

“Shooting an Elephant”: A Stylistic Analysis

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Abstract

Stylistic analysis has always been an important aid in understanding literary texts. Stylistic knowledge enriches readers' understanding of literary pieces and can supplement their knowledge of literary interpretation. With this view in mind, literary texts have been analyzed from linguistic point of view. The present study looks at an important political essay “Shooting an Elephant” by George Orwell. The text has attracted wide recognition and appreciation from the literary critics. It portrays Orwell's anti-imperialistic view which is presented through an incident, the shooting of an elephant. The theme is presented in a fantastic way and this is evident from Orwell's use of lexis, syntax, cohesive ties, point of view, and figures of speech. A closer look at the linguistic devices indicates that his style matches his objectives and that he has been successful in attaining his political, artistic as well as thematic aims through his elegant style.

Key words: literary criticism, linguistics, lexis, syntactic analysis, figurative language, cohesion.

Introduction

“Shooting an Elephant” by George Orwell has all through been appreciated for its multifaceted qualities. It is “vivid, passionate, but simple, clear and direct” and is “an example of political writing at its best” (Alam, 1998: 148). Orwell is well known for his sincere presentation of harsh reality and its more appreciable aspects with artistic intelligence. The essay places humanity, violence, politics, power, dominance, race, culture and reality on the same platform. It is about the shooting of an elephant which in actuality becomes a matter of ego and pride for an alienated white man working for the British Imperial Police in Burma. The literary value of the text arises from an analysis of the critical situation of the government officer pressed by a large crowd before a giant power, the mad elephant. The elephant itself is a symbol of the imperial power which the narrator in the text asserts “was dying”. The narrator's mind was divided as he was against the inhumanity and cruelty of imperialism which he served while sympathizing with the locals. He was also “stuck” between his hatred for the empire and his rage against the bullying natives as he says, “All I knew was that I was stuck between my hatred of the empire I served and my rage against the evil spirited little beast who tried to make my job impossible”(Orwell: 214). The narrator's dilemma is expressed in an eloquent manner. A stylistic analysis, which helps to unfold the meaning of the text through linguistic analysis of the text, reveals that the theme of the text is expressed by a network of lexical and syntactic organization.

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The whole text is an accumulation of the images that Orwell portrays with his expert selection of words. His attitude towards imperialism is evident through the narrative point of view. The texture is attained through the appropriate use of cohesive ties. There is also an abundant use of figures of speech such as simile, metaphor, irony, paradox, kinesthetic images, auditory images and visual images. The essay asserts its impact through a prolific use of complex and compound sentences as well as occasional assertive sentences. Therefore, a stylistic analysis of “Shooting an Elephant” provides a scope to learn about literary interpretation in relation to linguistic analysis of word, phrase and sentence levels.

Stylistics

Stylistics normally refers to “the practice of using linguistics for the study of literature” (Simpson, 1993: 3). Similarly according to Short (1996), stylistics is an approach to the analysis of (literary) texts using linguistic description. It relates the linguistic features of a literary piece with its interpretation and synthesizes literary critics’ observation with the linguists’ literary intuition. Widdowson (1975) has also described stylistics as a mediating discipline between linguistics and literary criticism. In stylistics the relation of the linguistic devices in a text with the generated meanings is explored. The words and sentences of the text are examined critically and are studied in relation to its literary criticisms. Stylistic analysis helps “to foster interpretive skills and to encourage reading between the lines of what is said” (Carter, 1996: 5). Stylistics, according to Lazar (1993) has two main objectives. Firstly, it enables students to make meaningful interpretations of the text. Secondly, it expands students’ knowledge and awareness of the language in general.

Stylistics is concerned with “the study of style in language” (Verdonk, 2002: 3). Verdonk points out that “style” in language is the distinctive linguistic expression. Style arises from the unique and individualistic use of words and expressions of the author that are later to be decoded by the readers. A text attains its meaning through the interplay of form and function of language. Therefore, the relation between form and meaning in a text is objectively studied in stylistics. Language is a dynamic process which is dependent on the spatio-temporal, cultural and cognitive context of the text and stylistics takes these factors into consideration. Stylistics gives a closer view of the working of language and enhances reader’s understanding of the text. Stylistic analysis of a text supplements the literary interpretation of it. It provides ample scope of applying systematic procedure of language on a text, thus the interpretation gets more objective, and less impressionistic. As discourse includes both literary and non-literary texts, the scope of stylistics extends wide for both arenas.

