

The Profundity Entailed in the Poetic Language: A Stylistic Analysis of W. B. Yeats' *Leda and the Swan*

YUAN Wei

Civil Aviation Flight University of China, Chengdu, China

LIU Sha

Southwest University, Chongqing, China

As a central issue in stylistics, foregrounding, which can be achieved by deviation and overregularity at every linguistic level, can give readers more innovative and ingenious perspective on appreciation of text. W. B. Yeats' *Leda and the Swan* is a poem deserving close reading and attention. The analysis from sound patterning, meter and rhythm, verbal repetition endows the poem with some novel and new aesthetic significance.

Keywords: foregrounding, stylistic analysis, W. B. Yeats, *Leda and the Swan*

Introduction

Without any doubt, in English literature, W. B. Yeats is the most important and influential poet, who towers his contemporaries by his outstanding craftsmanship and distinguished thoughts. His poetry, like an unexhausted treasure, can be the resources of human civilization and literature, therefore, it is of great value and necessity to study his literary works, in order to feel the subtlety of creative use of literary language, appreciate the profoundness of thoughts and taste his charming personality.

Yeats (1865-1939), an important and great poet in English language literature, was born to an artistic family. Yeats drew from mystical traditions, Irish history and mythology with his life and passion. He was awarded Nobel Prize for literature in 1923.

Leda and the Swan was written in Yeats' late years. This poem is full of mysticism and shows the poet's profundity. "The sonnet '*Leda and the Swan*' written when Yeats was fifty-eight, rivets attention on one such event: the ravishment of the girl Leda by the god Zeus in the shape of a swan" (Rosenthal, 2004, p. 41). What the poem conveys is very rich and multiple, so many critics have been attracted.

This poem depicts the annunciation of the subjective Greek epoch Yeats believed to have preceded the objective era. Defying associations between sonnets and tender expressions of love, it pictures the mythical rape of the mortal Leda by the god Zeus in the guise of a swan. According to the poem, this rape led to Greek civilizations defining episode by engendering Helen of Troy and her sister. (Holdeman, 2008, p. 89)

Poetry, whose language is artful and tasteful, to some extent, is the highest form of literature, having a long history. "Yet poetry has existed from the time of the emergence of the human race from shadowy prehistory and has survived, in one form or another, in every society since that time" (Brooks & Warren, 2004, p. 1). As one of

YUAN Wei, Lecturer, Department of English Language Training, Xinjin Flight College, Civil Aviation Flight University of China.

LIU Sha, Postgraduate, Department of Education, Southwest University.

the classic poems of Yeats, it deserves careful study, for appreciating the ingenious art and getting a deeper and more penetrating understanding, therefore, this paper devotes itself to a penetrating, comprehensive and systematic perception and understanding from the perspective of stylistics.

To ensure a solid, sound and systematic appreciation or analysis, related theories are indispensable and essential. The approach of stylistics will be employed in this paper. As is known to all, Leech, the professor of linguistics at Lancaster University, is a great contributor and scholar in modern stylistics, thus, his theory and framework of stylistic analysis will be applied and adopted. To have a panorama of stylistics, first and foremost, a general view of stylistics is of great necessity.

Theories About Stylistics

Stylistics, narrowly speaking, is a discipline that studies styles of language use in literary works from the linguistic perspective, thus, such kind of critical approach is very scientific and objective, because of its sound and systematic linguistic foundation.

Stylistic analysis is generally concerned with the uniqueness of a text, that is to say, what is peculiar to the uses of language in a literary text for delivering the message. It takes literary discourse as its object of study and uses linguistics as a means to that end. (ZHU, 2006, p. 6)

By stylistics, I mean the study of literary discourse from a linguistic orientation and I shall take the view that what distinguishes stylistics from a linguistic criticism on the one hand and linguistics on the other, it is essentially a means of linking the two. (Widdowson, 1975, p. 17)

Stylistics is derived from classical rhetoric with a long history and tradition but it's not systematic. Stylistics expert Roman Jakobson in his *Linguistics and Poetics*, he called for "an explicit, objective, scientific and structuralist linguistics. What makes such a scientific approach possible is that Jacobson sees style as an inherent property of the literary text, to the exclusion of the reader" (Weber, 1996, p. 2). In fact, the purpose of stylistics is to see how the language materials are put together to form meaningful, even artful text. "Stylistic is very similar to practical criticism in many aspects, and the focus is on the text, Stylistics experts are trying their best to avoid ambiguity and subjective impression" (HU & LIU, 2004, p. 305).

