



Objectifying Intuitive Response in Stylistic Analysis: A Study of Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise"

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Author IN proposed the topic, designed the scope of the study and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Author OKS investigated the related literature and in conjunction with author IN managed the analyses of the study. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Intuitive response is an antagonistic phenomenon in the stylistic analysis of a literary work. This is given the fact that stylistics relies on tangible linguistic evidence to unfold the writer's meaning or the communicative purposes of an author. This paper however, examined objectivity in Maya Angelou's 'Still I Rise'. The study employed the different linguistic levels of stylistic analysis as a framework. They are: Syntax, Semantics, Lexis, Graphology and phonology levels of analysis. It is believed that this work will serve as a division of labour between a stylistic analyst and a literary critic.

Keywords: Objectivity; intuitive response; stylistics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Stylistics is a branch of linguistics and linguistics is the scientific study of language and

language is a central phenomenon in the studies of stylistics. By this, stylistics is unarguably an offshoot of linguistics. Stylistics according to [1] relies on evidence and proofs to

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validate its proposition. This is the task of a stylistician. It is an observable reality, that critics often mistake stylistic analysis for literary criticism. While stylistics tries to give proof and evidence of their propositions, literary criticism suggests a closer look at a literary piece and it allows for the critic's personal views, feelings and attitude. This is the concept of *intuitive response*, which can also be described as a personal assumption of the critic towards a literary work, and it is against the norms of stylistics. On this note therefore, this paper draws a clear distinction between stylistic analysis and literary criticism and empowers the stylistic analyst with the "linguistic levels of analysis" as imperative tools for an in-depth and sound stylistic analysis of a literary work. This is achieved with a review of Maya Angelou's 'Still I Rise', as a case study.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In recent times, the stylistics has continually enjoyed an overwhelming intellectual and scholarly attention by scholars of linguistics. Several attempts have been made to explain this branch of linguistics called, stylistics. To many, stylistics is perceived as a branch of linguistics that deals with the study of varieties of language, its properties, principles behind choice, dialogue, accent, length and register [2], while others insist that it attempts to establish principles capable of explaining the particular [style] choices used by individuals and social groups in their use of language. This is according to [3,4] and [5].

"Objectivity" and "intuitive response" are two parallel tools and concepts in stylistics. While the former is often associated with linguistic stylistics, the latter aligns with literary criticism. In a bit to create a clear distinction between these two concepts, [1] opines that, stylistics is objective and involves the recognition of the levels of linguistic description or analysis of a "text". These linguistic levels however prevent the reader's intuitive response or personal feelings. By this, the critic is unable to dive into hasty conclusions to a particular literary 'text' analysis. Objectivity however, provides the critic with invaluable insights gained from linguistics and offers discipline in the process of stylistic analysis of any literary 'text'.

According to Jacobson, [1], Stylistic criticism seeks to bring the methods of linguistics into

literary criticism; it also aims at being more precise and systematic than conventional in criticism. However, this implies that, for there to be a significant stylistic analysis, greater emphasis must be made on language components – 'the linguistic levels'. In contrast to this, any literary analysis based on instinctive response is likely to avoid a purely technical approach to the study of such 'text' and will be much concerned about matters of aesthetic value and content as conventional criticism.

The practice of stylistics is targeted at achieving certain goals, some of which include: studying the peculiarities that characterize the discourse of a writer, speaker, period, people or genre and to create sensitivity to the different linguistic manipulations and choices in a given "text". Primarily, according to [6], cited in [7], the objective of stylistics is to help determine the linguistic background and orientation embedded in literary work and induce the writer of speaker's illocution. This can only be achieved through objectivity and little or no intuitive response. An objective stylistician, therefore, is saddled with the task of pointing out those linguistic choices which a writer or speaker has made as well as the effects of the choices, [8] and [9]. Given a piece of literature, a poem for example, a linguistic stylistic analyst who is objective in his analysis will be interested in describing the form and function of language in the poem, paying attention to certain curiosities that may be accounted for in 'linguistic terms'. On the whole, stylistics requires a reliance on stylistic evidence for proper and significant analysis. It is dependent on linguistic description of textual details. In such linguistic description, [10] identifies the following linguistic features: Graphological, syntactic, semantics, lexical, and phonological features.

