

Stylistic Scrutiny of Robert Frost's poem *Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening*

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Abstract

Style has long been associated primarily or exclusively with literature as a characteristic of good, effective or beautiful writing. The application of stylistic technique to the study of literature is perhaps the most important reason for carrying on this business of effective and beautiful writing and ultimately it might well provide the most illuminating information. Introduction to stylistic analysis should begin with literature as this is potentially the most difficult kind of language, not only because it allows a greater range and more extreme kinds of deviation from the linguistic norms present in the rest of the language. It presupposes an understanding of the varieties which constitute normal, non-literary languages. One has to be aware of the normal function of the linguistic features constituting the varieties in non-literary language. Literary language establishes special relationship with the scheme of language by using linguistic elements to build new schemes of its own, adding new rules to meter and line length, word order, and the choice of vocabulary. These new schemes multiply the possibilities of variation in a complex way, allowing departures from ordinary language in accordance with the literary scheme. Each type of literature has a structure of its own. If we wish to understand the structure of a literary work, it seems sensible to begin by examining one. This paper attempts to highlight how well the poet effectively uses various stylistic devices in making his poem a stylistically rich, closely-knit with complete fusion of sound and senses, making it indeed quite a simple, yet suggestive poem.

Keywords: Stylistics, effective writing, literature, linguistics features, literary scheme.

Linguistics is the academic discipline which studies language scientifically. Stylistics, studying certain aspects of language variation is, therefore, essentially a part of this discipline. Some scholars have called the object of study of 'style' without further qualification. Style is certainly a familiar word to most of us, but unfortunately to say simply that stylistics studies style does not clarify the matter greatly, because of the multiplicity of definitions that the word style has.¹ Style may refer to some or all of the language habits of one person as when we talk of Shakespeare's

style or the style of John Keats, or when we discuss the questions of disputed authorship. More often, it refers in this way to the selection of language habits, the occasional linguistic idiosyncrasies which characterize an individual's uniqueness. In a similar way, style may refer to some or all of the language habits shared by a group of people at one time, or over a period of time, as when we talk about the style of the Augustan poets, the style of the Pre-Raphaelite poets and so on. To be more precise, style has long been associated primarily or exclusively with literature as a characteristic of good, effective or beautiful writing and the focus of the literary critic's attention alone. This sense is partially evaluative, partially descriptive and stylistics here would not concern itself with uses of language outside that of literature.

The application of stylistic technique to the study of literature is perhaps the most important reason for carrying on this business at all and ultimately it might well provide the most illuminating information. But no introduction to stylistic analysis should begin with literature as this is potentially the most difficult kind of language, not only because it allows a greater range and more extreme kinds of deviation from the linguistic norms present in the rest of the language, but also because it presupposes an understanding of the varieties which constitute normal, non-literary languages. One has to be aware of the normal function of the linguistic features constituting the varieties in non-literary language before one can see what use the author is making of them, which is why the application of stylistic techniques to literature should be the last part of a stylistician's training, not the first.

Literary language establishes special relationship with the scheme of language by using linguistic elements to build new schemes of its own, adding new rules to meter and line length, word order, and the choice of vocabulary to the existing rules of ordinary language. These new schemes multiply the possibilities of scheme and variation in a complex way, allowing departures from ordinary language in accordance with the literary scheme and departures from the literary language in accordance with ordinary language.²

Each type of literature has a structure of its own. If we wish to understand the structure of a literary work, it seems sensible to begin by examining one. We shall learn much about the work in general if we can discover exactly what the author has done and how he has done it. Poetic language has been called a deviation from the linguistic norm, the norm being the ordinary language, the language of prose. Deviation from or distortion of the norm has been considered by many as the essence of poetry.³ In short, deviation can take the form either of abnormal irregularity, like hyperbation or of abnormal regularity, like syntactic parallelism and other kinds of schematic patterning. Verse form is itself a form of abnormal regularity because it consists of elements like meter, rhyme scheme and stanza form. It is not, however, itself a form of stylistic variation, but rather a set of schematic structures which allow their own stylistic variation. The slogan 'teaching of poetry is contradiction in terms' still holds sway among the students of poetry than among trained reader-critic. The concept of poetry has come to be redefined on

account of evolution of applied linguistic approach to the segment of language we know as poetry.

