

STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF P. B. SHELLEY'S POEM OZYMANDIAS: FORMALISM VS READER RESPONSE THEORY

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Abstract

Stylistic analysis of a literary text finds its grounds on formalism and puts the reader aside from the text. It does not allow the 'informed reader' to construct the meanings of the text. On the other hand, reader response theory takes the reader as the constructor of the meaning of any literary text. However, in the present work, the researchers have tried to merge these contradictory schools of thought in the analysis of Ozymandias. The foregrounded linguistics features are highlighted objectively but interpreted with subjective approach. The reader is involved in the interpretations of these foregroundings which leads to more than one interpretation based on commonsense and are influenced by readers' perspectives and viewpoints. Narrative, Syntactic and Grammatical complexities in the poem have been focused for the interpretation. The study is an attempt to pinpoint the limitations imposed in formalist stylistics and tries to prove that there is a deep relationship between reader, text and interpretation.

Key Words: Formalism, stylistics, interpretation, Shelley, Ozymandious

Stylistics is mainly concerned with formalism, as it takes a text into account in isolation and does not focus the social, historical or other contextual factors. Formalism, however, does not attract a large community of critics, as Weber (1996) finds the problems with formalism and says:

The problem with these formalist stylistics analyses is that they strike one as mechanical, lifeless, sterile exercises, and largely irrelevant to the interpretation of the literary work that they are describing. And if the critics try to ascribe some function or the meaning to the formal patterns that they have uncovered, then a huge leap of faith is required to move from description to interpretation (p. 2).

Fish (1973) also criticizes the formalist stylistics for its objectivity and negligence of the role of reader in the interpretation of the text. He is of the view that the reader should not be ignored in the interpretation of the

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text and comes up with “Affective Stylistics” (1980) to involve the reader. He takes into account the reader’s ‘emotional responses’ as well as the ‘psychological processes’ that contribute in the interpretation of the text.

Both reader and text contribute in the process of meaning construction as every individual writer gets different meaning from the same text according to the social context in which he lives and according to his own viewpoints. Iser (1978) focuses on meaning construction by involving both ‘reader’s ‘mental input’ and the text’s form that contributes in the construction of meaning. Van Peer (1986) goes a step ahead and identifies that the reader is actually attracted by the deviations and parallelism found in the text and explores that reader finds the passages containing such devices more important and considers it more worthy of dimension. Leech & short (1981) also highlight the role of the reader in interpreting foregrounded items by including “psychological prominence” on their model of stylistic use. They first try to analyze the extracts or foregrounding from chosen narratives and then examine the psychological impacts of this foregrounding on the reader.

While describing linguistic devices Leech (1969) tries to explain ‘foregrounding’ and says that feature or the item that strikes the reader at once is the foregrounding. He is of the view that “the significance of a poem lies ultimately in the mind of the reader just as the beauty lies in the eyes of beholder” (p. 60). Leech, however, considers it least satisfactory for the critic. The present study is an attempt to show the significance of strong relationship between reader and text after finding out the linguistic evidences for the intuition.

The reader is involved from ‘affective stylistics’ to Iser (1978) though on the marginal basis. However, reader-response criticism involves the reader influentially. It operates on the following grounds:

- Text affects readers in unique and subjective ways
- Readers participate in determining the meaning of literary works
- Anything that contributes to the development of a reader influences his/her interpretation of reading selection
- An individual’s social class, racial background, ethnicity and other such factors make a profound impact on how that person sees and understands the world.

Wales (2001) summarizes that the “reader-response criticism, like post-structuralism, tried to move away from the text as critical focus, and even more so from (the intention of) the author (p. 331). The students (of literature) may ultimately recognize that it is their beliefs and attitudes that guide their “imaginative construction of these world” (Beach, 1998: p. 184: cited in Norgaard et al., 2010).