Summary of the text

The narrator of “Shooting an Elephant”, a young English man, was working as a sub-divisional police officer in Moulmein in lower Burma (now Myanmar). He had to work there as an agent of imperialism in spite of his hatred towards it. The experience that he went through while working as a police officer in Burma was traumatic. He describes an incident of shooting an elephant which gave him an insight into the real nature of imperialism. One early morning, he was informed by the sub-inspector at a police station that an elephant was ravaging the bazaar. It was a tame elephant but had gone mad because of the attack of “must” or madness. It had killed an Indian, a black coolie. The narrator managed a rifle and five cartridges without having any intention of shooting the elephant but just to keep the situation under control. The Burmans, who had not shown much interest about the elephant ravaging their houses, quite ironically were having fun with the idea that the British police officer was going to shoot the elephant dead. The narrator was followed by an immense unnerving crowd to find the elephant. He knew with perfect certainty that he ought not to shoot him as a working elephant is like a costly piece of machinery. He also added that an elephant at a distance eating peacefully looked no more dangerous than a cow. In an epiphany he grasped the hollowness and futility of the white man’s dominion in the East. He emphatically asserts the role of the dominant ruler not to go against set decorum of power practice. Despite his unwillingness to kill the elephant, he was preoccupied by the thought of being laughed at by the natives if he failed to control the elephant. The local crowd appeared to observe the incident as curious spectators. After much hesitation, the narrator finally shot the elephant straight at the ear-hole. The bullet paralyzed it in pain. Later he shot twice more and the elephant collapsed after a long struggle but took a long time to die. Afterwards the incident became a controversial issue among the Europeans. The narrator, however, mentioned that in actuality he only shot the elephant not to look like a fool before the natives.

Style in relation to theme in “Shooting an Elephant”

“Shooting an Elephant” is autobiographical and is narrated as a story in the form of an essay. The predominant themes of imperialism, violence and alienation are implied in the linguistic descriptions all through the text and are supported by symbols. The setting and the mood also correspond to the ideas in the text. The imperial power imposes its rule and domination over the natives which is parallel to the officer’s attempt to control the mad elephant. The officer who serves the government is seen in an antagonistic relation with the natives. This symmetry in the text makes the idea more eminent and plausible. Violence is there in the act of shooting the elephant or in the elephant’s ransacking the bazaar and in the killing of the coolie. The officer is humiliated by the natives from time to time. The natives spit on him, jeer at him and make faces at him. As for example, the officer feels isolated at the humiliating incident when a nimble Burman tripped him up on the football field and the referee (another Burman) looked the other way while the crowd yelled with hideous laughter. This incident and many more mark the alienation of the white among the locals. The mad crowd tortures him with its dominating presence and impels him to shoot against his intention. His failure to execute his own decision is

the outcome of his alienation in a foreign land. The set image that “sahibs must act like sahibs” does not allow him to act going beyond the supposed roles.

The ambivalence of the narrator regarding the shooting of the elephant is found in the fact that he feels sympathy for the elephant which looks “no more dangerous than a cow” (Orwell: 216) but at the same time he feels an instinctive impulse to kill it “to avoid looking like a fool” (Orwell: 219). Even when he ends his narration, Orwell says his whole life, every white man’s life in the East for that matter was “one long struggle not to be laughed at” (Orwell: 217). His humiliation and sense of defeat are conveyed through these compelling words.

The long description of the dying elephant shows the narrator’s sensitive attachment to and sympathy with the creature. He prolongs the description of the pain of the elephant which shows his sense of guilt for killing the animal and also his care about it. The irritation of the officer at the callous reaction of the natives is explicit in the words “devilish”, “roar” and “glee” in “... but I heard the devilish roar of glee”. The use of the word “devilish” advocates the imperial perspective of the narrator.