In the first half of 20 century, stylistics had an exceedingly great development and innovation. Russian Formalism has a great influence on modern stylistics.

The Russian Formalists, a group of theorists who flourished in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, claimed another use of language as a defining quality of literature. The key to literature, they said, is "literary language", the term for this quality, invented by Viktor Shklosky, is defamiliarization. The principle of defamiliarization is to "foreground"—give prominence to—something in the work of literature that departs from everyday use or familiar artistic conventions. (Griffith, 2006, p. 14)

The word "defamiliarization", which stresses the language in literature, is not as familiar and automatic as ordinary language. In 1926, Mukaiovsky developed formalist concept of "defamiliarization" into the more systematic and influential concept "foregrounding".

Foregrounding

Foregrounding, is regarded as the most important term in literary stylistics, which is borrowed from the art of painting, originally related to the visual art. Leech points out:

Foregrounding is a useful, even crucial concept in stylistics which provides a bridge between the relative objectivity of linguistic description and the relative subjectivity of literary judgment. It is a criterion by which we may select from a mass of linguistic detail, those features relevant to literary effects. (Leech, 2001, p. 75)

Viktor Shklovski put forward the term “literariness”, which is the reason that a written text can be thought as literature. In one word, the foregrounded language is special and distinguished, which can attract the readers’ attention and interest. The opposite of foreground is background, the relation between the two is just like the relation between poetical language and ordinary one.

Ordinary language is too common, and nothing special can intrigue readers’ interest and psychological excitement. Then the difference between literary language and common language is key to this, “the essential difference between literary and other uses of language: in literature, the message is text-contained, and presupposes no wider context so that everything necessary for its interpretation is to be found within the message itself” (Widdowson, 1999, p. 139). Jan Mukaiovsky has stated in *Standard Language and Poetic Language* that: foregrounding is the opposite of automatization, which is the de-automatization of an act. In fact, poetical language is the intentional violation of the norm of the standard. Behind the “intentional violation”, the intention or motivation can be traced or analyzed. Just as Halliday pointed out in *Linguistic Function and Literary Style: An Inquiring into the Language of William Golding’s “The Inheritor”*,

Foregrounding, as I understand it, is prominence that is motivated. It is not difficult to find patterns of prominence in poem or prose text, regularities in the sounds or words or structures that stand out in some way, or maybe brought out by careful reading; and one may often be led in this way towards a new sight, through finding that such prominence contributes to the writer’s total meaning. (Halliday, 2008, p. 225)

By the analysis of the foregrounding language, the aesthetic value and literary significance can emerge.

Since foregrounding is the core of literary stylistics, that is to say, the interpretation of the foregrounded language is the very critical. “Foregrounding, or motivated deviation from linguistic or other socially accepted norms, has been claimed to be a basic principle of aesthetic communication” (Leech, 2001, p. 121). How can it be realized? “Foregrounding can be achieved in one or two ways, either via parallelism or by deviation, and the important point here is that anything that is foregrounded is highly interpretable and arguably more memorable” (McIntyre, 2008, p. 419). Language has three levels, namely, form, realization and semantics. The foregrounding effect can occur in every linguistic level, thus, the theory of foregrounding is very systematic and comprehensive, covering every linguistic detail, which is objective, theoretic and scientific.

