

FOREGROUNDING ROMANTICISM IN KEATS'S "ODE TO AUTUMN": A STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract:

The present research project provides a stylistic description of the celebrated John Keats's ode "To Autumn" (1819) with special emphasis on the foregrounding of Romantic literary qualities by using linguistic and stylistic means. Using the Leech and Short (2007) framework of stylistic analysis, the study investigates the poem in four broad areas: Lexical choices, Grammatical structures, Figures of speech and Cohesion and context. The research is designed to show in which ways Keats uses sensory imagery, personification, extended metaphor, and the strategic use of lexical items to communicate the primary Romantic ideas of the beauty of nature, the passing of time, mortality, and the sadness of transience. The main source of data for this study is the text of the ode. The method applied in this study is qualitative research which is dealing with analysis of this ode at four levels of language. The results show that Keats's stylistic decisions are not just external ornamentations but are internal and ideological, and serve as vehicles by which Romantic philosophy can be conveyed. This study will be of interest to the growing body of stylistic research into Romantic poetry and will make a contribution to the research gap by systematically analyzing the mechanisms foregrounded by the poem, following a framework.

Keywords:

Stylistics, Foregrounding, Romanticism, Leech and Short Framework, Keats, Ode to Autumn, Imagery, Figurative Language

Introduction:

"To Autumn" is one of the finest poems in the whole of English Romantic poetry, by John Keats. This ode, written a year before the poet's early death in September 1819, is considered one of Keats' most remarkable achievements in rendering a mundane sense of experience into a meditation on beauty, time and death. The mood of the poem is quiet, and the subject of the poem is not directly addressed by the philosophical and political conflicts of the Romantic period; instead, the Romantic values are presented and examined through nature. Stylistics is a discipline that lies in the fertile interface of literary criticism and linguistics. It offers the scholars a collection of analytical tools, which go beyond impressionistic reading and facilitate a systematic approach to the investigation of the construction of meaning through language. In this tradition, the Leech and Short (2007) model of stylistic analysis is among the most influential and widely used models. This categorization divides stylistic elements into lexical, grammatical, figurative and contextual/cohesive aspects and provides a comprehensive checklist to be used in analyzing their aesthetical and ideational effects on literary texts. Central to this analysis is the concept of foregrounding, which was first suggested by the formalists in Prague and then elaborated by such scholars as Geoffrey Leech. Foregrounding is a process of making some linguistic elements salient or prominent in comparison to the norm or expectations of language usage. In poetry foregrounding may take place through deviation, or the use of language in an unexpected or rule-breaking way, or through parallelism, or the creation of patterns of repetition that stand out. Both of these make an appearance in a profusion of abundance within Keats's "To Autumn", and by analysing them we will gain insight into how the poem encodes and communicates Romantic ideology. The present paper makes a detailed stylistic analysis of the poem "To Autumn" from the viewpoint of Leech and Short's

framework and gives a particular example of the themes of Romanticism foregrounded by the use of language.

Text of the Poem
Ode To Autumn
By John Keats (1819)

I.

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until the bees themselves their cells o'ercome,
And o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells.

II.

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;
Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,
Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
Hooks its next swath and the green hill's gleam;
Or on a brook, by a cider-press, with patient look,
Thou watches the last oozings hours by hours.

III.

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—
While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river salallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
Hedge-cricket sing; and now with treble soft
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

Introduction to the Poem:

John Keats wrote the poem 'To Autumn' on 19th Sept. 1819 after a walk at Winchester in southern England. Keats's letter to his friend John Hamilton Reynolds details his inspiration for the poem with reference to the stubble fields, the warmth of the autumn air, and the overall mood of the season. The poem is a lyric, an ode in particular, which the Romantics used with particular frequency because it could combine personal emotion and philosophical reflection. It's three stanzas of 11 lines each, in a modified Petrarchan rhyme scheme. In the first stanza, autumn is described as a time of plenty and maturity, emphasizing the richness and fullness of nature. The second stanza portrays autumn as a figure lying in a

rural landscape. The third, the most emotional, stanza explores the autumnal sounds and implicitly deals with the sadness of endings and the coming of winter. The poem stands apart in the literary world because it was one of the final poems completed before the rapid deterioration of Keats' health. He passed away at the age of 25 in Rome in February 1821, due to tuberculosis. With this knowledge, many readers see in "To Autumn" a certain resignedness to the end, a readiness to see beauty in the end, and a philosophical maturity that seems quite extraordinary for a poet of his youth. One of the most fecund topics for stylistic analysis is this elegiac quality, the sense that the poem laments while at the same time celebrating.