The ideology of reader response criticism, i.e. the reader is no longer the receiver of meaning rather the maker of the meaning lead to define the “reader” who could construct the meaning. Many theorists have thrown light on the role of the reader in meaning construction. Fish (1970) writes about the efficient reader, i.e. the reader who is able to construct meaning, and calls him an “informed reader” and Iser (1978) uses the term “implied reader” for such a reader. The present study uses Iser’s term for the efficient reader.

Rosenblatt (1978) consider the relationship of reader and text as complementary for each other. According to him the literary text or the “poem” is not text-centered or reader-centered but it remains in between as the meanings “constructed” by the reader are “structured” by the language of the text. The construction of the meaning of literary text is “transaction” as Rosenblatt calls it, in which both the reader and the text are involved and where none of them stands alone as a “sole repository of meaning”.

The formalist approach has been supplemented by demonstrations of the reader-response method within literary criticism (Scott 1990, 1991, 1994) which “tries to show how a text works with the probable knowledge, expectations, or motives of the reader” (Scott, 1994 p.34). The same approach has been applied in the interpretation of the Ozymandias, which has already been analyzed a lot, but this approach tries to find new meanings and new interpretation of the text involving both language and reader.

Ozymandias has been an attraction for the critics and researchers who have tried to find some new dimensions in it. Blair (2000) focuses on the language of the Ozymandias and analyses the poem stylistically. His major focus remains on the difficulties faced by EAP learner while he tries to interpret the poem through its language. He finds the grammatical usage of articles and deixis can lead the learner in wrong

direction as he is not familiar with such grammatical usages. Barnes et al. (2005) hints to the poem and say that the whole poem, except first line, has been presented through the viewpoint of the “traveler from an antique land, who said...” However, Martindale (1993) finds the clash of viewpoints in the narration of the poem. He views the poem as historical text and identifies one of the viewpoints being of Ozymandias’ and the other one of the artist “who mocked the king’s pretensions and yet produced a work of art” (p. 3). He infers this interpretation from eighth line of the poem

“The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed” (L-8)

And calls the hand and heart the objects of “survive” (L-7). However he shows the possibility of the existence of two more viewpoints; that of ‘traveler’ and ‘I’ the speaker of the lines who may or may not also be the poet himself, Shelley. He analyses the poem following the ‘reception theory’ and calls the poem in this light “a tiny part of dialogical processes of its reception” and finds that the meaning is “always realized at the point of reception” and that no ‘intention’ or interpretation is communicated within any text.

Theoretical Framework

The researchers have tried to intermingle the two schools of thought i.e. the formalistic stylistics and reader-response theory. For formalist stylistic analysis of the poem, the model presented by Leech & Short (1981) has been followed. The findings following this model remain objective but the researchers have validated these objective findings of the poem subjectively by involving the reader in this process. The researchers have tried to relate the findings they found in linguistic devices used in the poem with their subjective approaches and to uphold the relationship they organized the group discussion, in the end of which the findings were accepted as a whole as they were based on commonsense. This proves that there is a relationship between the formalist stylistics and reader-response theory. Reader tends to assume the findings of linguistic devices in their own perspective.

Ozymandias

Apparently the poem seems to be a simple one as much as to be understood even by an undergraduate student having basic knowledge of

English. But the beauty of the poem lies in its hidden complexity which may be overlooked in the first reading even by an informed reader. The researchers have found three levels of the complexity in the poem:

