

**STYLISTICS, LITERATURE AND THE
EFL/ ESL LEARNER AT UNIVERSITY
LEVEL**

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One should make the distinction between literature as a subject and literature as a resource, i.e. integrated within language teaching. It has been argued (Widdowson 1975) that unless literature is integrated with language teaching, it can be of a contribution to the EFL / ESL learner. My aim in this paper is to investigate the way stylistic analysis fits in the traditional approach of teaching literature, and how it can be a means of integrating this teaching with that of language. The question that this paper asks is whether an adoption of a stylistic approach allows literature to be taught within the traditional preoccupations such as plot, character, motivation, value, psychology and so on, and to what an extent it can be helpful in combining between literature and language.

Literature is either taught as a subject or as a resource. Maley in Carter et al (1989:10-11) not

only excludes the use of stylistics in literature as a resource but also makes its combination with the traditional approach impossible when literature is taught as a subject. My aim is to argue that a combination between the literary critical and stylistics is also possible when teaching literature as a subject. By literature as a subject I mean studying it for an academic purpose to get a qualification in literary studies. The issue of literary competence is not a problem since learners are supposed to have the ability to perform adequately in response to literature and its various techniques. Their competence in the language is meant not to be a problem too. They are supposed to have acquired enough systemic and lexical knowledge that enable them to understand the texts dealt with. Literature as a subject draws its inspiration from literary criticism and mainly from I.A. Richard's **Practical Criticism**. This literary critical approach requires a good deal of preparatory work both at the level of language and that of sensitisation to literature. Students in the case of poetry for instance start by examining the metrical structure and rhythm, rhyme, imagery, and then they look at some general features of the poem such as alliteration, and assonance relying on their impressions and feelings. The main emphasis here is on the learner's response to the text and on the

evaluation of this response. The central question *‘is what gives the experience of reading a certain poem its value? How is this experience better than another’* (Richards 1924: 1) Form is not as important as the analysis of the process of reading and the formulation of criteria by which students can evaluate the result of their reading. To illustrate this approach, let us study the following poem:

Mr Bleaney

‘This was Mr Bleaney’s room. He stayed
The whole time he was at the bodies, till
They moved him.’ Flowered curtains,
thin and frayed,
Fall to within five inches of the sill,

Whose window shows a strip of building land,
Tussocky, littered. ‘Mr Bleaney took
My bit of garden properly in hand.’
Bed, upright chair, sixty-watt bulb, no hook

Behind the door, no room for hooks or bags-
‘I’ll take it.’ So it happens that I lie
Where Mr Bleaney lay, and stub my fags
On the same sauce –souvenir, and try
Stuffing my ears with cotton-wool, to drown
The jabbering set he egged her o to buy.
I know his habits- what time he came down,

His preference for sauce to gravy, why

He kept on plugging at the four aways-
Likewise their yearly frame: the frinton folk
Who put him up for summer holidays,
And Christmas at his sister's house in Stoke.

But if he stood and watched the frigid wind
Tousling the clouds, lay on the fusty bed
Telling himself this was home, and grinned,
And shivered, without shaking off the dread

That how we live measures our own nature,
And at his age having no more to show
Than one hired box should make him pretty sure
He warranted no better, I don't know.

Philip Larkin

An analysis of this poem based on the practical criticism approach will, to a certain extent, be as follow: this poem consists of seven stanzas which have a regular a b a b rhyme scheme. Each stanza is based round iambic pentameters, with five stressed syllables to a line, and a lot of lines in the poem are not punctuated. This, together with the use of dialogue, gives the poem a colloquial and almost relaxed feeling. The situation

is urban, and unattractive: *building land / Tussocky / littered*. Three characters seem to be present in this poem: the landlady, the lodger (the speaker) and indirectly Mr Bleaney, through the former's speech and the latter's actions. In this poem, Larkin concentrates his description on the room and the house in which it is situated as it is the scene around which he develops his theme. The tone of the poem is forthright and direct, its descriptive range is narrow, and there is even a slight trace of bitter humour: (*Stuffing my ears with cotton wool to drown / The jabbering set he egged her to buy.*)

So far as the theme of the poem is concerned, one can say that it is about human beings and their lives. This poem shows hopeless, isolated people leading both an absurd and hopeless life. There is nothing that could give Mr Bleaney a sense for his life.: (*Behind the door, no room for books or bags-*) and the absurdity of this kind of live is almost inevitable: (*'I'll take'. So it happens that I lie / Where Mr Bleaney lay.*) This idea terrifies Larkin. His fears that human existence is useless and life pointless is brought to a head by the word '*dread*' in the penultimate stanza, and the observation of the lifestyle of a single man living in a single rented room is very acute. A sense of impertinence is given in the observation that there was no hook '*behind the door*' and an

overwhelming impression of bleakness by the bareness of the room, with ‘ *Bed, upright chair, sixty-watt bulb* ’.

