Linguistics and literature: stylistics as a tool for the literary critic

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1. Introduction

Since the emergence in the 1960s of English Language as a university subject in its own right, the relationship between the study of literature and the study of language has often been one of bitter rivalry. Literary critics have railed against the 'cold', 'scientific' approach used by scholars of language in their analyses of literary texts, whilst linguists have accused their literary colleagues of being too vague and subjective in the analyses they produced. Nowhere is this disagreement more clearly seen than in the clash between Bateson and Fowler (see Fowler 1971), which, although useful in terms of raising the issues involved, had the unfortunate effect of dragging the debate down to the level of personal insult. Fowler's famous question to Bateson asking him whether he would allow his sister to marry a linguist represents, perhaps, the nadir of this particular argument. The relationship between literature and language, then, has, for the most part, been an unhappy one, and this is unfortunate since undoubtedly scholars in both disciplines have much to learn from one another. My aim in this article is to show how it is possible to bridge the divide between language and literature by using the analytical techniques available within the sub-discipline of language study known as stylistics. I analyse a poem by the American poet, E. E. Cummings, discussing how linguistic form relates to literary effect. I aim to show how taking a linguistic approach to the analysis of a literary text does not have to mean disregarding interpretation. Rather I would suggest that stylistic analysis can often illuminate just why a particular literary text is regarded so highly. Stylistics acknowledges the skills of the writer by assuming that every decision made in the production of a text is deliberate, despite whether these decisions were made consciously or unconsciously. Consequently, stylistics aims to explain the *link* between linguistic form and literary effect, and to account for what it is that we are responding to when we praise the quality of a particular piece of writing.

2. (listen) by E. E. Cummings

How do you begin a stylistic analysis? Well, it's a good idea to start with your initial thoughts and feelings about the text you're going to analyse. Then when you do the actual analysis you can see if you were right or wrong in your initial interpretation. Sometimes the linguistic

structure of the text will not support your interpretation, in which case you may have to reconsider this in the light of your analysis. This is why stylistics is useful as a method of interpreting texts. Let's begin, then, by looking at our chosen poem.

'(listen)' is taken from E. E. Cummings' 1964 collection *73 Poems*, of which it is number 63. None of the poems in the collection have titles but are instead referred to by number. However, for ease of reference I have used the first line of the poem as a title. A transcript of the poem is given on page 2. The poem '(listen)' is typical of Cummings' style and contains some striking irregularities of form in comparison to 'traditional' poetry. You can notice, for example, the lack of capitalisation where you might normally expect it, the strange use of punctuation and the seemingly odd structure of particular phrases. Cummings' poems all use lots of deviation and '(listen)' is no exception. The poem is on the next page:

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[1] (listen)

  this a dog barks and
  how crazily houses
  eyes people smiles
[5] faces streets
  steeples are eagerly

  tumbl

  ing through wonder
  ful sunlight
[10] - look –
  selves,stir:writhe
  o-p-e-n-i-n-g

  are(leaves;flowers)dreams

  ,come quickly come
[15] run run
  with me now
  jump shout(laugh
  dance cry

  sing)for it's Spring

[20] - irrevocably;
  and in
  earth sky trees
  :every
  where a miracle arrives

[25] (yes)

  you and I may not
  hurry it with
  a thousand poems
  my darling
[30] but nobody will stop it

  With All The Policemen In The World

         (E. E. Cummings, *73 Poems*)

One of the reasons for this is Cummings' desire to break with more conventional poetic traditions. However, his use of deviation is not simply for shock value, and the linguistic choices he makes are by no means arbitrary. Despite this, such extreme deviation can make it difficult for us to interpret his poems. In the past, some critics have even disregarded his seemingly odd use of language, claiming that it is of no interpretative significance. R. P. Blackmur, for example, a critic writing in 1954, had this to say about the strange linguistic choices in Cummings' poems:

> …extensive consideration of these peculiarities today has very little importance, carries almost no reference to the meaning of the poems.

> (Blackmur 1954: 320)

The view that Blackmur gives is now extremely dated. What he refers to as 'peculiarities' are in fact highly significant linguistic deviations, and it is important for us to assume that every element of any piece of writing has a possible interpretative significance. You might ask if this is actually the case. Do we really infer meaning from every bit of a text? Well, the evidence we have would suggest that we do. Researchers such as Van Peer (1980; 1986) have found that readers do indeed pick up on the smallest details of a text and use them to construct a meaningful interpretation. A stylistic analysis of our poem will enable us to explain the foregrounding within it thoroughly, and will also show how stylistics can be a valuable tool for the literary critic.