A poem is a living organism which contains necessary elements of its own. If a poem means the sum of everything which it is, we must not only understand everything in the poem, we must also be aware of all its parts as they work together to make the total meaning of the poem. If the poem is a good one, and this is certainly one test, every element in it contributes to its meaning. A poem has at least two levels of meaning: the literal and the figurative. A poem suggests much more than it says literally. In addition to it, a poem possesses a contradiction and intensity which help to make it memorable. The right word in the right place, best word in the best order as S.T. Coleridge suggests, the economy of rich suggestions etc. are virtues of the structure of the best poetry. The following few pages shows an analysis of Robert Frost's poem stressing particularly on the poetic devices the poet uses and how he effected them in making the poem a stylistically rich, closely-knit poem with complete fusion of sound and senses and indeed a quite suggestive poem.

Stylistic analysis of Robert Frost's poem *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*:

Whose woods these are I think I Know.

His house is in the village though;

He will not see me stopping here

To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer

To stop without a farmhouse near

Between the woods and frozen lake

The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake

To ask if there is some mistake.

The only other sound's the sweep

Of easy wind and downy flake.

*The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.*

Robert Frost, 1922

Robert Frost is not a literary poet. He has, no doubt, read extensively, but unlike erudite T.S. Eliot, he rarely employs literary allusions. The classic regularity of *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* is a triumph of its kind by Frost, for in the simplest diction he invents a commonplace verse pattern with strength and dignity which are the mark of a master. Frost finds an inviting challenge in formal metrics, a restraining element within which the craftsman can exercise freedom in proportion to the perfectness of his control. If the poet must pad or squeeze, or if his rhymes are not inevitable, he betrays his lack of mastery, for within formal structures his obligations cannot be concealed. Frost has thus found his freedom without resorting to free verse, but this attitude is a measure of his zest and not a mark of narrow conservatism.⁴

Frost's views on poetry, gleaned from his occasional utterances, could be presented as follows: 'Poetry is unpremeditatedness. The poet possesses an inner mood to create as he says in 'The figure a poem makes'. Frost may not be in favour of writing without content for the sake of pure art, nor is he in favour of writing merely to preach. Artistic intention and value intention could be said to be viewed by him as equally important. He has a greater concern for the sound of a poem than for its language, meter and rhyme. The sound begins in delight and ends in wisdom, maintaining a balance between emotion and thought, because the aim is to sing and a song is a song with sense. The form in which the song is conveyed is an important characteristic which Frost finds essential to poetry in his age. When the form is driven by a creative fury of the poet to its final shape, the form in which the song is communicated becomes the sole property of the readers who are to interpret the poem in the light of their experience of reading it. Frost seems to be uncomfortable and uneasy at the reader's effort to read so much in his poems.

Plain sense of the poem:

As we read Frost's poem for the first time, a certain kind of sense comes through to us almost immediately. This is the poem's literal sense and it gives us the literal facts of the poem and with such facts all understanding of a poem begins, but does not end. The plain sense of Frost's poem tells us that the speaker, returning home at dusk with his one horse sleigh, stops to enjoy the peace and solitude of the occasion: the snow is falling softly, the woods are inviting; there is no other human being to break the silence. It is growing dark; there is no house in sight, and the miles stretch before them. Reflecting on his horse's impatience, the speaker concedes that he should move on to keep the commitment he has made.

Foregrounding:

It is a term used for an effect brought about in the reader by linguistic or other forms of deviation. The deviation, being unexpected, comes to the foreground of the reader's attention as a deautomatization of the normal linguistic processes. The normal linguistic features of a poem became the background against which the deviant features are foregrounded. The degree of deviation varies and so does the strength of foregrounding. There is no requirement that foregrounding should be consciously noted by the reader.⁵ Certain literary devices like imagery, figures of speech, symbolism, metrical arrangement and certain others create deviation in poetic composition. Besides, elements of contrast, similarity, parallelism, mimesis, and enjambment etc. also effect deviation.

