Abstract

The discipline of stylistics aspires to be a science but falls short of it as it lacks clear and accepted definitions of its key terms. In the last forty years stylistics has become passé but it still draws the interest of theorists and literary critics. The study of stylistics continues to find a place in English Major Programs in many Anglo-American universities and remains an integral part of English Studies. The survival of stylistics has to do with both the ideology of literary criticism and the economic expediency of academic institutions. Scholars however do not agree whether the method of stylistics should be used for linguistic interpretation of literary texts or to evaluate styles in different discourses. Practitioners of stylistics often describe a text (poetics) and then arbitrarily interpret it (hermeneutics). The shift from linguistic analysis to literary interpretation has no rationale whatsoever and the onus of the shift lies on each critic. Given this background an analysis of style is necessarily conducted to comprehend a writer’s point of view, tone of voice and narrative method. Writers have always favored a simple style.

Vive la Littéraire Stylistique

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though each writer, from Shakespeare to Hemingway, has used a distinctive style to communicate meaning. A writer's style directly affects his worldview and narrative technique. An analysis of style involves an understanding of both denotation and connotation in a work of art. But an evaluation of poetry, more than fiction, involves a greater emphasis on connotation to bring out meaning. Systematizing ingredients of style has been the prime concern of stylistics over the years. Though it was understood by the Greeks as rhetoric, it was the Russian formalists and Anglo-American New Critics who made it a distinctive practice. The cognitive turn in stylistics has introduced new areas of understanding such as literary structure and logical thinking. Still stylistics suffers from a Eurocentric bias. Literary works are individual entities and no global standard can be created to evaluate the merits of a text.

In the 1980s Stanley Fish proclaimed the death of stylistics in America while in the 1990s Jean-Jacques Lecercle noticed that stylistics was vanishing from Europe (Fish, 1980 68-96; Lecercle, 1993 14-18). But these revelations were squarely challenged by many scholars foremost amongst them was Katile Wales (Wales, 1993 30-31). Though the death knell of stylistics has been sounded many times since the 1980s it has stubbornly survived such prognostication. Today the discipline of stylistics may not be a la mode but many Anglo-American departments of English still introduce the study of stylistics in their English Major programs. This could stem from both the way literary studies have evolved and the economic exigency of departmental survival. Even after thirty years of declaring the demise of stylistics by Fish, the discipline is still alive as can be seen by over 20,000 publications since then listed in MLA International Bibliography publications. International publishing houses such as Oxford University Press and Routledge are still active in publishing dozens of books on stylistics.

Defining Stylistics

Though stylistics is alive and kicking it is hard to define. Some see stylistics as a method to interpret a literary text through linguistic analysis (Simpson, 2004 3), while others see it as the study of literary style emphasizing linguistic expressions (Verdonk, 2002 4). Though both positions are quite different from each other they nonetheless emphasize common ideas connected to notions of interpretation, analysis, study and commentary. These notions mean different things to different scholars and are rather hard to define. Moreover stylistics does not deal only with literary discourse. Other discourses such as legal, historical and social also fall within the ambit of stylistics and they also employ linguistic analysis to clarify meaning (Rotgé, 2004 511-14). A lack of clear definition of terms and overlapping discourses prevent stylistics to aspire to the status of a scientific discipline.

Fish believes that there is no science involved in stylistics, as neither linguistics nor ‘language sciences’ can be termed scientific (Fish, 1980 68-96). Yet most scholars dabbling in stylistics would like us to believe that what they are handling is a scientific discipline. Some scholars see stylistics as an attempt to expand interpretation (Pierrot, 1993 281) while others see it as a way to describe first and interpret later (Burke, 2005 187). Often stylistics attempts to describe (poetics) and then arbitrarily begins to interpret (hermeneutics). Fish places the onus of justifying an arbitrary shift from linguistic analysis to literary interpretation on those who practice stylistics.

