



## STYLISTICS AND ELEMENTS OF STYLE IN LITERATURE

**Babajanova Yulduz Igorovna**

Student, Foreign Philology Faculty,  
Urgench State University, Urgench, Uzbekistan.

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### ABSTRACT

*This article discusses what stylistics means and features of style include the following: diction (word choice), sentence structure and syntax, nature of figurative language, rhythm and component sounds, rhetorical patterns. It also highlights the use of reading literature for stylistics.*

Stylistics is a branch of applied linguistics concerned with the study of style in texts, especially, but not exclusively, in literary works. Also called literary linguistics, stylistics focuses on the figures, tropes, and other rhetorical devices used to provide variety and a distinctness to someone's writing. It is linguistic analysis plus literary criticism.

Studying a text closely helps to unearth layers of meaning that run deeper than just the basic plot, which happens on the surface level.

Elements of Style in Literature

Elements of style studied in literary works are what is up for discussion in any literature or writing class, such as:

Big-Picture Elements

Character development: How a character changes throughout the story

Dialogue: Lines spoken or internal thoughts

Foreshadowing: Hints dropped about what's going to happen later

Form: Whether something is poetry, prose, drama, a short story, a sonnet, etc.

Imagery: Scenes set or items shown with descriptive words

Irony: An occurrence that's the opposite of what's expected

Juxtaposition: Putting two elements together to compare or contrast them

Mood: The atmosphere of a work, the attitude of the narrator

Pacing: How quickly the narration unfolds

Point of view: The narrator's perspective; first person (I) or third person (he or she)

Structure: How a story is told (beginning, action, climax, denouement) or how a piece is organized (introduction, main body, conclusion vs. reverse-pyramid journalistic style)

Symbolism: Using an element of the story to represent something else

Theme: A message delivered by or shown in a work; its central topic or big idea

Tone: The writer's attitude toward the subject or manner with choosing vocabulary and presenting information, such as informal or formal

Line-by-Line Elements

Alliteration: Close repetition of consonants, used for effect



**Assonance:** Close repetition of vowels, used for effect

**Colloquialisms:** Informal words, such as slang and regional terms

**Diction:** The correctness of the overall grammar (big picture) or how characters speak, such as with an accent or with poor grammar

**Jargon:** Terms specific to a certain field

**Metaphor:** A means to compare two elements (Can also be big-picture if an entire story or scene is laid out to show a parallel with something else)

**Repetition:** Using the same words or phrases in a short amount of time for emphasis

**Rhyme:** When the same sounds appear in two or more words

**Rhythm:** having a musicality to the writing such as by using stressed and unstressed syllables in a line of poetry or sentence variety or repetition in a paragraph

**Sentence variety:** Variation in the structure and length of consecutive sentences

**Syntax:** The arrangement of words in a sentence

Elements of style are the characteristics of the language used in the written work, and stylistics is their study. How an author uses them is what makes one writer's work distinct from another, from Henry James to Mark Twain to Virginia Woolf. An author's way of using the elements creates their distinct writing voice.

**Why Studying Literature Is Useful**

Just as a baseball pitcher studies how to properly grip and throw a type of pitch a certain way, to make the ball go in a certain location, and to create a game plan based on a lineup of specific hitters, studying writing and literature helps people to learn how to improve their writing (and thus

communication skills) as well as to learn empathy and the human condition.

By becoming wrapped up in a character's thoughts and actions in a book, story, or poem, people experience that narrator's point of view and can draw on that knowledge and those feelings when interacting with others in real life who might have similar thought processes or actions.

**Stylisticians**

In many ways, stylistics is an interdisciplinarity study of textual interpretations, using both language comprehension and an understanding of social dynamics. A stylistician's textual analysis is influenced by rhetoric reasoning and history.

Michael Burke describes the field in "The Routledge Handbook of Stylistics" as an empirical or forensic discourse critique, wherein the stylistician is "a person who with his/her detailed knowledge of the workings of morphology, phonology, lexis, syntax, semantics, and various discourse and pragmatic models, goes in search of language-based evidence in order to support or indeed challenge the subjective interpretations and evaluations of various critics and cultural commentators."

Burke paints stylisticians, then, as a kind of Sherlock Holmes character who has expertise in grammar and rhetoric and a love of literature and other creative texts, picking apart the details on how they operate piece by piece—observing style as it informs meaning, as it informs comprehension.

There are various overlapping subdisciplines of stylistics, and a person who studies any of these is known as a stylistician:



Literary stylistics: Studying forms, such as poetry, drama, and prose

Interpretive stylistics: How the linguistic elements work to create meaningful art

Evaluative stylistics: How an author's style works—or doesn't—in the work

Corpus stylistics: Studying the frequency of various elements in a text, such as to determine the authenticity of a manuscript

Discourse stylistics: How language in use creates meaning, such as studying parallelism, assonance, alliteration, and rhyme

Feminist stylistics: Commonalities among women's writing, how writing is engendered, and how women's writing is read differently than men's

Computational stylistics: Using computers to analyze a text and determine a writer's style

Cognitive stylistics: The study of what happens in the mind when it encounters language

Modern Understanding of Rhetoric

As far back as ancient Greece and philosophers like Aristotle, the study of rhetoric has been an important part of human communication and evolution as a result. It's no wonder, then, that author Peter Barry uses rhetoric to define stylistics as "the modern version of the ancient discipline known as rhetoric," in his book "Beginning Theory."

Barry goes on to say that rhetoric teaches "its students how to structure an argument, how to make effective use of figures of speech, and generally how to pattern and

vary a speech or a piece of writing so as to produce maximum impact."

He says that stylistics' analysis of these similar qualities—or rather how they are utilized—would, therefore, entail that stylistics is a modern interpretation of the ancient study.

However, he also notes that stylistics differs from simple close reading in the following ways:

"1. Close reading emphasizes differences between literary language and that of the general speech community. ...Stylistics, by contrast, emphasizes connections between literary language and everyday language.

"2. Stylistics uses specialized technical terms and concepts which derive from the science of linguistics, terms like 'transitivity,' 'under-lexicalisation,' 'collocation,' and 'cohesion'.

"3. Stylistics makes greater claims to scientific objectivity than does close reading, stressing that its methods and procedures can be learned and applied by all. Hence, its aim is partly the 'demystification' of both literature and criticism."

Stylistics is arguing for the universality of language usage while close reading hinges upon an observation of how this particular style and usage may vary from and thereby make an error relating to the norm. Stylistics, then, is the pursuit of understanding key elements of style that affect a given audience's interpretation of a text.

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