As a matter of fact, the stylistic analysis is to find the aesthetic values through the language by means of linguistic methods. H. G. Widdowson shows his opinion:

It seems to me that the aesthetic effect of a poem depends on the satisfaction of two conditions. In respect to this condition, the greater the incongruity of the poem, the more difficult it is to accommodate within accepted structures of reality, therefore the more variable responses it evokes, the greater its aesthetic potential. But this condition alone would lead us to equate artistic quality with obscurity. We need the second condition, in respect to this condition, the more patterning that one can discern within a poem, and the more integrated the patterns, the greater its aesthetic potential. (Widdowson, 1996, pp. 61-62)

Such statement also shows the two dimensions of foregrounding from different angles. Here is a diagram to show how foregrounding is to be formed.

foregrounding



deviation parallelism (YU, 2007, p. 26)

Leech, the very important and influential professor of stylistics, whose theory has adopted and absorbed the previous ones, at the same time, he made much efforts, improvement and innovation for more systematic and theoretical development. This paper, mainly applies the approach provided by Leech, which can be regarded as a conducive and beneficial experiment and practice.

Linguistic Overregularity and Its Interpretations

As an important literary stylistic feature, foregrounding is the very central idea in analysis of English poetry. Foregrounding effects can be reached by deviation and parallelism.

Linguistic deviation as we have studied is not the only mechanism of linguistic foregrounding. Now I want to concentrate on a type of foregrounding which is in a sense the opposite of deviation, for it consists in the introduction of extra regularities, not irregularities, into the language. (Leech, 2001, p. 62)

It has been clear that foregrounding can be reached either by either deviation or overregularity, which is both distant and distinct from the ordinary language, and the literariness just lies the distance between the “abnormal” language and normal one. Of course, behind every “abnormal” expression must imply the author’s intention and purpose.

If parallelism is unexpected regularity, then deviation is unexpected irregularity. Deviating from accepted norms also produces a foregrounding effect. Since anything that is foregrounded is highly interpretable you would be forced to look for an explanation for his or her deviant behavior. (McIntyre, 2008, p. 423)

The Stylistic Analysis of the Poem

Sound Patterning

In ancient times, poems were used to sing, so the language must be easy to remember and sound of poems should have features. Sound patterning is an important feature in English poems, which can produce an effect of music. In other words, the special usage and arrangement of sound, which is different from ordinary language, thus, it is foregrounded. Leech put forward a formula: “ $C^{0-3} V C^{0-4}$ ”, cluster of up to three consonants followed by a vowel nucleus followed by a cluster of up to four consonants” (Leech, 2001, p. 89).

Alliteration. In general, alliteration means that the two or more words share the same initial sound, to produce an effect of music. In the formula, the C is same between words, but the VC is different. To clarify, Leech also modified the formula for a full understanding of alliteration.

To redefine alliteration and rhyme in their most widely used senses, we first divide the rhythmic measure into two parts: A (the initial consonant cluster) and B (the whole what follows A):

C V C..... C V C.....
| A | | B | | A | | B |

Alliteration is then the parallelism which consists in keeping A constant while B varies. (Leech, 2001, p. 91)

In the first stanza, “He holds her helpless breast upon his breast”, alliteration exists among “he, hold, her,

helpless”, they share the sound /h/, which is a glottal, having a sense of extremely tired, happy, excited and so on, especially this is the description of the sexual activity, seemingly, the groaning can be heard, very real and vivid. Other interpretations are also acceptable: it shows that Leda is very terrified and fragile, such emotions or mood only can be expressed well by glottal.

In the last stanza, in “the brute blood of the air”, “brute” and “blood” are semi-alliteration. “In terms of the phonemic make-up of the three constituents CVC, but other kinds of parallelism are possible constant clusters can be related in terms of partial, not full identity” (Leech, 2001, p. 90). The words “brute” and “blood”, though the sound /br/ and /bl/ are not totally identical, they share /b/, such semi-alliteration is also popular. In addition, /b/ is a plosive, which is very hard by hearing, so the sound symbolism shows the air or atmosphere is very unpleasant.