Both linguistic theorists and literary critics claim stylistics as their discipline to the exclusion of the other. During the 1960s Bateson-Fowler debate on the position of stylistics in Literary Studies, F. W. Bateson argued for the exclusion of linguistic theory from literary criticism, as these two disciplines “do not
overlap” (Simpson, 2004, 156). Stylistics is claimed by both the linguist and the literary critic, each demanding exclusive rights over the discipline.

Some have argued that it is possible to divide the engagement of stylistics into literary stylistics and linguistic stylistics. But this is more in the nature of turf war than scientific analysis. The methodologies of stylistics overlap and interconnect diverse areas. Though literary texts are chosen as examples by literary stylists, conversation pieces are selected by sociolinguists. However the methods of stylistics can be applied effectively to both literary and non-literary texts. We can neither study language based on either literary criteria or linguistic standards. Language extends and interacts with both (Jeffries & McIntyre, 2010 3).

Until the late 1970s stylistics theory dealt primarily with poetic analysis. There was hardly any worthwhile work on stylistics in fiction except Fowler’s Linguistics and the Novel (1977). Only with the publication of Style in Fiction in the early 1980s the area opened up to include the rhetoric of the text, mind styles, discourses and discourse situations. But even here the theories were merely exploratory and many of those areas, now highly developed such as cognitive linguistics and narratology, were excluded from the book.

The cognitive turn in stylistics has taken literary analysis into new areas such as exploring the ways fiction affects logical thinking of the reader, narrator and character, the ways meaning is structured by the writer, the interaction of mental spaces and concepts and the ways readers realize coherence (Herman, 2002; Fludernik 1993; Fauconnier, Giles and Turner, 2002; Dancygier, 2005 99-127; 2006 5-15). Obviously the cognitive exploration has taken us away from formalist aspects of literary analysis where the text is important. This problem has been addressed to some extent by the arrival of corpus linguistics and use of the electronic media to understand the literary text. Often the computer comes to the aid of the literary critic by helping him understand style and mental constructs by computing patterns of change and recurrence in a given text. However the methods of both cognitive linguistics and corpus stylistics are not independent in nature but interact to provide a better understanding of style.

Today in the US cognitive stylistics is seen as cognitive linguistics while in Europe it is seen as cognitive psychology (Culpeper, 2003 ix). The debate whether stylistics should deal with literary style or linguistic meaning may not end soon, but the fact remains that stylistics as a discipline in British departments of English and is here to stay.

**Defining Literary Style**

We define style as the way something is said, done or expressed. We speak of a particular style of speech or a unique style of writing. Style reveals a man's inner self, his sensibility and perception. Style in literature invariably refers to the indubitable way in which a writer uses words, phrases, symbols, sounds and images to realize his goal. It has more to do with a signature language that a writer employs. It epitomizes his choice of words, phrases, and the way he constructs his sentences, and organizes paragraphs. Style encourages the reader to return to the language on the page and understand the message. A writer is not playing with cognitive linguistics but finding the exact words to use in his narrative. He is looking for the mot juste to represent his vision.

Style is the substance of the writer but points of view, literary techniques, tone of voice, characterization or dialogue are part of his narrative method. We often read in Times Literary Supplement or The Book Review section of The Japan
Times that so-and-so writer’s style was ‘bad’ or it was ‘brilliant.’ Often such evaluations are hard to understand unless they are supported by literary evidence. Style may enter the structure of a work of art but it is different from the way the events in the story are arranged. As we read a work of art we gradually become aware of the writer’s style and use words like ‘elegant,’ ‘formal,’ ‘grand,’ ‘pompous’ or ‘crisp.’ Even though we experience style it is difficult for us to explain our perception as we lack the literary tools of analysis. Style is therefore far more difficult to grasp than content.

