

# The Interpretation of a Novel by Hemingway in Terms of Literary Stylistics

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## Abstract

*Literary stylistics is a discipline mediating between linguistics and literary criticism. Its object is to investigate thematic and aesthetic values generated by linguistic forms, values which convey the author's vision, tone and attitude, which increase the affective or emotive force of the message, which contribute to characterization and make fictional reality function more effectively in the thematic unity. The linguistic forms that attract analysts' attention are foregrounded ones or deviant. This paper tries to interpret the novel Cat in the rain of Hemingway by focusing on its deviation in nominal and verbal structures and repetition so as to reveal the theme of the novel.*

## Introduction

People are fond of literature and can be deeply moved by the hero's or the heroine's life of a novel or enchanted by the plot of a play. From what perspective or in what way do we appreciate or criticize the novel or the play? As we know, all aspects of literary experience are mediated through language. There is no other way of reading literature except through language in which they are composed. As Lodge (1966) puts it: "the novelist's medium is language: whatever he does, qua novelist, he does it in and through language." To bridge the appreciation of literary works with language is what literary stylistics does.

## Literary Stylistics

Literary stylistics is a discipline mediating between linguistics and literary criticism. Its concern can be simply and broadly defined as thematically and artistically motivated verbal choices (Shen Dan, 1995:19). In other words, its object is to investigate thematic and aesthetic values generated by linguistic forms, values which convey the author's vision, tone and attitude, which increase the affective or emotive force of the message, which contribute to characterization and make fictional reality function more effectively in the thematic unity. Leech et al (Leech & Short, 1981, p. 2) remark that "by making ourselves explain how a particular effect or meaning is achieved we understand better not just how it is achieved (which in itself is essential to the critical task of explanation) but also gain a greater appreciation of what the writer has created". This investigation progresses from linguistic forms to literary significance or interpretation. The question may be asked what particular linguistic features in a text are going to be relevant to interpretation. Analysts often restrict themselves to those features which, for some reason or other, attract some degree of foregrounding. Foregrounding is considered as the most basic feature in literary language and demarcation line between literature and non-literature. Short termed stylistics as "linguistically deviant, and therefore foregrounded." (Short, 1984).

The notion of foregrounding was first put forward by Mukrovsky of the Prague School. By foregrounding he means that "the aesthetic exploration of language takes the form of surprising a reader into a fresh awareness of, and sensitivity to, the linguistic medium which is normally taken for granted as an automatized background of communication." (Leech & Short, 1985, p. 28) He emphasizes that the

main manifestation of foregrounding is deviation. Later Halliday defines it as not only deviation from a norm but attainment of a norm.

## Deviation

Deviation is a departure from the norm, which is itself relative and hard to define. Norm can be that of a historical period, of a writer, or even the norm manifested in a text. But a creative writer can sometimes go outside the conventions of a language for special effects. Such deviations are external deviations because the norm is determined outside the text. As Widdowson argues: Literary discourse is characterized by the creation of language patterns over and above those which are required by the linguistic code and these patterns bestow upon the linguistic items within them certain meanings which, when fused with the signification these items have as code elements, constitute their unique semantic value. The application of rhetoric is a case in point. The following is an example:

*The rain set early in tonight,  
 The sullen wind was soon awake,  
 It tore the elm-tops down for spite,  
 And did its best to vex the lake. (Browning)*

The above poem violates the selection restrictions, giving the features of animacy (or / + animate /) to the noun 'wind' that is specified as inanimate (or /- animate /) in the language system. The personification of wind strikes the readers as unhappy, cruel and destructive.

Another example taken from *I Have a Dream*:

*But one hundred years later, we must face the tragic fact that the Negro is still not free.  
 One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination.  
 One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of vast ocean of material prosperity.  
 One hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land.*

In the poem, the main idea is foregrounded through parallel structures and the repetition of the phrase. Each of the four lines consists of the same adverbial phrase followed by an independent clause, all of which carry a similar contextual meaning. The first clause is the starting statement, which expresses the main idea of the passage. The following are the restatements, which effectively hammer at the main idea by repeating and emphasizing it in different words. Through the parallelism and repetition is the theme foregrounded.

