

**LANGUAGE AND THE POET: AN
INTERPRETIVE STYLISTIC READING OF
SHAKESPEARE’S “SHALL I COMPARE THEE
TO A SUMMER’S DAY?”**

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Abstract

This paper presents an interpretive stylistic analysis of William Shakespeare’s poem, “Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer’s Day?” It analyses the style of language used in the poem. The theoretical framework adopted for the analysis of the data is Stephen Regan’s model of Reader-Response Theory. This theory focuses on the reader’s response to a text. It believes that the meaning of a text is created by the reader’s interaction with it and that different readers may interpret the same text in different ways. The poem is a fourteen-line poem (sonnet) that eulogizes the beauty essence of a “beloved” whose beauty cannot be compared to anything else. The findings revealed that literary-cum-linguistic techniques such as graphology, rhetorical question, archaism, repetition, metaphor, personification, pathetic fallacy, indentation, deviation, syncope, and anaphora are used to create meaning and add depth and complexity to the language of the poem.

Keywords: Style, Stylistics, Literary Stylistics, Reader-Response Theory, Sonnet

Introduction

This paper is a literary stylistic analysis of William Shakespeare's creative use of language in one of the most famous sonnets, "Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day?" To express his thoughts and feelings towards his object or subject of admiration. Literary stylistics, according to Chapman and Clark (2014, p.1), is the "study of how close attention to language use can contribute to accounts of how texts are understood and evaluated". This definition is corroborated and expanded in Ayeomoni (2009) cited in Mowarin (2011, p. 13) thus:

Literary stylistics spans the border of the two subjects, linguistics and literature or literary criticism. It also deals with relating linguistic features to context to make the meaning as explicit as possible. The linguistic structure of a text is analyzed... to understand the structure of a text and the relation between them and the meanings.

In "Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day?" ("Shall I Compare Thee", henceforth), the linguistic structure or language resources are analyzed to foreground the themes of love, beauty, perfection, endearment, and immortality.

Synopsis of the Text

The poem is a sonnet that is written in the form of an *ode* to celebrate the beauty of a beloved whose beauty is justified by comparing it to a summer's day. Summer has always been the best season in Europe and is often seen as the respite from the long, dreadful winter. Thus, to

compare the beloved here to a summer's day, there is the feeling that the beloved is even worthier than the summer's day itself. The beloved will continue to live on while every other thing may fail or die: this is the belief of the poet persona. The tone of the poem is that of celebration, adoration, and admiration. Aside from other themes, the dominant themes in the poem are those of beauty, love, and immortality.

About the Poet

William Shakespeare was born on April 23, 1564, in the small town of Stratford-upon-Avon, and he was educated at the grammar school in that town. Shakespeare did not proceed to the university when he left school. During his lifetime, he wrote numerous plays, novels, stories, histories, and poems, and also acted in many plays. Shakespeare wrote 154 sonnets. The poem, "Shall I Compare Thee", is the 18th out of his 154 sonnets. At eighteen, he got married to Anne Hathaway who bore him Susanna in 1583, and a set of twins later in 1585. He died on his 52nd birthday on April 23, 1616, after he was said to have drunk too much or taken some hard drugs at a meeting with Ben Jonson, and Drayton.

The Concept of Style and Stylistics

The term "style" is from the Latin word "stylus" which originally means a sharp-pointed instrument for writing or engraving. It came to be known as a "manner of writing" by (metronymic) change" (see Wales, 2014, p. 397). The phenomenon of style is a controversial language concept in linguistic and literary discourse. Maledo (2017) affirms this when he states that the concept of style has proved so

ambiguous to define by scholars. For instance, Ayeomoni (2006, p. 545) sees style as an amorphous concept. This is because it could be viewed from several perspectives and thus has innumerable definitions. This polysemic nature of the style is perhaps why Wales (2014) concludes that what style is can be “very difficult to define”. Despite this difficulty in pinning down what style is, some scholars have given working definitions. For example, style refers to the manner of expression in writing or speaking (Wales, 2014). Similarly, it denotes the manner of doing or executing anything (Ayeomoni, 2006). Another view of style that is worth mentioning is the one by Leech and Short (1981, p. 10) who see style as: “... how language is used in a given context, by a given person, for a given purpose, and so on”. This definition shows that style varies in all of its manifestations depending on *situations* (different contexts), *users* (different writers/speakers), and *goals* (different purposes). Style, then patterns to *parole* (i.e. it is the selection from a total linguistic repertoire that constitutes a style).

