

Artistic and Mental Images in E. Bishop's 'The Fish' and 'The Armadillo': A Stylistic Investigation

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Abstract

The current study investigates Elizabeth Bishop's poetic techniques with reference to her poems 'The Fish' and 'The Armadillo'. It aims at identifying the salient stylistic devices through which the poetess communicates her thought and feelings. To achieve this aim, the paper adopts a close-reading approach as a method for data collection. Then, the researcher stylistically analyzes and interprets the collected data. The analysis of the data has revealed a number of results. First, it is quite evident that, devices like: simile, metaphor, imagery, and personification are the salient stylistic devices in Bishop's 'The Fish' and 'The Armadillo'. Moreover, the paper has also found out that Bishop's poetic style in the poems under question could help the readers in grasping the poems intended meanings.

Keywords: Style, figurative language, simile, imagery, employment

INTRODUCTION

Poetry is defined as a form of literature in which human language is used for its aesthetic qualities in addition to, or instead of, its notional and semantic content. In other words, it communicates the thoughts and feelings of the poets in noticeable aesthetic, rhythmic, and imaginative manner. Thus, poetic language is totally different from ordinary speech because poetry involves specific grammatical features and syntactic structures. Levin (1969) in his book *Linguistic Structures in Poetry* claims that there are many distinctions between poetic and

ordinary speech language. He further argues that these differences emerge from the poet's need to express himself/herself in a style that clearly shows his or her thoughts or/and emotions.

A creative writer often uses language in his/her own way to achieve beauty and meaning. S/he deviates – through what is called figurative language, from the conventional way of using the language for particular literary or non-literary purposes. In a broader sense, figurative language is defined as the way in which words imply a meaning different from what exactly they mean. When a man says: 'the moon always lights the dark nights' for example, he means the actual 'moon' that anybody knows. However, when he says: 'she is the 'moon' of my life', the target meaning indicates that he figuratively likens a certain woman in his life to the moon for she always guides him to do the right thing. In a narrow sense, the term refers to the expression in which figures of speech such as: simile, metaphor, synecdoche, etc. or figures of sounds like alliteration, assonance, etc. are employed (McArthur, 1992). Moreover, the language components of a literary text may mark the author's writing style which in addition to his/her words choice, sentence structures and arrangements includes figurative language. Thus, in order to explore an author's own writing style, one has to utilize a stylistic analysis to identify how the linguistic features of a particular literary text shape the writer's style.

Elizabeth Bishop's poetry is embellished with excessive use of literary techniques and devices that still awaiting for further investigation. Yet, the massive literary heritage she left behind, is hardly recognized by literary critics and scholars. Thus, this paper tries to stylistically explore her poetic style in two selected poems – '*The Fish*' and '*The Armadillo*' from Bishop'. The rich and condensed language that embellish these poems have actually driven the researcher's interest to study and analyse them. Though the paper's rationale seems personal, it can be affiliated with ongoing field of literary analysis through identifying the salient stylistic devices in Bishop's poems. Moreover, it also tries to find out how utilizing particular expressive means and stylistic devices in a poem may dexterously demonstrate the poet's subject matter and themes. To achieve these goals, the paper poses two relevant questions: (1) what are the most salient and characterizing stylistic features in both Elizabeth Bishop's '*The Fish*' and '*The Armadillo*'? and (2) To what extent does the use figurative language in '*The Fish*' and '*The Armadillo*' reflect Elizabeth Bishop's

writing style? Furthermore, the paper adopts the stylistic analytical method as a tool for analysing the data.

Concise Biography of the Poetess

Elizabeth Bishop who was born on February 9, 1911 in Worcester, Massachusetts as only child of William Thomas Bishop and Gertrude (Bulmer) Bishop. She lost her father for Kidney disease when she was only eight months. His death aggravated her mother's already unstable mental health, and after several breakdowns, she entered a Massachusetts hospital, removing later to an asylum in Canada, where she died in 1934. Following her mother's admittance, Elizabeth, who was never again to see her mother, lived with her maternal grandparents in Great Village, Nova Scotia for a short time before being taken to live in Worcester with her father's parents so she could attend school in the United States.

Bishop herself suffered a severe health problem which at some point in her life prevented her from going to school. Thus, she spent much of her time reading books at home and by the time she entered Walnut Hill School in 1927 she had already become familiar with the poetry of poets like Walt Whitman and Gerard Manley Hopkins etc. In 1930 Bishop went to Vassar College, where she took a B.A. in English in 1934 – the year that matches her first meeting with Marianne Moore. Her poems and short stories were accepted not only by the college review but by national magazines a thing that marked the early commencement of her literary career. Throughout her literary career, Elizabeth Bishop had written and published different collections of poetry: *'North and South'*, *'A Cold Spring'*, *'Questions of Travel'* among others, She died on October 6, 1979 leaving a great literary heritage behind.