Style can be seen not only as the artistic expression of a person but also of a group or a school. It can also refer to the imaginative or individual quality of the way language is employed. Style can be a form of appearance, a design, or production, the way in which something is done. Obviously it must be clear and simple. In the Rhetoric (350 BCE) Aristotle mentioned that the foundation of a good style was “correctness of language” by which he implied five ingredients—firstly, proper use of connecting words; secondly, correct naming of things, thirdly, avoiding ambiguities; fourthly maintaining proper grammatical classification and finally, using correct words to express plurality, fewness and unity (Aristotle, 1984 174-75). Aristotle further distinguished the written and spoken style. The former was “more finished” while the latter involved “oratory” and “emotion.” For Aristotle, a good style made the text readable.

Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Prose Styles

Writers from the mid-eighteenth century were fascinated by the English prose style and pontificated on what constituted a good style. Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) campaigned for a simple style and felt that a style which obscured “most evident truths” could be called “the bugbear style” as it did little to clarify but more to repulse and terrify (Johnson, 1758). Oliver Goldsmith (1730-1774) argued that the most sublime subjects were often expressed most simply. He elaborated,

True eloquence does not consist, as the rhetoricians assure us, in saying great things in a sublime style, but in a simple style, for there is, properly speaking, no such thing as a sublime style; the sublimity lies only in the things; and when they are not so, the language may be turgid, affected, metaphorical—but not affecting (Goldsmith, 1759).

Goldsmith felt that sublimity was more a function of life, of “things” and not of language. Therefore language must be kept simple in order to communicate.

American author William Dean Howells (1837-1920) pointed out that the style of a writer revealed his country, his race, his heart, his likes and dislikes.

The style is the man, and he cannot hide himself in any garb of words so that we shall not know somehow what manner of man he is within it; his speech betrayeth him, not only as to his country and his race, but more subtly yet as to his heart, and the loves and hates of his heart (Howells, 2006 19).

Style is something that exists beyond the ‘garb of words’ and no writer can ‘hide’ his inner self. Style is therefore a revelation of the self, of the hidden motives and desires of the writer. It is precisely because style captures the essence of man it is hard to explain and difficult to evaluate.

The Basic Elements of Style

Obviously students of literature are often asked to venture on the difficult task of finding the basic elements of style in a writer’s work and are often told to focus
on grammar, structure and vocabulary. But within these broad divisions many other aspects are hidden. Understanding sentence structure would involve identifying loose, periodic or balanced sentences and their significance towards shaping the central vision of the story. The emphasis and pace in writing would direct the student towards the diction of the prose whether it is expansive or compact. This would help to reveal the intention of the writer just as diction helps to clarify the goal. Vocabulary, figures of speech (metonymy, personification, figurative language), dialogues (natural or contrived), use of sound (alliteration, rhythm), character development (flat or round) all go to pin down the style of the writer and provide a uniqueness to his literary vision. Similarly tone of voice (detached, ironic, personifying or literal) help us to understand where the sympathy of the writer lies. Paragraph length (short, long, organized, free flowing), chronology (temporal rhythms, duration, gaps), allusions (inter-textuality, myths, symbols), meta-fictional traits (interrogation of narrative process) and linguistic techniques (grammar, onomatopoeia, aporia) all direct us to the presentation of a specific vision of the writer in the work of art.

The function of stylistic analysis is to make the reader aware of the style of the writer in a specific literary text and through such analysis to evaluate the effectiveness and characteristics of style. Since style often relates to sentence structure, wordplay, diction, sound and inter-textuality—and the ways all these are joined together to form the literary vision of the writer—writing about style has to do with evaluation and placing it within a larger literary tradition or genre. So in a way a literary critic is not just analyzing the elements of style but also evaluating those elements of literature that give style its aesthetic merit.

An analysis of style invariably takes up a short expository paragraph, a thematic dialogue or a transition as representative samples. To analyze the complete works of an artist, like Erich Auerbach analyses Homer, the Old Testament, Virginia Woolf and Marcel Proust in *Mimesis*, is a larger project and more time consuming than the analysis of a short story by a writer. In *Mimesis* Auerbach establishes a connection between the style of a writer and the socio-political milieu and religious ideas surrounding the writer. In this way he places the stylistic preference of a writer within the aesthetic values of his age.

