



RESEARCH PAPER

Examining Language Features in Plath's Poetry: A Feministic Stylistic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to examine the figurative language of the selected poems of Plath to reveal the way, the poetess conveyed the target meanings to the readers. A sample of three particular poems written by Plath has been taken through purposive sampling technique. Meanwhile, Leech and Short's (2006) stylistics model has been applied as the framework of this study. Hence, the results show the constant use of certain stylistic features done by Plath like simile, metaphor, imagery, personification and symbols to highlight the sufferings of women in contemporary society. Moreover, the researcher is hopeful that the particular study will not only motivate the future researchers to examine some other work of Plath but will also leave a ground to reinvestigate the findings of this study itself.

KEYWORDS Feministic Perspective, Poetry, Stylistic Features, Textual Analysis

Introduction

The term style is derived from the Latin word "Stylus". It can be defined as a way in which something is written. According to Leech and Short (2014), it is the style that encourages writers and poets to make the use of certain words and figurative devices to create an effect in their work. It also helps them to convey their thoughts, beliefs and attitudes. In the same way, stylistics is the branch of linguistics that examines the style of different writers, authors and poets (Winndowson, 2004). It helps the researcher to examine the language of a text to understand the way meanings are conveyed and interpreted by the writers and the readers. In other words, it can be said that it delves into the fusion of content and form within a literary work.

The present study is based on examining the figurative language of the selected poems of Sylvia Plath to explore the way, meanings are constructed and being conveyed to the reading audience. However, the secondary objective of this study is to trace the certain figures of speech that the poetess used in her particular poems.

Synoptic Overview of the Poetess and the Poems

Sylvia Plath is an American poet, novelist and short story writer who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1982. She is credited with the advanced genre of confessional poetry. Through her poetry, she addresses personal and emotional subjects such as sexuality, trauma and suicide. Confessionalism serves as a model to those who reject modern

difficulty to favor personal voice (Christopher, 2003). In an interview with Peter Orr, she asserted that:

“I think my poems are the result of emotional and sensuous experiences that I have.....I believe that an individual must have the potential to control and manipulate even terrible experiences such as madness. Hence, through her writing, she seems to identify the line between life and writing to show her boldness toward addressing terrible experiences without being afraid (20018, Plath)”.

The particular poems under this investigation talk about the sufferings that the women of contemporary society were going through. They are also containing the autobiographical elements and highlight the miserable life of Plath herself.

Hence, the poem “Widow” was written in 1962 and highlights the societal expectations and pressure that a woman has to face after the death of her husband. The biggest fear of her life is that the soul of her dead husband is constantly trying to communicate and there is no one in her surroundings with whom she can share her fear.

The second poem under this investigation is “Edge”. Through this poem, Plath has attempted to depict the painful life of a woman who is done with her life that pushed her into a terrible state of depression and commits suicide after killing her two little kids.

“Ariel” is the third poem of this study that seems to talk about the terror of a wild horseback ride which enables its rider (who is the speaker of this poem also) to overcome her fears of life and transforms herself from a fearful lady to a strongest one who is now ready to face any danger of life.

Literature Review

Sharma and Upadhyay (2023) did a psychological study of Plath’s selected poems. The study was based on the qualitative method and Freud’s psychological model was applied as the framework of the study. As far as the sample is concerned, it was based on three particular poems selected through the purposive sampling technique. The results showed a series of psychological issues that Plath was going through as a result of a troubled relationship earlier with her father and later with her husband like depression, Post-traumatic stress disorder and suicidal thoughts which ultimately led to the end of her life when she was only thirty years old.

Chalesti (2022) examined the language of the selected poems of Sylvia Plath under the lens of the stylistics model developed by Leech and Short. The nature of the study was qualitative descriptive and the researcher selected five poems that were respectively: Daddy, Ariel, Edge, Lady Lazarus and Poppies in October as a sample of the study by applying the purposive sampling technique. The findings of the study revealed the significant use of stylistic devices made by Plath to give a strong voice to her emotions and to convey the meanings to the readers in an impressive way.

Yasmin et al (2022) explored the portrayal of patriarchy in the context of Plath’s poetry. The main objective of the study was to trace the way women were being suppressed by their male members in that particular era. Beauvoir’s (1947) notion of feminism was applied as the framework. However, the findings of the study showed that the male were misusing their authority and power against women and continuously treating them as humiliated creatures who never deserve any respect from their male

partners. In short, the study depicted the miserable life of the women of that era to which Plath belongs.