Imagery:

Imagery is the representation of the sense experience through languages. Concreteness of imagery is one of the distinguishing characteristics of literary language, especially the language of poetry. Images help to evoke in the reader's mind the experience the writer wishes to communicate.⁶ For instance, when Frost uses words such as 'woods' and 'house', he depends on the reader's ability to see the real woods and the house. Contrary to some popular opinion, there is no mystery in imagery. Its function in poetry is identical with its function in everyday speech: it presents to the reader his concrete world of things and recalls the sight and sound and feel of them. With imagery the poet peoples and furnishes the world of his poem and causes us to experience that world as directly and unmistakably as we experience life itself.

Figurative language:

Figurative language is a departure from what the users of the language apprehend as the standard meaning of words or else the standard order or words in order to achieve some special meaning or effect. Such figures are described as primarily poetic ornaments, but they are integral to the functioning of language and indispensable to poetry.⁷ Frost's poem shows that he uses some of his imagery in a special way as when one reads the lines like:

My little horse must think it queer

To stop without a farmhouse near

The reader might suspect that this is not an ordinary horse. And when he reads further -

He gives his harness bells a shake

To ask if there is some mistake

The reader at once knows that this is a very special horse, one that asks questions. At this point to understand the poem, we are moving from the plain sense to the figurative sense. The

speaker in the poem is not alone as he seems to be in the first stanza, and we sense a conflict of some sort between him and the horse. The horse, having been given some human characteristics, becomes in a sense a human being and challenges the speaker in some significant ways. By comparing the horse with a human being, the poet has described him figuratively. The figure of speech not only says exactly what the poet means; it also invites the reader to help to say it.

Symbol:

A symbol is an object, character or an incident that stands for something else. In the poem, Frost describes the horse figuratively by giving it certain characteristics of a person. The horse thinks it queer to stop without a farm house near and therefore he asks if there is some mistake about this stopping. He is challenging the impractical sense of the driver with his own horse sense. When the poet uses one thing to stand for another, we find here the use of symbol. The horse stands for horse sense and operates as symbol in the poem. Similarly, the speaker here in the poem symbolized a representative individual who stops to think of his past life and also of the unknown future; woods symbolized the temptations of human life; snowy lake symbolized the world of challenges. The speaker is on the path, in a dilemma, in between two options of tempting aspirations versus daunting challenges ahead in life.

It is interesting to note that not all figures of speech contain symbols, and not all symbols in a poem are embedded in figures of speech. Symbols are identified and their meaning made clear by full context of the poem. In fact, this principle determines the meaning of all the elements in every poem. It can also be stated in this way: the whole poem helps to determine the meaning of its parts, and in turn, each part helps to determine the meaning of the whole poem.

Rhyme and rhythm:

There are other elements which Frost has used to fashion the total meaning of his poem. It is sometimes difficult for readers to believe that such matters as rhyme and rhythm are used to convey meaning. Popular opinion regards them as troublesome technical matters of interest to the specialist only, or at best as ornaments on the poetic Christmas tree. But actually, rhyme and rhythm help to convey meaning in poetry.

A very old definition of poetry regards it as a fusion of sound and sense. Here fusion is used in the sense of not a mechanical combination, but a fusion, melting together of sound and sense.⁸ Unlike Swinburne, who sacrificed sense to effect sound, Frost blended them without sacrificing either of them. Experienced readers of poetry know that the division between sound and sense is impossible because as one reads for sense, he is either consciously or unconsciously being influenced by the sound. The following analysis will show how skillfully Frost used them in the poem.

As we read the poem aloud, we hear and feel the movement within each line. In a good poem right sound is fused with the right sense, thus:

Whose woods these are I think I know

His house is in the village though.

If we change this word order but not the words themselves like this:

I think I know whose woods these are

Though his house is in the village

Here, the wrong sound has distorted the sense. As we read Frost's arrangements aloud, we hear the four pulsations in each line. Because there are four beats, we call the line 'tetrameter' (a line of four feet). We also hear that each foot consists of two syllables, the first one unstressed and the second one stressed, which we call 'iambic'.

