bolts – the grammar and vocabulary - of a language one is not competent in.' To Gower, the more a teacher focuses on the language as language form, the less the students' understanding on what is going on. This paper does not subscribe to this particular lack of appreciation for the mediatory role between linguistics and literary criticism. On the contrary, when a teacher engages students in a stylistic analysis of a poem, it is unlike the contrived grammar teaching situations where form is not married to content. When working on a stylistic analysis of a text, the language situation is not decontextualised. There is some interplay between form and

content that is of benefit to the student. To some extent a stylistic analysis of a text gives students a sense of purpose in working with language. It is anticipated that they would appreciate the fact that their understanding of the poem will depend very much on a stylistic analysis which would lead them on into the poem after removing linguistic inhibitions. This paper subscribes to the cautious approach by Leech (1969:226) that it is a fallacy that 'because poetry consists of language, the linguist, if he had enough leisure, could eventually give a complete explanation of poem'. He insightfully adds that 'to see how wrong this is, we merely have to reflect on how many kinds of knowledge apart from the knowledge of language, enter into the interpretation of ...poetry.'

Besides a stylistic analysis of 'London', much of the understanding of 'London' can depend on the personal background of the poet and the reading of other poems by Blake. Further understanding of 'London' can be influenced by the knowledge that Blake was a mystic and a visionary' and that his art was:

'marked by its objection to and outcry against restrictions on personal liberty and natural behavior, for its attacks on fetters of organized and traditional institutions, and attacks on social injustice, the slave trade in particular' (Martin, 1989:1).

Insight into the poem can be gained by a reading of poems contained in Songs of Experience and Songs of Innocence. In poems such as 'The Chimney Sweeper', 'The Little Black Boy' 'Earth's Answer', 'The Sick Rose' and 'The Garden of Love', issues of moral decadence and infringement on individual liberties pervade the poems, 'London' included.

More insight of the poem under discussion can be attained from an understanding of the social and political history obtaining at the time when Blake was writing since writers do not operate in a vacuum. Blake's work is much influenced by the Romantic age and the French revolution. The time in which Blake was writing was a time when writers sought to philosophize and

grapple with important issues that affected their societies.

Leech (1969:226) also explains that the interpretation of a poem can also depend on a knowledge of intellectual and moral systems, familiarity with literary traditions, conventional symbolism, and mythology. The list of other bodies of knowledge that could inform one on 'London' is not exhaustive. Given that there is interplay between stylistics, literary criticism and factors inherent in the reader, the inferential level of comprehension by students is likely to be very high. This paper finds the statement by Leech (1969:226) encapsulating as far as the utility of other bodies of knowledge is concerned. He rightly observes that 'scarcely any item of information on any subject can be ruled out as irrelevant to the understanding of poetry'.

Conclusion

The success of any literature teaching approach can only be measured by how independent students would be in interacting with a literary text. The aim is to demystify literary texts so that students can be brought to the awareness that texts are malleable and that they can be manipulated in the process of meaning making. Students can benefit from stylistics as it makes a work of art malleable to literary criticism. An interplay between stylistics, literary criticism and factors inherent in the reader facilitates inferential comprehension. What is within and without the workings of language in a text is critical for meaning making.

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Appendix

WILLIAM BLAKE

London

I wander thro' each chattered street,
Near where the chattered Thames does
flow,
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe,

In every cry of every man,
In every infant's cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind- forged manacles I here.

How the chimney sweeper's cry
Every blackening church appall;
And the hapless soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down palace walls.

But most through midnight streets I
hear
How the youthful harlot's curse
Blasts the new born infant's tear,
And blights with plagues the marriage
hearse.