Biography of the Poet:

Keats was born on 31st October 1795 in Moorgate, London. Thomas Keats was the father of four children, the eldest of whom was him. Unlike many of his contemporary Romantic poets (such as Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron), he did not come from a wealthy or aristocratic family. Yet Keats early showed great intellectual promise and was schooled at the Clarke School in Enfield where he developed an interest in literature and mythology which would profoundly influence his poetic imagination as well as his classical texts. After the publication of his last volume, *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes and Other Poems* in late 1820, Keats journeyed to Rome to take advantage of the warm weather and to boost the failing health. He was accompanied by his friend, the painter Joseph Severn. All these efforts failed, however, and Keats died on February 23, 1821, at age twenty-five in a room at the Piazza di Spagna. He is buried in a Protestant cemetery in Rome.

Literature Review:

This overview of the most important works on stylistic analysis, foregrounding theory and critical approaches to Keats's "To Autumn" will situate the present study in its proper scholarly context and help to identify the lacuna that it attempts to fill.

Stylistics and the Leech and Short Framework:

The most widely cited and applied framework in the field of literary stylistics is that of Leech and Short's *Style in Fiction* (1981, revised 2007). The model includes a detailed analysis checklist for the lexical, grammatical, figurative, and contextual aspects of language analysis. The concept of foregrounding as a key mechanism of poetic language is further developed in Geoffrey Leech's earlier work, *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* (1969). Leech builds on Jan Mukarovsky, and the Prague School, and identifies two forms of foregrounding: deviation (violating the rules of the language) and parallelism (providing unexpected repetitions and contrasts). For close analysis such as that in this paper, the comprehensive glossary of stylistic terms offered by Wales (2001) is invaluable. Her work provides clear definitions of major terms that are used throughout her analysis, including deixis, register, collocation and cohesion. The Leech and Short model is complemented by cognitive stylistic approaches to the literature such as that provided by Burke (2011) and Stockwell (2002), who provide analyses of the mental images and feelings that literary texts evoke in readers.

Stylistic and Critical Approaches to Keats:

A wide range of the critical literature on Keats exists, but some is especially pertinent to the present study. The *Odes of John Keats* (1983), by Helen Vendler, is the most extensive close reading of the odes, and should be consulted by any serious student of the poems. Of the critical biographical works on Keats, Bate (1963) is the most influential, placing the odes in the context of the poet's life, letters, and philosophical development. His description of the poem's composition and its connection with Keats' theories of 'Negative Capability' and 'vale of soul-making' is directly applicable to the study of the foregrounding of Romantic themes in the poem. Likewise, a more recent biographical

interpretation is offered by Motion (1997), which builds on new archival sources to offer insight into the circumstances of the poem's writing. Useful editions of Keats's poetry and letters are found in Roe (2012) and Stillinger (1999). The linguistic analysis of poetry relies, of course, on the reliable nature of the text and on the ability to access an accurate text, and both of these editions have an authority. Bloom (1993) offers a critical introduction to Keats, situating the odes in the context of English Romanticism, and tracing Keats's complex connections with Milton, Shakespeare, Wordsworth and others.

Foregrounding in Romantic Poetry:

There have been a number of significant studies which have focused on Romantic poetry using foregrounding theory. Clark and Brooke-Rose (1958) were the first to examine the Romantic imagery using a linguistic approach, contending that the figurative density of Romantic poetry is systematic deviation from the norms of ordinary language. The present study is relevant to this linguistic account of poetic meter and rhythm by Fabb and Halle (2008), which deals with the way the ode-form was manipulated by Keats with regard to foregrounding effects. Likewise, the theoretical context of Jakobson's (1960) seminal article on the poetic function of language is useful in the understanding of the operation of projection of the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection onto the axis of combination as his definition of poetically is applied to "To Autumn."

