

Stylistics Approach in the Works of Angus Wilson

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Abstract:

Stylistics is a serious approach which uses the devices and results of the science of linguistics in the analysis of literary texts. It developed in the twentieth century and aim to show the way by which technical linguistic features of a literary work, like the grammatical structure of its sentences, contribute to its overall meanings and effects. Stylistics, is not only restricted to the analysis of literature: it can be applied equally to expository prose, political speeches, advertisements, and so on. It concedes no special secretive qualities to literary language: it is not blessed or revered; it is simply the data on which the method can be put to use. Wilson shows great analytical skill in his characterization and is particularly happy in his dialogues. His technique in general is traditional nineteenth century, varied by 'flash-backs' of the cinema, long reveries and introspections to link the past with the present.

Key Words: *Alienation, Characterization, Dialogue, Discourse, phonology, Stylistics, Symbolism, Rhetoric*

Introduction:

Stylistics is the modern version of the older discipline known as 'rhetoric', which educated its students to structure an argument, to make effective use of figures of speech, and to pattern and vary a speech or a piece of writing so as to produce the maximum effect. Stylistic analysis tries to provide an unbiased and scientific observation, based on concrete computable data, and applied in an organized way. It is well to refer Jacobson for lucid construction of stylistic as he believed that "the study of poetic language should be a sub branch of linguistic."¹

Stylistics is the study of the devices in language that are considered to produce expressive or literary style. Aristotle, Cicero, Demetrius, and Quintilian treated style as the proper beautification of thought from ancient times. In this view, which succeeded all over the Resurgence period, devices of style can be catalogued. The author or storyteller is expected to frame his ideas with the help of model sentences and prescribed kinds of "figures" suitable to his mode of dissertation. Modern stylistics uses the tools of formal linguistic analysis attached with the methods of literary criticism; its goal is to try to isolate characteristic uses and functions of language and rhetoric rather than advance normative or prescriptive rules and patterns.

Angus Wilson was one of the leading British authors to emerge in the post-World War II era. He is best known as a storyteller of the postwar social revolution in England and for his ability to successfully combine the techniques of modernist fiction with the traditional novel. Although often extremely funny, his novels also contain serious assessments of British society. His practicality consists in throwing the spotlight on some of the less reputable aspects of modern British society, especially its insincerity and self-deception. He was the first contemporary English novelist to treat the theme of homosexuality on a full scale. What is pleasing about him is his open-minded acceptance of people who are frank and honest about their weaknesses. He is hard only on the frauds and self-deceivers. A writer of strength and liveliness, Wilson fill his novels with too many characters with the result that he cannot develop

all of them adequately. Because of his desire for subtlety and sophistication, his style is often heavy, involved and awkward.

Wilson's subjects are usually failed or wasted lives, individuals whose crises reflect the disintegration of a larger way of life. Angus Wilson's family was 'a wealthy merchant family of Durban'.² He spent a somewhat lonely childhood with adults as buddies, as being the youngest among his five siblings, he was more than ten years younger than the fourth child. Wilson studied in Merton College, Oxford, where he met friends with different backgrounds and political ideas. He did various jobs, like tutoring and secretarial work. In 1936, he took a position in the Department of Printed Books at the British Museum, where he worked for almost twenty years. During this period, he was politically active, mixing with intellectuals of the left ideology, who reappear in his work. His experience and education, made him interested in the use and abuse of power. During the war years, Wilson worked in the Foreign Office doing intelligence work. He had to leave the busy city life and move to a small village where he was housed with a widow and her daughter. His sense of loneliness and alienation at work and at his lodgings, together with an unsuccessful love affair, brought him to the point of a nervous breakdown. On his therapist's suggestion, Wilson began writing short stories, and during the following seven years, he published two collections of short stories and two novels. His first short-story collection, *The Wrong Set and Other Stories*, appeared in 1949. By this time, he held a new post.