Let's start with an initial interpretation of the poem. Like many of Cummings' poems, '(listen)' appears to be a celebration of the imminent arrival of Spring and all the joy and newness this brings. There is a dynamic feel to the poem and, of course, along with the references to new life we can note the related sexual connotations; the poem seems also to be an address to a lover to share the poet's happiness, and to acknowledge the inevitability of the natural world and all that this encompasses. The themes of Spring and sex, and nature and man are thus intertwined, creating the quirky humour typical of Cummings – in this case, a double-meaning plea to a lover to let nature take its course. The poem is not overtly descriptive in its treatment of Spring. Instead we seem to be presented with a set of random images (e.g. *houses*, *smiles*, *people*, *streets*) and actions. We'll look at the significance of this factor in creating what we perceive to be a poem about Spring in section 3.1. To sum up, then, the speaker appears to be saying that, like the arrival of Spring, his love is inevitable and cannot be stopped.

'(listen)' is not a particularly difficult poem in terms of the complexity of the subject matter. What is more difficult is to relate the numerous 'strange' stylistic features that Cummings has chosen to use to our general interpretation. We can begin to do this by looking at the most foregrounded features of the poem; that is, the bits of the poem that stand out because they seem unusual. So, now that we've got an initial interpretation of the poem, we can move on and try a thorough linguistic analysis of it.

3. Analysis

My initial interpretation of '(listen)' came about solely as a consequence of looking at the words in the poem. I wasn't, for example, thinking particularly about the deviant grammatical and graphological elements. An examination of the lexical features, then, is perhaps a good place to start with a more detailed linguistic analysis. We will consider how other poetic effects contribute to the overall meaning of the poem later on.

3.1 Lexical features

Let's first of all consider the open class words in the poem. Open class words are those which carry the majority of meaning in a language, as opposed to closed class (grammatical) words such as determiners (e.g. *this*, *that*, *the*) and prepositions (e.g. *in*, *at*, *on*). Closed class words act like sentence 'glue' and link together open class words in meaningful arrangements (sentences). Table 1 shows how the open class words are distributed throughout the poem, and whether they are nouns, verbs, adjectives or adverbs.

Nouns	Main Verbs	Adjectives	Adverbs
dog	listen	wonderful	crazily
houses	barks		eagerly
eyes	tumbling		quickly
people	look		irrevocably
smiles	stir		
faces	writhe		
streets	opening		
steeples	come (x2)		
sunlight	run (x2)		
leaves	jump		
flowers	shout		
dreams	laugh		
earth	dance		
sky	cry		
trees	sing		
miracle	'[i]s		
poems	arrives		
policemen	hurry		
world	stop		
19	**21**	**1**	**4**

Table 1 Distribution of open class words in '(listen)'

We can see from the above table that the poem consists mainly of nouns and verbs. The nouns are mostly concrete - that is, they refer to physical objects – and only two of the nouns are abstract (*dreams* and *miracle*). It is possible to divide the nouns into two rough areas of meaning, or *semantic fields*. Table 2 shows how we might do this:

NOUNS RELATED TO NATURE	NOUNS RELATED TO HUMANS
dog, sunlight, leaves, flowers, earth, sky, trees, miracle, world	houses, eyes, people, smiles, faces, streets, steeples, dreams, poems, policemen

Table 2 Distribution of nouns within two basic semantic classes

The mixture in the poem of nouns belonging to these two different semantic classes could be said to account for what we perceive as an interconnection between nature and man. My initial impression of the poem was that there was some kind of conflict between these two elements and this is explained in part by the above table. The two abstract nouns, *dreams* and *miracle*, could belong to either category and might be seen to connect the two semantic classes.

If we now look at the verbs in the poem we can see that they create a sense of immediacy as we read it. They also contribute to our understanding of it as an address to another person. All the verbs which are marked for tense (finite verbs) are in the present tense. So we have present simple verbs such as 'barks' [2], 'is' [19] and 'arrives' [24] and present progressive forms such as 'are [eagerly] tumb/ling' [6/7/8] and 'o-p-e-n-i-n-g/are' [12/13]. In addition to helping to establish the sense of immediacy, the progressive present participles ('tumbling' and 'opening') indicate the ongoing ('stretched') nature of the actions. This contributes to the idea of the inevitability of nature – Spring is arriving even as the poet speaks. This is also reinforced by the four adverbs of manner, which convey a sense of speed (*quickly*), excitement (*crazily*, *eagerly*) and inevitability (*irrevocably*).

