

On Griffith's Simple and Efficient Strategies for Sense in Poetry

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Griffith's strategies refer to the series of simple strategies with the four elements of general sense, diction, syntax, and allusion for reading a poem the first time offered by Kelley Griffith in *Writing Essays About Literature: Guide and Style Sheet* (1998/2006). And Griffith's strategies are the first and only series till now concerning reading a poem the first time. With the relationship between sense and elements explained by Brogan's sense (elements that convey meaning) in poetry and the finding for sense (elements that get meaning) in Griffith's strategies, this paper identifies that Griffith's strategies are simple and efficient by focusing on (1) the simple strategies with the elements easy to follow and (2) the efficient strategies with the elements that get meaning. The conclusion is that Griffith's strategies with the elements that convey/get meaning are not only simple enough to follow but also efficient enough to get the meaning of a poem.

Keywords: Griffith's strategies, simple and efficient, sense in poetry

Introduction

A poem, when read for the first time quite often does not make any sense at all because the sense in poetry is conveyed by the conventions or elements which make its language "heightened" and "intensified". Kelley Griffith, the first and only one till now offers the readers some simple strategies with the four elements of general sense, diction, syntax, and allusion for reading a poem the first time.

In *Writing Essays About Literature: Guide and Style Sheet* (1998/2006), Kelley Griffith introduces some strategies for reading a poem the first time. Griffith's strategies are as follows:

- (1) Read the poem through once without stopping. Do not try to understand every word or phrase. Just get the general sense of the poem.
- (2) Reread the poem, looking up words you don't know. See *Diction* below.
- (3) Read the poem again. This time identify the normal word order of all the sentences. See *Syntax* below.
- (4) Track down any allusions¹ in the poem. (p. 109)

Griffith (1998/2006) himself defines the strategies as "some simple strategies" (p. 109). But with the four elements of general sense, diction, syntax, and allusion, he also suggests that his strategies are efficient for sense in poetry, owing to the relationship between sense and elements which can be explained by Brogan's sense (elements that convey meaning) in poetry.

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¹ The element "allusion" from the fourth strategy of "Track down any allusions in the poem" is different from the first three in Griffith's strategies, which can be substituted with such elements as symbol, irony, and metaphor.

Brogan's Sense (Elements That Convey Meaning) in Poetry

Griffith gets his explanation for the relationship between sense and elements from Brogan's sense (elements that convey meaning) in poetry. In *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (1993), Brogan said that "a poem conveys heightened forms of perception, experience, meaning, or consciousness in heightened language" (p. 938). As "a heightened mode of discourse", poetry exhibits "intensified speech". Brogan ordered these "heightened" and "intensified" into three categories: sense (elements that convey meaning), sound (elements that underscore the musical qualities of language), and sight (elements that affect the appearance of poems) (pp. 939-940).

Sense, one of the three categories in Brogan's sense in poetry, refers to elements that convey meaning. The elements or conventions in this category are for poetry composition, for the poet's use, and for the poet to convey meaning.

And Griffith's sense in poetry in his strategies corresponds to the category of Brogan's sense in poetry, but the elements of general sense, diction, syntax, and allusion in the strategies are for poetry interpretation, for the reader's use, for the reader to get meaning in a poem, rather than conventions or elements for the poet to compose poetry. Therefore, the sense in poetry of Griffith's strategies may well be defined as sense (elements that get meaning).

Given that Brogan's sense in poetry is defined as the elements that convey meaning and Griffith's sense in poetry in his strategies as the elements that get meaning, the elements for sense in poetry are two orientated: One is to convey meaning for poetry composition and the other is to get meaning for poetry interpretation which can be employed to explain that Griffith's strategies are simple and efficient for sense in poetry.

Simple Strategies With Elements Easy to Follow

Griffith (1998/2006) himself defines his strategies for reading a poem the first time as "some simple strategies" (p. 109), and he supports it by offering the definitions for the elements of general sense, diction, syntax, and allusion,² and focusing on diction and syntax with two parts explanation subtitled as "Diction" and "Syntax" which share the example of William Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" (1800). And the definitions for the elements, the subtitled "Diction" and "Syntax" for the two parts explanation, the interpretation of "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" are all centering on the four elements as well as their sub-elements.³

Here is Griffith's description of his approach to the interpretation of Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" with the two elements of diction and syntax from his strategies.