The academic discipline of stylistics is a twentieth-century invention (see Bradford 1997, p. 2; Carter 2007, p. vii). Although, stylistics is a multifaceted field of linguistics as well as literary criticism. In other words, it “bridges the traditional gulf between literature and language” (see Osundare, 2003, p. 36). Stylistics is the meeting point for all other branches of linguistics like phonology, grammar, semantics, syntax, morphology, lexis, etc. Stylistics also helps to connect the genres of literature (drama, prose, poetry). Simply put, stylistics is the scientific/empirical study of style (Verdonk, 2000; Ayeomoni, 2006; Maledo & Ogboru, 2023; Murana,

2010; Cunanan, 2011; Wales, 2011). This semantic interrelatedness between style and stylistics may have informed Ayeomoni's (2006, p. 549) view that "studying stylistics entails studying style". Apart from the loose definition of stylistics as the study of style, several other divergent and convergent views of the concept have been adopted. For example, Stylistics is defined as simply "the study of literary style, or, to make matters even more explicit, the study of the use of language in literature" (Leech, 1969, p.1). According to Barry (2009), stylistics is a critical approach that uses the methods and findings of the science of linguistics in the analysis of literary texts. Furthermore, stylistics is termed by McRae and Clark (2004) as a way of applying linguistic models to literary texts. Similarly, stylistics is seen to be the study of the relation between linguistic form and literary function (see Leech & Short 2007). However, to Crystal (1979) cited in Darani (2014, p. 180), stylistics is "studying the variations found in texts". Although the definitions by Leech, Barry, Leech and Short and McRae and Clark seem to be too specific, that is, limiting stylistic investigation to only literary texts; the one by Crystal is somewhat general and seems to cover the interdisciplinary status of stylistics. Another general definition of the term may be found in Nørgaard, Montoro & Busse (2010, p. 1), thus "stylistics is the study of how meaning is created through language in literature as well as in other types of text". It should be noted that the stylistic analysis of a text of any kind is not done for its own sake: it is a route to accounting for its meaning (Thornborrow & Wareing 1998, p. 4).

Stylistics can be likened to a pendulum that swings to one side (linguistics) and to the other side (literary

criticism). It draws heavily from the resources of linguistics to the analysis of literary texts and sometimes non-literary texts. Apart from the knowledge of linguistics, a successful stylistician should also have a full grasp of resources of literature known as literary tropes or devices to give his/her analysis elegant, complete, and perspicacious. Stressing the interlocking relationship between linguistics and literature in doing stylistics, Roman Jakobson avers thus:

A linguist deaf to the poetic function of language and a literary scholar indifferent to linguistic problems and unconvertant with linguistic methods, are equally flagrant anachronisms (see Thornborrow & Wareing 1998, p. ii).

This multifaceted nature of stylistics has generated several nomenclatures with which the concept is referred to depending on the scholar's preference. These alternative names are linguistic stylistics, literary stylistics, literary-linguistic stylistics, stylistics, linguistic criticism, modern stylistics, new stylistics, linguistic appreciation, and so on.