Rhyme. Rhyme is a very old poetical device. In the formula CVC, the part VC is the same, but the first C is different. To clarify, the figure designed by Leech will be quoted again,

$$\begin{array}{ccccccc} C & & VC & \dots & C & & VC & \dots \\ | A | & | B | & & & | A | & | B | \end{array}$$

“Rhyme is the parallelism which consists in keeping B constant while A varies” (Leech, 2001, p. 91). In one word, rhyme, as an important poetical device for special sound effect, the part B should be constant, but part A must be different. As a pattern of sound, it makes poetry musical. “Rhyme helps to unify a poem; it also repeats a sound that links one concept to another, thus helping to determine the structure of a poem” (YU, 2007, p. 70).

As a sonnet, it has its own features in rhyme. The octave: abab, cdcd. However, the next part is a little irregular, “there” and “tower” are rhymed, “dead” not.

In addition, “caressed” and “breast” are not rhyme, to be strict, they both share /est/, however, before the vowel /e/, the consonant r is still the same, according to the definition of rhyme, the consonant before the vowel should not be identical. What’s more, “push” “rush”, “up” “drop” /u/, /ʌ/ and /ʊ/ are different, and they are not totally rhymed. Such intentional arrangement in rhyme indicates that the union between the two is not normal and orthodox, and anyway, the musical effects have been reached.

Onomatopoeia. Onomatopoeia is the imitation in words of the natural sounds of thing. As a figure of speech, onomatopoeia makes the sound of the words have close relations to the meaning by resemblance according to our mental connection and experience. “these words help us from mental pictures about the things, people, or places that are described” (YU, 2007, p. 72). It is more vivid and live. “A very different kind of reinforcement takes the form of resemblance between what a piece of language sounds like, and what it refers to” (Leech, 2001, p. 96). According to Saussure’s theory: language is arbitrary, no logical relations between the sound and what the sound refers to. Onomatopoeia is exceptional, the sound can mean something between resemblance and connection. Alexander Pope ever said: the sound must seem an echo to the sense.

A good poet will adapt the very sound to the things he treats of, so that there is (if one may express so) a style of sound... This is undoubtedly of wonderful force in imprinting the image on the reader. (QIN, 2002, p. 42)

Leech divided it into some categories, and the next analysis will follow this.

First, “On a wider and rather more abstract interpretation, the phonological patterns can be taken to represent the activity as a whole, the connection is made not via the ear alone, but through the little understood pathways of

empathy and synaesthesia” (Leech, 2001, p. 97). In the first stanza, “A sudden blow”, when pronouncing these sounds, the feeling is very sharp and amazing, like a stroke, making readers astonished. Moreover, as the opening word, it decides the basic notes of the poem. In the third stanza, “shudder” is also interesting. By synaesthesia, it has a sense an accident or occurring unexpectedly and seriously. Accordingly, it described the war, disaster and turbulence caused by fateful union.

Second, “even more abstract and mysterious plane of suggestion, onomatopoeia effects are attributive to the general ‘color’ of sound on such dimensions ‘hardness’, ‘softness’, ‘thinness’ and ‘sonority’” (Leech, 2001, p. 98). In his opinion, all the consonants have the soft end of the scale is liquids and nasals, the hard end of the scale is plosives /b/, /d/ and so on. In the third stanza, “the broken war, the burning roof and tower”, the sound /b/ is hard and plosive, which is very hard and sharp, seemingly, the sound of the falling and combustion of building can be heard vividly.

Meter and Rhythm

“Rhythm is a principle of all life and all activity and is, of course, deeply involved in the experience of, and the expression of, emotion, the very origin of language involves rhythm” (Brooks & Warren, 2004, p. 2). Rhythm is a feature any language may have, “a global term covering all relations of strength and weakness” (Attridge, 1995, p. 11). The rhythm of English is based on the contrast of the stressed and unstressed syllables. To be clearer, Leech said that “language can be split into segments which are in some sense of equal durations. I have emphasized the qualification ‘in some sense of equal duration’, because the rhythm of language is not isochronical in terms of crude physical measurement” (Leech, 2001, p. 105). In other words, the “equal” of duration is relative, should not be too strict, because language must be influenced by the context.