From 1947 to 1955, Wilson was Deputy Superintendent of the Reading Room, where he was in charge of replacing three hundred thousand volumes lost in the bombings of World War II. In 1955, Wilson resigned his job at the British Library to become a full-time writer. In 1957 Angus Wilson's second collection '*A Bit off the Map*' containing '*Higher Standards*' was published. During the next ten years, he produced four novels and one more collection of short stories. Wilson's novels in this time period include *The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot* (1958) and *The Old Men at the Zoo* (1961). He also became an active reviewer and literary biographer.

From 1966 to 1978, Wilson was a professor in the School of English and American Studies at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, but he continued to travel and lectured extensively all over the world. In 1978, at the age of sixty-five, Wilson retired from his teaching post, though he continued to take guest professorships at various universities in the United States.

He was knighted in 1980 for both his literary achievements and his contributions to the arts and service organizations. His last novel, *Setting the World on Fire* (1980), explores the influence of place on human character and is largely constructed of dramatic dialogue. Wilson died of a stroke on May 31, 1991, at a nursing home in Bury Saint Edmunds, where he had spent his last few years.

Main Thrust:

Here we will discuss the linguistic and stylistic analysis of the novels of Angus Wilson. According to Toolan, Verdonk and Stubbs a list of possible patterns used in the short story was created, which are content (who, where), phonology, orthography, lexis/semantic fields, symbolism, inter-textual references as well as cultural references. This examination makes it possible to provide an understanding based on the linguistic and stylistic features of the text.

The first pattern is to be the content which tells about the portrayal of the story. It starts with the question, how the persons taking action in the story are portrayed and what the story deals with. *Higher Standards* shows a typical evening in the life of the 'Corfe' family who are living in a village. Mrs Corfe is the main character in the story. At first sight, there is no hint to describe her outward appearance. One can only guess how she looks by the description of her

character and her behaviour. At the beginning of the story, she calls her daughter Elsie and her husband, Mr Corfe for dinner. Elsie's and Mr Corfe's appearances are not described as. All one finds out is that Elsie is a local school teacher, who teaches a fourth grade; Mr Corfe is mentally and physically disabled since he had a stroke four years ago. Furthermore, is or was a religious person and by the way Mrs Corfe talks, one can state that she is a religious person too, i.e. the Corfe's must be a religious family, for even Elsie's name carries a religious meaning, namely 'my god is a vow'. One can state, that the portrayed family stands for a majority of lower middle-class families in post-war Britain. Anyway, after Mrs Corfe's call for dinner, which has always been the same for about 15 years, the three of them take a seat at the overcrowded dinner table. Mrs Corfe serves a grunter, a traditional dish to which, under the stress of rationing, Mrs Corfe has become increasingly attached.

During dinner Elsie rather refuses to eat the 'grunter', while her mother is described as a person who loves to eat. she must be a rather obese woman. Moreover, Mrs Corfe is running down people during dinner. Elsie cannot stand her behaviour and turns to her father. Her manners towards her mother can be described as rebellious in a subtle way. There are several hints for her behaviour in the story. This is just one of the passages, which describe her manners towards her mother.

As Elsie turns to her Father she asks him about his day and he tells her, that he sat at the window and watched the fowls. Elsie's behaviour upsets Mrs Corfe. She feels betrayed and rather wants to go on with her gossip, so she asks Elsie about her day at school. After Elsie told her, she immediately starts to say malicious things about her pupils and their parents, whereupon Elsie counters with a remark about her mother's education. Half an hour after dinner, Elsie goes out to the pillar box, where she meets a few friends from her youth. She starts to flirt with one of the groups, namely Bill Daly. After this very short conversation she goes back home and meets her mother at the front door. Mrs Corfe wants to go out to help an old lady from the village they live in, while the 'grunter' turned on Mr Corfe.

Phonology is the study of the patterns of sound in a language and across language, how speech sounds are organised in the mind and used to convey meaning. "There is a popular view that phonology is typically distinguished from phonetics, which concerns the physical production, acoustic transmission and perception of the sounds or signs of language."³ The main feature that can be found and which is essential for the interpretation is the repetition of the word 'standard', for it is already mentioned in the title Higher Standards. The word 'standard' is also connected to Elsie's job. She is the teacher of a 'standard four', which is another term for a fourth grade. Furthermore, Mrs Corfe calls the group of young adults 'standard four', out of which Elsie was torn out and already reached a higher standard than they did. 'Standard' is also repeated at the end of the story when Mrs Corfe and Elsie meet after dinner at the front door of their house. 'Well, it's lucky there are folks with higher standards.' and 'You haven't got a monopoly of higher standards, you know.'