Kaur (2018) investigated Plath's poetry intending to reveal the pains of betrayed relationships. She applied the qualitative approach in her study along with a feministic perspective. A total of seven poems written by Plath were included in the sample and the results revealed a highly disappointing and bitter relationship where a woman is always the one who suffers and takes pain rather than a man (Ted Hughes) who doesn't acknowledge the importance of their relationship and never be loyal towards her wife.

Theoretical Framework

According to Leech and Short (2006), there are four levels of stylistic analysis; However, the two particular levels that have been explored in this study are mentioned below;

Phonological Level: In the context of linguistics, the phonological level can be defined as the systematic study of the sound system of language. It also focuses its attention on determining the rules for pronunciation. The devices that come under this level are consonance, assonance, and alliteration.

Consonance: Repetition of the same consonant sounds within the line of a text.

Assonance: Repetition of the same vowel sounds within the line.

Alliteration: Alliteration can be defined as the repetition of initial consonant sounds in the line of a text.

Semantic Level: Semantics is the study of meanings in language. Meaning is examined by analyzing the context in which it occurs, and social and individual point of view is also observed. According to Simpson (2004), this level concerns meaning and is the most interesting element of language. It includes the following terms.

Simile: A simile can be understood as a figure of speech that is concerned with the comparison of two unlike things by applying the terms "like" or "as".

Metaphor: This is also a most important figurative device and unlike simile, it is concerned with the direct comparison of two different without having any concern for applying the words "like" or "as".

Personification: It occurs when certain qualities of human beings are given to non-living things.

Hyperbole: It is referred to as an overstatement in which something is exaggerated to create an effect and to put an emphasis on a certain point.

Symbol: It can be defined as an object, situation, action or person that has a literal meaning in a literary piece of work but refers to or represents something else.

Allusion: An indirect reference to a thing, person or event that is going to be the part of another text. Allusions are usually based on the assumption that there is a body of knowledge that is being shared by the author to deepen the understanding of the readers.

Imagery: It is perceived as one of the strongest literary devices because of its strength to connect the personal experiences of the readers. It refers to the creation of words that can have the potential to trigger the readers of a particular text to recall images that involve one of the five senses, vision, taste, sound, touch and smell.

Material and Methods

The study is qualitative as Kumar (2014) defined qualitative approach in these words: it can be perceived as a flexible approach of inquiry which leaves the ground for an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under a particular investigation. Leech and Short's (2006) model of stylistics has been applied as the framework. Moreover, three particular poems "Widow, Ariel and Edge" were chosen by the researcher as a sample of the study and the researcher got this process accomplished with the help of a purposive sampling technique. Meanwhile, the textual analysis method has been used as the data analysis technique.

Results and Discussion

Table 1
Poem *Widow* (1962) at Phonological Level

Alliteration	Assonance	Consonance
Widow. The w ord consumes itself..... (stanza 1, line 1)	Widow. The w ord c onsumes itself.... (Stanza 1, line 1)	Levitat ing a numb minut e in the up dr aft. (Stanza 1, line 3)
Widow. The dead syllable w ith its shadow of an echo. (Stanza 2, line 1)	Body, a sheet of newspaper on the f ire levit at ing a numb min u te in the up dr aft.... (Stanza 1, line 2)	Widow. The d ead syllable with its sh ad ow. (Stanza 2 line 1)
Widow. The bitter s pider s its. (Stanza 3 line 1)	Widow. The d ead syll ab le with its sh ad ow..... (Stanza 2, line 1)	That o pen s at the top o nto n othing at all. (Stanza 2 line 5)
H and folding h and, and nothing in between.... (Stanza 7, line 1)	Widow. The b itter spider sits. (Stanza 3, line 1)	And s its in the corner of her loveless s poke. (Stanza 3, line 2)
That is the f ear she has the f ear.... (Stanza 8, line 1)	D eath is the d ress s he w ears, h er hat and collar. (Stanza 3, line 3)	The way, she l a i d his l etters, t ill they grew warm. (Stanza 4, line 3)
His soul may b eat and b e b eating at her dull sense (Stanza 8, line 2)	His soul may b eat and b e b eating at h er dull s ense. (Stanza 8, line 2)	P romising s imply the hard stars, the s pace.... (Stanza 5, line 3)
It l ooks in on and must go on l ooking in on. (Stanza 8, line 5)	The v oice o f G od is full of draftiness. (Stanza 5, line 2)	A widow resembles t hem, a s hadow t hing... (Stanza 6, line 5)