Traditional feet have a long history, which dominates the rhythm analysis for a long period, however, the traditional feet, having strict confinement of stressed syllable and unstressed ones, are never perfect, but problematic. For example, when the number of the syllables is odd, it is problematic and ambiguous:

(1) /x/x/x/x/

(2) x/x/x/x/x/x/

In these situations, “rising rhythm” and “falling rhythm” can not be drawn clearly, which can either be a trochee or iamb, it will become meaningless.

In addition, the other shortcoming also is mentioned, “The traditional feet is not suitable to analyze English poetry in essence, though the terms are from the sound theory for Latin or other pure syllabic language” (Baldick, 2000, p. 136).

In terms of the shortcomings of the traditional feet, professor Song Desheng summarized like this: “one defect is that traditional feet has no accurate definition of foot, the other is that it has strict requirement and confinement of unstressed syllables, however, in English prosody, the number of unstressed syllables is of no significance” (SONG, 2003, p. 425).

To solve this problem, Leech put forward a term “measure”,

...each of the measure begins with a stressed syllable, corresponding to the musical downbeat. A number of unstressed syllables, varying from nil to about four, can occur between one stressed syllable and the next, and the duration of any individual syllable depends largely upon the number of other syllables in the same measure. (Leech, 2001, p. 106)

In measure theory, first, the stressed syllables are only focused, the unstressed ones are of no importance. Second, the number of measure of a line must be even instead of odd, however, to achieve this, the concept “silent beat” has no sound, but takes up the same time duration,

Allowance must be made both for pauses in the middle or at the end of a measure, and for pauses at the beginning of a measure, standing in place of a stressed syllable. Such “silent beat” (∧) can occur within a line of poetry (Leech, 2001, p. 108)

The measure is therefore a more reliable concept than foot in English Prosody. The importance of the foot lies mainly in its historical position in the body of theory which poets through the centuries have learnt, and have more or less considering applied in their poetry. (Leech, 2001, p. 113)

Since measure is more reliable and scientific than foot, this poem will be analyzed by measure.

Professor Song Desheng also stated,

The employment silent beat paves the way for eliminating the odd number. If the number is odd, the adding of silent beat will make it even; if the number has been even, then, the silent beat is unnecessary, anyway, measure is an important discovery and improvement. (SONG, 2003, p. 427)

Based on such theoretical preparation of measure, the analysis is the following:

A/sudden/blow: the/great/wings/beating/still
 /Above the/staggering/girl, her/thighs/caressed ∧^①
 By the/dark/webs, ∧ her/nape/caught in his/bill,
 He/holds her/helpless/breast/upon his/breast. ∧
 /How can/hose/terrified/vague/fingers/push
 The/feathered/glory from her/loosening/thighs?
 And/how can/body, /laid in that/white/rush, ∧
 But/feel the/strange/heart/beating/where it/lies?
 A/shudder in the/loins/engenders/there
 The/broken/wall, the/burning/roof and/tower
 And/Agamemnon/dead.
 Being so/caught up, ∧
 So/mastered by the/brute/blood of the/air,
 Did she/put on his/knowledge ∧ with his/power^②
 Before the/indifferent/beak could/let her/drop?

Since measure is closely related to stressed syllable, but which syllables are stressed? “Although there are plenty of exceptions, it is a useful general rule that proper nouns and lexical words bear stress in concerned speech, whereas grammatical words, particularly monosyllabic words, usually do not” (Leech, 2001, p. 107). In my analysis of meter, two points are chosen for special interpretation.

① in this line, the silent beat is added. On the one hand, it is necessary to add a silent beat to form a even number, on the other hand, this is enjambment, this line and the next one form a whole sentence. The silent beat after “caressed” is coincidently the division in meaning of the sentence, the position of ∧ needs a pause. “Above” is also stressed, though a grammatical word, this word shows the status of the swan, the contrast between Leda

and the swan is obvious.

