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RESEARCH PAPER

A Study of Robert Frost's *Mending Wall* Through the Lens of Stylistics

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine the stylistic features of the poem *Mending Wall* at the lexical, grammatical, phonological, and graphological levels and the contribution of the overall tone and mood of the text in emergence of key themes in the poem. The stylistics field centers on the investigation of linguistic features inherent in literary works. The study adopted Leech and Short's model of stylistic analysis as its framework to explore the interplay between language and meaning. As the research methodology, the study employed close reading for analysis of the stylistic elements. The findings are significant and synthesised all linguistic levels in a single study. The findings also demonstrate how Frost employs stylistic tools to question the necessity of walls in interpersonal relationships, simultaneously critiquing societal norms while promoting introspection. Further studies are recommended to grasp a deeper understanding of the stylistic analysis of literature and its evolving role in literary studies.

| **KEYWORDS** | Stylistics, Metaphors, Boundaries, Reflective Tone, Interpersonal Relationships |

Introduction

Stylistics focuses on how language is used to create meaning and achieve specific effects in various contexts, particularly in literary texts (Crystal, 2008). It is a bridge between linguistics and literature. Specifically, Stylistics in literature examines linguistic characteristics within a literary work. According to Leech and Short (2007), the primary goal of this field is to pinpoint and illustrate the link between language and artistic function of literature, whether it is considered "art for art's sake" or "art for life's sake." Similarly, Verdok (2002) defines style in language as a specific way of using linguistic expressions to make a distinct choice in conveying a message. This deliberate choice is always made with purpose, aiming to create particular effects on the reader. This implies that analysing style is crucial for a thorough understanding of a literary text, and the discipline of stylistics serves as a tool to achieve this comprehensive understanding.

Stylistic analysis involves systematically examining the linguistic characteristics of a text to uncover patterns and interpret how these features contribute to its meaning, tone, or emotional impact (Crystal, 2008). A stylistic analysis of *Mending Wall* by Robert Frost focuses on examining the poem's use of language and the application of literary devices to understand how the total design, based on these elements, affects overall meaning and theme. *Mending Wall* was published by Robert Frost in 1914 and stands as one of his most renowned poems. This poem depicts a conversation between neighbours who annually meet to mend the shared wall running between their properties. The poem investigates themes of isolation, the human tendency to create boundaries, interpersonal connections, and tradition set against a rural New England backdrop. To effectively convey a text's

mood, tone, and underlying layers of meaning, specific literary devices are not only crucial but also frequently overlooked in previous studies. Hence, this research aims to bridge that gap. It will examine the poem's stylistic features at the lexical, grammatical, phonological, and graphological levels and investigate how the overall tone and mood of the text contribute to the emergence of key themes in *Mending Wall*.

Robert Frost is one of the most well-known American poets of the twentieth century. Despite his struggles, his art radiates fortitude and a deep understanding of the human condition. According to Wooten (2006), Frost's rural New England background has a significant impact on both his poetic language and the subjects he decides to write about. Major Works of the Author are *Mending Wall* (1914), *The Road Not Taken* (1916), *Birches* (1916), *Fire and Ice* (1920), *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* (1923), *Robert Frost's Collected Prose* (2009). His writings combine inventive poetic devices, deep philosophical questions, and rural images. Themes like humanity's feelings, nature, rural culture, and inner turmoil are frequently featured in Frost's poetry. His ability to blend modernist topics with traditional poetry styles cemented his status as a literary powerhouse. His writings continue to have a significant impact on the study of American literature.

His poetry has influenced readers for many years and exhibits a harmony between realism and introspection (Faggen, 2014). He frequently uses natural elements and rural settings in his symbols to examine difficult subjects like solitude, morality, and decision (Hart, 2017). His writing has been crucial in examining these subjects and has therefore influenced innumerable poets and authors (Hart, 2017).

Style in Literature

Literature is a collection of written works that convey global or cultural concepts (Cuddon, 2012). The meaning of a literary work is clarified by the style's attributes and traits as well as the identification of the literary era (Cowan, 2023). The quality that sets an author's or artist's work distinct from other authors is known as style in literature which includes vocabulary choices, sentence construction, tone, etc. Style encompasses the unique characteristics of a writer's language usage (Abrams, 2009; Cuddon, 2012).