The Sonnet

A sonnet is a lyrical poem consisting of a single stanza of fourteen iambic pentameter lines linked by an intricate rhyme scheme (Abrams & Harpham 2012, p. 370). The sonnet tradition was introduced to English literature by Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542) and was subsequently developed in England by Henry Howard, and Earl Surrey

(1516-1547) in the 16th century. However, sonnet writing did not thrive until it was popularized by William Shakespeare who wrote 154 sonnets, making sonnet a beloved literary form. Due to Shakespeare's influence, the English sonnet is named after him as *Shakespearean Sonnet*. Other forms of sonnet abound however with different patterns, structures, and forms. These may include, the Italian sonnet, Spenserian sonnet, and English sonnet, which is otherwise known as Shakespearean and/or Elizabethan sonnet. Our data for analysis in this study falls under Shakespearean sonnet. This kind of sonnet is often divided into two parts: the *octave* (the first eight lines that introduce the theme or subject matter) and the *sestet* (the remaining six lines that discuss the issue presented in the octave). The octave often has the rhyme scheme of *abab, cdcd*, while the sestet *efef* and the sestet always end with a heroic couplet of *gg*. Shakespeare's *Shall I Compare Thee* remains an iconic English sonnet whose influence would continue to be felt in English literature.

Theoretical Framework

Reader-response theory describes various kinds of critical approaches popular from the 1970s which focused on the activity of the reader in the interpretation of a work (Wales, 2014, p. 354). In other words, RRT seeks to understand literary texts with an emphasis on the reader's role in the creation of meaning (see Adegoju, 2013, p. 84). What this means is that the meaning of the text is never self-formulated; according to Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker (2005, p. 47), "the reader must act upon the textual material to produce meaning". The reader is

therefore to be seen “not as the passive recipient but as the active producer of meaning” (Regan, 1998, p. 137). To put it in another way, the interpretation of a text is a matter of negotiation and conversation between the author and the reader; both of them belong to the same universe (see Adegbite 2005, p. 1460).

The theoretical framework for this study is that of the Reader-Response Theory of Stephen Regan (1998), which canvasses that the literary work has no real existence until it is read and that, in fact, the meaning of a text, according to Adegoju (2013) “can only be determined by its readers”. It is on this basis that the text’s meaning will be actualized by drawing inferences from the linguistic, stylistic, or semiotic resources contained in the text. For this study, only two levels of linguistic analysis will be adopted from the six identified by Crystal & Davy (1969). Viz: graphological and lexical levels.

Methodology

The poem, “Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer’s Day?”, is analyzed in this study is extracted from the anthology, *Seven Centuries of Verse (English & American): From the Early Modern Lyrics to the Present Day* by A. J. M. Smith, page 101 and *The Complete works of WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE* by Geddes & Grosset, page 721. The study provides an interface of linguistic and literary studies by integrating concepts and categories from linguistic and literary stylistics in the analysis of the poem. A wide range of issues such as love, beauty, perfection, endearment, and immortality, are thematized by the poet in eulogizing and celebrating the addressee (lover/beloved) in the poem. All of these themes or claims

can be validated through the stylistic markers or linguistic evidence employed by the poet.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
Sometimes too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimmed,
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance, or native's changing course
untrimmed.
But thy eternal summer shall not fade;
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st
Nor shall death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st,
So long as men breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

The poem is a short poem of fourteen lines (Sonnet) that carries layers of meaning as expressed through the various stylistic markers. The dominant themes of the poem that are put forward for analysis are *beauty*, *perfection*, and *immortality*, and each of these will be interpreted from the text at two levels: graphological and lexical below.

Graphological Level of Analysis

Graphology anchors on the physical outlook of a text. It is solely concerned with the mode or manner of structuring and organizing the writing of a piece of work. It is concerned with the general layout of a work.

Paragraphing, spacing, punctuation, capitalization techniques, and so on (see Ayeomoni 2006, p. 553). In the text under study, these techniques above are used not for their own sake but are adopted as meaning-making resources in the text. For instance, the poem is well-punctuated in such a way that the punctuation helps to give lucidity, lustre, and perspicuity to the poem and this however enhances the themes of beauty in the poem. For instance, Line 1 of the poem reads “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” The use of the question mark in this line is significant because it helps to create an emotional intensity that conveys a sense of ironical self-reflection foregrounding the theme of beauty and perfection in the poem. This is because summer is the most pleasing season in Europe marked by clement weather, temperature, and tranquillity. Then, the question mark in the poem is not necessarily used to request a response but to state the fact that the addressee’s beauty cannot be compared even with that of the summer’s day. The following corroborates this point and further establishes the superiority of the addressee over the summer’s day with the repetitive use of the intensifier “more” thus: “thou art more lovely and more temperate” (Line 2). The repetition of the comparative intensifier “more” which means “in greater or higher degree”, is employed stylistically to draw a comparison between the addressee and the summer’s day and which suggests, from the tone, that the addressee is hallowed as being more beautiful and perfect than the summer’s day. Other graphological features to look at in the poem would be *indentation* and *deviation* which are evidently in tandem with each other in the concluding two lines (13 & 14) of the poem thus:

So long as men breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Indentation, as a graphological feature, is a style of paragraphing that refers to the intentional spacing or blank area between the margin and the beginning of a line of text. This indentation is an obvious instance of deviation from the structural layout of the poem (Lines 1-12), and it is significant for meaning. Deviation, itself, is “a norm-breaking as well as norm-making linguistic feature” (see Osundare 2003, p. 28). It is an example of what Osundare refers to as syntagmatic deviation (deviation from a norm present in the text). Looking at the poem under study structurally, however, one notices a deviation indentation in Lines 13-14, which are conspicuously different from the structural norm of arrangement of the lines of the poem (Lines 1-12). The two deviant Lines (13 & 14) are graphologically foregrounded as a *heroic couplet*. A heroic couplet comprises two lines of iambic pentameter that rhyme in pairs (see Abrams & Harpham 2012, p. 158; Cuddon & Habib 2013, p. 329). Heroic couplet is often used in English Literature especially in epics and legends to accentuate the exemplary deeds or qualities of a person or a phenomenon. In the context of this poem, however, the heroic couplet in (Lines 13 & 14) must have been used graphologically to valorize and romanticize the admirable qualities of the addressee in the poem.

Lexical Level of Analysis

It can be argued that the meaning of a lexical item in a text can only be adequately described through its semantic

relations and contrasts to other words in the text (Maledo, 2019). At the lexical level of analysis in literary stylistics, Enkvist et al (1969) cited in Mowarin (2011, p. 16), posit that “words are either in the *chain* one thing after another and, *choice* one thing rather than another”. The former relation of lexical patterns is called a syntagmatic relationship while the latter is, a paradigmatic relationship. The syntagmatic relation is referred to as collocation while the paradigmatic relation is the term lexical set. These lexical relationships can however be manipulated by literary writers especially poets for them to have a unique language style called *diction*. They enjoy this through a concept known as *poetic license* in literary criticism. For this study, we shall look at how the poet has used certain lexical sets in an unusual manner as well as his choice of language to convey meanings in the text.

These lexical sets in the text are instances of unusual *collocation*. For instance, the noun phrase “eye of heaven” in (Line 5) is used metaphorically to refer to the “sun”. Furthermore, the idea of giving the sun an “eye” which is a quality of an animate being, is the stylistic use of *personification*. The sun is personified further through the use of the possessive adjective “his” in (Line 6), which suggests the sun belongs to the masculine gender as though a human being. Expanding on this, the pronominal item “his”, which anaphorically refers to the “sun”, cannot be used as collocates of each other since “his” is used as an animate reference while the “sun” is an inanimate phenomenon. This stylistic incompatibility is referred to as collocational clash or unusual collocation.

Similarly, there is the use of pathetic fallacy in “Nor shall death brag thou wand’rest in his shade” (Line

11). *Pathetic fallacy* is a type of personification that attributes human emotions or feelings to nature. So, the abstract noun “death”, a natural occurrence, is accorded the human emotional quality through the lexical verb “brag” and the possessive adjective “his”. These are instances of unexpected collocation or what Bamiro (2014, p. 2492) refers to as “discolorations”. Such usage is stylistically significant for meaning. For instance, death is conferred with human attributes to foreground the theme of immortality. That is, even if death threatens (brags) when the addressee walks (wand’rest) to its (death’s) territory (shade), the addressee would not die but rather would continue to grow in beauty, as in, “When in eternal lines to time thou grow’st” (Line 12).