Theoretical Framework:

The present study is based on the framework of stylistic analysis by Leech and Short (2007) which offers a systematic and comprehensive set of categories for the linguistic analysis of literary texts.

Lexical Categories:

The lexical dimension of Leech and Short looks at word selection and the semantic, associative and connotative aspects of vocabulary. Analyzing To Autumn will be based on lexical analysis, including an examination of words related to senses (especially sight, sound, smell, and touch), words related to abundance and ripeness, and words related to death and endings.

Grammatical Categories:

The grammatical dimension of the text focuses on the syntactic structures of the text. Grammatical analysis will highlight the use of present participles and the verbal's in "To Autumn" (as this gives an impression of ongoing process); the use of personification (as this makes Autumn a grammatical subject); and the use of interrogatives in the third stanza of the poem.

Figures of Speech:

The dimension encompasses every aspect of rhetorical figures and tropes such as metaphor, simile, personification, apostrophe, synesthesia, alliteration, assonance, and onomatopoeia. Leech and Short (2007) argue that figurative language is one of the most important sources of foregrounding in literary texts, that draws attention to itself. Using figurative language analysis in the analysis of To Autumn, the main focus will be on the personifications of Autumn, the extended metaphors of ripeness and harvest, and the sonic figures in the third stanza.

Cohesion and Context:

The cohesion aspect is the aspect that looks at the way the text is united as a whole. This dimension will be applied in the analysis of "To Autumn," examining the relationship of the three stanzas, the way the abundant to melancholy shift is handled in the poem with the use of cohesive devices, and the connection of the poem to the larger context of Romantic ideology.

Foregrounding Theory:

Foregrounding is not just for show, it is a way to build and express meaning. For the purposes of this study the term foregrounding analysis will be used to identify the specific linguistic features that contribute to making Romantic themes salient and central to the meaning of the poem, 'To Autumn'.

Methodology:

The research design used in this study is qualitative, a text-based research approach with the tradition of literary stylistics. Primary data is taken from the complete text of 'To Autumn' by John Keats (1819) from the authoritative scholarly edition by Stillinger (1999). The research process is carried out in three stages. A close reading of the poem was performed to locate all cases of foregrounded language for the first stage, which are lexical, grammatical, figurative and/or cohesive features that depart from the ordinary use of language or evoke significant schemes of parallelism. These occurred and were documented and categorized based on the four major categories of Leech and Short (2007) framework. The second phase involved identifying each of the features and discussing the way that the features helped to convey the meaning and thematic significance of the poem. This included the linguistic description, but also the interpretative analysis, the placing of specific features into the Romantic themes of nature, beauty, transience and death. The results of the analysis were then presented in the third stage in a way that allows for systematic comparison and discussion of the results in the context of the three research questions.

Research Questions:

The present study is directed towards the following three research questions:

1. How does the use of words in Keats's 'To Autumn' highlight the Romantic sensibility as it pertains to the abundance, transience and beauty of the natural world?
2. In what ways do grammatical structures and syntactic patterns in "To Autumn" help to foreground the particularly the Romantic emphasis on nature, process and organic unity?
3. Figurative language, such as personification, imagery, and sound patterns, serve to emphasize the Romantic themes of mortality, melancholy, and the embrace of endings in "To Autumn"?

Research Objectives

The study pursues the following three primary research objectives:

1. To recognize and examine the lexical dictionary of 'To Autumn' which establish its semantic fields of Romantic interests, and to show how the use of words is a medium for foregrounding Keats's Romantic outlook.
2. To compare the grammatical/syntactic structures of 'To Autumn', in relation to the Leech and Short framework, and how such structures support the Romantic ideology of the poem, using examples of parallelism, progressive aspect and syntactic deviation.
3. To explore the figurative language of 'To Autumn' (such as personification, imagery, synesthesia and sound devices) and how these are used as mechanisms of 'foregrounding' making Romantic themes of the poem universal.

