STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF ROBERT FROST'S POEM "MENDING WALL"

Muhammad Ilyas Mahmood
Department of English, University of Okara, Punjab, Pakistan
Ilyas.edu.tesl@gmail.com
Abida Shamim
Visiting Lecturer
Department of English, University of Okara, Punjab, Pakistan
Mobashra Mobeen
Visiting Lecturer
Department of English, University of Okara, Punjab, Pakistan

Abstract

The prime intention of conducting this research is stylistic analysis of Robert Frost's famous poem 'Mending Wall'. No doubt, a plenty of work is existent on the literary interpretation of this poem, but hardly any inclusive study could be found on its style. The present study is an attempt in this regard which explores the stylistic features of this poem. Robert Frost is a symbolic poet whose poetry has allegorical significance behind its superficial level. Thus, a comprehensive stylistic analysis of the poem 'Mending Wall' has been conducted on phonological, graphological, morphological, syntactic and semantic levels to grasp its true meanings. It has been explored that Frost has employed a number of stylistic features as alliteration, assonance, metaphor, simile, personification, imagery and symbolism to depict the idea of modern man's isolation. Man's own created barriers like racial, social, national and ideological ones have separated the human beings, and contribute to their emotional loneliness and depression in modern times. Frost flourishes the idea of nature that nature is against such barriers and tries to destroy them, so human beings must reconsider the authenticity of such restrictions in modern age. This study will help the literary readers, teachers and students comprehend the poem on linguistic basis, and understand poet's intended idea hidden behind the written discourse.

Keywords: Linguistics, stylistic devices, morphological, syntactic, semantics

1. Introduction

Leech (1969) defined the style as application of particular structures, patterns and sequencing of linguistic elements in a literary work. According to Short and Leech (1981) style is a means of conveying thoughts and ideas to readers through the particular use of vocabulary. Style differs from individual to individual and context of individual (Whales, 1983). Furthermore, it is presentation of same situation and theme in a unique and distinctive way. Therefore, it is essential to analyze the author's style to fully understand his work. Robert Frost is an American, regional poet who belongs to North of Boston, New England. His country region, North of Boston serves as background for his poetry, and Yankee personas become the symbolic representative of universal human nature. His characters' thoughts and emotional behaviors have very deep interpretation. His apparent simple style is delusive and complex with layers and layers of meanings in it. So, it is necessary to know Frost's unique style to understand his point of view. Abdul Bari and Summara's (2014) stylistic analysis of "The Onset" showed that Frost used various stylistic features as alliteration, consonance, metaphors, simile and hyperbole to

highlight the idea of good and bad and life and demise. Another research in this domain was accomplished by Arooj, Bushra and Samia (2014) to demonstrate Frost's style in "Bereft". It explored stylistic features as (nouns, pronouns, adjectives, rhyming schemes and images) employed by the author for the elaboration of theme of loneliness, mental conflict, optimism and distinctive conduct of nature. Frost thought that subject matter of verse should be common experiences but unusual in expression (Frost Friends, 2004).

The current study stylistically examines Robert Frost's Poem "Mending Wall" which is also based on poet's own real experience. This poem was published in Frost's second volume of poems "North of Boston" in 1914. This dramatic lyric is exposition of   conflict between tradition and modernity. This analysis will focus on phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic levels of stylistics.

2. Literature Review
Cuddon (1998) defined style as a distinctive mode of expression of a literary work. According to Harmon (2006), style involves two basic elements: personality of the author and the idea which he/she intends to convey. Authors make the use of a number of figurations in their works which make their styles more unique. As Ogunsiji (2000) argued that figurative devices convey author's intentional meanings to reader and elevate his style. It is basically connotative implication on which exact appreciation of a author's work lies (Balogun ,1996.349). All figurations containing connotative meanings are studied under one major field, stylistics which came into being at the end of 20th century (Freeman,1971). Widdowson explicated stylistics as linguistic study of a text (1975,p.3). Frost's poetry is found affluent in use of stylistic features by many researchers. Kaplan (2007) observed frequent use of coordinating conjunctions in Frost's poetry. Frost's poetry is exact imitation of New Englanders' ordinary speech and rhythm (Everything2, 2001). Frost (1923) himself affirmed that all his poetry is imitation of real speech (p.28). His poems are simple in words but loaded with wisdom. For the complexity of thought, Schndeider (1931) identified Frost's poetic style as "gnomic" (p.269). It is his unique style for which his poems are found everlasting and fresh by critics (Gerber,1982). Therefore, to comprehend Frost's poems, stylistic analysis is requisite which has been already done in many of his poems. Stylistic analysis of Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken" by Khurram, Bari and Sumera illustrated that Frost applies stylistic features to give profound meanings. Abdul Bari (2014) argued that Frost uses figures of speech like metaphors, similes and symbolism to have strong impression on reader. It develops a complex relation between intentional and conveyed meanings of literary text. This vagueness of interpretation can be resolved through stylistic analysis (Bari & Summara, 2014). So, this study endeavors to analyze Frost's poem "Mending Wall" at various levels of stylistics.

