

# PRACTICAL STYLISTICS: A CASE STUDY

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## INTRODUCTION

According to Heidegger (1889–1976) and Derrida (Born 1930), ‘understanding’ literature is not, to put it simply, an activity that can be performed but rather an attainment facilitated by the processes of ‘being’ and of using language. Both the writers and readers of texts share in an effect that is not merely described but revealed by the text. On the other hand, one of the principal tenets of Practical Criticism maintains that the formulation of literary interpretations is derived from the principle that ‘understanding’ is essentially referential at both an endo-contextual and exo-contextual level. The language of texts is therefore studied primarily in order to demonstrate the ways in which it ‘serves’ the broader literary analysis. As an analytical tool, practical criticism was adopted in both high school and university literature syllabuses for much of the twentieth century where the focus on determining ‘what’ a text meant was widely believed to be the only worthwhile objective of literary study.

The initial challenge to the claim that readers should concentrate upon uncovering authorial intention was marked by an increasing emphasis on textual manifestation of meaning or how the language used constituted a peculiar ‘mode of calling’. Consequently, the endeavour to locate textual essence, hitherto regarded as fixed was superseded by an approach to meaning that accentuated the mutability of interpretation, one that is constantly open to negotiation. Writing in 1971, M.A.K. Halliday had already adapted his theory of functional grammar to account for “how” rather than “what” texts mean and in the process helped to substantiate Fowler’s claim (*Linguistics and the Novel*: 1977) that linguistics provided the means for determining the literary “values” of precise literary effects. Halliday’s analysis explores the variety of functions that language is called upon to provide and by virtue of this functional diversity, multiple values can and are attributed to syntactic structures. At this point it became apparent that linguistic analysis of text would henceforth be predicated on entirely different ideas of how literary effects are achieved. Meaning, recoverable from the text, should, Fowler argues (Ibid) always be based

on the analysis of linguistic evidence and this assertion underlies the rigorous methodological approaches to literature associated with stylistic enquiry in general and Practical Stylistics in particular.

Practical stylistic analysis casts doubt on the relevance of non-linguistic data in the interpretative process. In his analysis of poetry, Widdowson (*Practical Stylistics*: 1992) reveals the extent to which literary traditional commentaries on “what” a poem meant were based almost exclusively on exo-contextual criteria; historical, social and biographical factors that did not necessarily ignore formal descriptions of the language employed but failed to show how literary “style” could elucidate textual meaning.

Analysis of prose, in this article, the short story, should begin with the application of categories of sentence structure to the larger text. The form and content of a sentence relate to its surface and deep structures respectively. Whereas the surface structure reveals the logical and differential relationships among the component parts of the syntactical and morphological systems, the deep structure, to which Fowler ascribes cognitive or propositional meaning resides in the connotational or reverberative depth of a text although the effect it creates can be radically altered when there is a change in the surface structure. In addition, modality and proposition which correspond respectively to extra-linguistic phenomena and what may be termed ‘point of view’ are regarded as central to analyses of narrative and embrace appreciation of how linguistic ambiguity operates principally within the deeper structure of a text.

### **PRACTICAL STYLISTICS: ANALYSIS OF A SHORT STORY**

As a case study text, I have chosen a short story by the English novelist and diarist, Evelyn Waugh (1903–66). As in much of Waugh’s fiction, the protagonist of ‘Tactical Exercise’ has been identified, in terms of character and disposition, with the author himself. First published in 1962, the story belongs to the final phase of Waugh’s creative life, one that included his biography of Ronald Knox (1959) and ‘The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold’ (1957), his last major work of fiction. Like the eponymous hero of his last novel, the reactionary, curmudgeonly ‘anti-hero’ of ‘Tactical Exercise’ is a man consumed with impotent rage and contemptuous of almost everyone around him; a misanthrope whose only comfort lies in the self pity he indulges in so liberally. Literary and biographical studies have revealed the extent to which most of these attributes (or failings) were not only applicable to Waugh himself but were perversely paraded in a self-caricaturizing vein during the last years of his life (*Diaries*, Ed. M. Davie 1976; ‘Evelyn Waugh’ by Christopher Sykes, 1975; ‘Letters’, Ed. Mark Amory, 1980).