Theoretical Framework

The word 'style' is basically originated from Latin language – stylus – which means "anything to write". Scholars seem to agree on the fact that 'style' as an abstract term could hardly be defined. The term was traditionally viewed as a method of persuasion i.e. it highlights the techniques that writers or speakers use in their discourse to positively or negatively influence their readers/listeners. However, Wimsatt (1967) relates style with the notion of meaning. He argues that it is hard to separate the writers' style from their texts since style concerns

the selection and organization of words in an utterance, and that words are considered units of meaning. Literally, style is a way of doing something, especially, one which is typical to a person, place, group, or period. Despite the frequent use of the term style in both literary and linguistic fields, Wales (2014) remarks that the word is very difficult to be defined. She highlights different comprehensive areas in which it is used asserting the fact that “style pervades all aspects of our life and culture” (ibid. 397). On this score, Uzoma (2012) believes that writers/speakers always follow particular style through selecting a variety of lexical and syntactic options. He adds that the chosen linguistic items usually match the purpose of the writers’ communication.

A parallel definition is voiced by Freeman in his book *‘Style’* in which he refers the word style to the manner of expression that characterizes a particular writer, literary group, or period (1996: 2). In this respect, Khan, Raffique, and Siddique, in introducing their paper *‘Stylistic Analysis of the Poem ‘The Onset’ by Robert Frost’*, define style as “the way in which the writer uses language, his choice of words, arrangements and form of sentences, use of poetic devices to present his thought to the reader” (2014: 121). From all the definitions above, one can deduce that style is what differentiates X from Y. As it is stated earlier, the word style defies comprehensive definition. However, a writer’s style varies according to the linguistic variants he/she uses in his/her work.

On this score, Carter (1996 cited in Ali, Bhatti, and Shah 2016: 18) emphasizes that “every text and writing style is different to others due to ‘linguistics levels’”. In other words, style is the variety of ways, diction, and forms that a writer or speaker enjoys from broader linguistic choices. Additionally, Leech and Short (2007) demonstrate that the linguistic study of a person’s writing has paved the paths for the emergence of stylistics. That is, stylistics –as a discipline, is developed from the process of closely addressing the linguistic features of the text with the purpose of deciphering the verbal clues that it yields.

Stylistics –as simply described by Turner (1973:7), Leech and Short (2007: 11), and Wales (2014: 399) – “is the study of style”. It concerns with the writer’s or speaker’s diction, sentence structure, and other linguistic features in his/her text or utterance. In many respects, stylistics is the public sphere in which linguistics and literature

harmoniously mingle. Wales (2014 cited in Ali, Bhatti and Shah 2016) has clarified that stylistics does not only concentrate on the linguistic features of the text but also goes further to embrace its interpretation such as exploring the linguistic relations of the patterns and the interconnectedness amongst the texts which constitute the protruded features. Then, it delves deeper and deeper to go beyond the surface meaning of words or phrases to draw a fixed net that bring together the different ends of the different phenomena.

In a paper entitled “*Stylistics: A Contact between Linguistics and Literary Criticism*”, Hejal (2006) describe stylistics as a means of studying literary discourse from a linguistic standpoint. He is apparently agreeing with Turner (1975 cited in ibid) in the view that stylistics is one of the branches of linguistics which focuses on the language use and variation in literary texts. Besides, Hejel concludes that a stylistic study “involves both literary criticism and linguistics” (2). Thus, realising that stylistics cannot be defined a way from both linguistics and literature, one can concede that; the newly-born field always shows its gratitude to “its parent disciplines” (Leech, 2013: 1).

Stylistic Analysis of Bishop's 'The Fish' and 'The Armadillo'

One of the problems that faces critical studies is the platform on which the process of analysis is based. Besides, many critics treat literary texts superficially without digging deeper into their layers. However, stylistic analysis does further distances itself from such types of studies through its deep concentration on the linguistic choices in the text under question. Bishop's *'The Fish'* and *'The Armadillo'* – as it is mentioned, contain various illustrations of stylistic devices such as simile, metaphor, imagery, personification which are going to be the focus of this study.