Style in Fiction

Writing fiction is the process of crafting stories that are based on the author's imagination (Kennedy et al., 2013). In fiction, style refers to an author's unique way of using language to tell a tale, which includes word selection, syntax, rhythm, voice, mood, and literary techniques (James et al., 2024). It influences how readers interpret the story and frequently mirrors the writer's tone and the subject matter of the work (Semino, 2020).

Leech and Short's *Style in Fiction* (2007) is a detailed study of how linguistic elements are used in fiction writings to improve meaning, provide visual effects, and influence the reader's experience. It is a strong foundation for comprehending how linguistic choices, foregrounding, and linguistic devices interact to influence the style of fiction (Steward, 2018). Several levels of analysis are covered by linguistics, which looks at various facets of language usage and structure (Crystal, 2008).

Components of Style

The creation of a distinctive writing style relies on the deliberate selection of various linguistic components. This foundation rest upon **linguistic choices, which manifests in diction —** the careful selection of words to convey specific meaning and contexts (**(lexical choices;** Jeffries & McIntyre, 2010; Pinker, 2015) – and **Syntax –** the structuring of words

and phrases into sentences that influences emphasis, rhythm, and clarity **(grammatical choices**; Leech& Short, 2007; Williams & Bizup, 2014**).** A writer's **voice** is his distinct personality or point of view conveyed through his writing style. The visual presentation through **graphological choices** like punctuation and formatting (Simpson, 2002).

Beyond these structural elements, the writer's perception of the topic or audience is reflected in the **tone** (Greene, 2023), and **mood** (Öhman& Rossi, 2023), are crucial stylistic components that contributes significantly to the text's impact, often working in harmony to illuminate underlying **themes** (John, 2015). Authors also employ imagery to create vivid scenarios and tangible examples (Raupp, 2024) and **figurative language**- symbolism, personification, similes, idioms, and metaphors- to add richness and explore ideas **(Pragmatic choices** in their application; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003; Scott, 2022**)**. The rhythm of writing, created through vocabulary, sentence length, and punctuation also plays a crucial role in reader attention and comprehension (William & Bizup, 2014). Finally, adherence to grammar and mechanics ensures professionalism and coherence (Cameron & Panetta, 2019; Pinker, 2015), while **discourse choices** govern the organistaion of ideas at broader textual levels, influencing the overall flow and impact (Toolan, 2014).

Literature Review

A number of recent studies offer insights into Rober Frost's poem *Mending Wall*. In "Stylistic Deviation" Riaz et al. (2023) compared Frost' other works with *Mending Wall*. This study pinpoints how the unique language of language and structure contribute to original creative expressions, highlighting Frost's impact on novel literature through his stylistic innovations. Kuttappan et al.'s "Obscure Biblical Allusions" (2023) examined biblical allusions in *Mending Wall*, exploring their metaphorical and cultural significance. Moreover, the study reveals Frost's adeptness understanding of religious undertones of the poem. Finally, "The Application of Hirschberg Maxims" by Al-Badri et al. (2022) investigates the use of Hirschberg's conversational maxims in *Mending Wall* and other works of Frost. Their analysis explores how the poem communicates implicit tensions, employs specific stylistic devices, and carries layered meanings, thereby illuminating Frost's skillful use of language to express multifaceted and complex ideas.

Another study by Latif et al.'s (2022) revealed the use of assonance and other sound devices in the Frost's selected poems and their contribution to the poem's rhythm and personal impact. Their study emphasises how stylistic choices of Frost reinforce the lyrical quality and thematic content, revealing a rich connection between the words and their sounds. Similarly, Mehmood et al. 's (2021) stylistic analysis specifically focuses on *Mending Wall*, examining its phonological, grammatical, and lexical features. How these stylistic elements improve thematic depth of the poem and potential for interpretation, drawing attention to the complex relationship between expressive techniques of Frost and meaning of the poem were highlighted in the study. Furthermore, Freeman's Cognitive Poetics (2006) focuses on cognitive poetics in *Mending Wall* poem and bridges the gap between linguistic and literary studies. In order to understand how the audience interprets imagery, structure and themes of the poem, the study highlights Frost's imaginative use of language and underlying thoughts.

The existing research on Frost's *Mending Wall* highlights that the researchers have separately examined stylistic choices, religious allusions, conversational principles, phonological elements, and cognitive aspects; however, few studies synthesise these diverse approaches to offer a holistic understanding of the poem's complexity. The present study addresses this gap by considering four levels of analysis along with themes, tone, and mood.