Deviation can occur when the features of language within a text depart from the norms of the text itself: they may stand out against the background of what the text has led us to expect. This is the phenomenon of internal deviation. A case in point is Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. Against the background of Hemingway's more usual simplicity of style, a sudden variation in sentence complexity projects the culmination of the Old Man's battle with the fish. The unusually complex sentences convey a climatic frenzy of movement. Here we quote a characteristic passage to appreciate the contrast.

1. That way nothing is accomplished, he thought. His mouth was too dry to speak but he could not search for the water now. I must get him alongside this time, he thought. I am not good for many more turns. Yes you are, he told himself. You're good forever.
2. He took all his pain and what was left of his strength and his long-gone pride and he put it against the fish's agony and the fish came over onto his side and swam gently on his side, his bill almost touching the planking of the skiff, and started to pass the boat, long, deep, wide, silver and barred with purple and interminable in the water.

(Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*, illus edn pp. 84-87)

In the first passage, except the second sentence, which consists of two coordinative clauses introduced by 'but', all the sentences are simple ones. In contrast, the second passage is more complicated by being a coordinative sentence, which is made up of three clauses.

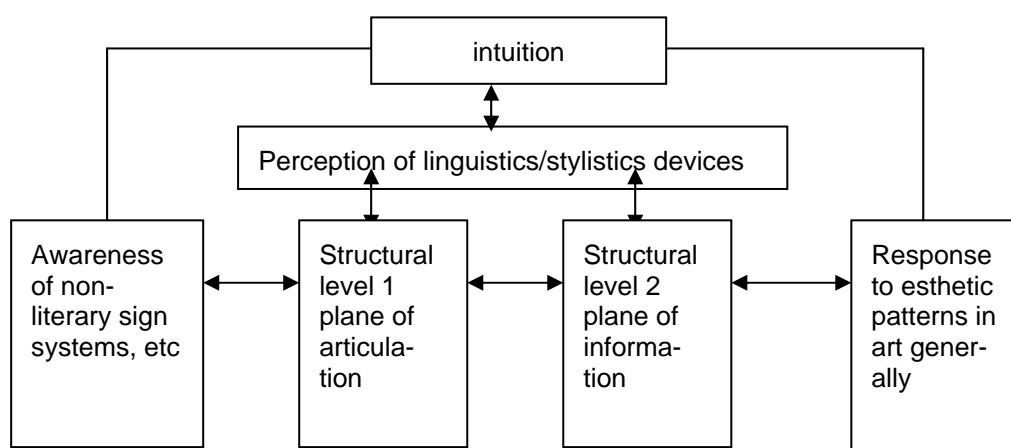
- a) He took all his pain and what was left of his strength and his long-gone pride

- b) he put it against the fish's agony
- c) the fish came over onto his side and swam gently on his side, his bill almost touching the planking of the skiff, and started to pass the boat, long, deep, wide, silver and barred with purple and interminable in the water

In the first clause, the verb 'took' is followed by three objects, with the second one being a nominal clause. The third clause is embedded with three verb phrases qualified by long adverbials. The complexity of the sentence structure is deviated from the simple norm of the story to foreground the hard struggle the Old Man confronted.

## The Process of Interpretation

As deviation has been illustrated, the discussion centers on the progression from linguistic forms to interpretation. The interpretative process of literary stylistics depends on interpretative experience and intuition. While it stresses close reading of the text and grounds the intuition on evidence, most stylisticians relate interpretation to language description. By reading the text repeatedly, they single out the linguistic features relevant to thematic significance and aesthetic effect and analyze them employing apparatus of linguistic description and then elucidate their literary significance. In such stylistic study, description and interpretation are inseparable. The linguistic features that are described are those, after being interpreted, artistically relevant, whereas the linguistic observation in its turn reinforces or modifies interpretation. The process is demonstrated by Nash in the figure (Nash, 1982, p. 113).