Graphological features involve the use of language in print. It allows the stylistician, opportunity to reasonably explore and give descriptions of the physical appearance of a literary 'text'. Here, such features as the use of punctuation marks to create stylistic effects are significant. However, a major feature here is foregrounding. In this instance, certain words are foregrounded or brought to the fore to give them prominence through the use of italics, capital letters, underlining, and so on.

Syntactic features involve the identification of the effects created by the various 'sentence types

and structures' in a text. Such aspects as ellipses, parataxis, hypotaxis, right and left-branching sentences, etc are considered significant. For instance, dislocation in syntax is occasionally used to demonstrate the dislocation in human thoughts (stream of consciousness) and this is highly manifested in James Joyce's novels.

Semantic Features focus on the level of meaning – the meaning one attaches to what is read or heard. Sentences have the following meanings: interpersonal, ideational and textual. Interpersonal meaning deals with interpersonal function of language which is to express attitude, comment and evaluation. Ideational meaning allows one to form concepts and ideas based on the orderliness and experience that relate to the text read or heard, while the textual meaning has to do with events as they occur in terms of language use – references can only be made to those events through textual recourse.

Lexical Features involves the choice of words (diction). The stylistic use of words here may produce denotative, connotative, *collocative*, affective, thematic, or stylistic meanings based on the speaker's or writer's intention. Certain characteristic use of words may help us to identify the context of a text, its genre, its communicative purposes, its author, and so on.

Phonological Features are the level of sounds. These features involve sound combinations. Because language is basically spoken, this level of stylistic analysis seems to be the richest and most important.

3. MAYA ANGELOU'S "STILL I RISE"

Maya Angelou's famous poem, 'Still I Rise' is part of a 1978 collection similarly titled: *And Still I Rise*. The poem is a reaction to the struggles experienced by African American women in the long history of oppression and discrimination in America.

3.1 The Poem: "Still I Rise"

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
4 But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells

8 Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,

12 Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see my broken
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
16 Weakened by my soulful cries.

Does my haughtiness offend you
Don't you take it awful hard.
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
20 Digging' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
24 But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise?
That I dance like I've got diamonds
28 At the meeting of my things?

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and far.
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors
gave,
I am the dram and the hope of the slave
I rise
I rise
I rise

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Graphological Features

The poem is divided into eight stanzas. Each of the first to seventh stanzas contains four lines. The eighth stanza, however, comprises 15 lines. There is predominant use of the question mark in the poem as this could be seen in lines 5, 6, 13, 14 17, 25 and 28. This is, perhaps, related to the background of the poem, which has to do with the Black American slaves' constant but purposive quest for identity and freedom from the white masters' oppression and tyranny. Also in

the poem, both commas and full stops are employed, virtually in equal proportions. These beautify the lines with courage and hope, reveals the teary and sorrowful nature of the poetic persona, thereby. There is a conscious use of “apostrophe” in the poem as a graphological tool to indicate the colloquial nature of the language-use in the poem; for example:

I'll	-	(lines 4, 12 and 24)
'Cause	-	(lines 7 and 19)
Don't	-	(line 18)
I've	-	(lines 7, 19 and 27)
That's	-	(line 31)
I'm	-	(line, 33)

By implication, the use of “apostrophe”, probably, shows the care-free attitude of the poetic persona to her uncaring audience (the white masters). The poem is symbolic as its form represents its title. The successive repetition of “I rise” in three Lines in the final stanza of the poem cuts the image of a rising phalanx. Thus, the form of the poem is quite suggestive of a group of people rising against the tide of oppression and tyranny – and that is, the Black American slaves. The structure of the stanza typical of lamentation – the poem began with an equal stanza of four not until towards the end of the poem, eight. This suggests an outpouring of one’s cares.

4.2 Phonological Features

There are a great number of phonological features in the poem which promotes a degree of musicality in it. Rhyme, as a prosodic element in a poem, is utilized in a good measure in the poem. This is noticeable in *lines 2 and 4, 6 and 8, 10 and 12, 14 and 16, 18 and 20, 22 and 24, 26 and 28, 33 and 34, 35 and 37, and 39 and 40.*

The musicality which the use of rhyme evokes in the poem appears to have made it attract attention to the condescending message which the poetic persona is trying to get across to her audience. The use of repetition in “I rise”, which, though, begins the poem as “I’ll rise” is another noticeable phonological feature which assists in placing emphasis on the resolution of the defiant poetic persona not to allow anything deter her from achieving freedom.