The sense we get of the poem being an address to another person is achieved through the use of *directive* verbs. 12 of the verbs in the poem take this form (*listen*, *look*, *come* (x2), *run* (x2), *jump*, *shout*, *laugh*, *dance*, *cry*, *sing*). Directives can be used for commanding (*Do your essay!*), inviting (*Come in*), warning (*Mind your head*) etc. In '(listen)' they appear to be used (1) to plead with, and to urge the addressee to join in with, the speaker's celebration of Spring, and (2) to share in, and contribute to, his feelings of happiness (for example, in the lines 'run run/with me now' and 'sing for it's Spring'). Note, too, that in the final stanza there is a second person pronoun ('you') and that in line 29 this addressee is referred to as 'my darling', suggesting a romantic relationship between the speaker and whomever he/she[2] is addressing.

There are no unusual words in the poem – no neologisms, for example, and no unconventional affixation, which Cummings often uses in his other poems. However, some of the words are arranged on the page in a seemingly strange way. *Wonderful*, for example, runs across two lines and as a consequence is highly foregrounded. Dividing the word across the morphemes (*wonder* and *ful*) allows us two interpretative effects. We first read the word as the noun *wonder*, and then as the adjective *wonderful*. The graphological deviation here foregrounds the word and creates a density of meaning. Since deviation is such an apparent feature in '(listen)', it is worth examining it in more detail. We can also consider parallelism and the foregrounding effects that this creates.

3.2 Deviation and parallelism

Perhaps the most striking aspect of deviation in '(listen)' is the almost constant use of lower case letters where we would normally expect capitals. This though is typical of Cumming's poetry and so we can't attribute any great significance to it, other than his desire to break with normal convention. However, one of the effects of this graphological deviation is to foreground any instances where Cummings *does* use capitalisation. Because of this we can infer that the word 'Spring' in line 19 is an important concept in the poem, since it is the first word we come across with initial capitalisation. Likewise, the final line of the poem [31] is heavily foregrounded by each word beginning with a capital letter. This emphasises the idea being expressed here; namely that nothing (least of all poetry) and nobody is able to stop the progression of Spring or the poet's love for his addressee - not even conventionally powerful people such as policemen. Cummings perhaps chooses 'policemen' because they are a prototypical example of powerful people.

In addition to the graphological deviations, there are also a number of grammatical deviations in the poem. Many of these occur through Cummings' tendency to use punctuation where it would not normally be necessary. So, for instance, we get phrases being bracketed where there is no grammatical need, in order to express the notion of two events happening at the same time. An example would be in lines 12 and 13 – 'o-p-e-n-i-n-g/are(leaves;flowers)dreams'. Here, the bracketed part of line 13 seems to mean that leaves and flowers are physically opening at the same time as the poet's dreams are opening metaphorically. Again, this contributes to our understanding of the poem as being very active and dynamic. Note the additional semantic deviation here – *dreams* cannot actually open and so this part of the line is foregrounded too, possibly to suggest that with the arrival of Spring the speaker becomes more aware of his dreams and aspirations, more 'open' in the sense of receptive and unguarded.

Cummings tries to capture the idea of a multitude of thoughts occurring simultaneously by breaking grammatical conventions. In addition to his use of bracketed phrases, groups of nouns are often run together without punctuation (e.g. lines 3 to 6 and line 22), and we also find both definite and indefinite reference within the same clause ('**this a** dog barks'; a possible explanation for this is that *this* is used to show that the speaker is referring to a specific dog, but *a* is also used because the speaker is not familiar with the animal – i.e. is not aware of its name. By using both definite and indefinite reference the poet is able to convey this idea.). Such features, remember, are what Blackmur (1954) dismissed as 'peculiarities'. However, if we examine these closely we can see that there is actually a systematicity to the deviations, and that they do indeed contribute to meaning. We can see an example of this in lines 7 and 8. Here, Cummings divides the word *tumbling* so that the progressive morpheme *–ing* appears on a separate line. This foregrounds the verb and also creates a homological effect, or what Short (2000) refers to as a 'graphology-symbolic' effect. This is where a word or a piece of text actually looks like the concept that it represents - for example, if I were to write the word 'outline' like this, or the word 'w^{o}b^{b}l$_y$' like this. In lines 7 and 8 the verb appears to 'tumble' from one line to the next and so we understand the action to be an important concept within the poem. Similarly, in line 12 Cummings uses deviant punctuation to split the progressive participle 'opening' into its