As a historical reference: The word 'standard' might be referred to two events at that time. On the one hand, it could allude to the post-war situation. There was a time, of course, before the war when Elsie had not had "moods". This post-war situation might be the reason for Mrs Corfe's stress of rationing. Families which were living in that time were unable to afford a higher standard, unless they were rich: 'Standard' in terms of lifestyle. On the other hand, the

word ‘standard’ might allude to a standard of education. According to Späth (1999), there had been several discussions during the 1950’s about the ‘scholarship boys’. They had been boys who reached a higher standard of education thanks to a scholarship. Due to their higher education, they were unable to fit into their families and former environment and they were also unable to fit into a ‘higher’ class of people because of their origin. In the short story Elsie appears to have exactly the same problem.

Orthography is a set of conventions for writing a language. It includes norms of spelling, “hyphenation, capitalization, word breaks boundaries emphasis and punctuation”⁴. In Wilson’s short story several words are highlighted in italic print. It becomes quite clear what is intended with the italic print having a look on the list of these words: *crêpe du Chine*, that, all, if, pounds, her, our, you, done, could, she, her, our, higher; the majority of these words have something to do with possession. On the one hand, there is ‘[...] the little lemon *crêpe de Chine scarf*’ as well as ‘[...] It was pounds then, [...]’ which describe a real possession. Other words which are stressed bold are possessive - pronouns. These features might indicate a more subtle stress on possession in contrast to the obvious allusions to possession.

A semantic field is a set of words related in meaning. Most often, fields are defined by subject matter, such as body parts, landforms, diseases, colors, foods or kinship relation. There are several semantic fields contributing to the meaning and the interpretation of the text. The most obvious – but general- feature concerning this focus is the contrast between the language of the narrator and the language used by the characters in direct speech. The writer’s language appears to be academic while on the other hand the language of the Corfe’s suites more to a lower middle class family. With this Wilson leads the reader consequently through the whole narrative. Additionally, with this contrast he lends irony to the story.

Wilson uses certain vocabulary in certain situations in his story *Higher Standards*: the conflict between Elsie and Mrs Corfe, for example is described with war, and legal vocabulary. The war vocabulary might also allude again to the post-war situation but first and foremost to dramatize the power struggle between the two characters. Although Mrs Corfe’s outward appearance is not being described, she is always connected to some certain semantic fields, which are religion, possession, tradition and food. On the other hand Elsie is connected with education and possession as well.

The use of symbols to represent ideas or qualities. It is an artistic and poetic movement or style using symbolic images and indirect suggestions to express mystical ideas emotions and state of mind. It is an opinion that “symbolism was a reaction in favor of spirituality, imagination and dreams.”⁵ Within the story one can find several words which might have a symbolic meaning. The meanings of these symbols can be found in the *Dictionary of Symbols* by J.C. Cirlot. The first symbol is the colour yellow which is also discussed in the interpretation of Späth.

Conclusion:

Stylistic is one of the most important techniques for understanding and interpreting literature. Stylistic critics have comprehensive methodology as well as descriptive tools for

investigating the text. They move through lexical to grammatical and to semantic realm of a literary text.

Angus Wilson is both a writer of, middle brow appeal and true literary seriousness, a fact which enables him to elude confident critical placing. Without doubt Wilson is a writer of unusually fine intelligence, wide reading and great sensitivity. Yet for him, as for many of his contemporaries, writing is just a question of writing, saying what one wants to say, without theoretical worrying. His fiction is often considered to be in the tradition of the novel of manners. It is true that Wilson's stories too, from the point of view of neatness and brevity and of the avoidance of emotionalism, are products of the same cuisine but they are carried to lengths of caricature that prevent them from being so pleasantly assimilable as the usual British product. He has dealt with a wide range and verity of contemporary experience.

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