This study focused on exploring a) stylistic devices utilized in Robert Frost's poem '*Mending Wall*'; and b) contribution of stylistic devices to the construction and meanings of poem.

3. Methodology

The current research is qualitative and exploratory in nature. The researcher has deeply examined Frost's poem "Mending Wall" with the reference of phonological, graphological, morphological, syntactic and semantic levels of stylistics.

4. Analysis

4.1   Phonological Level:

 Lodge (2009) defined phonology as language system more particularly sound system of a language. Phonological devices include alliteration, assonance, consonance, rhyme, monophthongs and diphthongs.

4.1.1   Alliteration

Reoccurrence of initial consonant sounds in neighboring words in same line of poetry is called alliteration. In the present poem, repetition of /s/ sound occurs in second and third lines consecutively like in "**s**end and **s**well", and in "**s**pill and **s**un". Furthermore, /w/ sound goes over in "**W**hat I **w**as **w**alling in or walling out". Here Frost has applied the device of alliteration to give a musical touch and emphatic effect to poem.

4.1.2 Assonance

 Assonance is the reiteration of alike vowel sounds in nearby words of a line of verse. Repetition of /a/ sound is found in the third line in "m**a**kes" and "g**a**ps", and in "c**a**n" and "p**a**ss" in fourth line successively . Similarly, /e/ sound repeats in fifth line in words "aft**e**r" and "th**e**m", and /ee/ shows again in "k**ee**p the wall betw**ee**n us". /o/ sound reiterates in most of lines as in "n**o**t and st**o**ne", in "neighb**o**r kn**o**w bey**o**nd", in "s**o**me and l**o**aves", in "n**o** c**o**ws". As the poem does not follow any particular rhyming scheme, so technique of assonance is relied on by the poet to create occasional internal rhyme.

4.1.3 Monophthongs

Monophthongs are pure vowel sounds like / ɪ, iː, e **,** æ, ʌ, ə **,** ɜː, ɑː, ɒ, ɔː, ʊ, uː/
In "Mending wall Frost has frequently utilized monophthongs to produce pleasing sound effect.

1:/ɑː/ sound in w**a**ll, p**a**ss, b**a**lls, **a**re and w**a**nt.

2: /**æ** / sound in th**a**t, m**a**ke, g**a**ps, c**a**n, m**a**de,

3:/e/ sound in s**e**nd, sw**e**ll, l**e**ft, l**e**t, s**e**t, sp**e**ll, and t**e**ll, w**e**ll.

/ɪ/ sound in th**i**ng, **i**t, rabb**i**t, h**i**ll, spr**i**ng, bu**i**lt,

/i:/ sound in m**ea**n, s**ee**n, m**ee**t, k**ee**p, betw**ee**n, n**ee**d, tr**ee**s, **ea**t,

4.2. Graphological Level

Graphological level implies entire writing system. Leech (1969) explained it as appliance of punctuation, line spacing and paragraphing in written discourse. Graphological analysis incorporates examination of construction and layout of a poem. Capitalization, punctuation, spacing, contraction and stanza forms are some constituents of graphological analysis.

4.2.1 Dramatic monologue

Mending Wall is a long dramatic lyric which is written in forty-five lines without any stanza breaks.

4.2.2 Blank verse

This poem is written in a traditional iambic pentameter without any particular rhyming scheme.

4.2.3 Formal style of writing

 Frost has followed a strict formal and organized way of writing with correct appliance of punctuation marks as initiation of every line with capital letter, representation of thought breaks with commas, separating compound sentences with semicolon and marking full stop at the completion of sense. Only one contracted form "doesn't has been used in the whole poem to maintain the formal style of writing.

4.3 Morphological Level

According to Kirsten (2005) morphology is a linguistic level which is associated with word formation. Main ways of word formation involve compounding, blending, clipping, backformation, acronyms, coinage, borrowing and modification. Analysis of the poem showed that Frost uses more monosyllabic and disyllabic words in poem except a few compound words.