Table 2
Poem *Widow* (1962) at Semantic Level

Metaphors	Simile	Imagery
Body a s heet of newsprint on the fire. (Stanza 1, line 2)	r ed t opography that will put her heart out l ike an only eye. (Stanza 1, line 3)	Body a sheet of newsprint on the f ire (Stanza 1, line 2)
Widow t he d ead syllable, with its shadow of an echo..... (Stanza 2, line 1)	A nd n o b odies, s inging l ike arrows up to heaven. (Stanza 5, line 5)	//
T he c oiled- s pring stair that opens at the top..... (Stanza 2, line 4)	The trees of mourning, t hey s tand l ike shadows about the green landscape (Stanza 6, line 2)	//

Widow. The bitter spider sits and sits..... (Stanza 3, line 1)	Or even like black holes cut out of it. (Stanza 6, line 4)	//
The moth-face of her husband..... (Stanza 3, line 4)	Like Blue Mary's Angel, dovelike against a pane.... (Stanza 8, line 3)	//
Widow. The great vacant estate (Stanza 5, line 1)	The way she laid her letters, till they grew warm, And seemed to give her warmth like a live skin (Stanza 4, line 3)	//
Widow. The compassionate trees bend in (Stanza 6, line 1)	//	//
A bodiless soul could pass another soul (Stanza 7, line 2)	//	//

The poem "Widow" depicts the expectations that society imposes on women after her husband's death. It is written in the form of eight stanzas. However, the title "Widow" serves more than merely being the descriptor of the subject as it also stands for an emotional condition that the poem unfolds through a series of literary devices and sound patterns. Hence, phonological analysis of the poem revealed three types of literary devices namely alliteration, consonance and alliteration that not only gave a musical effect to the lines of the poem but intensified the emotions of the readers also by making the poem more meaningful.

The semantic level showed her making the vast use of simile metaphors and imagery to highlight the painful life of a widow who has lost all her happiness after the death of her husband. She is now forced to live a lonely life where no one is there to share her sorrows and to console her in her sufferings. She seems to compare her with a burning newspaper which reveals her constant sufferings and in the next stanza, she is compared with a "bitter spider" that is responsible for the death of her husband.

In short, this poem reflects Plath's own experience of losing her father at an early age and her later life full of a series of depression and suicidal thoughts.

Table 3
Poem Ariel (1965) at phonological Level

Alliteration	Assonance	Consonance
Of the neck, I <u>cannot catch</u> (Stanza 3, line 3)	<u>Pour of tor</u> and distance (stanza 1, line 3)	<u>Stasis in darkness</u> (Stanza 1, line 1)
<u>Black sweet blood</u> mouthful (stanza 5 line 1)	The pivot of <u>heels</u> and <u>knees</u> !- <u>The furrow</u> (Stanza 2, line 3)	<u>How one we grow</u> (Stanza 2, line 2)
//	<u>Split</u> and passes, <u>sister</u> to (stanza 3, line 1)	<u>Spilits</u> and passes, <u>Sisters to</u> (Stanza 3, line 1)
//	Of the neck I <u>cannot catch</u> (stanza 3, line 3)	<u>Berries cast dark</u> (Stanza 4, line 2)
//	<u>Am the arrow</u> (Stanza 9, line 3)	<u>Dead hands</u> , dead stringencies (Stanza 7, line 3)
//	//	<u>Melts in the wall</u> (Stanza 9, line 3)

Table 4
Poem Ariel (1965) at Semantic Level

Personification	Symbols
The dew that flies	Ariel
//	God's lioness
//	The brown arc

//	Godiva
//	The Arrow
//	Cauldron

In this particular poem, the poetess has made the use of alliteration two times as compared to other sound patterns like consonant and assonance that occurred respectively five and six times and added to the rhythmic beauty of the whole poem. While the semantic level showed the application of two semantic features that were personification and symbol. Personification occurred just one time in stanza ten when the poetess gave the traits of a living thing (flies) to a non-living object (dew) just to create an effect in her poem. In the same way, a symbol is a semantic element that frequently has been used in this poem to describe the terror of a wild horseback ride and the emotional and mental transformation that the rider can go through when he faces death. The horse that has been referred to in this poem is named "Ariel" This is also the title of this poem. According to an interview given by Ted Hughes (her husband), Ariel is the name of her horse. And the way, she described the experience of a horseback ride done by the speaker of this poem and the different powerful symbols that she used to depict the transformation of the speaker from a fearful lady to a strong one who is now ready to face all challenges of life with remarkable courage that she mustered up in a course of this terrible journey hints that the speaker of the poem is Plath herself and the horse is also her real one and the terrible journey refers to all the bitter experiences and inhumane treatment that she always received from her father and husband. A part of this, she also seemed to make use of biblical references and allusions in this poem when she assumed the speaker was Lady Godiva and Jerusalem.