component letters ('o-p-e-n-i-n-g'). Again this foregrounds the verb and creates the homological effect of the word actually opening. Notice as well that the hyphens also suggest that the opening is a long, drawn-out process, reminiscent of the slowness with which flowers bloom, especially when contrasted with the following line which contains no spaces between words and punctuation marks.

If we look closely at the occurrences of graphological deviation in the poem, we can see that it often works to foreground the dynamic verbs – those verbs which imply action of some sort. Line 10 ('-look-') is an example of this. The line consists of a single verb in the imperative mood, foregrounded by a hyphen either side of it. The initial verb of line 14 is also foregrounded due to the deviant punctuation (a comma is used to begin the line). And in line 11 ('selves,stir:writhe') the verbs are foregrounded through being connected by a colon and by the lack of spaces between words.

Other actions are foregrounded in different ways. In line 15 we get repetition of the verb, and in lines 16, 17 and 18 the verbs occur in an unpunctuated list, with the list in brackets running on to a new line. And line 12 is foregrounded at a number of different levels; graphology (which we have already mentioned), grammar (through an inversion of the expected subject-verb-object word order, which has the effect of placing the emphasis of the clause on the action) and semantics – by having an inanimate abstract noun ('dreams') functioning as the subject of a dynamic verb. All these deviations focus our attention on the actions in '(listen)' and contribute to the sense we have of the poem being very dynamic. You can see, then, that our stylistic analysis is so far upholding our initial interpretation of the poem.

In addition to the graphological deviation in the poem, there is also some degree of graphological parallelism in the arrangement of the poem into stanzas. There are several possible ways of describing the graphological organisation of the poem. It may be seen as five 6-line stanzas (the first line of each stanza being separated from the remaining 5 by a line space), with a stand-alone line at the end of the poem. Alternatively, we might describe it as being made up of five 5-line stanzas, all interspersed with a single line. However you prefer to see it, what this seems to suggest is that there is some order to the poem. It is not the chaotic graphological jumble that it first appears. It is difficult, though, to know what to make of the parallel structure of the poem, and if we were to try and relate it to our initial impression of the poem it would be a pretty tenuous interpretation. However, one researcher who has studied a number of Cummings poems suggests that graphological parallelism is a significant stylistic feature in his poetry. Dixit (1977) studied a corpus of E. E. Cummings poems in detail and concluded that, far from being arbitrary examples of deviation, the poems are, in fact, systematically deviant. She explains that:

When the poet chooses to talk about spring, his poem displays a regular cyclic structure like that of the seasons themselves.

(Dixit 1977: 87-88)

Obviously, it is no accident that Cummings structured the poem as he did, and the above is one possible explanation as to why.

Another instance of parallelism in the poem occurs at the phonological level, where we find the repetition of particular sounds. Although '(listen)' does not have a rhyme scheme of any regularity (in fact, all that saves it from being defined as free verse is the regularity of its graphological organisation on the page), Cummings does make use of internal rhyme at particular points within the poem. There is no strict pattern to its occurrence, yet there is some degree of phonological parallelism in each stanza except the last two.[3] Often we find a repetition of vowel sounds in words in close proximity to each other, as we can see in the examples below (repeated vowel sounds are in bold):

how crazily houses /h**au** kreɪzɪlɪ h**au**zəz/	[3]
eyes people smiles /**aɪ**z piːpəl sm**aɪ**lz/	[4]
steeples are eagerly /stiːpəlzəʳiːzɪlɪ/	[6]
…wonder/ful sunlight /w**ʊ**ndəfəl s**ʊ**nlaɪt/	[8, 9]
,come quickly come /k**ʊ**m kwɪklɪ k**ʊ**m/	[14]
sing) for it's Spring /s**ɪ**ŋ fərɪʔs pr**ɪ**ŋ/	[19]

What we can note from this is that the absence of phonological parallelism in the last stanza again foregrounds this part of the poem. The last stanza, then, is heavy with deviation, which suggests it is important in interpretative terms.