Overall, Larkin paints a bleak picture of human life, showing it to be tedious, dull, and concerned mostly with putting off serious thought. He even sees himself to be part of it ending his poem by (... *I don't know*), affirming thus his worries and incapacity to change the human condition or get rid of what is absurd in it.

There is one thing I want to assert, this approach can be of no efficiency to the EFL / ESL learner. An adoption of such model will, I will argue, destroy any confidence that this student might have in acquiring the language as it requires a certain level of literary competence and a sufficient knowledge of literary conventions which foreign learners do not have till, at least, higher levels.

What one can notice from the above analysis is that there is no focus on form. All the interpretations made are, more or less, not based on linguistic data. They are, indeed, the result of our impressions and feelings after reading the poem. No textual description, no reference is made to the system or the internal structure as if the medium of this poem is not a language that has its own linguistic rules which do contribute to our understanding of the meaning conveyed. In fact

with this particular poem, Widdowson (in Carter 82:19) argues that its appreciation ‘ *depends, in some degree at least, on an understanding of the peculiarities of certain grammatical features.*’

One question can be asked, is it possible to back up our intuitions and feelings by a close syntactic and lexical analysis of the text ? One should know that there is an unfounded tendency to present practical criticism and stylistic analysis in a binary opposition, one excluding the other, and thus preventing learners to use them both in their analysis of literary texts. The tendency among teachers has always been, depending on their studies as undergraduate students, to lean on either linguistics or literary criticism, but never on them both. My aim now is to demonstrate that a combination of these two approaches, when studying literature as a subject, is possible and that much that is of pedagogical benefit can be derived from not limiting ourselves as teachers to one mode of interpretation or approach. But how might this combination be realized in practice? What appropriate pedagogy can be followed?

In the following paragraphs, I intend to propose some activities that may help effectively the teacher to combine between the practical criticism and stylistic analysis. I must admit that I have no claim of originality in these activities. They are, in

fact, familiar to a lot of teachers and textbook writers.

The first activity to be done in the class is to read the poem aloud to the students as many times as the teacher sees it necessary. Once this done, the students are asked to jot down any impression or reaction they have got from their listening to the poem. After that, they are asked to form small groups depending on the size of the class and discuss what they have written. To assure that the objective behind this activity is achieved the teacher should supervise the whole activity making sure to intervene when it is necessary. This activity will give the learners possibility to compare the different impressions that they have from their listening to the poem, and to help them to see the poem as a piece of communication. The next activity is to let the students read the poem and see if their first impressions remain the same after their close reading. A discussion and a debate on the subject will follow. After that, they are asked to discuss the metrical structure and rhythmic features of the text, and how they do help not only in conveying the meaning, but also the mood of the poem as a whole, while noting down clusters of images and figurative meanings. This activity will prepare the ground for what is yet to come. The next step, once this activity is over, is to ask the

learners to pick up all the unusual features of the poem and explore the way they deviate from the normal pattern of the language. This question will help them not only to relate their experience of the language and literature but will also provide them with the necessary clues that might confirm their first intuitive reactions and judgements. What the students will be doing in fact is analysing the text very closely focusing on the lexical and linguistic features that the practical criticism approach neglects or tends not to focus on. They will be able to substantiate their impressions and feelings, and hence, back up every interpretation they might give to the text by referring to the features of the text itself. Indeed, no matter how the language of literature is fashioned to create its own context, it has always to refer to the code from which it is derived (Widdowson 1992:88). This will, as Widdowson (ibid) states ‘ *enable them to engage with the poem as individuals and make it their own as an experience of conditional reality.*’ Another alternative activity to the previous one is to paraphrase the poem. The purpose of this operation is not to make an equivalence between the meaning of the poetic text and the description of its content,. The aim is, indeed, to make the learners aware of certain aspects of the poem that can not be paraphrased and thus direct their

attention to them as being unusual features that deviate from the conventions. As a final activity, learners are asked to link between stylistic features of the text and their interpretations. They will draw the various observations together so that the link between form and meaning that was deduced intuitively applying a set of unconscious procedures can be seen more clearly.