In those cases where fictional characters appear to reflect or even embody authorial

characteristics, it is tempting to base textual interpretation on the assumption that exo-contextual considerations alone, whether they be the circumstances of composition or the author's own views, provide the reader with all the clues needed to uncover meaning in the text. As a part of the explicatory process, discussion of exo-contextual factors is both valid and helpful but the inherent danger is that all too often, exo-contextual criteria are used in order to illuminate endo-contextual meaning. In brief, the story revolves around the character of John Verney and his decision to murder his wife. The story is set in the immediate post war period, during a time of demobilization, rationing and the first steps being taken to return the machinery of state to civilian rule. After non-active engagement with the enemy during the war, Verney unsuccessfully contests a seat in the 1945 general election ( the result of which brought an end to Churchill's wartime coalition government and victory for the Labour Party under Clement Attlee). Embittered by his failure to poll more votes than "...a rancorous Jewish schoolteacher.." and irritated by his wife's public-spirited determination to help build a new Britain, Verney devises a plan to kill her, thereby alleviating his sense of miserable failure. Having meticulously planned both the murder and his own alibi, Verney is slow to realize that his wife has, in turn, been actively engaged in planning his murder. At this point the story comes to an abrupt end.

'Tactical Exercise', in bitterly comic vein depicts the efforts being made to rebuild a country fractured by war, a task undertaken in a mood of desperation and profound disillusionment. Relegated to the sidelines of this brave new world, John Verney can do little more than observe the inexorable changes wrought by six years of war while gloomily noting the disappearance of the tepid comforts he had enjoyed back in 1938. Unaccustomed to displays of emotion however, Verney's outwardly phlegmatic demeanour conceals the dark motion of his spirit. Vengeance is his, or so he believes, but it is neither sweet nor justified. By murdering his wife, whose blithe spirit seems incapable of arousing such uxoricidal intent, Verney hopes both to release his pent up frustration and defeat an overwhelming sense of world weary ennui at one stroke.

Verney is the principal character and nearly every paragraph either mentions his name or makes anaphoric or cataphoric reference to him through the pronouns "he" and "him". Up to the moment he loses the election, Waugh identifies him as "John Verney" but dispenses with the surname when his material and professional prospects falter. This signaled informality implies a more intimate authorial involvement in the character's plight. On the three occasions he is addressed as "John" by his wife, her character uses free, direct speech after the gist of what she is about to say is outlined in short narrative segments. This creates a strong impression of narrator/protagonist collusion; the narrative voice effectively echoing Verney's interiorization of what is being said to him. Moreover, the absence of reporting verbs when Elizabeth speaks suggests that Verney's interpretation

or understanding of what is meant or implied is central to the narrative and indicative of authorial intention. This may be demonstrated in short narratives that reflect Verney's own thoughts:

"Elizabeth was part and parcel of it. She worked for the State and the Jews. She was a collaborator with the new, occupying, alien power."

A stylistic analysis of this passage would select a number of salient features.

1. In the first and third sentences, the verb "to be" indicates a relational process between verb and participant.
2. There is a marked contrast between the specified ACTANTIAL role assigned to Elizabeth and the unspecified OBJECT of that process, represented by the pronoun "it" and the abstract notion of "alien power".
3. In sentence two the verb assigns a MATERIAL action process to the agent but when the verb is collocated with the preposition "for", the effect is to align the process with the RECIPIENT rather than the ACTANT of the process.

The literary effect of these features is the accentuation of Elizabeth's alienation from her husband's world. She has been absorbed into and subordinated to an anonymous and rather sinister world, one that is diametrically opposed to the self-centred one her husband inhabits.

In Halliday's account of transitivity in stylistic analysis, role and event are united in a single framework. This account helps explain characterization that operates on distinct yet cohesive levels of transitivity. Consider the following passage from Waugh's story:

"With tremulous butterfly wings hope began to flutter in his heart, became a certainty. He felt a fire kindle and spread inside him until he was deliciously suffused in every limb and organ."

This passage begins with Verney's joyful reaction to the news that his wife, Elizabeth, may inadvertently have taken an overdose of sleeping pills. Although this turns out not to be the case and his hope is dashed, the intimation of his wife's mortality has a rejuvenating effect on Verney and steels his resolve to end her life. Stylistics, "concerned with language in relation to all the various levels of meaning a work may have" (Halliday: 1971) does not preclude the subject matter from being itself representative of stylistic choice. The passage quoted above is a 'deflection' from the norm in that "hope" (LINE 1) and its metaphorical attributes are foregrounded in a text that in almost every other respect foregrounds Verney himself. He is the SENSER as indicated by the verb 'to feel' (LINE 2) of the phenomenon of fire but the abstract noun 'hope' is the AGENT that

brings about a transformation in his demeanour. Although the subject of sentence 1 is preceded and anticipated by the noun phrase 'with tremulous butterfly wings', the material action process associated with it is directly connected with the function of the verbs 'kindle' and 'spread' (LINE 2), which are in turn associated with the object "fire" in sentence 2. Verney "feels" and is "suffused by" abstractions and in doing so becomes the affected participant, no longer the actant. It can be argued that the prominence given to one particular form in one selected passage does not establish the variant as the new norm in the text but it can also be argued that the subject matter of the passage cited above indicates a stylistic choice or preference; one that reinforces the idea of individual powerlessness. Verney's resolution to act remains a comforting hope and this is suggested stylistically by the syntactic subordination of the stative verbs associated with him to the active verbs associated with events outside his control.