3.3 Congruence of foregrounding in the final stanza

As we have seen so far, there is a strong element of foregrounding in the final stanza of '(listen)'. This is what Leech (1969) describes as 'congruence' of foregrounding, which is where we get lots of different types of foregrounding occurring at once. This is obviously very important for our interpretation of the poem but before coming to any overall conclusion about meaning, let's consider again exactly what elements are foregrounded here.

First there is the internal deviation we noticed with the initial capitalisation of each word in the last line. Secondly, unlike in the other stanzas, there is a lack of any sort of phonological parallelism, and (disregarding the obvious lack of punctuation) the grammatical ordering of the stanza follows conventional rules of syntax. What is interesting about these foregrounded elements is that they are all the result of internal deviation, and are all foregrounded because they conform to our normal expectations of written language! In addition to the numerous deviant features of the poem in the other stanzas, what we

have in the last stanza is a kind of 'reverse' deviation. The most strongly foregrounded features of '(listen)' are those which we would usually define as 'normal'.

The effect of all this is to make it unusually easy for us to understand the last stanza. There is no difficult interpretative work to do (in comparison to the rest of the poem) and so the final message of the poem is made extremely clear; nothing and nobody can stop the progress of Spring and the poet's love – the implication being, perhaps, that we should not struggle against these forces, but simply resign ourselves to accepting and becoming participants in them.

4. Conclusion

Now we have analysed the poem stylistically we are in a position to write some sort of conclusion to our study. Here, you can reflect on whether or not your initial interpretation was borne out, and on those features of the text which you were perhaps not able to account for.

My analysis of '(listen)' shows how we can use stylistics to uphold an interpretation of a poem, and how it can also highlight elements of a poem that we might otherwise miss. It also enables us to speculate with more certainty on precisely why E. E. Cummings chooses to use such seemingly odd stylistic techniques in '(listen)'. For example, we saw that deviant punctuation is linked to the foregrounding of dynamic verbs, explaining why we perceive so much 'movement' in the poem. Analysing the poem stylistically also highlights how the most internally deviant features of the poem are those which we would usually consider to be 'normal', non-deviant language in both everyday communication *and* within poetry, and suggests a reason as to why this might be. Stylistics, then, is helpful in explaining parts of a text which we might not otherwise understand.

There are particular features of the poem, though, which I have not been able to account for. For example, I can't explain the comma between 'selves' and 'stir' in line 11, and I'm not sure about the relevance of the colon just before 'every' in line 23. A stylistic analysis which could account for these factors would obviously supersede the one I have given.

In general though, I have shown how the linguistic features of a poem are directly related to meaning, and in doing so I have upheld my initial interpretation of '(listen)'. Of course, mine is not the only interpretation which could be given to the poem. However, by using a systematic analytical technique like stylistics we can ensure that our interpretation is as explicit and grounded in fact as it can be. It is also highly likely that any other stylistic analysis of the poem would include at least some of my conclusions. I hope, then, that I have shown you how to explain *why* a text makes you feel a particular way, and that I have gone some way towards convincing you that stylistics is a useful tool for anybody interpreting literary texts.

NOTES

1. Although many people believe that E[dward] E[stlin] Cummings had the lower case spelling of his name legalized, the E. E. Cummings Society has recently been working to correct this idea which is now generally believed to be false. More information concerning this issue is available at: http://www.gvsu.edu/english/cummings/caps.htm. Note though that many of Cummings' books are printed with the lower-case spelling of his name on the cover, which presumably he considered acceptable. To avoid confusion, throughout this article I use the conventional, upper-case spelling of Cummings' name.

2. Note that we cannot state conclusively that the speaker is male since there is no textual evidence for this. However, our schematic assumptions make it likely that we will imagine the speaker to be a man, since 'darling' is perhaps more likely to be used by a male to a female (of course, this is only an assumption; note that we could test this hypothesis by concordancing the word 'darling' in a corpus of spoken English). There is also a tendency for readers to assume that the persona in a poem and the poet are one and the same. Because we know that the writer of the poem is male, it is likely that we will suppose the persona to be male too.

3. The absence of phonological parallelism in the penultimate stanza is perhaps explained by the fact that at this stage in the poem the language is becoming more 'normal' as we arrive at the final stanza. The penultimate stanza of the poem is still stylistically odd, though, because of the deviant punctuation in line 24 and the use of parentheses in line 25.

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