

A Critical Stylistic analysis of the Poem “Birches” By Robert Frost



Asad Zia	BS in English, University of Malakand azia40047@gmail.com
Dawood Said	BS in English, University of Malakand dawoodsaid048@gmail.com
Sultan Mehmood	BS in English, University of Malakand sultanmehmood9395@gmail.com
Gauhar Rahman	BS in English, University of Malakand rahmanguhar824@gmail.com

Abstract: *To extract meaning from any literary text is the matter of interest and growing concern for the researchers in modern era. For this purpose, various strategies are adopted to uncover the inside meaning of literary pieces. The present work is a step in this connection. The researchers have chosen the poem of American poet Robert Frost “Birches” and conducted the study from the perspective of the stylistic Analysis. So, various stylistic techniques have been utilized to analyze the selected poem at lexical level, phonological level, graph logical level and grammatical level. After analyzing the poem in the light of the objectives, the researchers arrived at the conclusion that the poet has adopted various stylistic techniques in the poem. Moreover, various literary devices have been utilized in order to create a special effect and to give richness to the meaning of the poem.*

Keywords: Stylistics, Meaning, Literary texts, Stylistic analysis, Literary devices, Birches.

1. Introduction

Leech in “A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry” defines stylistics as “simply the study of literary style, or to make matters even more explicit, the study of the use of language in literature. When we discuss style, we bear in mind the language of a particular author, a specific period, a particular genre, even a certain poem” (Leech, 2014). According to Aitchison (2003), the linguistic analysis of literary language is known as stylistic. The words style and stylistics have acquired somewhat specialized, narrow usage of linguistics applied to literature.

Widdowson (1992) too in the same vein speaks of the relationship between the two disciplines of linguistics and literature. Stylistics is a bridge between linguistics and literary criticism, between language and literature. Widdowson is very comprehensive in his attitude towards

stylistics. He makes it all inclusive study of linguistics, literary criticism, language and literature. He considers stylistics a branch of linguistics that studies literary discourse from linguistic perspective. He says that “one can conduct enquiries of a linguistic kind without any reference to literary criticism” and vice versa. Another opinion is that literary criticism is impossible without any reference to language because literary interpretation does involve the study of the language of a text (Cited in Murtaza & Qasmi, 2013).

According to Bashir ud din (2018), Stylistics simply results from ‘style’ which is, in a widely held view, correspondence between thought and expression. The notion of style is based on the assumption that of the two functions of language i.e. means of communication and also a means of shaping ones thought. The first one is communicative and the second one is expressive.

Generally, it is defined as the ability to write clearly and correctly. Specifically, it belongs to the realm of Grammar and sets up a number of rules and general acceptance as how to speak and how to write-it discards all kinds of deviations as being violations of the existing norms.

1.1 Objectives

The work at hand serves the following objectives.

1. To find out the stylistic levels are adopted in the selected poem in order to extract meaning from it.
2. To know what literary devices have been applied in the poem in order to enrich the meaning of the poem.

Significance

This article has foremost importance not only for the students of literature but for the researchers as well. First of all, students of literature can get insights from this work related to the major themes and tone of the selected work of Frost. In addition, the analysis may also help readers to present them the general style, literary devices and language employed in this work. It can also pave way for the researchers to analyze this work from other perspectives. Finally, this analysis can also assist researchers to provide references for the review of relevant literature in this field.

2. Literature Review

Style is a unique way of expression which a writer adopts in his writings to convey his thoughts to the readers (Leech & Short, 2007). Writers use various methods and strategies in their works to improve the artistic beauty of their writings. All these literary techniques are studied under stylistics. Stylistics came to existence in the 2nd half of the twentieth century (Freeman, 1971). Widdowson (1975) called it a linguistic study of a literary text. Another linguist David Crystal (1985) further elaborated it as a sub-field of linguistics discussing various aspects of linguistic deviation. Stylistic analysis explores how certain social and cultural realities are constructed through language (MAHMOOD et.al. 2021)

2.1 Various levels of Stylistics

A. Graph logical Level:

Leech (2014) believes that graphology goes beyond orthography. It refers to the whole system of writing: punctuation, spacing as well as paragraphing. Moreover, Alabi (2007) has the opinion that among all other features graphology also entail the foregrounding of quotation marks, full stop, Colon, semi Colon, comma, hyphens, ellipses, capitalization, spacing, question marks etc.

B. Grammatical Level:

The grammatical level traditionally is divided into syntax and morphology. The investigation at this level will cover both. Syntax according to Tallerman (1998, as cited in Hussein, 2023) refers to the rules that govern the ways in which words combine to form phrases, clauses, and sentences. Morphology, on the other hand, is the study of a word structure (Haspelmath & Sims, 2010).

Aronoff and Fudeman (2022) assert that morphology is the study of the words, their internal structure and the ways they are formed. It deals that how words and phrases are combined to form a sentence. There is a tremendous need to be distinguished among phrases, words, nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, and clauses. And analysis is made to find out foregrounding and deviations.

C. Lexical Level:

The term lexis means vocabulary which is used in a language for particular purpose. It is the study in which single word or idiom is used in diverse linguistics context. Lexical level can be ascertained through collocates, simile, metaphor, oxymoron etc. (Ali et.al, 2016).

D. Phonological Level:

Ofuya (2007), states that phonology is the study of proper sequence of sounds in a language. Lodge also shares view about phonology that phonology is the linguistic organization in words. It is the study of various sounds in a given language, word, phrase and sentences (Cited in Latif et. al, 2022).

E. Semantic Level:

The semantic level deals with the meaning of words, phrases and sentences. It includes metaphor, simile, personification and other

literary devices. Stylistically, the utility of figurative language is the main focus of the stylistic analysis (Yeibo, 2012).