Often students tend to confuse between a writer’s style and the different styles the writers gives to his characters in a given text. It is important to distinguish between a writer’s style per se and the speaker’s or protagonist’s style. Often a skilled writer changes his style to suit the intellectual, cultural and emotional background of his characters. At times, two passages from the same text may differ in style remarkably, but this difference may have a specific intention (Roberts, 1964 128). Perhaps, it could be to reveal the emotional immaturity of a character or his or her psychological makeup.

**Shakespeare’s Style**

Shakespeare is seen as the master of the blank verse. His rhetoric may be faulty and his logic passé but he still remains an impressionistic writer who dexterously creates a web of desire and ambition in his plays. He may not understand race and ethnicity the way we understand now, but he does carry the imprint of the Elizabethan society complete with its faults and prejudices. His is a world of linguistic freedom when language is fresh and alive with new possibilities.

Though Shakespeare began with declamatory speeches he soon adapted the convention of his day to suit his own needs. In his plays we see a creative use of soliloquies, metaphorical poetry and blank verse. He could experiment with blank verse, free verse or poetry with dexterity that no one, except Chaucer had
done before. His is a society of nobility, gentry, yeomanry and the poor. In Shakespeare the nobility speaks blank verse or unrhymed iambic pentameter which consists of 5 iambs per line where every second syllable is accented.

The Merchant of Venice (written 1596-97 and performed 1600) is an excellent example of Shakespeare’s use of a highly argumentative and intellectual style, especially in the court scene where Portia outwits everyone and gets Bassanio’s friend Antonio freed from the unkind grips of moneylender Shylock. Early in the play we get a glimpse of her sharp-wit and eloquence. In Act I Scene 2 Portia tells her waiting maid Nerissa, that she is “aweary of this great world.” Nerissa advises her to be happy with just enough and to follow this advice, to which Portia replies,

‘If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches and poor men’s cottages princes’ palaces. It is a good divine that follows his own instructions: I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done, than be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching. The brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o’er a cold decree: such a hare is madness the youth, to skip o’er the meshes of good counsel the cripple. But this reasoning is not in the fashion to choose me a husband. O me, the word ‘choose!’ I may neither choose whom I would nor refuse whom I dislike; so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father. Is it not hard, Nerissa, that I cannot choose one nor refuse none?’ (Act I, Scene 2)

Obviously Portia’s feminine and argumentative style suits her position as a rich, beautiful and intelligent speaker. She is going to masquerade as lawyer Balthazar and argue Antonio’s freedom in a dramatic reinterpretation of the agreement entered upon earlier between the two. She begins her argument in a simple diction but becomes increasingly complex as she hammers in her point. Right in the beginning she uses two verbs, repeats one and thereby shows action. Her prose is dynamic and based on the standard of western rational discourse. She begins with an ‘if’ clause which is closely subordinated to the subsequent main clause. Portia’s ability to subordinate clauses can be seen as an evidence of her sharp mind and rational temper. She uses powerful rhetorical devices such as a zeugma with double grammatical implication (Roberts, 1964 129). The main clause of the first sentence is a condensed version of two clauses. It suppresses the verb “had been” but still keeps the balance —chapels had been churches and poor men’s cottages [had been] princes palaces. She uses rhetoric to expose the abuse of rhetoric and to win over an argument by sheer eloquence.

Though Portia is quick-witted, intelligent and beautiful, some scholars see her as cruelly-directed towards the moneylender Shylock. Wolf Mankowitz calls her a “cold, snobbish little bitch” while Harold Bloom sees her as anti-Semitic and philistine settling for the “glittering gold digger Bassanio” (Bloom, 1986b). Bloom resents her for expressing the anti-Semitism of the Elizabethan society, something equivalent to being a “Nazi sympathizer” as if the Jews were “decedents of Satan, rather than of Abraham.” He blames Shakespeare for creating the image of Shylock who has done “great harm in the world (Bloom, 2008 xi). Whatever be the nature of reactive criticism, Shakespeare’s blank verse suits the temper and needs of his Christian heroine in the play.