According to Nash, the reading of a prose text is a process of mutually supportive responses. Intuition is vital, but after the first impulses it does not continue to work unprompted. Further promptings come with the observation of linguistic/stylistic features which are marked by pairings, contrasts or some other method of foregrounding. Intuition is thus strengthened or modified, and is equipped to begin the definition of structural levels in the text. The discovery of one level involves the perception of another; and meanwhile the detection of linguistic features continues, supporting or qualifying the structural interpretation, guiding the intuition to further discoveries.

## The Interpretation of the Short Story *Cat in the Rain*:

*Cat in the Rain* tells a seemingly straightforward story of an American couple staying at a hotel in Italy. The wife looks out of the window of their hotel room, and sees a cat sheltering from the rain under a table. She goes down to get the cat. On her way out, she passes the hotel-keeper, a dignified old man, for whom she feels a great liking. The maid accompanies her outside with an umbrella. They look for the cat, but it has gone. Back in the hotel room, the wife complains to her husband. Yet the husband is indifferent to her complaints. The plot is very simple and straightforward but it produces complex effects. It brings into focus a rift or disorder in the relationship between husband and wife. It conveys a feeling of the American wife's frustration.

## Nominal Structure and Deviation

Generally, the majority of noun phrases consist of a head noun plus one or two of the optional elements, which assume a highly variable appearance form a single modifying word to a rather long passage of words that serve either as pre-modifiers or as post-modifiers. But in *Cat in the Rain*, one structure in particular—that of definite article and head—is largely repeated in nominal groups:

The hotel, the beach, the café, the square, the empty square

In this short paragraph of 198 words there are 27 such structures with the definite article. Obviously the writer goes outside the conventions of the language to create the effect of simplicity. This is why Hemingway's style is usually labeled as laconic, bare and simple, etc. We notice that our observations for the first paragraph hold for the remaining paragraphs in which such nominal structures are patterned across the whole text. For example:

*the umbrella, the cat, the door, the gravel path, the table, the maid, the hotel-keeper, the office, the doorway, the book, the padrone, the signora, the mirror, the bed, the dressing table, the square, the hand-glass and many others.*

These nominal groups are meant to produce an impression of "familiarity", which undoubtedly comes from the preponderant use of the definite article. It comes from knowing what is referred to. The use of the definite article makes the readers feel as if they were able to see what will happen. It needs no elaboration. Particularly in encountering "the room facing the sea", "the beach", "the palms", "the good weather", we feel we are faced with a typical scene that we all know so well. Our imagination is aroused: the picturesque park which lovers frequent; the beautiful beach which attracts a lot of tourists, the comfortable hotel where the tired travelers relax and other various romantic pictures and pleasant atmosphere. But "the war monument" produces a serious solemn effect, especially, with the incidence of "rain" and "the empty square", pleasant atmosphere suddenly disappears and the whole scene takes on a bleak and cold color. Our expectations are deflated. What relation does it have to the theme of the novel? What does it reveal about the characters? We will leave it untold first and focus on the stylistic patterns. Surely, this usage is a deviation when set against the norm of the English grammar, but when judged from the *Cat in the rain* text itself, this usage becomes its norm, i.e. the novel sets up its own secondary norm, and the use of other forms creates internal deviation. For instance:

*She liked his old, heavy face and big hands.  
 A big, tortoise-shell cat...swung against her body.  
 Cat in the rain*

Here we have the greatest degree of modification in the text applied to a description of the hotel-keeper and the cat respectively. We also notice the indefinite article used in relation to what is elsewhere predominantly *the cat*, connected with 'cat', too, is the title where the noun has no definite article in front of it. In this way are the hotel-keeper and the cat brought into some degree of prominence. In fact, besides hotel-keeper and the cat, the stylistic patterns are also noticeable with reference to the other main subjects of the story: wife and husband.

Firstly, I explicate the variations of the nominal structure referring to the cat and the effect the variations bring about. "A cat was crouched under one of the dripping green tables; when the wife came back, disappointed for not getting the cat, she said, "I wanted *that poor kitty*"; she went on after her desires were ignored, "I want a cat. I want to have a cat now. If I can't have long hair or any fun, I can

have a *cat*"; in the end, the padrone of the hotel asked the maid to bring her a *big tortoise cat*, we also notice the title *Cat in the Rain* where the noun has no article in front of it.