Simile

Simile is a figure of speech that occurs when two different entities are compared assuming a great similarity between them. The resemblance is indicted by using words such as *'like'* and *'as'* and *'than'*. According to Leech and Short (2007 cited in Wales, 2014: 383) simile also involves “the use of phrases like as if; resembling; suggesting, etc.” Moreover, Leech (1969) argues that simile always specifies the ground for comparison: i.e. it highlights the mutual characteristic between the two compared objects. In Bishop's *'The Fish'* for example, the speaker

experiences some feeling concerning the fish. By putting the poem's story between two main incidents; "I caught a tremendous fish" (CP, 42) and "I let the fish go" (CP, 44), her/his feeling ranges from sympathy to ultimate respect. Thus, simile is used in the poem to help readers understand the act of letting the fish go after that effort exerted in catching it. Moreover, the use of the first person (I) reveals the speaker's keenness to let the reader in her/his idea of things.

*his brown skin hung in strips
like ancient wallpaper,
and its pattern of darker brown
was like wallpaper:
shapes like full-blown roses
stained and lost through age.
(CP, 42)*

In the lines above, Bishop uses simile to compare the fish's skin by using the likening tool (like) to an 'ancient wallpaper'. By doing so, the reader is able to recognize that the fish is being depicted old and prized. Similarly, the fish's pattern or shape also looks like 'wallpaper' and 'full-blown roses'. The idea of portraying the fish as old as ancient objects indicates that it is a symbol of wisdom which is socially associated with elderly people. Moreover, Bishop uses more examples of simile in the lines;

*I thought of the coarse white flesh
packed in like feathers,
the big bones and the little bones,
the dramatic reds and blacks
of his shiny entrails,
and the pink swim-bladder
like a big peony.
(CP, 42)*

The speaker in the lines above must have thought about the fish as something more than a piece of food – meat. It has been described as beautiful as white and soft birds' feathers. The simile is significantly arresting as it marks a change in the speaker's attitude towards the caught fish. Bishop employs another example of simile in lines (32-3) "the pink swim-bladder/like a big peony" (CP, 42). In these lines, she compares the fish bladders to beautiful flowers; have red, pink and white colours. Elizabeth Bishop moves on to liken the fish's shifting

eyes to tilting object. In other words, the fish is metaphorically compared to a reluctant person who is diffidently unable to exchange stare.

*They shifted a little, but not
to return my stare.
It was more like the tipping
of an object toward the light.
(CP, 43)*

Furthermore, Bishop, in the lines below, describes the fish's fens as old medals with shabby ribbons.

*Like medals with their ribbons
frayed and wavering,
a five-haired beard of wisdom
trailing from his aching jaw.*

In 'The Armadillo' – a poem that portrays a Brazilian religious ceremony witnessed by Elizabeth Bishop however, the speaker compares the way in which the light comes and goes out of the chambers to heart beating.

*the paper chambers flush and fill with light
that comes and goes, like hearts.
(CP, 103)*

Later in the poem, she relates the fireworks to an egg when she says "it splattered like an egg of fire/against the cliff behind the house" (CP, 103). In this, the speaker firstly enjoys the ceremonial events by appreciating the act of setting fireworks to honour the saint and eventually ends up denouncing its destructive consequences.

Personification

Personification according to Wales (2014) is a deviant use of language in which an animate is given a human quality. Exploring Elizabeth Bishop's poems under study has resulted in a number of personified examples. As an illustration, the speaker in 'The Fish' uses third person masculine pronoun (HE) throughout the poem to refer to the antecedent; fish which is grammatically referred to it by the personal pronoun (IT). In the same manner, the speaker personifies the fish when she/he metaphorically gives it a human quality of being "battered and venerable and homely" (CP, 42). One more example occurs when

the speaker changes her/his attitude from a fisherwoman to an admirer: in this, she personifies the fish by talking about '(his) sullen face' instead of (its). Besides, 'sullen' as an adjective is only used to modify a person who can experience anger or calmness. Attributing the quality of 'climbing' to the "fire balloons" in 'The Armadillo' is another illustration of personifying objects in Bishop's selected poems. This association allows readers to visualize a familiar scene of fireworks flying upwards.

Imagery and Metaphor

Another detected stylistic feature in Elizabeth Bishop's '*The Fish*' and '*The Armadillo*' is metaphor. Compared to simile, metaphor is considered more powerful and striking in showing the association between the tenor and the vehicle. Many poetry critics treat metaphor and imagery as interwoven devices. That is, whenever the former is used a sense of the later appears on the surface. Thus, metaphoric expressions and imagery will be discussed all together in this paper.