History of Stylistics
Stylistics may be understood as the study of particular styles in literature or art that texts share such as the narrative structure of a novel or the verse form of a poem. In linguistics it implies a disciplined study of literary language, sounds,
forms and vocabulary that establish the whirligig of taste of individuals or social
groups. Obviously stylistic analysis constitutes one component of literary
evaluation, the other being formalistic analysis. Formal analysis of a literary text
involves a discussion of reported speech or informal syntax. In evaluating the
merits of a text, critics look for a balance between stylistic and formalistic
elements often termed as evaluative stylistics. Though evaluative stylistics is
often used in literary valuation it is not an objective method, as intellectual
priorities, values and tastes of the evaluator play a significant role in determining
the strength or weakness of a text.

Stylistics arises in the early twentieth century as a western academic discipline
and often traces its origin from the Greek principles of rhetoric. The Greek term
*techne rhetorika* once dealt with the art of persuasive public speaking. Long ago
denizens of Homer’s imagined community realized the power of public speech in
Greek society and its ability to positively influence real social events and
decisions. As the Greeks settled in Sicily they soon realized that many
contentious debates in politics or jurisprudence could be resolved to their
advantage if they mastered the basic elements of rhetoric. It was Gorgias, the
disciple of Corax and Tisias who expanded the use of rhetoric to include the
study of philosophy and literary texts. Afterwards Plato brought rhetoric to its
ultimate moment in Phaedrus where he paid homage to skilful public speaking,
but cautioned the rhetorician that without the proper study of philosophy it would
be nigh impossible to “speak properly about anything.” Socrates exhorts young
Phaedrus to understand the following truth:

Come here, then, noble creatures, and persuade the fair young Phaedrus
that unless he pay proper attention to philosophy he will never be able to
speak properly about anything. And let Phaedrus answer (Phaedrus 261A).

Socrates claimed that Sophist rhetoric was just persuasive flattery, a routine
which if practiced without moderation may prove to be socially divisive as it
might advance personal desires and interests at the expense of collective good.
He believed that public speaking should pursue truth not deceit, lest it become
persuasive flattery. Socrates felt that unguarded rhetoric was subversive and
therefore had to be tempered by philosophical inquiry into the nature of truth.

Aristotle disagreed with the anti-rhetoric premise of Plato and asserted that
rhetoric was an important component of philosophical inquiry. The perception of
facts through language cannot be considered unethical. On the contrary it is
conducive to bringing together appearance and reality. Instead of being socially
disruptive, the persuasive power of rhetoric preempts violence.

Stylistics is a byproduct of Russian formalism and Anglo-American New
Criticis which began in the 1920s and continued along different trajectories
until the 1950s. Both the groups were textualists of sorts who endeavored to
make literature into a modern discourse and discipline. In the 1960s both the
formalists and new critics began to see similarities in their use of rhetoric and
aesthetics as methodological tools to understand the uniqueness of literary style
and vision, their intellectual justification was weakened by the rise of new
practices such as structuralism, poststructuralism, new historicism and feminism.

Structuralism expanded the borders of the literary discourse and connected it to
other discourses in society such as the political and social. It not only revealed
the connection between literary and non-literary styles but also showed hot the
expectations of the reader may determine stylistic outcomes and interpretations.
Feminists argued against specific textual style and uncovered psycho-cultural
hegemonies that force literary critics to determine style and interpretation. New
historicists and Marxists saw style as indicative of cultural and ideological biases and changes.

In the early twentieth century Russian formalists with Roman Jakobson, Victor Borisorich Shklovsky (1893-1984) and Boris Tomashesky attempted to analyze literary language using the notion of defamiliarization to identify the aesthetic significance of a work of art. Russian formalism held that art always attempted to defamiliarize the familiar so as to shock the reader into a new awareness.

