

ABOUT THE DIFFICULTIES IN STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF SHAKESPEARIAN SONNETS

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ANNOTATION

This article gives some examples of the difficulties encountered in studying, analyzing and translating the sonnets by William Shakespeare, one of the representatives of the medieval literature period, in teaching the history of literature of the English speaking countries in higher educational establishments. Several types of exercises are also suggested in the analysis of Shakespeare's sonatas.

Keywords: sonnet, literary critics, literary studies, stylistics, linguistic analysis, poetry, systematic analysis

In high educational institutions throughout the world students are asked to be literary critics without having a good training or instruction in stylistics. Lacking both analytical methods and the self-confidence to propose their own views, they often use the adoption and recycling of "ready-made critical judgements"¹. Unfortunately, earlier source of published criticism means that learners are deprived of the pleasure that results from unlocking an apparently inaccessible text.

If students are simply told what a work of literature is about, why it is important, and what its strengths and weaknesses are, they will never develop literary competence or the confidence to trust their own interpretative skills. They will concentrate on what the experts say and not read the literary work itself with sufficient intensity. As a result, the benefits for their own understanding and use of the English language are limited.

Some will argue that stylistic analysis is time-consuming and that the literature content of a course syllabus would have to be reduced. Perhaps that is not such a bad compromise: reduction in the number of texts in exchange for the acquisition of interpretative skills and greater learner autonomy. The graduates of such a course would be less aware of the views of certain critics, but they would also be much better readers with a more active and independent approach to literary texts. In all probability, they would also be better speakers and writers of English since they would have followed a course that did not impose a false distinction between the "serious" subject of literary studies and its poor relation with language learning.

So it is important to know and understand stylistics in order to understand the literary work and the author's expressions and meaning of feelings, how artificially used the stylistic devices and what is meant in the literary work. To understand stylistics, it is important to eliminate the artificial separation of language and literature.

¹ Widdowson, H. G. 1975. *Stylistics and the teaching of literature*. London: Longman.

Stylistics involves the analysis of structures and lexis in order to understand how the creative writer exploits the ambiguity of language to mean one thing while apparently saying another. Although stylistics entails linguistic analysis, it also develops the learner's literary competence. According to Lazar learners who possess literary competence have an implicit understanding of and familiarity with certain conventions which allow them to take the words on the page of a play or other literary work and convert them into literary meanings². Stylistics may therefore be seen as an aid to intuition and a preparation for literary appreciation.

In poetry it is not unusual to find the continuing use of lexis from a particular semantic field throughout the work. For example, an initial reading of the following sonnet by Shakespeare would probably mean little to most nonnative speakers, but its message emerges after thorough lexical analysis.

Farewell! thou art too dear for my possessing;
 And like enough thou know'st thy estimate:
 The charter of thy worth gives thee releasing:
 My bonds in thee are all determinate.
 For how do I hold thee but by thy granting?
 And for that riches where is my deserving?
 The cause of this fair gift in me is wanting,
 And so my patent back again is swerving.
 Thyself thou gav'st, thy own worth then not knowing,
 Or me, to whom thou gav'st it, else mistaking;
 So thy great gift, upon misprision growing,
 Comes home again, on better judgment making.
 Thus have I had thee, as a dream doth flatter,
 In sleep a king, but waking no such matter.

I have read and tried to translate or understand this sonnet of Shakespeare several times myself. And I asked my university students majoring in English language and literature to try it themselves. They and I have been pleasantly surprised to discover that systematic work with a monolingual dictionary enabled them and me to understand a sonnet that had struck us as much nonsense, at first. So, here I suggest some procedures to understand or analyze the above sonnet. It may be analyzed in several stages or during several practical lessons on literature study.

First, the students are told that in this sonnet Shakespeare exploits the multiple meanings of certain words. Working in pairs, they use their dictionaries to discover all the meanings of words such as **dear**, **bond**, **estimate**, and **wanting**. The double meaning of **dear** in the first line is particularly relevant. There is one archaic term that have to be explained: the Middle English **misprision**, which means **a mistake** or **an omission**, especially on the part of a public official and also it should be explained that **like** in line 2 means **likely**. Fortunately the students have

² Lazar, G. 1993. Literature and language teaching. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

already encountered enough English literature to have learnt the archaic pronouns **thou** and **thee** but they have to be aware of such related verb forms as **know'st** and **gav'st**³.

Next, The students are told to group the content words into just two or three semantic categories. For instance, the categories may be evaluation (worth, deserving, judgment) and commercial agreements (charter, bonds, patent), more often possession, mistakes, and wealth. By this point the students work out and come to conclusion that Shakespeare is writing about love using vocabulary normally associated with entirely different fields.

In the next stage attention then focuses on discourse features. The students are asked to think about the following questions:

1. Who is the speaker and to whom is the poem addressed?
2. What does the pronoun **it** in the tenth line refer to?
3. To whom are the questions in the fifth and sixth lines addressed and do they require answers?
4. How do the last two lines sum up the entire poem?

Through this systematic analysis the students come to understand that Shakespeare uses the terminology of commercial and financial affairs as an extended metaphor for the termination of sentimental relations between lovers of unequal "worth." With this kind of analysis the students generally think that the addressee in this sonnet to be a woman and that is as it should be because stylistics is concerned with the text, not background knowledge or the author's biography. But, for literary historians the addressee is more likely to be Shakespeare's fair youth.

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³ In the middle English the verb is used with -st / est) thou knowest , thou knew(e)st , thou loved(e)st — And the man said, The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat. (Bible, King James Version; Genesis 3:12)

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