The result here is that we end up with a combination of activities that require more attention to language work and others which call for more concentration on literary appreciation. However, the main point as Widdowson (ibid:101) asserts ‘ *is that ... the language and literature are treated as interdependent: an awareness of linguistic potential is not distinct from a sense of literary effect.*’

With this in mind , let us consider again, as an example of reference Larkin’s Mr Bleaney and see how an analysis based on the some of the activities I have been propounding in the precedent lines, might be. I will begin my analysis of the poem by examining the metrical structure and rhythm. Then, I will give a general interpretation for it. After that, I will go to what seems to be the significant stylistic features in the text. Finally, I will try to show how the formal stylistic features are used as a basis for conveying meaning and effect.

General interpretation:

This poem consists of seven stanzas, each with a regular abab rhyme scheme. Every stanza is based round iambic pentameters, with five stressed syllables to a line. The poem opens with a voice, that of the landlady who establishes the colloquial idiom, the rest of the poem will make use of. In the first five stanzas, the first-person figure (the speaker) describes Mr Bleaney's room, the previous lodger by emphasising its bareness, and by the same token, Mr Bleaney's life which was also bare and futile. This futility seems to amount to the failure that is reflected even in the physical details of the room : (*bed, upright chair, sixty-watt bulb ...*) By the end of the third stanza, the reader has already an idea about Mr Bleaney and the absurd life he has led. This idea is strengthened when unexpectedly the first-person participant (the speaker) decides to take the room and occupy the same spatial setting Mr Bleaney used to. Here we see the emptiness of Mr Bleaney's life and its dull routine as we emerge gradually with him through the physical props of the setting that the speaker shares with him. In fact, we reach a stage, as readers, when we can not distinguish between him and the speaker, or at least, we see the latter taking his footsteps.

Indeed, the tension in the poem heightens in the last two stanzas when the first-person participant realizes that he is being identified with Mr Bleaney especially when he claims that he knows his habits. So, he concludes by a contradictory assertion: (... *I don't know.*) confirming thus, his worries and growing fear of being associated with Mr Bleaney. As a conclusion, the poem is about the inevitable absurdity and routine of life that the human being is unable to get rid of.

This is my interpretation of the poem. An interpretation based, I must admit, on my reading and intuitive judgement. Reference is still made to language in the text, yet, it is not enough if I want to back what I have understood from the poem in case of a disagreement about its interpretation. I may, indeed, be accused of not understanding the poem properly. This is because, as Short (1996:09) explains, ‘ *the meaning which we ascribe to sentences and texts is at the same time heavily constrained and yet variable to some limited degree because of the interaction between readers and what they read. Readers are different and so bring along possibility of fresh ways of interpreting a particular text.*’ So what is needed is a concentration on the linguistic configurations of the text that are, as Short (*ibid*) confirms, ‘ *stable and common to all of us.*’ This concentration

implies an analysis that is as detailed, as systematic and as true as possible. And here comes stylistics. My next step, therefore, is to analyse the poem adopting a stylistic approach to see how its meaning and effect come about.

(i) Characters

From the above general discussion, I can affirm that there are three characters in the poem, each involved differently and serving a particular purpose. My aim now is to have a close look at each character and discuss his role with reference to the discourse situation.

The Landlady: She takes the role of the addresser, introducing to the addressee, the new lodger, Mr Bleaney's room. A reader to the poem will notice that she is present only in the first two stanzas. Later, little or no reference is made to her. Her role consists of introducing Mr Bleaney and his room to the new tenant. However, from her speech, we can know a lot about her former lodger. We know for instance that he was working in a car factory (*...He stayed / The whole time he was at the Bodies ...*), and that he was an optimistic person (*... Mr Bleaney took / My bit of garden properly in hand.,*) In fact, she serves as a link between Mr Bleaney and the new lodger, and once this link is made,

there is no need for her. Her role is over. This explains her disappearance from the scene later.