Stylistic analysis of the text

Short (1996) provides a checklist to support a model to analyze the stylistic features of narrative description. The model focuses on the lexis, grammar, cohesion and coherence. Lexis covers the meaning and use of words. Grammar focuses on the analysis of phrases, clauses and sentences, and cohesion includes cohesive ties that connect or bind up sentences in the text. Coherence makes the text compact and makes it function as a unified whole.

Lexical Analysis

The choice and use of words in a text reflect its underlying meanings and ideas. The words in particular give the feelings associated and thus make the text produce its meaning. The text “Shooting an Elephant” sheds light on “imperialism and its discontents” (Alam, 1997:111). Therefore, it abounds in words related to politics like “riot”, “*target*”, “*imperialism*”, “oppressors”, “prisoners”, “*convicts*”, “*lock-ups*”, “*British Empire*”, “*oppress*”, “*tyranny*”, “British Raj”, “bayonet”, “despotic government”, “*rifle*”, “weapons”, “prostrate people” and “*cartridge*”.

The essay lacks technical jargons and has many informal words found in conversation which express the writer’s personal opinions. Some of these are “*damn shame*”, “*damn Coringhee coolie*”, “of course”, “*after all*” and “*petty*”. There are a few Latin and several native words used in the text. The phrases *saccula sacculorum* (forever and ever) and *in terrorem* (to frighten) used in successive paragraphs create a foregrounding effect to explain the dimensions of Orwell’s thought through the associations of the phrases.

Orwell describes his feelings of hatred for the “unbreakable tyranny” of the British Empire and the disgust for the Burmans, whom he calls “evil spirited little beasts” as they always humiliated him. He thought that the British would rule for ages and continue to survive as the phrase *saccula sacculorum* has survived in the catholic prayers through ages. Orwell believed that it would be the greatest avenging pleasure to be able to exercise the “power” against the natives. Again, he asserts that this “cruelty” is a normal effect of imperialism. He uses a .44 Winchester rifle which is “too small to kill an elephant” only to frighten the animal. The phrase *in terrorem* is a legal term which Orwell uses as he is a police officer who wants to take control over the panic-stricken Burmans.

The writer foregrounds the word “must” by putting it with inverted commas and using it several times. “Must” is defined in the freedictionary .com as “an annual period of heightened aggressiveness and sexual activity in male elephants, during which violent frenzies occur”. The elephant was a tame one which had gone “must”. The officer justifies his action emphasizing that when the elephant acted frenziedly, it was to be shot like a mad dog when its owner could not control it. Again, this is parallel to the unruly colonial oppression which set the natives go against the rulers. Crazyness is there in the inexperienced decision of the officer who shot the elephant being pressed by the howling crowd. This is symbolic and anticipates the decadence of the British Empire which had already reached its peak of domination and control.

Some local words found their way into the writings of Orwell, which seems very natural for a British officer working in a foreign land. Local words like “coolie” (porter), “mahout” (a person who works with, rides and cares for an elephant), “dahs” (a short heavy sword), “Coringhee coolie” (a porter from the town of Choringa in India) are found in the essay. A few Hindi words such as “sahib” (the master), “raj” (king) and “bazaar” (market) also appear in the text.

The derogatory expressions in the text come from the white people’s superiority complex. The phrases “only an Indian” “damn Coringhee coolie” and “evil spirited little beast” show the insult and humiliation of the natives from a colonial perspective. The incident of the shooting the elephant is presented from a white man’s perspective. Words like “yellow”, “beast”, “devilish”, and “hideous” are suggestive of the racial disparity and conflict. Some other words related to concrete animal images such as “flock”, “cow”, “elephant”, “pony” and “rabbit” are also found in the text. It seems Orwell subconsciously associates the natives with the animals and addresses them as “evil spirited little beasts”. Orwell provides a minute description of the agony of the dying elephant in the text to make the reader feel the pain. Therefore, words related to pain like “agony”, “tortured”, “grinning paralyzed” and “senility” are used in the essay.

