

Stylistic Analysis of Langston Hughes's Poem "Harlem"

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Abstract

This article attempts to analyze Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem" from the perspective of stylistic analysis. The analysis is made under the aspects of graphological, phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactic and semantic patterns to form the basis for the analysis which is helpful in understanding the basic content and form of the poem. The purpose of this article is to find out the stylistic devices which the poet has exploited to enhance his message. It is concluded that the stylistic devices the poet has used play a very important role in helping the readers grasp the meanings and message that he is trying to convey.

Key Words: Style, Stylistics, Stylistic analysis, Langston Hughes.

1. Introduction

Poetry, a very popular genre of literature, retains flexibility of forms, complexity of structures, multiplicity of meanings, variety of musicality and playfulness of words. Therefore, a poem can significantly be analyzed through diverse levels of the stylistic analysis. Style is a distinctive way of using language to convey the intended meaning in an appropriate manner and stylistics is the study of the distinctive expression of language.

James Mercer Langston Hughes (1902-1967) was a great African-American writer of his time. He was named the most renowned African-American Poet of the 20th century. He used his poetry to speak to his people. He spoke for his entire race and his words had a huge impact on the treatment of black people and the manner in which they were viewed. Hughes probably intended his poems to focus on the dream of African-American people who lived in Harlem, black area in New York. The poem "Harlem", which first appeared in 1951 in the collection of his poetry entitled "Montage of a Dream Deferred", is a lyric poem with irregular rhymes and sentence patterns.

The fundamental objective of this article is to explore the stylistic devices which the poet has exploited to enhance his message of the necessity of fulfilling the dream

without deferring it to maintain peace, understanding and progress among the American people regardless of colors and cultures. The poem is analyzed through examining its graphological, phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactic and semantic levels.

2. Literature Review

The literature review in this article retains just definitions of style, stylistics and levels of stylistic analysis.

2.1 Style

The term “Style” is derived from Latin word “elocution” and a Greek word “lexis”. Cuddon (1998) defines style as the characteristic manner of expression in prose or verse; “how a particular writer says things” (p.872). Harmon (2006) views that style combines two elements: “the idea to be expressed and the individuality of the author” (p.503). According to Wales (2001), style refers to the “perceived distinctive manner of expression” in writing or speaking (p.71). Leech and Short (1981) further elaborate that style is the “dress of thoughts” (p.15). These definitions enunciate that style is a distinctive way of using language for expressing ideas, emotions, feelings, thoughts and messages in the particular situations. Like the personalities of persons, style differs from person to person.

2.2 Stylistics

Widdowson (1975) defines stylistics as the study of literary discourse from a “linguistic orientation” (p.3). According to Short and Candlin (1989), stylistics is a linguistic approach to “the study of the literary texts” (183). Carter (1996) argues on the relevance of stylistics for literature teaching stating that stylistic analysis helps to foster “interpretative skills and to encourage reading between the lines” (p.5). He further posits the advantages of stylistics stating that stylistics provides students with a method of scrutinizing texts, ‘a way in’ to a text, opening up starting points for complete interpretation.

2.3 Levels of Stylistic Analysis

The following are the levels of stylistics. We analyze the text according to these levels.

i. Graphological level

Leech (1969) claims that graphology exceeds orthography. It refers to the whole writing system: “punctuation and paragraphing as well as spacing” (p.39). According to Crystal and Davy (1969) graphology is the analogous study of a languages writing system or orthography as seen in the various kinds of handwriting or topography^{ll}. These are “the formalized rules of writing” (p.18).

ii. Phonological level

Lodge (2009) views phonology as the study of linguistic systems, specifically the way in which “sound represents, differences of meaning in a language” (p.8).

iii. Morphological level

In the view of Mark and Kirsten (2005), morphology is the mental system involved in word formation or to the branch of linguistics that ‘deals with words, their internal structure, and how they are formed’ (p.1).

iv. Lexical level

This deals with level of “Lexis”. Lexis is the vocabulary items that make up a language or the body of words known and used by a particular person.

v. Syntactic level

According to Tallerman (1998, p.1), syntax means “Sentence construction” (p.1). It deals with how words group together to make phrases and sentences. Syntax is related to the formation of phrases, clauses and sentences.

vi. Semantic level

Semantic deals with the meaning of words, phrases and sentences. It includes metaphor, simile, personification and other literary devices.