Mr Bleaney: He is the third person figure, the subject of the whole poem. He appears in both scenes that the poem consists of: (*...Flowered curtains, thin and frayed / Fall within five inches of the sill, / Whose window shows ...*), and the second one: (*... So it happens that I lie ...*) Yet, he is never engaged in any interaction. ‘*everything*’ as Widdowson (1982:21) points out ‘*about him is reported in the simple past tense.*’ . In the first scene he is referred to by the landlady and in the second one reference to him is made by the new tenant: through the physical props of the setting and the actual activities of the new lodger himself (*... I lie / Where Mr Bleaney lay, and stub my fags / On the same saucer souvenir ...*). The effect of this reference is such that Mr Bleaney and the new lodger are no longer detached from each other. One is the shadow of the other. We reach a point where we can no longer tell who is who. Even the first- person speaker is puzzled, and no matter what he does to detach himself from the former tenant: (*But if he stood ... / Telling himself that this was home ...*) implying that he is different from him, he finally ends up by admitting his defeat or at least his doubts (*... I don’t know.*).

The new lodger (the speaker): This person is present throughout the poem in two different ways. In the first scene and though he is present, he is not part of it. However, it is this detachment which allows him not only to make the observations through which the room is described to the readers, but also distances him from the old lodger, Mr Bleaney. In the second scene he becomes fully engaged, shifting from a role of an observer to that of a participant. This shift results in a convergence of his life with that of Mr Bleaney. The occupation of the same room, and the use of the same props of the physical setting (the saucer souvenir, the jabbering set, and the fusty bed) have the effect of strengthening the convergence between the two character who started as distinct from each other in the first scene.

Stylistic Features:

(ii) Lexis

The poem starts with a description of Mr Bleaney's room. A consideration of the lexis used to describe it and its physical props will reveal that most of the lexical items used have a negative value: the room has **frayed** curtains with a window that shows **a strip** of building that is **tussocky** and **littered**. The bed is **fusty** and the radio is jabbering. These words convey an idea of

bleakness and boredom that the theme of the poem later reinforces. These lexical items also distance the speaker from the previous lodger and implies his unwillingness to accept to live in a room that is dull (a **60-watt** bulb) and confined (**no room** for books or bags). This particular expression also differentiates between the speaker and Mr Bleaney. We can guess that unlike the latter, the former is a literate person who cares about finding a space for the books that he may have.

All these words and expressions give to the reader an idea about Mr Bleaney and the bare, routinised life, punctuated by dulled and futile optimism: he took the landlady's garden *properly* in hand and accepted to stay in his room, in spite of its tawdriness, for a good deal of time.

(iii) Grammar

Tense: The poem starts by the simple past tense referring to Mr Bleaney: (This **was** Mr Bleaney ... He **stayed** ... They **moved** him ... Mr Bleaney **took** ... where Mr Bleaney **lay** ... he **egged** her ... he **came** ... He kept ... **put** him ... If he **stood** and **watched** ... He **warranted** ...). What can be noticed is that the simple past in these expressions, and indeed throughout the whole poem, is associated with Mr Bleaney. Reference to him is always made by the use of the past tense.

The second tense used is the simple present: (**I lie** ... and **stubb** ... we **live** ... I **don't** know ...). Most of the verbs that are in this tense refer to actual actions done by the new lodger. However, what can be noticed is that some of the verbs used in this tense are directly followed by others in the past describing previous actions done by Mr Bleaney. This has the effect of associating the present activities of the new lodger with that of the former one and confirms thus, as I have already pointed out, the convergence of their both lives : (*that how we live measures our own nature,*). It is at this point where the association between the two tenants reaches its peak.

Conditional clause:

Widdowson: (*ibid: 21-22*) asserts that ‘ *the syntax of the last two stanzas ... is complicated in the extreme*’ and ‘ *consist of one complex sentence whose completion is deferred by one syntactic elaboration after another until the very last three words of the poem.*’ This complexity as to him is illustrated by the unusual way of using the conditional clause or what seems to be so : (*But if he stood and watched the frigid wind ...*).

A close look at this conditional clause will enable us to realize that this is not an adverbial one of condition since the main clause does not appear

afterwards. It is, in fact, delayed till the very last line of the poem (*I don't know*). This delay not only denies our expectations as readers, but also reflects the new lodger's feeling of anxiety and growing fear. It also obliges us to reconsider what was taught to be an adverbial clause of condition as a nominal one. Yet, the fact that the simple tense in the if clause does not indicate clearly which state of affair it is referring to : either to a past event or a possible situation in the present leaves us in between, obliging us to reconsider again its nature. We end up, like the new lodger, by giving up. The effect of all these patterning is a fusion between the identity of the two tenants. Widdowson (ibid:24) ends up his discussion about the if clause in this poem, by stating that it '***is ... a syntactic hybrid: part adverbial and part nominal***' and yet it is neither. The reader has, in a rather confused way, to consider them both to resolve the meaning.