Syntactic analysis

Orwell uses different types of sentences of varied lengths. An examination of the sentence structures reveals that most of the sentences in the text are complex. The number of compound sentences is also high. Simple sentences occur less frequently compared to the compound and complex sentences. The use of complex, compound and compound-complex sentences is

indicative of the complex relationship between the ruler and the ruled. The essay talks about power relationship between the rulers and the ruled which may correspond to the profound use of complex sentences in the text. The ruler and the ruled are of unequal status. The imperialists are powerful and superior as the main clauses are in the complex sentences. The natives are dominated and considered powerless as the subordinate clauses are ruled by the main clauses in complex sentences.

Different clauses are used in complex sentences to add variety in the sentence structures and dimension to the text. The sentences in the text are arranged in a temporal sequence by the frequent use of adverbial clauses of time. When Orwell tries to justify his actions, he expresses them with adverbial clauses of reason. The narrator also uses other adverbial clauses related to place and condition. The vividness of the descriptions arises from the use of the noun and adjective clauses which provide specifications, particulars and details.

The compound sentences joined by ‘and’ describe the chain of actions as in the sentence “This was the rainy season and the ground was soft, and his face had scored a trench a foot deep and a couple off yards long” (Orwell: 215). The coordinating clauses are of equal significance. This is evident in the use of compound sentences such as “The Burmese population had no weapons and were quite helpless against it.” On the other hand, the sentences joined by ‘but’ usually indicate a contrast.

Simple sentences reflect the unconfused utterance and assertive note of the speaker. For example, the sentence “I got up” comes after the crash of the elephant on the ground and expresses the relief of the narrator from the tension he feels as the wounded elephant takes a long time to die.

The noun phrases grow from the headword noun being modified by the adjective which expresses the justification and point of view of the narrator. The adjectives used as pre-modifiers in the noun phrases “Unbreakable tyranny”, “dirty work of Empire”, “prostrate people”, “despotic government”, “devilish roar”, “frightful impact”, indicate the author’s judgment and perspective. Prepositional phrases are also used as post-modifier of the headword in the noun phrases and add minuteness to the description as seen in the sentence “The wretched prisoners huddling in the stinking cages of the lock-ups, the gray, cowed faces of the long-term convicts, the scarred buttocks of the men who had been flogged with bamboos—all these oppressed me with an intolerable sense of guilt” (Orwell: 214).

In the text adverb phrases are extensively used to provide facts about time, place and manner of action. For instance, in the first line of the text, “In Moulmein, in lower Burma, I was hated by large numbers of people” (Orwell, 214), the author focuses on the setting of the action in the sentence “he was breathing very rhythmically with long rattling gasps, his great mound of a side painfully rising and falling” (Orwell, 219), the author describes the breathing movement of the elephant minutely.

The adjective phrases in this text are important as they are used to provide justifications and evaluations. As “Shooting an Elephant” is a subjective essay, it provides the opinions and

comments of the narrator. When the elephant grew weak just before he collapsed, it seemed to the officer that the elephant in fear and pain of the bullet seemed “suddenly stricken, shrunken, immensely old” (Orwell: 218). The officer uses the phrase “young and ill educated” (Orwell: 214) for his inexperience and guilt.

In the text the main verb phrases in terms of aspect are simple, progressive, and perfective, and this feature is related to the descriptive nature of the text. All three aspects of past tense are found in the same sentence to describe the change in attitude of the natives towards the elephant, “They had not shown much interest in the elephant when he was merely ravaging their homes, but it was different now that he was going to be shot” (Orwell, 216). Past tense is used throughout the essay except in a few cases where the writer switches to present tense. The use of past tense indicates that the writer is describing the incident from a distance. This is evident when he switches to present tense. “I thought then and think now ...” (Orwell, 216). The text uses stative verbs like “seemed”, “imagined”, “remember”, “thought”, “grew”, “wondered”, “grasped”, “knew”, “was/were”, “had”, etc. that state the mental state, dilemma, thought and perceptions of the narrator. In the climax of the text where the elephant is shot, the number of action verbs increases remarkably. Verbs like “pulled”, “sagged”, “slobbered”, “fired”, “climbed”, “collapsed”, “trumpeted”, “walked”, “racing”, etc. are a few examples.