3. Purpose of the study

- 1. To investigate the stylistic devices exploited in the poem.*
- 2. To explore the message and meaning of the poem.*

4. Methodology

The researcher has followed graphological, morphological, phonological, lexical, syntactic and semantic levels of analysis to form the basis for stylistic analysis of this poem “Harlem” of Ted Hughes.

5. Stylistic analysis of the poem

5.1 Graphological level

The poem “Harlem” does not follows any format exploited by the previous poets. The poem consists of three stanzas. The first stanza consists of eight lines of irregular length. The first and third and sixth lines retain six words, the second and eighth lines retain four words, the fourth and seventh lines have five words, and the fifth line has three words. The second stanza consists of two poetic lines having each line four words .The third stanza has a single poetic line which retains for words. The irregularity of the length of lines and stanzas may suggest the irregular, chaotic and uncertain life style of the Negroes who live in Harlem.

All the poetic lines begin with the words which employ the capital letters. The first ten lines are in normal form, but the last line is italicized to draw the attention of the reader that a deferred dream is a bomb that can destroy the human society. There are six question marks in the poem. The first question exposes a big problem hinting at the would- be effect of the deferred dream. There are five rhetorical questions which are not intended to seek the answers, but they provide the answers themselves and hint at the adverse would-be effects or consequences. The fourth and seventh lines end with dash mark that may indicate hesitation in expression or a meditative pause. The second and ninth lines do not have any punctuation marks. There is only one period / full stop in the tenth poetic line.

5.2 Phonological level

*The third line rhymes with the fifth line (sun/run), the sixth line rhymes with the eighth line (meat/sweet) and the tenth line rhymes with the eleventh line (load/explode). These are the masculine rhymes. The rhyme scheme of the poem is **abcdcefeghh**. There is a repetition of the consonant sounds in the beginning of words in some poetic lines, such as /d/ in the words “dream/ deferred” in the first line, /d/ in “Does/dry” in the second line, /s/ in “syrupy/ sweet” in the eighth line and /l/ in “like/*

load” in the tenth line. It is known as alliteration. Such words are known as alliterative words. We can notice the initial consonant cluster /dr-/ in the word “dream”, /st-/ in the word “stink” and /sw-/ in the word “sweet”. We can also note three words that retain the final consonant cluster such as /-nz/ in “happens”, /-nk/ in “stink” and /-gz/ in “sags”. There are forty monosyllabic words, eleven disyllabic words.

5.3 Morphological level

Most of the words exploited in this poem are root words such as “dream”, “sun”, “run” “meat”, “load”, “sugar” etc. Some words are formed with the help of inflectional suffixes (-es, -s, and -ed). The words are “happens”, “does”, “deferred” and “sags”.

5.4 Lexical level

The major words used in the poems are main verbs such as “happens”, “deferred”, “fester”, “run”, “stink”, “crust”, “sugar”, “sags” and “explode”. The phrasal verb is “dry up”. The verbs “happens” and “run” indicate the change to take place in the existing condition. The “deferred” dream suggests the potentiality of causing explosion as the verb “explode” occurs as the last word in the poem. The verbs “dry”, “fester”, “stink”, “crust”, “sags” and “explode” suggest some sort of negative connotation tending to result in an unpleasant and terrifying situation.

The nouns are “dream”, “raisin”, “sun”, “sore”, “meat”, “sweet” and “load” that play a prominent role in the metaphoric use of language. The poem retains only one auxiliary verb “does” to construct rhetorical questions. There are pronouns “what” used to ask about the would-be result of the deferred dream and “it” that stands for the “deferred dream”. There are three adjectives “rotten”, “syrupy” and “heavy”. There are four adverbs “over”, “then” “maybe” and “just” which are used to intensify the bad condition. The poem uses three prepositions “to”, “in” and “like”. There are only two conjunctions “and” and “or”. There are two articles “a” and “the”.

Parts of speech used in the poem are given below:

Parts of speech	Words
Nouns	<i>dream, raisin, sun, sore, meat, sweet, load</i>
Main verbs	<i>happens, fester, stink, crust, sugar, explode, sags, deferred, dry up</i>

Adjectives	<i>rotten, syrupy, heavy</i>
Adverbs	<i>over , maybe, just, then</i>
Auxiliary verb	<i>does</i>
Pronouns	<i>what, it</i>
Prepositions	<i>to, in, like</i>
Conjunctions	<i>and, or</i>
Articles	<i>a, the</i>

5.5 Syntactic level

“Harlem” is a succinct poem written in free verse. All the poetic lines except the ninth and tenth lines are in active interrogative sentence patterns. These two lines form an affirmative sentence pattern. The first question commences with a wh-word which seeks the answers, whereas the other questions begins with an auxiliary verb “Does”. The fourth, seventh and eleventh lines begin with “or” that makes the poetic lines condense, while the third, eighth and tenth lines instigate with “like” as a connective word for linking the deferred dream with different noun phrases. The second and sixth lines begin with “Does”. The lines which commence with the same word are called the anaphoric lines. The frequently repeated construction in this poem is the prepositional phrase such as “like a raisin”, “like a sore”, “like rotten meat”, “like a syrupy sweet” and “like a heavy load”. It is known as parallelism.