One of the purposes of rhyme is to tie the sense together with sound. Here in this poem, we notice three important consequences of Frost's rhyme scheme. First, three of the four lines in each stanza (except the last stanza) rhyme. These stanzas are therefore very compact sound and sense units. Secondly, the third line in each stanza always rhymes with the first line in the following stanza; hence the sound helps to pass the sense from one stanza to the next. And lastly, in the last stanza all the four lines rhyme; hence, the sound is brought to rest just as the reconciliation of the conflict within the rider is brought to rest. And particularly that the symbols involved in the rhyming words 'deep', 'keep', and 'sleep' are the key symbols which finally reveal the full meaning of the poem. Thus, Frost has demonstrated to us the truth of Stephen Spender's acute remark in his essay, *On Teaching Modern Poetry* (p. 837) that 'a poem means the sum of everything which it is...'⁹

Systematic deviation:

Deviation is a term often used in stylistic criticism. It may refer to any departure from the norm, grammatical, lyrical or semantic. Poets tend to have their own grammar and resort to deviation whenever they have to express a meaning which the normal language cannot. Usually, English language follows SVO pattern, here Frost violated the sequence in the very first line itself to create rhythm, forming Adv. + O + Aux. + S + V sequence.

Whose woods these are I think I know

To be syntactically correct, it should be 'I think I know whose woods are these'. In the last two lines also, the verb 'go' is placed before the subject 'I' thus violating the grammatical rule. Another stylistic feature Frost employed in his poem is the 'run on line' or 'enjambment'. When there is no punctuation at the end of a line, the sense is carried on without a break into the next

line. Here the line-end works against the form and adds a special kind of poetical punctuation to the language. For instance, Frost uses enjambment once in the first stanza, thrice in the second and again twice in the third stanza:

My little horse must think it queer

To stop without farmhouse near

Between the woods and frozen lake

The darkest evening of the year. (Second stanza)

Frost also again effected deviation by starting each line with capital letters.

Repetition is an important stylistic device in poetry. As many repetitions in this poem, like letter 'w' in 'whose woods'; 'h' in 'his house' and 'he gives his harness bell'; 's' sound in 'other sound's the sweep'; 'd' in 'dark and deep' and many more add special effects in the poem. More specifically, complete repetition in the last two lines in the last stanza creates, besides musical effect, a sense of reconciliation of the conflict within the speaker and seeks to fasten the speaker's resolve to fulfill the commitments he has to execute in the near future.

One basic contrast that Frost establishes at the level of semantics in the poem is the contrast between the speaker's sense and horse's sense. No doubt, it also creates dramatic effect in the poem. The line 'to ask if there is some mistake' reveals the horse's point of view narrated by the speaker himself. From the point of view of its stylistic techniques as well as its contribution at the level of meaning in the poem, this line has great significance.

Topicalization:

Topicalization is the stylistic mechanism by which an element is fronted for thematic prominence or thematicization. It may also be defined as a stylistic device which isolates one of the constituents of a sequence as 'topic' and shifts it to the sentence initial position. In the poem, in the very first line itself, the object 'woods' has been fronted and the subject 'I' is back-shifted; thus, Frost resorts to topicalization technique.

Frost's poem, as a whole, creates a musical effect, at once capturing the reader's attention. Frost explored the dramatic monologue technique in lyric form in this poem and it seems to be written in 'rough conversational tone of speech'. Attention is also directed to the plain language, lack of rhetoric and lack of much literary jargon, the careful rendering into the meter of customary speech. Frost has written this poem in near-perfect rhyme scheme. One specific feature in this poem is that Frost avoids problematic poetic diction as suggested by Neo-classicists. He uses only words of his own, always striving to be natural and sincere. And it seems to create a special stylistic effect in his poem. Most outstanding feature in this poem is

Frost's technique of blending sound and sense. Certainly, Frost is gifted with a unique way of expressing things; he chooses words from conversational idiom, loads them with profound meanings and makes them look simple but intensely poetic though regional. The 'woods', the 'trees' seem to offer him quiet and solitude and it goes side by side with the world of social responsibilities for which he feels equally concerned.

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