When the wife decides to get the cat the in the rain, we can see she is sympathetic, and what she wants is a specific cat. Later she says again and again that she wants a cat so that she could stroke it, we know this cat has a general reference, which does not convey she has any special affection for a cat, but only implies she feels empty and longs for her husband's care and love. As for "a big tortoise-shell cat", although the author describes it in detail we are not sure whether or not it is the cat in the rain, so it enhances the element of mystery and suspense. The end of the novel, again according to the natural principle of information presentation, should be the point at which the fiction reaches completion, the sense that nothing remains provisional: all questions are answered, all presuppositions are satisfied, all mysteries are solved. But here again the concept of foregrounding may be applied to the fictional plane: the writer frustrates conventional expectations by leaving things unresolved at the conclusion. We don't know if the hotel-keeper's concern can comfort her. This ending reveals the wife's disappointment and frustration. In the title *Cat in the Rain*, it is neither definite nor indefinite, leaving a lot of guesses to its readers. One interpretation can be that it symbolizes the wife's situation: she is like a cat in the rain. At first sight of the cat, she says, "It isn't any fun to be a poor kitty out in the rain". It seems that she herself has had such experience. In sum, the cat begins by being something specific and ends up as a general symbol. By describing the cat, the narrator unfolds the complex psychology of the wife and the theme of the story.

Secondly, let's come to the shifts in reference to the wife and the husband. The "woman" undergoes some metamorphosis from "wife" to "girl" when she is going to catch the cat. This shift can't be without significance. She is apparently seeking some means of escape from this routine scene. She seems to want a new identity, but in vain. When she is talking about her desires, she is interrupted and made to shut up and she becomes "his wife" again, without her name or her identity and ignored and dominated by the husband. We note that the first time the husband is mentioned is when the wife says she is going to catch the cat.

*"I'm going down to get that kitty," the American wife said.*

*"I'll do it," her husband offered from the bed.*

*"No, I'll get it. The poor kitty out trying to keep dry under a table."*

*... "Don't get wet," he said.*

Here he shows a little concern for her, so he is referred to as "her husband". Yet when she comes back, disappointed and pours out her longings, he is cold and callous. It is no wonder that "George"—the name of the husband—recurs unaltered from the middle to the end of the story. He is no more than a stranger!

Such deviations in nominal group structures give the hint of their marital rift. We can get the answers to the two questions unanswered above. It predicts that the wife longs for the husband's care, looks forward to a bright life but her expectations are unfulfilled and she is frustrated.

## Verbal Structure and Deviation

It is common for authors to use both compound and simple verb phrases in a text, and to use the full range of modals and auxiliaries. It is less usual to find a text that displays a narrow range, such as only using simple verb phrases, or only using one kind of auxiliary. (Laura Wright et al, 2000:57)

It is noticeable how, in this story, a limited range of verbs are employed in a relatively limited range of structures. The main pattern for most verbal groups in the text is as follows:

*The wife went downstairs and the hotel owner stoop up and bowed to her as she passed the office. His desk was at the far end of the office. He was an old man and very tall.*

*The sentence contains either one (usually) or more than one (occasionally) main verb in either simple past or past progressive tense. It is a feature which contributes to our impression of the simplicity of the story's style. Such verb tenses depict objectively the characters' speech and acts. For instance, in the novel, the husband is mentioned six times through the description of his eyes' movements and physical positions. They are as follows:*

*The husband went on reading, lying propped up with the two pillows at the foot of the bed.*



*George was reading again.  
George looked up.  
George shifted his position in the bed.  
"Oh, shut up and get something to read," George said. He was reading again.  
George was not listening. He was reading his book.*

The author films flatly the character's acts and speeches and presents them without coloring or comment so that readers have no way to know the character's inner experience. Yet physical description can invite an empathic response from the readers. It is part of Hemingway's technique of dispassionate understatement. Hemingway doesn't tell us what to feel, but our imaginations work on these details. As the two tenses form the basic pattern of the novel, any deviation from it is highlighted. Take the following stretch of the text for example:

*Liking him she opened the door and looked out. It was raining harder. A man in a rubber cape was crossing the empty square to the café. The cat would be around to the right. Perhaps she could go along under the eaves. As she stood in the doorway an umbrella opened behind her. It was the maid who looked after their room. "You must not get wet," She smiled, speaking Italian. Of course, the hotel-keeper had sent her.*

This is the first time modal verbs occur in the novel. We have "could", "would", "must" and a shift in tense, "had sent". Their occurrence coincides with a moment of excitement in the story, aroused by the woman's closeness to the cat she is seeking and by the kindness shown her by the hotel-keeper. As a result, this passage stands out from the otherwise flat and repetitive narrative. In fact, the story gets, as it were, associated with modal verbs in contrast to her husband, whose actions and talk remain very much on the same plane.

## Repetition

In this story another obvious deviation is the repetition, both lexical and syntactic. The feature plays a role in the characterization. As has been mentioned, the character, George is portrayed mainly through his actions and dialogues with his wife. And particular the mechanic repetition of his main action arouses the reader's notice: from the beginning to the end he is reading. The word "reading" is repeated five times. This action alternates with such other gestures as "putting the book down", "resting his eyes", "looked up from his book", so that reading comes into notice. His indifference, inactivity, monotone are exposed to the readers. He strikes the readers as dull and stifling. No wonder for three times the wife is "looking out of the window." In contrast with her husband's indifferent actions, her action, "looking out of the window", reveals how she longs to go out, how she is tired of the dull life and how she hopes to flee from the gloomy room. Therefore, the repetition of "reading" and "looking out of the window" aims at a sharp contrast of the couple's physical actions and inner feelings. The theme of the novel gets stressed.

In addition to the lexical repetition, Hemingway uses syntactic repetition to emphasize wife's liking and desire. The first example is:

*The wife liked him, she liked the deadly serious way he received any complaints. She liked his dignity. She liked the way he wanted to serve her. She liked the way he felt about being a hotel-keeper. She liked his old, heavy face and big hands.*

This parallel repetition brings out the polite, civil, industrious moral qualities of the hotel-keeper, which forms a striking contrast with the husband's coldness. It also implies that the wife's mood changes immediately she leaves the room. Another example of the syntactic repetition is:

*And I want to eat at a table with my own silver and I want candles. And I want it to be spring and I want to brush my hair out in front of a mirror and I want a kitty and I want some new clothes.*

This is what the wife cries out when she can't get her husband's understanding. Her desire is lowly but strong. It reflects her disappointment and depression. Here Hemingway doesn't make any comment, nor mention whether she raises her voice, but we can imagine that it is her cry from the depth of her heart. It invites our empathic response. But the husband still ignores her and just asks her to "shut up". She had to suppress her already lowly desire, murmuring. Anyway I want a cat. I want a cat. I want a cat now. If I can't have long hair or any fun, I can have a cat.

In this kind of parallel structures, Hemingway makes the best use of simple languages to delineate

a character, who is lively in nature and eager for a colorful life, but is trapped and isolated from the outside world by her husband. She arouses our sympathy. In sum, these repetitive structures, foregrounded against the simple pattern established throughout the whole story, help evoke a pitying sense of wife's frustration, at the same time, highlight the rift of their marriage.

## Conclusion

The above analyses are far from exhaustive about the implications of the story. Hemingway's works are always simple and Hemingway is considered master of the understated prose style, which becomes his trademark. Both his novels and short stories have evoked an enormous amount of critical commentary, although his literary stature is secure, he remains a highly controversial writer. His narrow range of characters, as well as his terse, objective prose have led some critics to regard his fiction as shallow and insensitive. Others claim that beneath the deceptively limited surface lies a complex and fully realized fictional world. His supporters note that supreme importance of the things left unsaid. The paper would like to conclude the analysis with Hemingway's own comment in *Death in the Afternoon*, "If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about, he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water". Any reasonable interpretation of literature will take into account the features thrown up by the stylistic analysis.

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