② In this line, the silent beat is added before “knowledge”, one reason is to form an even number, the second reason is that “knowledge” is a key word, which should be given the priority and focus, coincidentally, the adding of a silent beat can achieve the purpose.

Every stressed word is crucial and essential, showing the disaster and catastrophe. The silent beat is in the end of line; the requirement of even number, the reason is that this place is also the division of different levels in meaning, full of craftsmanship.

Such is the analysis of the meter according to measure. Professor Song Desheng pointed out,

...phonometrics provides with a concise and reliable approach which is very suitable for poetry in English language. The beginning of measure is determined by the stressed syllable, within every measure, there is only one syllable, the number of unstressed is free. (2003, p. 426)

Obviously, phonometrics is helpful and practical in analysis of English poetry.

Admittedly, phonometrics is far from perfect, professor Song stated: “what the poets followed when writing poems is the traditional meter, so, possibly, the measure can not reflect all the details in meter designed by the poets” (2003, p. 427). But such defect is trivial, it never can cover the advantages, so measure or phonometrics is absolutely sound and systematic both in practice and theory.

Verbal Repetition

Repetition is an indispensable aspect in language to achieve the effects of foregrounding. Poetic deviation and overregularity account for most of what is characteristic of poetic language, either of them is significant. “The two types of foregrounding therefore have complementary spheres of importance” (Leech, 2001, p. 73). Generally speaking, in most cases, repetition is avoided, because in daily communication, too much repetition is dull and wordy. Nevertheless, in poetic language, repetition has special stylistic effects.

Free verbal repetition. “Free repetition of form means the exact copying of some previous part of a text” (Leech, 2001, p. 77). Leech also divided it into two categories: immediate repetition and intermittent repetition. In the first stanza, “He holds her helpless breast upon his breast”. It is an intermittent repetition, “The term was especially associated with the pregnant repetition of an item in different senses” (Leech, 2001, p. 78). The first breast is Leda’s, the second one is the swan’s, such repetition of the word is artful and subtle. On the one hand, the arrangement of “breast” indicates the union between the two, very vivid; on the other hand, this repetition forms an ironical effect. Though the “breast” is together ever paralleled, there is no heartfelt communication between them, no equal status. In terms of expression effects, Leech summarized: “repetition has its own kind of eloquence. It may further suggest a suppressed intensity of feeling—an imprisoned feeling, as it were, for which there is no outlet but a repeated hammering at the confining walls of language” (2001, p. 79).

Verbal parallelism. “What is important, if this is to constitute a parallelism, is that the repetition should be felt to occur at the beginning of equivalent pieces of language, within which there is an invariant part and variant part” (Leech, 2001, p. 79). That is to say, compared to verbal repetition, in verbal parallelism, the same and the different coexist. The second stanza is verbal parallelism, which consists of two questions, whose syntactic structures are paralleled. How can + (Leda’s fingers) + action? In fact, this is a rhetoric question, which needs no answer, such reinforcement strengthens that Leda is helpless and conquered.

In the last stanza, the structure “Being so caught up, so mastered”, this is also a verbal parallelism. This parallelism again shows Leda’s passivity and inferior status and condition.

Conclusion

What has been discussed above is stylistic analysis based on close reading of the poem. *Leda and the Swan* is a poem with multidimensional significance and aesthetics. Great poems will always entail diversified understandings and appreciations. Text, since its birth, is independent, so the interpretation of text has many possibilities. The analysis and appreciation above, hopefully, can be enlightening inspiring in the understanding of the poem and perceiving theory of literary stylistics. The whole paper follows the framework of Leech’s theory; of course, related theory and approach are also adopted and helpful, that is to say, this paper can be regarded as an experiment of the literary stylistic analysis under the guide of the updated theory, hopefully, it can be successful and significant.

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