Shklovsky felt that literature was built upon stylistic and formal devices which “force” the reader to see ordinary life in “new, unusual ways.” In his “Preface” to the *Theory of Prose* (1925) Shklovsky talks about this belief as follows:

> It is perfectly clear that language is influenced by socioeconomic conditions …. Nevertheless, the word is not a shadow. The word is a thing. It changes in accordance with the linguistic laws that govern the physiology of speech and so on…. As a literary critic I’ve been engaged in the study of the internal laws that govern literature (Shklovsky, 1998 vii).

Shklovsky distinguishes between “recognition” (implying a conventional understanding of objects) and “seeing” (meaning objects as revealed by the artist). An artist forces us to see things we have never seen before in that light by the power of his craft (image, rhythm, plot and vocabulary). Any theory of literature which does not take into account the masterful creativity of the artist is false. Shklovsky states,

> In a narrow sense we shall call a work artistic if it has been created by special devices whose purpose is to see to it that these artifacts are interpreted artistically as much as possible (Shklovsky, 1998 2).

In *Tematika* (1925) Tomashesky explains that it is possible to analyze a literary narrative based on themes which appeal to the reader. These themes are reinvigorated by emotions which keep up the interest of the reader. There are many sub-themes or motifs that are made to join the main themes creating a kind of artistic unity. In order to maintain coherence the artist must justify the introduction of motifs based on plausible motive relationships creating stories. These motives may be causal-temporal relationships creating stories and contemporaneous texts such as official letters or lyrics. Tomashesky also distinguishes between story or action and plot or the way the story is revealed to the reader.

Since Tomashesky the discipline of stylistics, once a part of linguistics, has branched out into many fields, and now escapes categorization. Loosely speaking stylistics deals with the way language is used by individual writers that distinguishes their style. Stylistics looks for those formal aspects which help us to understand this function. Style can also be typical of a historical period, genre or content. By and large stylistics analyses literary texts but we can extend it to include non-literary works as well.

The method of stylistics is often used to understand non-literary forms such as journalism. In journalism we often use ellipsis or missed out words to accommodate a heading within a specified sphere or space. This makes the heading catchy and allows the reader to guess the missing words. Often such phrases have intertextuality that call forth the reader’s familiarity with it. If we read a newspaper heading such as “Farewell to Arms in Libya” we are immediately reminded of the Italian front in World War I through Ernest
Hemingway’s novel A Farewell to Arms (1926) on the same theme. We remember the farewell of Frederic Henry from nurse Catherine Barkley in whose arms he once found love. We also remember Stephen Crane’s The Red Badge of Courage (1895) about the Civil War which also has the protagonist named Henry who also deserts the army. By choosing this heading the writer forces us to see close similarities between modern day Libya and Italy of World War I and Hemingway. Therefore both the foregrounding and context of a text can be both linguistic and/or non-linguistics which also persuade the reader with its own sweet rhetoric, repetition and urgency.

Setting Global Standards

Stylistics can be seen as a highly complex method of evaluating the merits of a literary text, but hides within it a shared cultural and educational biases predominantly western in nature. In his book Literary Theory (1983) Terry Eagleton felt that stylistics was more of an ideological conspiracy of the middle class than an objective method to evaluate a literary text (Eagleton, 1993 13). He argued that by merely emphasizing the self-referential aspects of a literary text a critic separates it from the real world (social, political and economic) in which it arises. Such world-renouncing aesthetics might force us to regard politically and ideologically-motivated texts as good literature. For Eagleton there can be no literature “in the sense of a set of works or assured or unalterable values, distinguished by certain shared inherent properties...” (Eagleton, 1993 9). On the contrary literary works are individual experiences. “what in German is called Lebenswelt, reality as actually organized and experienced by an individual subject” (Eagleton, 1993 51). In this sense there can be no global standard to evaluate the merits or demerits of a literary work or to agree upon a canon for creating global literature. Stylistics shares some of the Eurocentric biases that Eagleton highlighted over three decades ago. It remains a formidable pseudo-discipline aspiring to be a science.

Works Cited


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