Elizabeth Bishop's selected poems reveal sensible utilization of imagery and metaphoric expressions. The metaphor and vivid imagery in her poem '*The Fish*' help the readers to visualize the events in the poem and sympathize with the fish. In other words, Bishop – through her skilful use of metaphor and imagery succeeds to create emotional blend between the fish and her readers. At first, readers are surprisingly stunned with the image of the fish. That is to say, the fish is pictured as "tremendous", "homely", and "venerable". Moreover, the reader is enabled to visualize the speakers' hook fastened in the fish's mouth.

*I caught a tremendous fish
and held him beside the boat
half out of water, with my hook
fast in a corner of his mouth.
(CP, 42)*

Bishop's brilliant use of descriptive words like "speckled" and "infested" help in creating a clear mental image to the fish's scales. The poet goes on generating images in the readers' minds: "and underneath two or three/rags of green weed hung down" (Cp. 42). The fusion of metaphor with imagery in the lines below clearly explains Bishop descriptive talent.

*While his gills were breathing in
the terrible oxygen
- the frightening gills,
fresh and crisp with blood
(CP, 42)*

The opening and shutting of the fish's gills while breathing in creates both olfactory and visual images in the readers' minds. However, because it is uncommon for the fish to stay out of the water, the oxygen has been metaphorically portrayed as a terrifying creature so the fish's gills get frightened accordingly. Another example of mental pictures is created in the lines; "and then I saw/that from his lower lip/- if you could call it a lip/grim, wet, and weapon-like" (CP. 43). The reader in these lines is able to visualize the fish's lip which is pictured as "grim, wet, and weapon-like" (CP, 43). Again, the descriptive expression in Elizabeth Bishop's invites the readers to create a vivid mental picture about the event, object, and scene being described. The speaker keeps examining the fish with a piercing eye while it hangs "half of the water". Her intense examination and our diagnostic investigation resulted in comparing the fish's fins to "medals with their ribbons". This simile involves a mental activity of a hero winning various fights and competitions. Therefore, having the speaker piercing this puzzle: the fish's mysterious life, Bishop opines that "victory filled up the little rented boat" (CP, 43).

In the opening line of '*The Armadillo*', the speaker metaphorically uses a descriptive phrase to condemn the villagers' deeds. That is, the fire balloons are described as "illegal" due to the destructive consequences resulted in the ceremony. They are also depicted as something that possesses the ability of "Climbing the mountain height". This portrayal allows Bishop's readers to create a mental image for the event. Another visual description of the fire balloons is that; "they flare and falter, wobble and toss" (CP, 103) when the wind blows. Besides, in illustrating the descriptive events, the spread of fire is metaphorically presented as a living monster that runs up and down destroying everything ahead. Consequently, the owls are seen escaping the danger and leaving their nest burning behind:

*The flame ran down. We saw the pair
of owls who nest there flying up
and up, their whirling black-and-white
stained bright pink underneath, until*

they shrieked up out of sight.
(CP, 103)

The illustration of the “glistening armadillo’s” and the “short-eared” “baby rat’s” quest for survival –in the lines above, gives a comprehensive image of life’s collapse down. It is quite evident that Bishop was influenced by the characteristics of modern poetry as reflected in T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste land” where images such as “ stony rubbish”, “dead trees”, etc.. and the physical and emotional images caused by the WW1 presented, and Robert frost’s ‘Fire and ice’, which introduces to the reader the profound idea that the world could end in one of two ways, with fire or ice, through desire or hate.

CONCLUSION

This study presents a literary stylistic review to ponder Elizabeth Bishop’s selected poems –*‘The Fish’* and *‘The Armadillo’*. In other words, the paper examines how Bishop’s employment of figurative language arises emotional feelings in readers and helps to draw smart mental images to what she is depicting. It is found that simile, metaphor, personification, and imagery are the most salient stylistic devices in Bishop’s poems –*‘The Fish’* and *‘The Armadillo’*. It is through the dexterous utilization of such devices that readers are enabled, for instance, to visualize the captured fish in *‘The Fish’* and pathetically sympathize with it (passion and sympathy). The act of letting the fish go has filled both the speaker’s and audience’ hearts with ecstasy by creating a joyful image. This happy ending is earlier foreshadowed through Bishop’s metaphoric expression: ‘and *victory filled up / the little rented boat*’. In the same connection, Bishop’s ingenious use of figurative language in *‘The Armadillo’* allows her readers to follow the sequence of dramatic events portrayed in the poem. That is to say, readers have experienced at first the festive and delightful moments and then the catastrophic horrifying atmosphere throughout the poem (sense of bewilderment). On the contrary –in *‘The Fish’*, the audience have first experienced the terrifying moment of catching the fish and then celebrate with the speaker its release. To sum up, it is obvious that Elizabeth Bishop has crystallized the poems’ themes through her use of figurative language.

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