- Narrator complexity
- Syntactic complexity
- Grammatical complexity

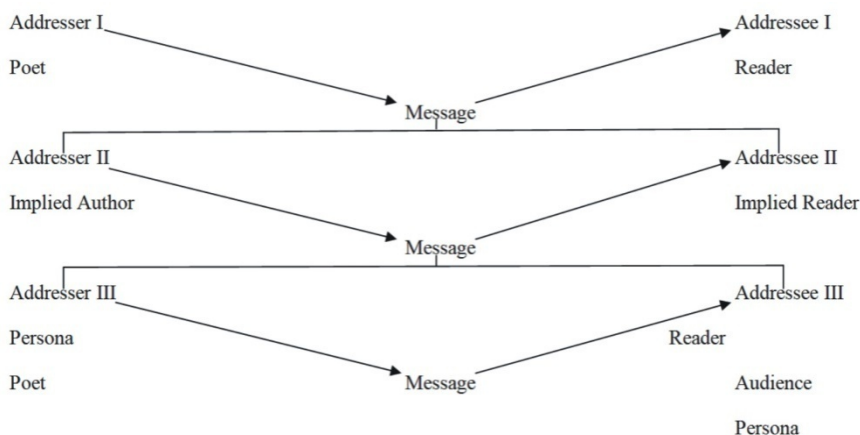
Narrator Complexity

Seemingly there are two narrators in the poem but there is overlapping of first and third person narrator and reader is indecisive about the narrator even after so many readings. The narrator shifts from 1st person narrator to 3rd person narrator and ends on 3rd person narration.

The poem opens up with the 1st person narration.

“I met a traveler...”

This ‘I’ is perhaps the poet himself or the persona created by the poet. The relationship between the addresser and the addressee can be drawn using the model given by Leech & Short (1981);



The addressee of these lines might be the reader of the poem or it is quite possible that the persona might be relating his meeting with the traveler to some audience or to some friends,. Still there is another possibility; this narration is an extract from the diary of the persona where he is writing his daily notes and important happenings. This way, both the addresser and the addressee is the persona himself.

The second narrator starts with “Who said:” this ‘who’ is anaphoric reference to the ‘traveler’. The 3rd Person narration then starts after “Who said:”

“Two vast and trunkless legs of stone (L-2)

...

Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!” (L-11)

is the second sentence. The complexity becomes more prominent when the reader finds both 3rd Person and 1st Person narration within the single sentence.

Here, in this extract, if the addresser is the traveler, the reader again remains indecisive about the addressee, whether the traveler is speaking to the persona only, or he is having a sitting among some audience and is relating what he had seen in “antique land” and persona or the poet being one among the audience.

Interestingly, the narration shifts from 3rd person to 1st Person narration in the same sentence. 1st person narration occurs in inverted commas in L-10 and L-11.

“My name is Ozymandias, king of kings

Look on my works, ye Mighty, and Despair!”

The statue-maker might have given these words in the mouth of statue whose addressees are travelers and visitors of that “antique land” or it is the extract from the diary of the king Ozymandias himself that shows his arrogance and superiority.

The last narration is even more complex; it is 3rd Person narration.

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay

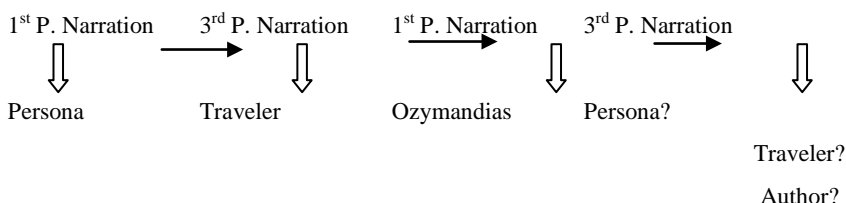
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare

The lone and level sands stretch far away (L 12-14)

The reader is indecisive about the narrator of last three lines, whether it is author or persona or traveler. If it is the persona, he might be commenting on traveler’s account of “antique land”. If it is traveler, he might be concluding his account for the “antique land” with a moral lesson, and his addressee could be the persona or his audience. But there is another possibility that the author i.e. the poet himself has jumped in for conclusion who is directly addressing to the reader.

Shifts in Narration

There is abrupt shift in narration of the poem.



This abrupt shift in narration makes the poem complex at deeper level. Moreover, in the last shift of third person narration the speaker or the addresser is indecisive that enhances the beauty of the poem.