The link between stylistic features and interpretation:

Though my comments on the various stylistic features contain more or less a detailed interpretation of the poem, I would like now to draw all the observations together so that to connect between form and meaning, and hence, see how the linguistic observations substantiate the

initial interpretation. The most noticeable feature in the poem is the successive shift from past to present, and the use of the “if clause” in circumstances that cannot be accounted for by grammar. In lines 2-3 stanza 4 the present tense is directly followed by the simple past (... *So it happens that I lie / Where Mr Bleaney lay* ...), creating thus a kind of parallelism which exhibit an internal association between the actions done by the former tenant and the new lodger. This association is also reinforced by the use of the word **same** in line 3 stanza 4: (... *and stub my fags / On the same sauce souvenir,* ...) . A reformulation of this line will give the following version: (... *and stub my fags / Where he stubbed his* ...) It is this association which will dictate to the poet the formulation of the hybrid created by the unusual use of the conditional clause where past and present events are combined together. This syntactic remark goes well with the initial interpretation where I mentioned that the poem starts by a clear distinction between Mr Bleaney and the speaker (the new tenant) then moves to an association between them to an extent where there is a complete convergence illustrated syntactically by the if clause. Finally, when the speaker realizes that he is being identified with the former tenant, whom he hates the routinised life and dull room, he tries

to dissociate himself from him by elaborating the conditional clause itself. Nevertheless, this elaboration ends up in a confusion that he cannot sort out: (*I don't know*).

The fear of having to endure the same inevitable futile bare routinised life : (... ***So it happens that I lie ...***) that is reflected in the barrenness of the room itself and which Mr Bleaney had is also suggested by the choice of the lexis, as I have demonstrated.

I have hopefully proved, to quote here Short (1966:27) that ‘ ***detailed and systematic analysis can be seen as an aid to our understanding and appreciation ... as well as providing a rational language- based account to support interpretation and giving insights into the processes by which we interpret when we read.***’ Only when practical criticism is backed up by a stylistic approach that literature as a subject, as defined in this paper, can be taught to foreign learners. Throughout my experience, first as a student, then as a university teacher I have seen a number of angry exchanges between teachers of literature and that of linguistics. No common ground could be found. The former taught literature adopting the traditional approach that could by no means help the students to appreciate it. No link or reference are made to language even though all the students are EFL

learners. This I would say is due to the fact that they themselves are not well trained to teach it. In fact, most of these ‘teachers’ are not qualified for teaching. They may be very good in literature, but this does not automatically imply that they are very good in teaching it. Knowing about literature is not the same as teaching it. EFL / ESL Students at university level are asked to analyse Shakespeare’s, John Donne’s and Larkin’s poems as if English were their native language. That kind of analysis requires both, to say the least, a cultural and historical background that most of them do not have. The result for sure is to quote Maley (in Carter et al: 1989 :11) ‘ *a pseudo-competence in which students learn to manipulate a lego - vocabulary of critical terms without understanding, and to repeat for examination purposes the recording of received opinions they have had imprinted upon them*’. I still remember my last examination - as an undergraduate- in literature where I was asked to write a critical review of E.M. Foster’s **A Passage to India** and how I had a B grade without even reading the novel. All I did was to go through a number of critical essays that I was a bit fortunate to get. I presume that an approach which can make it possible for a student to get good results, regardless of his competence in the subject, has to be revised

or at least backed up by a textual one, where a close attention and analysis to textual data are required. What is needed, indeed, is an approach that can convince learners of the diversity of interpretations and deny thus any interpretation sanctioned by a critical authority. This seems to me of a paramount importance in teaching literature either in EFL /ESL or mother tongue contexts.

We have reached a stage in the field of literature teaching where students rely more on books of literary criticism than on what the teacher says in the classroom. This is a denial of the essential aim of education.

To sum up, I would assert that stylistic analysis can be combined with the traditional approach of teaching literature as a subject either in EFL / ESL or mother tongue contexts. Teachers with a bit of good will can lean on both approaches, the critical and the stylistic during their analysis of any literary text, and this is all to the good of the learner.

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