Material and Methods

Applying a qualitative approach with close reading techniques, the present study analysed the stylistic nuances of *Mending Wall* through the lens of Leech and Short's model. This analysis investigated lexical, grammatical, phonological, and graphological levels to uncover underlying themes of the poem.

Analytical Framework

The stylistics model of Leech and Short, presented in their seminal work "Style in Fiction" (1981) offers an analytical framework for literary analysis. This four-levels framework, empasises the relationship between language choices and literary effects, encompassing various literary devices at each level to support overall style of the text (Leech & Short, 2007, 2014).
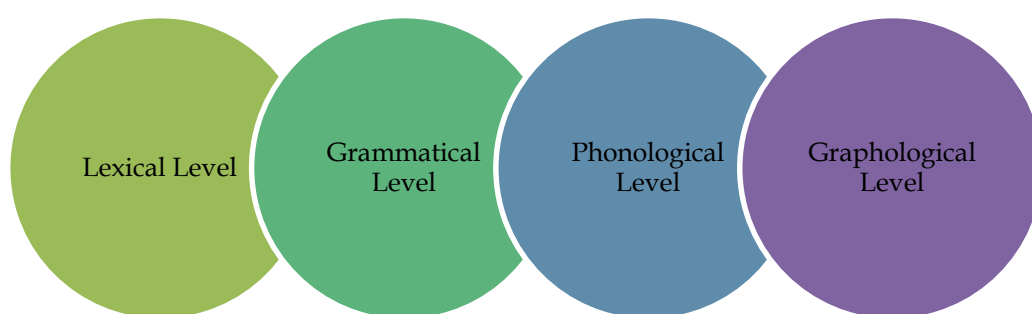

Figure.1 Levels of Stylistic Analysis

Nature of Research of the Present Study

This study employed a descriptive, qualitative, and analytical approach to examine the poem. The focus was analysingthe poem's language and its impacts on the reader, making it descriptive in nature rather than predictive.

Research Instrument

The researchers served as the primary research instrument in this study. Through close reading, they identified and interpreted stylistic features of *Mending Wall*, utilizing their critical judgment, knowledge of stylistics, and contextual understanding to analyse the poem's deeper meanings. The poem's text was sourced from theblacktavern.com, with each verse serving as a key analytical unit.

Data Collection Techniques and Procedures

The data collection involved the processes of close reading, coding, and categorisation.

Close Reading

Close reading encompasses a comprehensive examination of a text to disclose its underlying meanings. In data analysis, this process requires scrutinizing the data to recognise patterns, anomalies, and significant features.

Coding and Categorisation

Coding and categorisation are necessary steps in shaping and investigating qualitative data. This practice involves allocating codes or labels to specific sections of the text based on predefined themes and categories. These codes are descriptive, in which segments were labeled based on word choice, content, and subject matter.

Rigour and Trustworthiness of the Data

Accuracy and credibility were ensured through systematic analysis of the poem's language, structure, and devices (diction, imagery, tone, syntax) using Leech and Short's framework (2007). Reliability was established through unambiguous evidence, transparent procedures, and avoidance of overgenralistion. Furthermore, by keeping interpretations open to criticism, taking into account alternative readings, and interacting with previous research on the poetry all support the trustworthiness of the study. A reliable and valid interpretation of the stylistic features of the poem *Mending Wall* was offered by integrating rigour with transparent and evidence-based analysis.

Analysis of the Poem

Applying the Leech and Short framework, this study examined stylistic features at the lexical (word choice), grammatical (sentence structure), phonological (sound), and graphological (visual presentation) levels to uncover deeper layers of meaning. Furthermore, the study employed close reading to analyse the interplay between form and content, paying specific attention to how Frost's use of structure, punctuation, and imagery portrays the conflict between tradition and advancement.

Results and Discussion

The following is the summary of the findings of the stylistic analysis of *Mending Wall* by Robert Frost at the Lexical, Grammatical, Phonological, and Graphological levels as well as the impact of the overall tone and mood of the poem on the themes of *Mending Wall*.