As for diction, Griffith focuses on connotation, one of the sub-elements in diction, to discuss how it creates the effect on "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal". He examines the words in the poem for all their possible shades

² The definitions offered by Griffith for the elements of general sense, diction, syntax, and allusion are as follows: Griffith's definition of "sense" is a substitute for that of "general sense" from his first strategy, that is, the "elements that convey meaning" (p. 109). The "diction" from Griffith's second strategy "refers to the poet's choice of words" (p. 110). The "syntax" from the third is "sentence structure, the way words go together to make sentences" (p. 112). The "allusion" from the fourth is "a reference to historical events and people, to mythological and biblical figures, and to works of literature" (p. 109).

³ The sub-elements named by the author of the present writing refer to the elements formed from the four elements of general sense, diction, syntax, and allusion in Griffith's strategies. We may take diction and syntax for examples. In diction the connotation, denotation, and wordplay described by Griffith are some sub-elements; and the independent clauses or simple sentences, complex sentences with subordinate clauses are some sub-elements for syntax.

and levels of meaning, such words as “diurnal”, “rock”, “stones”, and “tree” from the last two lines of the eighth-line poem. And he explains how the meanings of the four words together create the overall effect on the poem.

As for syntax, Griffith only deals with the word order of the poem's title. The inverted title of the poem “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal” is derived from the normal word order of “My spirit did seal a slumber”. Thus, the inversion is grouped under the element of syntax.

Griffith's interpretation of Wordsworth's “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal” as described above is centering on the two elements of diction and syntax including their sub-elements. At least two things are worth mentioning: One is that the elements of diction and syntax including their sub-elements serve as a bridge or a guide for the reader, and the other is that the basic linguistic elements of literature⁴ are used in Griffith's strategies for sense in poetry.

The elements of diction and syntax in Griffith's strategies as a bridge or a guide for the reader means there are some connections between the elements in a poem that convey meaning and the elements in Griffith's strategies that get meaning. And the connections can help the reader build up the sense of rule or form for poetry interpretation within the linguistic system at the level of word and sentence. And as a result, it makes Griffith's strategies easy to follow, thus working.

And the basic linguistic elements of literature appear in Griffith's strategies for sense in poetry such as the diction and syntax as well as their sub-elements used by Griffith for interpreting Wordsworth's “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal”. Some works concerning poetry interpreting have provided the reader with some basic linguistic elements for sense in poetry, such as “Understanding Poetry” (1938/2004) by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, “Literature: Reading, Reacting, Writing (Poetry)” by Laurie G. Kirsznner and Stephen R. Mandell (2006), “Poetry” (2006/2009) by John Strachan and Richard Terry. In “Literature: Reading, Reacting, Writing (Poetry)” (2006), Laurie G. Kirsznner and Stephen R. Mandell suggest the approach of “Study the poem's diction” (2006, p. 801), connotation and denotation are suggested for word choice (p. 867), and levels of diction and dialect are also discussed (pp. 877-886). And the word order is introduced with the definition followed by four poems interpretation. The word order is the subtitle of this section rather than syntax, and it is only mentioned as the source of the word order (p. 889). In “Poetry”, diction is introduced with two sections titled “Poetic diction” (Strachan and Terry, 2009, p. 146) and “Diction and argots” (p. 156). But all these books fail to arranged diction and syntax, the basic linguistic elements for poetry interpretation, in a systematical way as Griffith does, nor do they have a clear statement of the elements for reading a poem the first time.

Efficient Strategies With Elements That Get Meaning

Griffith himself does not define his strategies as some “efficient” strategies, but he suggests it by doing such things as describing the meaning or roles of the four elements and his interpreting Wordsworth's “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal” with the two elements of diction and syntax. And all this may well reveal that his strategies are efficient for sense in poetry.