Another stylistic marker that is striking in the language of the poem is archaism. Archaism is the literary use of words and expressions that have become obsolete in the common speech of an era (Abrams & Harpham 2012, p. 16). Such words as (forthwith, ye, thou, takest, thee, thy, etc.), according to Wales (2014, p. 31), are “no longer generally current...” and can also be found in the “language of liturgy”. It is noteworthy, however, that stylistic analysis at the lexical level accounts for information regarding the choice of specific lexical items in a text. This choice, according to Crystal and Davy (1969, p. 19), “will of course be closely related to subject matter... meaning”. So, archaic terms are used deliberately in poetry for the glorification, exhortation, and elevation of the person or phenomenon being addressed by the user. In the poem, therefore, these lexical sets of words have been used not for their sakes but to spotlight the theme of endearment and perhaps perfection

of the beloved addressee. The following archaic terms are ubiquitous in the poem, “thee, art, hath, thou, thy”. The pronominal equivalents of these archaic words in modern-day discourse are *you* instead of *thou* or *thee*, *has* instead of *hath*, *are* instead of *art*, and *your* instead of *thy*.

There are yet other techniques in the text which are syncope, repetition, and anaphora. Syncope, on the one hand, is a poetic device in which a letter or a group of letters is deliberately or mechanically omitted from the middle of a word to achieve rhythm in a line of poetry. There are a few such instances in the text “ow’st, wand’reſt and grow’st” in (Lines 10, 11 & 12) respectively. The use of these syncopated words is to create a kind of melodious rhythm in the poem emphasizing the theme of beauty and tranquility within the context of the addressee. On the other hand, repetition is a figure of speech that shows the logical emphasis that is necessary to attract a reader’s attention to the keyword or key phrase of the text. It implies repeating sounds, words, expressions, and clauses in certain succession or even with no particular placement of the words, to provide emphasis (see Kemertelidze & Manjavidze 2013, p. 2). In the text, the following words: “more”, “too”, “summer”, “fair”, “shall”, and “and”, are used repetitively in the text to create rhetorical intensity emphasizing subject the matter of the poem. Also, the use of anaphora is noted. Anaphora is a rhetorical device involving the repetition of a word or group of words in successive clauses (Cuddon & Habib 2013, p. 35). Such anaphoric repetition is found in the last two lines of the poem under investigation, as “So long... / So long ...” (Lines 13 & 14). This anaphora is used to convey urgency, passion, and insistence,

creating a sense of continuity and immortality about the addressee.

No doubt, the fundamental function of every stylistic analysis is to help rewrite, recreate, or reproduce a text to unravel the hidden meanings for the readers' easy understanding. Based on this analysis, the poem can be re-written or paraphrased for simplicity for the reader thus:

You're not to be compared to the summer's day, my beloved.

You are more lovely and milder than the weather in the summer period:

Weather can be severe and can change too quickly to become too cold,

Too hot, too windy, too buggy, too much.

But you remain unchanged in your grandeur and prettiness.

Everything else in life grows old over time and season;

But you will never age, nor will you die,

Nor will your beauty fade away.

You will remain eternally beautiful;

As long as this poem (lines) about you endures forever

And as long as people continue to inhabit this world:

You will continue to be an immortal.

Conclusion

The poem, "Shall I Compare Thee", has been analyzed in this paper using the reader-response theory. The poem is analyzed from two different levels of stylistic analysis: graphological and lexical. How the themes or meanings of the text are conveyed through certain stylistic markers are illustrated bringing out relevant instances from the text to

validate all the impressionistic claims. Through our interpretation and analysis, it is revealed that the poem is a sonnet (poem of fourteen lines) that hinges on the theme of beauty, immortality, perfection, and perhaps love. The messages of the text are communicated through certain poetic as well as stylistic devices like indentation, deviation, collocation, personification, pathetic fallacy, syncope, archaism, repetition, and anaphora.

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