Stylistic analysis challenges the referential justification of literary interpretation on the grounds that literature represents "alternative realities in a different dimension from reference" (Widdowson: 1993). Implicatures are created when the Gricean maxims are bypassed or ignored in ways that result in information, surplus to the needs of the reader in helping to identify the referent(s) in the text, diverting attention from the addressee to the addressor (or author). In such cases, modality tends to be foregrounded textually in order to emphasize the addressor's "attitude" to the referent(s). Consider the following passage and the description of Verney's wartime activities.

"He did not have his good or his bad days; they were all uniformly good or bad. . . . . in the mess when the subalterns disturbed his reading by playing the wireless; at the staff college when the 'syndicate' disagreed with his solution...when the staff sergeant mislaid a file...when the driver of his car missed a turning..."

The first sentence is weighted equally between two main clauses and achieves a balance through the same repeated contrasting adjectives. The order and regularity of army life are indicated by the modifying adverb while the verbs suggest the temporal and habitual harmony governing his relationship to routine. In the sentence that follows however, the balanced syntactic structure is abandoned. The initial clause containing the subject pronoun "he" and its compliment (omitted) ends very abruptly and is followed by six finite, independent clauses beginning with the adverb "when" in which Verney becomes the recipient of transitive processes at all four levels of Halliday's scale. The tightly compressed structure of this passage and the introduction of a new actant in each finite clause overwhelms the subject, Verney until his name is restated at the end of the sentence:

"John Verney's eyelids drooped wearily, a tiny grenade of hate exploded, and the

fragments rang and ricocheted round the steel walls of his mind.”

Syntactically, this passage mounts clause upon clause until a much needed release is eventually provided by the restatement of the text's principal subject. I would suggest that in echoing Verney's mounting frustration, the surface structure mirrors the deep structure. Waugh has structured this (and other) passages in ways that signal an authorial identification with his character's emotional states. This identification consistently filters through the story in a combined addressor/actor vision, an interpretation that is reinforced by the fundamentally monologic nature of the text, which, in Fowler's terms stresses the dependency of the characters on the authorial position (Carter et al: 1989). Elizabeth, having been presented as a woman whose judgements are “mainly negative, deep or dull” tends to express herself through a series of declarative statements incorporating the modal auxiliaries “must” and “should” rather than the interrogatives of dialogic interaction. However these auxiliaries are used in apposition with mostly stative verbs, in marked contrast with the intensifying adverbs such as “absolutely” and “definitely” that coincide with Verney's dramatic resolution to act and the series of active verbs that strike a note of imperative urgency. Thus Waugh has encased Verney's “speech style” in a manner that consistently resists contradiction or any dialectical alternative. Thought, as the product of dialogic interaction is not attributed to Elizabeth at all and the apparent freedom of her direct speech is representationally diminished by its isolation within the text. In other words her character possesses an idiolect but it never engages dialogically. On the other hand, the author and his protagonist employ compatible, even similar voices and the pronoun “he” could be equally read as “I”.

The final passage for consideration in this short analysis is taken from the last section of the story. Verney and Elizabeth arrive at their cliff top lodging, chosen by Verney to be the location of his wife's ‘accidental’ death.

“They arrived on a gusty April afternoon. . . .they passed through it and out along a track, which suddenly emerged from its high banks into open grazing land on the cliff's edge, high, swift clouds and sea birds wheeling overhead, the turf at their feet alive with fluttering wild flowers, salt in the air. . . . white tumbling waters and beyond it the serene arc of the horizon. Here was the house.”

The panoramic unfolding of this description is comparable to that of a cinematic representation and incidentally, Verney has recently seen a film that ends with the kind of murder he has devised for Elizabeth. The outer sentences frame the complex middle sentence, establishing the fixity of both character and location and the deictic relationship of the house to the foregoing description. The participial forms “wheeling”, “fluttering” and “tumbling” connote unrestrained movement in contrast with the solid, past tense

forms of the verbs “to pass” and “to emerge”. There is an abundance of qualitative adjectives in attributive position but comparatively little description of the physical properties of “the cliff’s edge”, “the turf” or the “salt in the air”. Moreover, the land and the banks are described by mere classifying adjectives, the combined effect of which is to foreground the qualitatively described ANIMATE (or animated) features of the text rather than its INANIMATE, earth bound and descriptively barren features.