Research Gap:

The present study fills a gap in the existing literature that is evident in a review of the scholarship on "To Autumn" and on stylistic analyses of Romantic poetry, respectively. The poem has received a great deal of literary criticism, most notably that of Vendler (1983), Bate (1963), and Bloom (1993); these studies, however, are not primarily concerned with systematic linguistic analysis. In their interpretations of the meaning and significance of the poem, they provide rich and insightful readings but do not use the explicit analytical categories and procedures of stylistics. In the present study this gap is filled by drawing a comprehensive,

question-driven, framework-driven stylistic analysis that takes explicit and systematic account of these questions.

Analysis:

Analysis The following analysis focusses on Leech and Short (2007) four different aspects of the text: lexical choices, grammatical structures, figures of speech, cohesion and context

Lexical Analysis :

Lexical Analysis The overall texture of the lexical elements in "To Autumn" is one of the most carefully developed in the entire English Romantic tradition. The sensory richness, the semantic density and the layering of positive and slightly elegiac connotations are always foregrounded in the word choices of Keats. The use of the verb cluster in the first stanza—load, bless, bend, fill, swell, plump, set, o'erbrimm'd—generates a strong semantic field of abundance and excess. These verbs are mostly transitive, and their associations of weight, pressure and satisfaction of fullness make them the preferred verbs for Autumn as the implicit agent. The words "swell" and "plump" are especially important because in them the celebration of nature has almost tactile qualities that convey the sense of roundness and satisfaction in the body. The third stanza creates a new lexical field of sound and music, but the words are always tinged with a subdued sadness. The term soft-dying day is a fascinating compounding of the terms: the prefix soft softens the blow of dying, and makes the less dramatic image of dying into a more benign one of a peaceful ending.

Grammatical Analysis:

The grammatical structure of 'To Autumn' is as finely developed as its lexical structure is and it plays a role as a mechanism of foregrounding on the syntactic and clause level. What is most striking in the first stanza is the absence of finite main verbs, except for one in the second line. The stanza is built mainly with the use of infinitive phrases: "to load and bless, to bend with apples, to fill all fruit, to swell the gourd, to plump the hazel shells, to set budding more. It is an enormous syntactic decision since it represents the Romantic vision of nature as organic, purposeful and coherent, as opposed to mechanical progression of events.

Figures of Speech Analysis :

Analysis of figurative language. In "To Autumn," figurative language may be the most important element of foregrounding, and the poem packs in an amazing variety of figures, all used with great artistry and thematic consistency. Personification is the dominant figure in the poem. In each of the three stanzas, Autumn is described as a person having a body, emotions and plans. In the first stanza, Autumn "conspires" with the sun, where the use of the verb "conspires" inflects the idea of intentional partnership and personal intimacy with the sun. In "To Autumn," the imagery is simultaneously present on many sensory registers, and this may be called synesthetic effects, the crossing or blending of registers. There is a combination of visual imagery (mists) and gustatory imagery (fruitfulness, mellowness) in the phrase "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness. Alliteration is very prominent: "mists and mellow", "Close-bosom", "maturing...moss'd", "soft-lifted...sound asleep", "stubble-plains...soft-dying", "sallows...sinking". The alliterative patterns establish a musical texture that enhances the rhythmical quality of the poem, enhancing its meditative and incantatory qualities.

Cohesion and Contextual Analysis:

Cohesion and Contextual Analysis In the aspect of cohesion and context, "To Autumn" achieves a very high level of structural cohesion, evidenced by a multi-layered series of lexical, thematic and symbolic links. There is lexical cohesion with the repetition and development of important semantic fields throughout the stanzas. The themes of the three stanzas are connected by a series of terms in the field of fullness and ripeness,

introduced in the first stanza by load, bless, fill, swell, plump, o'erbrimm'd; echoed in the second by store, granary; and again in the third by full-grown lambs. Likewise the theme of softness and mellowness in the first line ('mellow fruitfulness') is repeated in 'soft-lifted', 'soft-dying' and 'treble soft', lending the poem its gentle, uncomplaining beauty.