Syntactic Complexity

The second sentence is highly complex at syntactic level. The structure can be drawn to make a sense of complexity in it. Clause Structure:

Near them, on the sand, half sunk a shattered visage lies
 | Whose frown and wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command tell
 | That
 | Its sculptor well those passions read
 | Which yet survive
 | Stamped on these lifeless things
 | The hand that mocked them
 | The heart that fed
 And
 On the pedestal, these words appear
 | My name is Ozymandias, king of kings
 | Look on my works, ye mighty
 | And
 | Despair!

Here in one single sentence there are two main clauses connected with each other with coordinating conjunction ‘And’, and there are almost nine subordinate clauses to these two main clauses rather there are subordinate clauses even to the sub-subordinate clauses of the main clause.

But the complexity does not end here rather it moves to the grammatical level. Unexpected use of deixis creates another complexity. In L-7

“Stamped on these lifeless things”

The use of such ‘proximal terms’ in diexis (Yule, 1996) may mislead the reader as to think about the things found nearby, but until now, the atmosphere of the poem seems to be that of “antique land” i.e. old place which does not exist now, but ‘these’ is the word that immediately involves the reader in the description and reader feels as if he is a part of land which is bring described before him.

However, the reader is not kept in this situation till the end and a distance is maintained in L-13 using ‘distal terms’ (Yule, 1996)

“Round the decay, of that colossal wreck”

The poet first creates an “antique land” then involves the reader and again, in the end, keeps his reader at a distance. This spatial and temporal uncertainty also strikes the reader’s mind.

Another complexity which is found in the poem is that of anaphoric references. In L-6

Tell

That its sculptor well

Those passions read

Which yet survive

The ‘which’ is used anaphorically but the reader is indecisive whether it refers to the ‘sculptor’ or the ‘passions’, what survived till then?

Again in L-8

“The hand that mocked them, the heart that fed”

The second half of the line again refers to ‘them’. This is the most complex anaphoric reference. This ‘them’ may refer to the ‘passions’ ‘which yet survive’ or it is the direct object of ‘survive’ (Martindale 1993) or were it the masses of king Ozymandias who were mocked by king’s hands or were they his courtiers whom king mocked. Again there is another complexity in the choice of lexis. It is not the hand that mocks and not the heart that feeds; rather it is vice versa, i.e. hands can feed and heart can mock.

Other features that are stylistically significant are the use of graphology symbolic devices and equity with children literature. The second sentence which presents the description of a broken statue is itself broken into many segments:

“...Near them, on the sand,

Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,

And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,

Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things
The hand that mocked them, the heart that fed;"

This frequent occurrence of commas in the sentence result in the pauses and reader relates this segmented piece with that broken statue. Moreover, what reader gathers from this description is that the head of the statue is broken and lies before the legs of the statue. Symbolically it has been presented in graphics as well. The description of legs is given earlier than the description of the head.

Many critics have recognized some particular characteristics of children literature; omission of time and place being one of them. In this poem, the only word "antique" makes the scene of "Once upon a time there lived a king..." Here the literature crosses the limits of time and place. Another aspect of children literature is that most of the children literature ends up with some moral lesson. This aspect is also found in the poem as it ends with the same tone; 'Nothing beside remains...level sands stretch far away'. Some of the complexities have been highlighted in the paper that involve both the language and the reader of the poem while in the construction of the meaning.

Conclusion

The research on Ozymandias has been limited in some sense as the analysts follow only one school of thought. The present study explores more than one interpretations that 'informed reader' constructs while taking into account the structure of the poem. Also, the researchers have tried to prove that there is a deep relationship among 'reader', 'text' and 'language' of the text. The popped up features i.e. 'foregroundings' attract readers' attention but all the readers do not necessarily take the same meaning of the same text rather every reader develops his/her own understanding which is influenced by his/her own perspective and viewpoints. In Ozymandias some readers may take it as a simple poem, some may take it as historical narration, some may take it as moral story and others may take it as a representative of children literature. It is the underlying complexity of the poem that paves way for these many interpretations and which consequently enhances the beauty of seemingly simple poem.

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