In addition, the elongated syntax with its succession of noun phrases serves to illustrate Sinclair’s notion of “arresting order” in literary texts (Fictional Worlds: 1986), contributing to the creation of tension, expectation and suspense. The inversion of verb and subject in the final sentence preceded by the adverb “here” rescues a simple sentence from appearing bathetic while simultaneously sustaining the mood of expectancy in the syntactic ordering of elements.

## **OBJECTIONS TO PRACTICAL STYLISTICS**

From a pedagogic perspective, analysis of this kind obliges students to justify their interpretation of text by close reference to the textual features. It is central to the claims made by the exponents of Practical Stylistics that linguistic and literary awareness are one and the same. Therefore, any attempt to understand the deep structure of a text must be determined primarily by knowledge of how linguistic features can be patterned for semantic and literary effect. In short, the meaning of a text is always located endo-contextually and understanding should follow on from a detailed analysis of a text’s linguistic framework. It remains to be seen whether the Leavisite principles on which most traditional literature syllabuses are based will adapt to the challenges posed by practical stylistic analysis. After all, definitive readings and explanations of literature are immensely reassuring to many teachers regardless of how much classroom or lecture theatre experience they have.

The practical stylistic approach to understanding literature also runs counter to the arguments of Foucault, Lucaks and Macherey which maintain that texts are the result of discursive formations enmeshed in the ideological system of any given society. Consequently, literature functions pragmatically in the sense that it points to meaning that lies OUTSIDE language. As Michael Hoey has argued (1989), the coalition of approaches to literary text known collectively as Discourse Stylistics offers the reader as infinite a number of patterns of textual organization as practical stylistics while paying due attention to the non-linguistic data that together constitute discourse. M.H. Short goes further and advocates the erosion of boundaries between literature and non-literary texts in favour of one system of analysis.

Writing in 1989, David Birch argued that the failure to account for the “intertextuality” of literary discourse would indirectly reassert the primacy of the author and a static reading of texts. The socio-political, cultural, historical and ideological positions he cites as being crucial to our understanding of the poet, Edward Thumboo have some bearing on our reading of Waugh’s short story. “Tactical Exercise” not only benefits from an understanding of how the pre-war ‘squirearchy’ (to which Waugh himself belonged) became increasingly irrelevant politically after the electoral volte-face of 1945 but also relies on culturally specific idiom such as the military terms “staff solution” and “civvy street”. Therefore, Birch’s thesis is not necessarily a rejection of practical stylistics but the advocacy of an approach to text (including literature) that includes non-linguistic data as well as inter-textual reference.

The drawback to Birch’s thesis however is primarily the reason why practical stylistics was conceived as an alternative, yet no less rigorous approach to the analysis of literary text. The text ultimately loses its autonomy and becomes instead part of an ideological matrix, its language subject to a whole range of discursal criteria that have little to do with the linguistic and literary properties inherent in the text itself. Knowledge of the author and the conditions that influenced or determined the composition of the text do have an important role to play in the study of literature but sifted and selected “facts” can be used to endorse any number of ex cathedra opinions that diverge magnificently from any credible textual evidence. Similarly, Fowler’s concept of modality has a pre-determined discursal objective that is in many respects restraining rather than liberating, concerned less with literary effect and more with authorial intention. The study of literature, as opposed to learning ‘through’ literature requires a different set of interpretative priorities. Whatever discursal role literature is called upon to play, ultimately the peculiar linguistic patterning of any given text will be appraised for the light it sheds on exo-contextual concerns.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

In this brief survey of Practical Stylistics, I have selected what I consider to be some of the salient textual features of Waugh’s story. It does not purport to be either exhaustive or definitive. It is however intentionally selective for as Widdowson (1972) and Fowler (1975) pointed out, the practice of linguists like Jakobson (1970) had been to try and account for every linguistic detail in literary text with equal importance. A complete analysis, argued Fowler ‘provides too much detail and all characteristics of a text are reduced, by being displayed to the same level of detailed but banal observation.’ (Ibid). Practical Stylistics has its limitations, most obviously in my opinion in the analysis of satire and other literary genres where exo-contextual and inter-textual factors must be considered (e.g. Swift’s ‘Gulliver’s Travels’ and Pope’s ‘The Dunciad’). However, it

offers a refreshing, if challenging approach to literary analysis and has helped to reassert the primacy of language in the process of interpreting and understanding text.

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