Table 1
Summary of Major Findings

Level of Analysis	Stylistic Devices	Examples from the Poem	Contribution to Meaning, Tone, & Theme
Lexical Level	Metaphor	"Wall," (l.15)"fences" (l. 46) for physical/psychological boundaries; "Spring" (l. 28) for transformation/growth; "Mending" for tradition; "Apple"&"Pine" (l. 24) trees for individuality; "loaves"&"balls" (l. 17) for imperfect nature; "gaps"(l. 9) for fragility/opportunity	Highlights the multifaceted nature of boundaries, the cyclical tension between order and disruption, individual differences, and the inherent flaws and potential within those boundaries.
	Personification	"ground" (l. 2) having likes/dislikes; "Fences" (l. 46) upholding/affecting human relations; "Apple trees" (l. 25), eating (l. 26)	Animates abstract concepts and inanimate objects, emphasising the seemingly inherent human-like qualities in the natural world and the perceived agency of barriers in shaping relationships.
	Simile	"like an old-stoned savage armed" (l. 41)	Creates a vivid and potentially threatening image associated with the neighbour, suggesting a primal, unreasoning adherence to tradition.
	Imagery	"frozen ground swell" (l. 2), "spills the upper boulders" (l. 3),	Evokes sensory experiences, grounding the abstract ideas in

		"grasped firmly" (l. 40), *"old-stone savage"* (l. 41) "Apple"&"Pine" trees (l. 25), "loaves"&"balls" (l. 17), "fingers rough" (l. 20), "yelping dogs" (l. 9)	concrete details of the rural setting and enhancing the reader's engagement with the physical reality of the wall and the interaction.
	Proverb	"Good fences make good neighbours" (ll. 27, 46)	Presents a seemingly simple, traditional wisdom that the poem critically examines and ultimately questions through the narrator's perspective and the ironic situation.
	Paradox	*"Good fences make good neighbors"* (ll. 27, 46) *"Something there is that doesn't love a wall"* ((l.1) *"There where it is we do not need the wall"* (l. 23)	Undermines conventional understanding and exposes the complex and often contradictory nature of human interaction, tradition, and the very structures meant to define relationships.
	Irony	*"Good fences make good neighbors"* (l. 46)	Highlights the speaker's internal conflict and the inherent contradictions in blindly following tradition without critical reflection.
	Hyperbole	*"And makes gaps even two can pass abreast"* (l. 4) *"We have to use a spell to make them balance:* *Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"* (ll. 18-19)	Likely used for emphasis or to exaggerate the effort or impact related to the wall, potentially adding a touch of humour or highlighting the perceived absurdity.
	Allusion	"Wall" (l.1) alluding to "Hadrian Wall,""Walls of Jericho,""Berlin Wall" (Biblical); "Apple Orchard"&"Pine" (l. 24) trees referencing "The Tree of Knowledge"; "Elves" (l. 37) referencing folklore	Broadens the scope of the poem, connecting the local act of mending a wall to larger historical, cultural, and mythical contexts, suggesting universal themes of division, knowledge, and unseen forces.
	Rhetorical Questions	"Why do they make good neighbours?" (l. 30), "Isn't it where there are cows?" (l. 31)	Engage the reader directly, prompting reflection on the validity of the neighbour's belief and the underlying assumptions about boundaries and relationships.
	Refrain/ Repetition	"Something there is that doesn't love a wall" (l. 1, 36); "Good fences make good neighbours" (ll. 27, 46)	Emphasises key ideas and the central conflict of the poem – the inherent resistance to boundaries and the unquestioned acceptance of traditional wisdom.
Grammatic al Level	Enjambment	*"Before I build I'd ask to know/ what I was walling in or walling out"* (ll. 33-34) *"I see him there, bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top* *In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed"* (ll. 40-41)	Creates a sense of continuation and flow, potentially mirroring the ongoing, recurring nature of the wall mending or emphasizing specific words at the line breaks.
	Present Tense	*"That wants it down…."* (l. 37) *"And he likes….."* (l. 45)	Conveys a sense of ongoing action and the cyclical nature of the wall maintenance, suggesting a persistent and perhaps unchanging tradition.
	Sentence Variety	Simple, compound, and complex sentences Simple sentences:*"I see him there"* (l.39) *"He says again,"* (l. 46)	Adds complexity and variation to the narrative voice, reflecting different levels of thought and observation.