4.3.1 Monosyllabic Words

That, love, wall, send, make, gap, can, pass, thing, come, sun, work, left, find, hill, walk, day, meet, line, keep, go, some, ball, stay, kind, side, need, eat, good, put, head, like, give, hand,

4.3.2 Disyllabic Words

Something, repair, hunter, rabbit, mending, neighbor, beyond, fallen, nearly, balance, finger, orchard, under, fences, notion, before, rather.

4.3.3 Compound Words

Outdoor, handling, Frozen-ground-swell, mending-time and old-stone.

4.4 Syntactic Level

Syntax implies "sentence structure" how the words are joined to form sentences. Like most of Frost's poetry, this poem is autobiographical in nature which is based on poet's own personal experience. It exposes a dramatic situation between Frost and his neighbor, Napoleon Guay in New Hampshire. Therefore, Frost has used personal pronouns "I" to illustrate his own involvement in the activity of mending wall while 3rd personal pronoun "he" is used to represent his neighbor. A frequent use of coordinating conjunctions is observed in Frost's poetry as "And" is repeated in this poem for more than seven times.

4.4.1 Use of Compound Sentences

Use of two clauses in a sentence is defined the sentence to be compound. The following presents the use of compound sentences in this poem:

Compound sentence is joining of two independent clauses or sentences. Compound sentences used in this poem are given below.

1: Something there is that doesn't love a wall,

That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it

And spills the upper boulders in the sun,

And makes gaps even two can pass.

2: He is all pine, and I am apple orchard.

4.4.2 Use of Enjambment

Enjambment is the extension of a thought to next line of verse without any pause. Frost's application of this figure of speech indicates profusion of ideas in his mind. Like

"And he likes having thought of it so well

He says again, "Good fences make good neighbours".

Another example of enjambment is:

"I see him there, bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top

In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed".

4.5 Semantic Level

Semantics is the study of meanings. Figures of speech are utilized by authors in their literary works for structural embellishment, and convey deep meanings. Semantic analysis involves investigation of these figures of speech which have contribution in structure and meanings as well. Main figures of speech used in this poem are discussed over here.

4.5.1 Metaphor

Frost has applied the metaphor of "Hunters" more generally for all who make struggle to achieve something, but more specifically for the narrator and readers. He, metaphorically, names the process of mending wall as an "outdoor game".

4.5.2 Personification

Personification is a poetic expression in which human attributes are assigned to non-human, non-living and abstract ideas. Narrator has apple orchard while his neighbor owns trees of pine cones. The neighbour is insisted on the construction of wall between their respective properties. On the contrary, the narrator tries to convince him that they don't need any wall. Narrator says:
My apple trees will never get across And eat the cones" Here in this illustration trees of apples are temporarily personified by narrator, as he argues that trees will not walk across to eat neighbor's pine cones. Secondly, in the opening line, "something there is that doesn't love wall" nature has consigned the power of intention which is specific for human beings.

4.5.3 Symbolism

A thing (living or non-living) representing something else is given the name of symbolism. Symbols used in Frost's poetry are simple in source, but complex in interpretation. "Wall" is a central symbol used in this poem which suggests national, social, economic, racial and emotional barriers existing among humans. Such barriers lead to humans' isolation. Furthermore, wall represents generation gap that we experience in our daily lives. Here, the speaker and the neighbour are symbolic representation of tradition versus modernity. Narrator as spokesperson of young age wants to replace the traditional ideas with modern ones while the neighbour representing old generation clings on his father's traditional beliefs. Moreover, the neighbour justifies his traditional view by saying ""Good fences make good neighbours."

4.5.4 Proverb
Proverb is a well-known concise statement expressing truth or wisdom. Each culture has its own adages which give idea about the way of living of its people. These sayings are called "proverbs". In the poem "Mending Wall", Frost highlights the idea of Americans' autonomous way of living through his real neighbour, Napoleon Guay's famous proverb "Good fences make good neighbours". This statement is proverb and paradox at the same time as it contrasts with very first statement of the poem "Something there is that doesn't love a wall".

4.5.5 Imagery

Imagery is presentation of a mental image through words. Frost's poems are loaded with rustic imagery which demonstrate Poet's geographical and cultural background. In "Mending Wall" Frost has utilized visual imagery as "And some are loaves and some so nearly balls", "He is all pine and I am apple orchard".

