

LITERARY CRITICISM AND STYLISTICS: FORMALIST, PSYCHOANALYTIC AND MARXIST CRITICISM

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Abstract

Using terminology imported from linguistics, literary stylistics may be regarded as another school of criticism. However, with the set of techniques it employs, it can be used along with other schools of criticism so as to refresh and deepen our interpretation. Hence, although research studies have focused on literary stylistics, it is rarely associated with schools of literary criticism. In this poster presentation, we relate stylistics to three schools of criticism, namely, Formalist, Psychoanalytical and Marxist criticism to show how stylistics can be used in the study of literary texts with these lenses.

Keywords

Literary criticism, stylistics, formalist criticism, psychoanalytic criticism, Marxist criticism

Stylistics

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Formalist Criticism

Formalists accepted the «Art for art's sake» approach to literature and argued that each text should be studied by looking at those formal devices that

make it an «artistic» object (Bennett, 1979). Of particular interest to the formalist critic are the elements of form—style, structure, tone, imagery, etc.—that are found within the text. A primary goal for formalist critics is to determine how such elements work together with the text's content to shape its effects upon readers (Kennedy, 1995).

The idea of literariness is embraced by formalists in terms of what differentiates literature from non-literature. What distinguishes these is language and its particular use. The formalists juxtaposed the language of imaginative literature, especially poetry, with the language of everyday conversations to present the specific function assigned to language use in literature. Colloquial language, formalists indicated, serves purely communicative purposes, whereas in poetry this communicative function of language is reduced to a minimum (Karcz, 2005).

All major formalist critics were linguists and they employed their knowledge of linguistics while analyzing literary texts from formalist perspectives. However, almost a century has passed since the movement's golden years and much has been produced in the field of linguistics since those days. Among newer concepts and trends in the field of linguistics are corpus and cognitive linguistics whose notions can easily and fruitfully be used along with Formalist literary criticism.

Psychoanalytic Criticism

Freud's radical insights articulate that human beings are driven by their own desires, fears, needs, and conflicts of which they are unaware. Hence, the unconscious is the storehouse of our emotions, experiences, wounds, and unresolved conflicts and we are often afraid of what we will find if we examine our "unconscious" too closely. In fact, our unconscious is primarily shaped in our families because we are a product of our families' upbringing since the day we are born. Giving an example to the effect of our past on our present and future life choices can be seen in the following example:

“If I don’t realize that I still long for the love I never received from my long-dead, alcoholic father, I am very liable to select an alcoholic, aloof mate so that I can re-enact my relationship with my father and , “this time,” make him love me.”

We use our defense mechanisms to get rid of our negative feelings, but sometimes they break down the result of which is anxiety (Tyson, 1999). In such problematic phases, our dreams help us because during sleep, our unconscious is free to express what is hidden. Psychoanalytic concepts have been applied to our study of literature, but stylistic analyses have rarely been carried out along with such concepts. We often psychoanalyze literary characters by looking at their behaviors, thoughts, and diction, but their diction is rarely examined from a linguistic perspective in such studies. However, especially when psychopathological cases are considered, it can be claimed that, a linguistic study of these cases’ diction can bring insight to our psychoanalytic examination. Is speech pathology visible in the character’s speech? Does the character’s speech reveal awkward patterns or irregularities? Does the character’s lexical choice point at a deviant character? In short, stylistic analysis can help us in our psychoanalytic analyses by adding another dimension to our interpretation.

Marxist Criticism

Marxist criticism regards literature in any historical era as “products” of the economic and ideological determinants specific to that era (Abrams & Harpham, 2009). A Marxist critic, then, judges a text in relation to its social and political effect in society (Watson, 1962). For Marxists, especially in the first half of the 20th century, the main function of literature was accepted to be propagandist, calling people to revolt and retain Communist world view (Moran, 1994). Hence, some Marxist critics rejected any literary writing that didn’t serve this grand purpose. However, even Marxist critics themselves accept that their ideals do not always match with the social and political language use of the common people. Thus, stylistics may help Marxist critics

to locate the social and political use of language in a given text especially to understand the tone and register (speech variety) hidden in a text.

As stylistics is also concerned with the choices that are available to an author and the reasons why particular forms and expressions are used rather than some others (Richards & Schmidt, 2010), Marxist criticism may also benefit from stylistic analyses to determine the ideology on which the text is based. By paying close attention to the author's choice of words, phrases or even sentences, such a Marxist critic may uncover different ideologies in a given text.

Who speaks in the literary text? Whose voice is heard over others'? Whose ideology is supported? Is there propaganda? And how is language used to create such ideological effect? Stylistic analysis may help a Marxist critic in his or her research endeavor by showing the linguistic aspects that characterize a text.

Conclusion

Stylistic analysis in linguistics often starts with the identification of patterns in speech and writing. In some forms of stylistic analysis, the numerical recurrence of certain stylistic features is used to make judgments about the nature and the quality of the writing. Hence, any school of criticism can benefit from stylistics whose toolbox is attained from the field of linguistics.

Studying literary criticism requires a thorough understanding of how properties of language (semantics, syntactic, morphological etc.) work in literature. Hence, using knowledge of linguistics in the analysis of literary texts is of utmost importance as we have exemplified through our analysis of Formalist, Psychoanalytic and Marxist criticisms.

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