Here are Griffith's views of the meanings conveyed by the four elements of general sense, diction,

⁴ The literary terms are categorized by LIU Xiang-yu in his introductory remark on Abrams' *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (2004) into four groups which include literary types, literary school or movement, literature elements, and literary criticism. And the elements in Griffith's strategies for sense in poetry belong to the group of literature elements (Abrams, 2004, Introduction, p. 2).

syntax, and allusion in his strategies. Griffith (1998/2006) fails to define the meaning of general sense, but it can be interpreted from his definition for sense from Brogan's concept, that is, sense "elements that convey meaning" (p. 109), which may well be explained by the finding of the present writing, that is, "elements that get meaning".

The meaning conveyed from the diction is to know the poets' understanding of the words they use which is crucial to understanding the meaning of their poems. And by definition Griffith builds up a hierarchy (unity or coherence) of his diction system with both denotation and connotation as the sub-elements. Here are his definitions of denotation and connotation for meaning of words. Denotation is the object or idea—the referent—that a word represents. The denotation of a word is its core meaning, its dictionary meaning. Connotation is the subjective, emotional association that a word has for one person or a group of people. Poets often choose words that contribute to the poem's meaning on both a denotational and a connotational level (Griffith, 1998/2006, p. 110). And your reading will be efficient if you do as Griffith suggests: "examine the words in a poem for all their possible shades and levels of meaning, and get to know how these meanings combine to create an overall effect" (p. 110).

Syntax in poetry can be profoundly meaningful... (Griffith, 1998/2006, p. 112). Inversion and complex sentences are sub-elements in syntax. The inversion is to "make the sentence rhyme, to fit a metrical pattern, or to emphasize an idea" (Griffith, 1998/2006, p. 112). And complex sentences in poetry "can be richly suggestive..." (Griffith, 1998/2006, p. 113).

And an allusion invites "comparison between the work at hand and the items referred to... And an allusion is a compact way of adding meaning to the work" (Griffith, 1998/2006, p. 110).

We may come to see how Griffith describes his efficient strategies centering on the two elements of diction and syntax for the meaning in Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal".

As for diction, with the connotation, one of its sub-elements, first Griffith gets the meaning of "daily" for the words "diurnal", and the connotative meaning for "rock, stones, and tree", then by examining the four words in the poem for all the shades and levels of meaning, he comes to the idea emphasized by the combined meanings of these words: "The effect of the word 'diurnal' is to make the processes of nature—death, the revolving of Earth, the existence of rocks and stones and trees—seem remote, remorseless, and inevitable" (Griffith, 1998/2006, p. 111).

As for syntax, Griffith's (1998/2006) description of the effect created by the inverted title "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" goes like "by inverting the word order, Wordsworth gains the end-rhyme he wants, the iambic metrical pattern he wants, and an emphasis on the speaker's state of mind, 'slumber'" (p. 113).

Griffith supports that his strategies are efficient for reading a poem the first time with the four elements in his strategies introduced by focusing on the two elements of diction and syntax for the interpretation of "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal". And if a reader follows the elements in Griffith's strategies, an efficient reading is coming, and coming from the elements of general sense, diction, syntax, allusion that convey/get meaning.

Conclusion

With the concept of sense in poetry explained based on Brogan's sense (elements that convey meaning) and the finding for sense (elements that get meaning) in Griffith's strategies, Griffith's simple and efficient strategies

for reading a poem the first time have been identified by focusing on the simple strategies with elements easy to follow and the efficient strategies with elements that get meaning.

As for the simple strategies with elements easy to follow, Griffith's explanation of the simple strategies has been centered on the elements such as the elements as the subtitle, definitions of the elements, and his interpretation of "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" with elements for the strategies' simplicity. Two points are summed up for the reason why Griffith's strategies are simple: One is that the elements including their sub-elements in Griffith's strategies serve as a bridge or a guide for the reader, and the other is that the basic linguistic elements are used in Griffith's strategies for sense in poetry.

The efficiency of Griffith's strategies is examined mainly with Griffith's views of the meaning conveyed by the four elements in his strategies and his interpretation of Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" centering on the two elements of diction and syntax.

The conclusion is that Griffith's strategies with the elements that convey/get meaning are not only simple enough to follow but also efficient enough to get the meaning of a poem.

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