Findings:

Lexical Foregrounding of Romantic Sensibility:

The Romantic Sensibility is lexicalized in the foregrounding of the Romantic. The analysis indicates that there are three major ways in which the choices of words in "To Autumn" emphasize Romantic sensibility. First, Keats creates rich semantic fields of sensory abundance, with tactile and gustatory vocabulary, such as "mellow," "plump," and "swell," and "o'erbrimm'd" that convey the Romantic appreciation of direct, embodied experience over abstract conceptual knowledge. Second, the lexical ambivalence, the choice of words which in the same context have a positive and a slightly melancholic nuance, emphasizes the Romantic consciousness of transience as an integral part of beauty. Ambivalent words, such as "mellow," "soft-dying," and "last oozeings" illustrate this. Third, lexical deviation in the form of the use of archaic, unusual and compound forms ("o'erbrimm'd," "wailful," "soft-dying") draws attention to the language itself, making the poem a heightened, specially crafted form of discourse, fitting with the Romantic spirit of defamiliarization.

Grammatical Foregrounding of Romantic Ideology:

The grammatical analysis highlights three major structural features through which Romantic ideology is expressed. First, the frequent use of infinitive phrases in the first stanza and present participles throughout the poem portrays nature as a continuous and purposeful process rather than a fixed object or completed action. This reflects the Romantic view of nature as a living and organic entity. Second, the use of the archaic second-person singular pronouns "thee" and "thou" creates a sense of intimacy and reverence toward Autumn, elevating it to a quasi-sacred status that aligns with Romantic pantheistic beliefs. Third, the interrogative opening of the third stanza introduces a grammatical shift that mirrors the poem's movement from joyful celebration to thoughtful acceptance. This change reflects the Romantic ideal of what John Keats called Negative Capability—the capacity to embrace uncertainty and melancholy without seeking immediate answers or resolution.

Figurative Foregrounding of Mortality and Melancholy:

The figurative analysis reveals three major findings. First, the extended personification of Autumn serves as the poem's central figurative device, functioning not simply as a decorative element but as an ideological expression of the connection between human experience and natural processes. Second, the progression of imagery from tactile in the first stanza, to visual in the second, and finally to auditory in the third reflects the poem's thematic movement from presence and abundance to absence and resonance. In this way, the imagery formally enacts the elegiac dimension of the Romantic celebration of nature. Third, the poem's sound devices—including alliteration, assonance, and onomatopoeia—act as forms of prosodic foregrounding that allow the language to embody its meanings. This technique reflects the Romantic belief that poetic language maintains a unique and intimate relationship with the natural world it seeks to represent.

Discussion:

The lexical results are possibly the most obviously confirmatory of the previous studies. The discovery that the archaic and the deviant are used as devices for foregrounding is consistent with Leech's (1969) overall theory of deviation, and it can be extended here to

indicate how the use of archaism in particular links the poem to the classical tradition of the ode and thus helps to tie Keats' treatment of nature to a long poetic history of celebration of the natural world. It is from the case of the figurative findings that the most theoretical and most significant link to the question of the communicability of Romantic ideology through poetry is to be found. *To Autumn* uses personification as a philosophical argument—it makes the point that human and natural experience are continuous and implicitly argues for the opposite of the Enlightenment attitude, which is to place the human observer in detachment and superiority over the natural world. Lastly, questions about cohesion and context highlight the interconnections between the larger cultural and historical context and the linguistic structure of the poem. This interpretative claim is supported linguistically in the stylistic analysis where it is shown that the poem's commitment to the beauty of the present moment is not coincidental, but is maintained throughout by a consistent use of lexical and grammatical devices. The results and discussion, taken together, prove that the Leech and Short framework is an extraordinarily fruitful one for the study of Romantic poetry; and for the study of the encoding and communication of Romantic ideology through language in particular.

Conclusion:

This research work has been provided detailed stylistic analysis of the John Keats's poem *'To Autumn'* in the framework of Leech and Short (2007), with the special aim of showing how Romantic themes are foregrounded by the lexical, grammatical, figurative and cohesive mechanism. The data analysis process, based on the three research questions and three research objectives, has resulted in data that are able to confirm and extend the previous understandings of the poem from the previous researchers. The main finding of this study is that foregrounding in *"To Autumn"* is not just a superficial element of the text but is an integral part of its language, working on all four levels of the Leech and Short model, and in a consistent way, to encode and communicate the central values of Romantic ideology: that of emphasizing sensory experience, continuity of human and natural life, beauty of transience and the capacity for affirmative acceptance in the face of mortality.

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