4.3 Syntactic Features

The sentence types that are commonly used in the poem are the imperative and the

interrogative. The use of these sentence types harmonizes with the tone and the mood of the poetic persona, while the pseudo imperative sentences are depicted in Table 1.

Show the dare devil poetic persona’s attitude of calling her listener’s bluff, the interrogative sentences, such as the following:

Does my sassiness upset you?	(line 5)
Why are you beset with gloom?	(line 6)
Did you want to see me broken?	(line 13)
Does my haughtiness offend you?	(line 25)
Does my sexiness upset you?	(line 25)

have the illocutionary force of probing the reasons for the oppressor’s oppressive tendencies which are to the detriment of the poetic persona. Again, in the poem, both simple and complex sentences are used in a considerable proportion. There is cohesion in the structural patterns of the poem through the use of the conjunctions, ‘but’ and ‘like’ as we have in the following lines:

But still, like dust, I’ll rise	(line 4)
Just like hopes springing high,	(line 11)
But still, like air, I’ll rise,	(line 24).

Bondage, on the other hand, manifests through the use of subordinators like ‘cause’ (because] and ‘that’ as shown in the following lines:

Why are you beset with gloom?	
“Cause I walk like I’ve got oil wells	(lines 7-8)
Don’t you take it awful hard.	
‘Cause I laugh like I’ve got gold mines	(lines 18-19)
Does it come as a surprise?	
That I dance like I’ve got diamonds	(lines 26-27).

The use of these devices, especially, bondage (which shows dependency) probably depicts the servitude in which the Black American slaves were to their white masters, while slavery lasted in America. Most of the simple sentences utilized in the poem are inverted as follows for stylistic effect:

...like dust, I’ll rise	(line 4)	Still I’ll rise	(line 12) ...
...like air I’ll rise	(lines 24)	Out of the huts of history’s shame	
I rise	(lines 31 - 32)	126	
Into a daybreak that’s wondrously clear		I rise	(lines 37-38)

Table 1. List of pseudo imperative sentences

Subject	Verb	Object	Complement	
You	May write	Me	Down in history	(Line 1)
You	May shoot	Me	With your words	(Line 21)
You	May cut	Me	With your eyes	(Line 22)
You	May kill	Me	With your hatefulness	(Line 23)

Inverting structures in a text manifests one of the concepts of style known as deviation from the norm, and it is a form of foregrounding inversion in this poem may have to do with the audacious poetic-persona doing the unusual by confronting her oppressor-listener. Besides, and very importantly, the fronting of the adjuncts in the above-cited structures is a means by which emphasis is achieved.

4.4 Lexico-semantic Features

Although, a cursory look at the poem would suggest that the reader might not have difficulty in understanding the message in it, it is noteworthy that the poem employs some words and expressions that demand a careful analysis for their meanings to be properly decoded. This is because such words are not usual collocations – a situation which creates some stylistic effects. Such unusual collocations include the ‘words’ in ‘You may shoot me with your words’, ‘cut’ and ‘eyes’ in ‘You may cut me with your eyes’, ‘kill’ and ‘hatefulness’ in ‘You may kill me with your hatefulnes’ and ‘black’ and ‘ocean’ in ‘I’ am black ocean. They bring about strikingly metaphoric meanings that draw the reader closer to the import of the poet’s message. It is not unlikely that the poet does this to show the inequality between the white masters and the black American slaves.

Apart from metaphor, simile is also employed by the poet to some stylistic advantages. The simile in each of ‘.....like dust’, ‘..... like air.....’ and ‘.....like I’ve got diamonds’ creates an imagery which helps in enhancing the reader’s understanding of the message in the poem.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In carrying out a stylistic analysis of a literary work, one must pay attention to its content, form

and language. Objectivity posits that, such observations and analyses should always be backed with tangible linguistic evidence away from intuitive response. Again, a thorough and effective reading with sensitivity to linguistics choices is essential to a productive stylistic analysis of any literary work. On the whole, Maya Angelou’s “Still I Rise” deploys rich poetic devices to a number of purposes such as explaining, illustrating, revealing and clarifying. However, the analysis provided in this paper as believed, has provided a division of labour between a stylistic analyst and a literary critic.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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