		Compound sentences:*"He is all pine, and I am apple orchard."*(l. 24) Complex sentences:*"Before I build I'd ask to know/what I was walling in or walling out".*(ll. 33-34)	
	Active Voice	Predominant use *"I see him there"*(l. 39) *"Before I build a wall…."*(l. 33)	Creates a sense of directness and agency in the actions described, focusing on the interaction between the speaker, the neighbour, and nature.
	Parallelism	*"Good fences make good neighbors".* Good (adjective) + plural noun. (l. 46) *"No one has seen them made or heard them made".* 3rd form of the verb +them+ made. (l. 10)	Enhances rhythm and emphasises the equal weight or connection between the elements being paralleled, drawing attention to the shared experience or the balanced structure of the proverb.
Phonological Level	Alliteration	Recurrence of /s/,*"send and swell"*and*"spill and sun"*(ll. 2-3), /w/ *"What I was walling in or walling out".* (l. 34)	Creates subtle sound effects that can add emphasis, rhythm, or a particular auditory texture to the lines.
	Assonance	Repetition of /i:/ *"please"*and *"mean"*(l. 9), /æ/*"keep"* and *"between"* (l. 15) *"And makes gaps even two can pass abreast"*(l. 4)	Creates internal rhymes and sonic connections between words, contributing to the musicality and memorability of the lines.
	Blank Verse (Unrhymed Iambic Pentameter)	Overall structure	Contributes to a natural, conversational rhythm while maintaining a degree of formal structure, mirroring the seemingly simple yet thoughtful interaction.
	Near Rhyme	*"He moves in darkness as it seems to me~ Not of woods only and the shade of trees."*(ll. 42-43) The use of *"me"* and *"trees"* create a gentle rhyme.	Introduces a subtle sense of connection or a hint of traditional poetic form without fully adhering to it, perhaps mirroring the nuanced relationship between the neighbours.
	Iambic Pentameter	Consistent rhythm (mostly) *"Some-THING there IS that DOESn't LOVE a WALL"*(l. 1) *"GOOD fences MAKE good NEIGHBORS"*(l.46)	Establishes a steady, measured pace that can reflect the deliberate and somewhat ritualistic act of mending the wall.
Graphological Level	Formal Writing Style	Adherence to conventions	Reinforces the serious and reflective tone of the poem.
	Long Dramatic Monologue	Single Stanza of 46 lines	Creates a sense of continuous thought and uninterrupted reflection from the speaker.
	Proper Punctuation	Commas:*"oh,"* and *"outdoor game,"*(l. 21) Question marks: *"Why do they make good neighbors?"*(l. 30) Quotation marks: *"Good fences make good neighbors".*(l. 46) Colons:	Ensures clarity and guides the reader through the speaker's thoughts and the dialogue.

		"a little more:" and *"in his head:"* (ll. 22, 29) Semicolon: *"I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;"* (l. 12)	
	Capitalization at Line Start	Consistent use *"And spills the….."* (l. 3) *"If I could……"* (l. 29)	Emphasises the importance of each line and new idea within the speaker's contemplation.
	Left Alignment	Text layout	Standard presentation that doesn't draw specific graphological attention.
Tone	Reflective Tone	Overall contemplative voice *"Something there is that doesn't love a wall"* (l.1)	Encourages the reader to consider the deeper implications of the wall and the interaction.
	Ironic Tone	Underlying tension between tradition and change, narrator's participation despite critique *Why do they make good neighbors?"* (l.30)	Highlights the contradictions and complexities of human behaviour and societal norms.
Mood	Ambivalent Mood	Uncertainty and mixed feelings towards the wall and the neighbour *"What I was walling in or walling out"* (l.34)	Reflects the speaker's internal struggle and the lack of a simple resolution to the central conflict.
	Melancholic Mood	Sense of isolation and perhaps the futility of truly connecting despite proximity *"We have to use a spell to make them balance:"* (l.18)	Underscores the underlying separation between the neighbours and the potential limitations of human connection.
Themes	Custom & Tradition	The annual mending of the wall	Explores the power and persistence of inherited practices, even when their purpose is questioned.
	Boundaries (Physical & Psychological)	The wall itself	Symbolises the various barriers that separate individuals and the internal divisions within the human psyche.
	Interpersonal Bonds	The relationship between the narrator and the neighbour	Examines the nature of connection and separation, and how even shared activities can reinforce distance.
	Usefulness & Significance of Barriers	Questioning the necessity of the wall	Prompts reflection on the purpose and impact of the divisions we create.
	Individualism vs. Conformity	Narrator's questioning vs. neighbour's adherence	Highlights the tension between independent thought and the pressure to conform to societal norms.
	Nature vs. Man-Made Borders	Nature's constant disruption of the wall	Suggests the inherent resistance of the natural world to human attempts at division and control.
	Connection & Isolation	The act of mending fostering fleeting intimacy but strengthening separation	Explores the paradoxical nature of interactions that maintain distance despite physical proximity.