Figurative language

The story is richly illustrated with literary and figurative use of language. Orwell uses various literary techniques to convey the emotion and situational irony of the whole shooting scene, which ultimately leads to a satirical presentation of imperialism. The young officer felt like a stupid person pushed to and fro by the imposing wills of the crowd. His helplessness is shown through the metaphorical expression in the sentence “I marched down the hill, looking and feeling a fool”. The deep path of the huge elephants’ throat is described artistically with a vivid metaphor “caverns of pale pink throat”.

In the sentence “The friction of the great beast’s foot had stripped the skin from his back as neatly as one skins a rabbit” (Orwell: 216), the elephant hits the coolie and tears off his skin which is explicitly compared with the stripping of the soft skin of a rabbit. The cruel comparison of the animal with man is unpleasant, uncomfortable and arouses sympathy in the readers. The elephant, which is a powerful beast in this context, stands for the imperial dominating force and the implication is that when a power gets uncontrollable or over exercised, the narrator indicates that it needs to be destroyed and it should not exist any more. The fall of this unruly power and the hint that it should be destroyed is prominent in the sentence “A mad elephant has to be killed, like a mad dog” (Orwell: 219). This simile is symbolic and the theme of the story is expressed through it. The sentence also shows the narrator’s dilemma, hatred for power and his justification for killing the beast. The falling elephant is described as a “tower upward like a huge rock toppling” while its trunk reaches “skyward like a tree.”

The narrator as an imperialist agent, criticizes the attitude of the Europeans towards the natives and ironically says “...it was a damn shame to shoot an elephant for killing a coolie, because an elephant was worth more than any damn Coringhee coolie” (Orwell: 219). To the Europeans the

value of the elephant seems to be more than the “damn” coolie. When the elephant was shot, the huge crowd ironically broke into a hideous cry, which had the hue of revenge and the terror of the death of a living being. Their happiness was evil because it was in celebration of the death of the animal.

Symbols are the connotative meanings of words and their associations which give a deeper meaning to the text and implies more than it states. The Dravidian coolie dies with his arms “crucified”, which indicates that he is the victim of the Imperial power, a mere scapegoat. The mad Elephant stands for the tyrannical power of British Imperialism. The rifle/ bayonet stands for power used as a tool of oppression, “The Burmese population had no weapons and were quite helpless against it” (Orwell: 215). “The Dead coolie” symbolizes the down trodden Burmese. “Football” is indicative of the British imposition of their culture on their colonies.

Orwell’s essay has quite a number of instances of alliteration. Some of them are as follows:

“Yellow faces of young men that met me everywhere”

“I marched down the hill, looking and feeling a fool.”

“I was momentarily worth watching”

“And enormous senility seemed to have settled upon him.”

The paradox that stories of the Eastern people that sound clear from a distance in actuality are hollow and insignificant when closely seen, is implicit in “That is invariably the case in the East; a story always sounds clear enough at a distance, but the nearer you get to the scene the vaguer it becomes” (Orwell: 215). The conventional image of white man as the ruler ties him in his own cocoon and at times it does not allow him to go against his will or act according to his conscience. The chain rather limits his freedom. This paradox is exhibited in the sentence “I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys” (Orwell: 217).

The detailed and minute descriptions presented through the vivid imagery in the essay make the story realistic. Imagery contributes to its picturesque quality and increases its credibility as in the following example, “... when we heard yells a little distance away. There was a loud, scandalized cry of “Go away, child! Go away this instant!” and an old woman with a switch in her hand came round the corner of a hut, violently shooing away a crowd of naked children. Some more women followed, clicking their tongues and exclaiming...” (Orwell: 215). The narrator provides concrete images and unfolds layers of meanings through numerous words, phrases and clauses. Intelligent crafting of effective images adds to the economy of the essay. The writing is compact and elaborate at the same time. The text is rich because of the appropriate shades of meaning which do not lead to any redundant expression to derail the reader from the intended meaning. The image in the expression “His face was coated with mud, the eyes wide open, the teeth bared and grinning with an expression of unendurable agony” (Orwell: 216) is simple and heartrending which ingrains the text in the memory of the readers. The narrator uses violent images of the dying elephant to inject or imprint his arguments into the minds of the audience. The dying elephant is described with words like “thick blood”, “tortured breathing”, and “great agony” and such gruesome images tell about the tragedies of imperialism. Through such use of imagery,