5.6 Semantic level

In the poem “Harlem” the poet’s principal issue is “what happens to a dream deferred?” He employs rhetorical questions, simile, metaphor and images to suggest the answer. All these items reflect the negative and derogatory aspects that can be observed in life unless the dreams are fulfilled. Dry, fester, run, stink, crust, sags and explode are the major verbs which connote bad and bitter feelings African-American people are experiencing in their life.

Symbol

Symbol is an object, animate or inanimate, which represents or ‘stands for something else’. The word “dream” employed in this poem is highly symbolic. It

symbolizes a hope, a wish, a goal or an inspiration. The fulfillment of the dream is essential to reach a certain level of self-actualization.

Simile

Simile is a figure of speech in which two essentially dissimilar are expressly compared with one by use of like or as. The poem is rich in the use of simile. “A deferred dream “ is compared with “ a raisin in the sun”, “ a sore”, “rotten meat”, “ syrupy sweet with crust” and “ a heavy load” by using “like.”

“Does it dry up like / like a raisin in the sun?” Here, “dry up” implies two aspects: deteriorating condition of the dream and the loss of life –giving moisture or natural taste.” Or fester like a sore-/ And then run?” “Sore” suggests a painful feeling. If a sore is not treated in time, pus will spread in the body resulting in decay and death. “Does it stink like rotten meat?” reinforces the idea of decayed food with a bad taste, and a disgusting smell. “Crust and sugar over- / like a syrupy sweet?” hints at the fact that if we leave the syrup unused for several days, it becomes too hard and the material is no longer usable. Similarly the dream forced to sit idle hardens into an unusable substance of thought. “Maybe it just sags/ like a heavy load.” A heavy load makes one walk heavily and slowly, and makes him clumsy as he tries to move under the load. The dream that is not fulfilled may become heavy to bear because it weighs on his mind with negative musings resulting in depression and lethargy.

Metaphor

Metaphor is a figure of speech in which two unlike objects are implicitly compared without the use of like or as. The speaker employs metaphor of an explosion to compare a deferred dream with a bomb. “does it explode?” As a bomb explodes, it causes a great destruction of lives and properties. The person whose dream is deferred loses the optimistic vision in life. He explodes with great depression and despair that he may commit suicide, homicide or both.

Imagery

Imagery in a general term covers the use of language to represent objects, actions, feelings, thoughts, ideas, states of mind, and any sensory or extra-sensory experience. The poem “Harlem” exploits the use of imagery. The use of “dry up like a raisin in the sun?” poses a visual image that suggests the loss of beauty and natural life. “fester like a sore” consists of the visual and tactile images which imply the unpleasant

condition to see and feel. “stink like rotten meat” retains visual, olfactory and gustatory images that suggest ugly form, foul smell and disgusting taste respectively. “sags like a load” poses the visual and tactile images that imply the condition of domination and bitter feeling. The “explode” has an auditory image that expresses the explosive nature of a deferred dream. All these images reflect the fact that a deferred dream is depressive, destructive and explosive.

Imagery Used in the Poem

<i>Visual Image</i>	<i>Tactile Image</i>	<i>Auditory Image</i>	<i>Gustatory Image</i>	<i>Olfactory Image</i>
<i>raisin in the sun, fester like a sore, stink like rotten meat, sags like a load</i>	<i>fester like a sore, sags like a load</i>	<i>explode</i>	<i>stink like rotten meat</i>	<i>stink like rotten meat</i>

6. Conclusion

A deferred dream invites decay, destruction, depression, despair, anger and hatred. Therefore, the dream should not be deferred. The racial discrimination should be banned to create the pleasing aura of harmony, peaceful co-existence, mutual cooperation, justice, freedom and equality among the blacks and the whites in America. The fair, conscientious, considerate and cooperative Government and society can play a prominent role in fulfilling the dreams of the oppressed, suppressed and marginalized people in the nation.

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Appendix

Text: Harlem

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore—

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over—

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

(Langston Hughes)