4.5.6 Irony

Frost depicts an ironical situation in the poem in which two persons (narrator and neighbour) come together to perform such activity which separates them from each other. All this action of mending the wall is useless because it will get destroyed again before the next spring. Furthermore, they don't have animals which require physical boundaries to prevent them from walking across to each other's property. Narrator's sarcastic attitude illustrates his anxiety over the prevailing situation.

4.5.6 Simile

Simile is figurative use of language in which two things are compared with each other by using words "like" and "as". Frost has used simile "like an old-stone savage armed", through this figure of speech he has compared his neighbour with stone-age savage.

4.5.7 Rhetorical Question

Author's interrogative statement which needs no answer from reader is called rhetorical question. The narrator has questioned the authenticity of traditional view "Fences make good neighbours" in his rhetorical question "Why do they make good neighbors? In addition to it, speaker has employed a ratiocinative question too. For example: Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.

Conclusion

Stylistic analysis of the poem "Mending Wall" indicates that it is artistically well constructed dramatic monologue in which Robert Frost exposes his views against traditional humans' created barriers. Frost argues to modify his neighbour's conventional view about the necessity of fences for the maintenance of good relation, but all in vain. In spite of the narrator's efforts the neighbour sticks to his father's saying: "Good fences make good neighbours." For a good construction of the poem and elaboration of his idea, the poet has used a number of stylistic devices like alliteration, assonance, simile, metaphors, personification, imagery and symbolism. Repetitive use of "And" expresses abundance of arguments in the poet's mind for the justification of his point of view. An atmosphere of mystery and confusion is created by the author by using words like "something" and "Elves". Through his sarcastic expression "Why they make good neighbours?" Frost challenges the authenticity of all such barriers which create distances among people. At the end of the analysis, it has been concluded that all social, national, political and religious barriers have generated emotional tensions and sense of loneliness among people.

References

1. Balogun, F.O. (1996). "Literary Forms and Devices". In Longe, V. U. & Ofuani, O. A. (eds.) English Language and Communication. Benin: NERA.

2. Birch, D. (2005). *Language, literature and critical practice: Ways of analysing text*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203976845

3. Carter, R. (1996). Look both ways before crossing: developments in the language and literature classroom. In R. Carter and J. McRae (Eds.), Language, Literature & the Learner: Creative classroom practice (pp. 1-15). London: Longman.

4. Cuddon, J. A. (1999). *Literary terms and theory*. England: Penguin Book.

5. Everything2. (2001). New England Characteristics in Robert Frost's Poetry [On-line].Available: http://everything2.com/title/New%2520England%2520CharacteristicS%2520in%2520Robert%2520Frost%2527%2520Poetry [April 12, 2009].

6. Freeman, D. C. (Ed.). (1971). Linguistic and Literary Style. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

7. Frost Friends. (2004). The poetics of Robert Frost [On-line]. Available:http://www.frostfriends.org/tutorial-poetics.html [April 22, 2008].

8. Frost, R. (1923). *New Hampshire: A poem with notes and grace notes.* New York:Henry Holt and Company.

9. Gerber, P. (1982). *Robert Frost* (2nd ed.). Boston: Twayre Publishers.

10. Harmon, W. (2009). *A handbook to literature*. New Delhi: Dorling Kindersley.

11. Kaplan, D. M., & Blei, D. M. (2007, October). *A computational approach to style in American poetry* (pp. 553–558). In icdm. IEEE. https://doi.org/10.1109/ICDM.2007.76

12. Khan, A. B., Summara, R., & Saddique, G. (2014) Stylistic Analysis of the poem "ONSET" by Robert Frost.*International Journal of Academic Research and Reflection*, *2*(4).

13. Leech, G. (1989). *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* (14th ed.). London: Longman Group UK Limited.

14. Leech, G. N., & Short, M. (1981). *Style in fiction*. London & New York: Longman.

15. Lodge, K. (2009). *A critical introduction to phonetics*. A & C Black.

16. Ogunsiji, A. (2000). "Introductory Semantics". In Babajide, A.O. (ed) Studies in English Language. Ibadan: Enicrownfit Publishers

17. Schneider, I. (1931). Recognition of Robert Frost. *Collected poems* , 1.

18. Wales, K. (1993). Teach yourself rhetoric: an analysis of Philip Larkin's "Church Going". *Verdonk* (ed.), 87–99.

19. Widdowson, H. (1975). *Stylistics and the Teaching of Literature*. Longman.