Table 5
Poem Edge (1965) at Phonological Level

Alliteration	Consonant	Assonance
Feet <u>s</u> eem to be <u>s</u> aying (Stanza 4, line 1)	Flow <u>s</u> in the scroo <u>l</u> s (Stanza 3, line 1)	Wh <u>e</u> n the garden stiffens and odors (stanza 8, line 1)
<u>S</u> he is used to this <u>s</u> hort. (Stanza 10, line 1)	Wh <u>e</u> n the garden stiff <u>e</u> ns and odors (Stanza 8, line 1)	Staring fr <u>o</u> m her h <u>o</u> od of b <u>o</u> ne (Stanza 9, line 2)
//	Star <u>i</u> ng fr <u>o</u> m h <u>e</u> r hood of bone (Stanza 9, line 2)	She <u>i</u> s used to th <u>i</u> s short (Stanza 10, line 1)

Table 6
Poem Edge (1965) at Semantic Level

Simile	Imagery	Personification	Metaphors
Them back into her body as petals (Stanza 7, line 1)	Stiffens and odors bleed (Stanza 8, line 1)	Feet seem to be saying (Stanza 4, line 1)	Each dead child coiled, a whit serpent (Stanza 5, line 1)
//	//	The moon has nothing to be" sad about. (Stanza 9, line 1)	//

The poem "Edge" is considered Plath's last poem which she wrote a few days before her death. It is comprised of ten stanzas each having two lines and seems to talk about a lady who after killing her two little kids takes her own life also. Hence, it is a short and brutal piece of work done by her and reflects the depth of her depression that she got as a course of that troublesome relationship with her husband. Like the other two poems under this investigation, the phonological analysis of this poem also reveals three types of sound patterns alliteration, consonance and assonance which added the musical effect of the poem. While, as for as the semantic level is concerned, here, the researcher found various types of semantic features like simile, metaphor, imagery, allusion and

personification that were used to describe the nature of a dead woman who seems perfect after her death as she should have during her life because now her sufferings have been ended and no one has the right to control her life any more. She compared the children of the lady with a white serpent suggesting a loss of the warmth of motherhood feelings and a life force that has been ended with the life itself. In the same way, she made the use of simile to compare the actions of the petals of a rose that closes up at night and the language of these lines alludes to the female body. Similarly, the images used by the poetess like "odours, flowers and bleeds" refer the female menstruation and seem to claim that a woman's life is not something to be celebrated rather it is full of pains.

Discussion

In this particular study, the researcher has analyzed the selected poems of Plath at two stylistic levels that were respectively phonological and semantic and traced out the use of certain stylistic features that have been applied by the poetess to add a certain effect to the meanings being conveyed to her readers. Hence, the study was based on two research questions that have been successfully addressed as a course of the data analysis and data interpretation section. The first question was what types of stylistic features have been used by Plath in these particular poems?

The study has responded to this question in the way that in all these poems, Plath has made vast use of figurative language to make her arguments strong. For example, *Widow's* phonological analysis unfolded the continuous existence of certain sound patterns like alliteration, consonance and assonance that most of the time occurred in the same sentence structure and revealed Plath's intention to give a musical effect to her poetry so that, it could be able to touch the hearts of the readers. Meanwhile, the semantic level of this poem reveals the vast use of simile and metaphors done by the poetess to highlight the sufferings and pains of a widow who after the death of her husband, is devoid of all the happiness and sympathy of the people who start to perceive her as a taboo and do not like to interact with her. She seems to compare her with the fire that burns itself up and also with a bitter spider known for taking the life of her male partner and now is forced to live just with the memories of him.

In the same way, the phonological analysis of the poem *Edge* revealed the same sound pattern as already been applied in *Widow* but the semantic level of this poem traced the use of simile, personification and huge imagery to depict the painful life of the lady who is being suppressed by the contemporary society and has been pushed into a state of depression which ultimately led her life to death after killing her two little kids., the third poem *Ariel* under this investigation, revealed the use of two sound patterns that were consonance and assonance along with the vast use of powerful symbols like the brown arc, Gods lioness, Godiva and arrow to describe the terrible wild horseback ride and the emotional and mental stress that the speaker who is also the rider faces when is subjected to death.

The second question of the study was to what extent the poetess has achieved her target of conveying the meanings successfully to her audience by adopting the particular selection of language. It is to say that yes, the particular selection of the language features that Plath has applied in these three poems has successfully enabled her to convey her meanings in a very strong and convincing way and at the same time, the autobiographical elements of these poems have increased the deepness of the meanings.

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