Orwell is able to plant a powerful political message in the minds of the audience. The text also abounds with auditory images like “shouting excitedly” “jeering” “grinning” “devilish roar of glee” “trumpeted” “breathing rhythmically with long rattling gasps” and “the tortured gasps continued as steadily as the ticking of a clock”. The image “He was tearing up bunches of grass, beating them against his knees to clean them and stuffing them in his mouth” (Orwell: 216) is kinesthetic.

Cohesion and coherence

According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), cohesion is a semantic relation that exists within the text. Cohesion “occurs when the interpretation of some element in the discourse is dependent on that of another. The one presupposes the other, in the sense that it cannot be effectively decoded except by recourse to it” (Halliday and Hasan, 1976: 4). Cohesion is realized partly through the grammar of the text and partly through vocabulary.

The use of explicit cohesive links such as “but”, “an”, “afterward”, “in the end”, “moreover”, “for”, “finally”, etc. are found in the text. The explicit cohesive link “but” is used to express the contrast of the previous statement or point; “I decided that I would watch him for a little while to make sure that he did not turn savage again and then go home” (Orwell: 216). Right after this the compelling external forces changed his mind and to express this change he uses “but” as in “But at that moment I glanced round at the crowd that had followed me” (Orwell: 217) and “But I did not want to shoot the elephant” (Orwell: 217). In the essay “and” and “but” are very frequently used at the discourse level which prominently asserts the dilemma, confusion and complexity of the narrator. The narrator pauses and starts again, thus showing the continuity in a discontinuous structure. The contradictory stance of the narrator and his confusion is explicit.

Again, repetition of the same idea through various sentences emphasizes the position of the narrator. Orwell uses the sentences “I had no intention of shooting the elephant” (Orwell: 216), “I ought not to shoot him (Orwell: 216)”, “I did not in the least want to shoot him (Orwell: 216)” and “But I did not want to shoot the elephant (Orwell: 217)” to emphasize his intention not to harm the animal and to justify his action in the context of his guilt. This repetition also makes the essay more coherent.

Point of view

The essay is told in the first person point of view using the first person pronoun “I” to express first hand experience of the narrator which corresponds to his autobiographical reality. Because of his hatred of imperialism George Orwell resigned from the Indian Imperial Police in Burma and returned to England in 1928. The essay “Shooting an Elephant” was written in 1936. Thus the essay records the two different perspectives of Orwell as a young officer and Orwell as a mature writer. The narrator talks about his experience with an incident that took place when he was a young officer. The opinions and comments on the incident found in the piece are the result of the

reinterpretation of mature Orwell. This shift of viewpoint is evident through the shift of tense in the text, for example, in the sentence “I thought then and I think now” (Orwell: 216).

Conclusion

Stylistic analysis of “Shooting an Elephant” supplements its literary criticism as a political text. The essay is a ground for a rich literary exploration and relates the political scenario of that time with social reality. At the same time, a stylistic analysis of this text binds the psychological factors of the narrator through his superiority complex, dilemma, insecurity, guilt and sympathy. Some local words, two Latin phrases and numerous typical words convey the proper tone required for the comprehensibility of the narrative. The denotative and connotative meanings of words serve well the narrator’s purpose of showing the dirty work of imperialism. The ambivalence and conflict going on in the mind of the narrator are vividly portrayed through well-chosen emotive words. The derogatory words used in the text imply the prejudiced attitude of the narrator. The text’s political message and its expression are in perfect harmony. Orwell’s sentence structures are of varied length and organized in different ways. The use of complex and compound and complex- compound sentence is suggestive of the complexity of the relationship between the natives and the imperialists as well as the complexity of the narrator’s state of mind. Intelligent use of figurative language establishes the essay as an influential writing with literary value. The compactness of the narration arises from the consistency of thought, focused action and the implicit/explicit cohesive devices. The stylistic features of the text have secured its influential status in the literary cannon.

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