Complementary insights are revealed through comparing our findings with studies conducted by Kuttappan et al., (2023), Mahmood et al., (2023), and Riaz et al., (2023). In order to draw attention to the speaker's psychological ambivalence, Mahmood et al. investigated irony and rhetorical questions in *Mending Wall*. Kuttappan et al. explored the

biblical allusion to the wall and trees in the poem. In contrast, Riaz et al. challenged blind obedience to rules by focusing on Frost's stylistic deviation in *Mending Wall*. Notably, at grammatical, phonological, and morphological levels, these findings align with existing research conducted by Riaz et al., (2023) and AL-Badri et al., (2022). The tone and mode in the present study corroborate Al-Badri et al.'s (2022) finding that the poem's ironic tone serves as a critique against strict social norms. This aligns with Freeman's (2006) assertion that changes in mood may be reflective of cognitive dissonance, thereby enhancing the tension between rituals and individualism. Moreover, the present study concurs with Latif et al. (2022), which demonstrates that the interaction between tone and mood within the poem illustrates the dynamic between isolation and community in the rural setting, revealing the way how these two techniques are employed to depict complex relationships and critique conformity. Despite these individual alignments with the previous studies, the present study distinguishes itself by synthesising all linguistic levels and extensively exploring the poem's theme, tone, and mood in holistic manner.

Conclusion

Robert Frost's *Mending Wall* skillfully utilises stylistic elements at different levels to support its thematic issues. Figurative speech, rhetorical questioning, refrain/repetition, simile, paradox, personification, proverb, and metaphor are strategically employed within the poem, effectively supporting the dominant themes of division and bond. Structurally, the poem, especially its dialogue and enjambment, highlights the differing viewpoints between the narrator and his next-door neighbour regarding boundaries. Furthermore, at the phonological level, features such as alliteration and rhythmic flow connote a sense of unity and continuity, which stands in contrast to the symbol that the wall represents-division. Graphologically, the poem's presentation in a single stanza, along with its irregular line lengths, punctuation, and capitalisation, highlights the sense of order, the conflict between tradition and change, and the underlying tension between separation and integration.

Additionally, *Mending Wall's* examination of borders, connections, and tradition is greatly enhanced by its carefully crafted tone and mood. The speaker's doubt regarding the wall's necessity is reflected in the insightful and gently sardonic tone, while the satirical reiteration of the neighbour's saying serves as a critique of mindless traditionalism. The mood of the poem subtly alternates between playful and melancholic, mirroring the underlying discomfort with the wall's metaphorical division. This thoughtful tone and shifting mood deepen the poem's central concerns, encouraging readers to critically examine human relations and challenge conformity. Therefore, through the poem's pervasive mood and tone, Frost effectively highlights the delicate balance between tradition and change and offers a poignant critique of isolation. This impression is crucial in conveying the poem's major concern: a critique of unreflective traditionalism that encourages a more thoughtful examination of the boundaries within human relationships. Through the analysis of these stylistic features, it becomes evident that Frost's *Mending Wall* not only adheres to the structural expectations of poetic composition but also deepens the exploration of human loneliness, the nature of boundaries, and the complexities of human relationships.

Recommendations

Based on this study's findings and limitations, the following recommendations for further research are suggested. Future studies could examine the stylistic features in Robert Frost's other works to assess the generalisability of the present findings. The same analytical technique can be applied to other literary texts to explore the diverse ways stylistic strategies create make meaning. For a broader and more in-depth analysis, future researchers might consider incorporating additional linguistic features into their stylistic analyses. In addition, it is suggested that college and university literature teachers make literary text stylistic analysis part of their courses. This would help students better understand literary texts, enabling them to recognize the stylistic and grammatical components that contribute to meaning and assisting them in searching for a myriad of literary interpretative possibilities. As a result, its implementation within class discussion would be helpful. Finally, further investigation is necessary to fully comprehend the impact of stylistic analysis on literary interpretation and to understand its evolving role in literary studies.

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