2.2 Biography of the poet

Robert Frost was born in San Francisco. He is a modern American poet. He is very famous for his poetry. In the field of poetry, he is considered a poet and a man of true wisdom. He has not only knowledge of literature but he also has knowledge of other fields such as history and philosophy. Frost uses a very distinctive style in his poetry. His poems are famous due to his unique style of poetry. He mostly uses simple and easy words. He uses a narrative language in his poems. He builds a very deep philosophy by using different natural objects. Style distinguishes a form of work from another form of work. The style of a writer portrays that how the writer thinks about a particular subject and thing. It is the tone and voice of every writer. Frost uses a different writing style in his poem. In poetry, Frost describes the reality of a life and different situations of a life. He has shown the intellectual issues and problem of his modern era. He is also called a philosophical poet because he mostly talks about philosophy of life. His main purpose of life was not to write poems only for aesthetic pleasure of readers but also to show bitter realities of life. He is also known as a great poet of a nature. He depicts a number of natural objects in his poems. For him nature is so unpredictable. He has shown the dual characteristics of a nature. Nature gives pleasure and comfort to people but on the other hand, it is indifferent to man (Latif et. al, 2022 P.72).

3. Methodology

The researchers have conducted the present study through the lens of stylistic analysis. For this purpose, Robert Frost's poem "Birches" has been selected. Thus, the primary data for this work was the text of the poem. Secondary data were extracted from various online and published sources for review of relevant literature. Close reading technique was adopted for the completion of the work. After in-depth and close reading of the original text, the poem was analyzed from the perspective of various levels of stylistics. These levels include; Lexical level, graph-logical level,

grammatical level and phonological level. Findings were enlisted in accordance with the objectives of the study.

4. Analysis of the poem

4.1 Overall idea of the poem

This poem by the American poet Robert Frost is basically nostalgic in which the poet desires for his youthful days when he used to swing by Birch trees. He seeks an escape from the grim realities of this world that one faces in adulthood life. Thus, he wants to leave these miseries behind and go for a while to funs of swinging and playing games of childhood. He wishes so because he knows that in childhood going through such games and swinging from a birch tree, he would find solace and a great internal pleasure in most of his boring times. When the poet sees bent trees of birch, he reminds at once that some boy must have bent them for swinging though he knows that in fact the trees have been bent by falling snow on them. Resultantly, his imaginations evoke which lead to poet's meditations of how he used to swing from such birch trees in his youthful days. Finally, he becomes nostalgic and a strong wish of becoming a child again comes in his mind so that he might avoid the responsibilities and grim realities of the world.

4.2 Nature of the Poem:

The selected poem of Robert Frost is basically composed in blank verse. It is a pastoral lyric where the poet has adopted various elements of nature like birch trees, winter, snow, woods and cobwebs etc. It is naturally a lyrical poem as a single speaker presents his ideas. This lyrical poem contains 59 lines and most of the lines follow iambic pentameter where a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable. Sometimes, the poet also has used anapest i.e. two unstressed syllables are followed by a stressed syllable. Similarly, iambic hexameter has also been applied in the last line of the poem. The whole poem is composed in a very simple and straightforward language without any stanzaic divisions. The Language of the poem is simple and conversational that nurtures nostalgic feelings in the readers.

4.3 Setting of the poem

The poem is set in a forest where birch trees are planted everywhere. It is winter season as the poet says that the trees are laden and bent down with snow. It seems that the tresses are in some remote area as the poet says about the boy he imagines “lives too far from town”.

The table given below shows the nouns that have been used in the poem. Nouns are further categorized in different categories including common nouns, Proper nouns, uncountable and collective nouns. Thus, the detail is given in the table.

4.4 Lexical Analysis:

Nouns	Common Nouns	Proper Nouns	Uncountable Nouns	Collective Nouns
Birches trees summer ground	Trees boy	Birches summer	Rain breeze	Heaps
Boy ice-storms baseball breeze	Cows	Baseball winter	Warmth poise	branches
Winter Rain air morning cows	Ground enamel	Morning sun	Air fate	woods
Enamel sun air hair knees	Hair shells	Heaven bracken	Wish love	
Bracken trunks woods glass	Knees leaves	Earth	Pains Ice-storms	
Warmth shells glassheaven	Crust		snow	
Snow crust leaves Heaps	glasses			
Twigglass painsWish	Cup brim			
Cup brim earth love fate	twig			

Table 1: Use of different kinds of nouns in the poem

In addition to the profound use of nouns, other parts of speech also have been utilized in the poem. It is evident from the table below that pronouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs have been used. The poet has used different cases like Nominative case, Accusative case and possessive case of pronouns. Furthermore, in

the use of verb, the poet has gone through the base form, present participle, past participle and the base form with an ‘s’. In adjectives, beside comparative degree, participle forms like broken loaded etc. are also used.

Pronouns	Verbs	Adjectives	Adverbs
I them	Think Swinging launching carrying	darker broken	never
you their	See bend riding kept	Loaded sunny colored	Afterwards
Her whose	Click rises going coming	Crystal withered	Again
His themselves	Makes shattering burns tickles	Black snow-white	Willfully
him he	Avalanching sweep flung kicking	Old Wreathed	carefully
they	Trailing throw fetch weeping return	straighter	likely
	Learn found play climbing bear		

Table 2: Use of Pronouns, Verbs, Adjectives and Adverbs.

4.5 Grammatical analysis: Along with other levels of Stylistics, various grammatical features also have been brought into consideration. Such features include use of various punctuation marks. The poet has used

different punctuations for various poetic purposes. They are discussed below in detail.

1. Use of Colons:

The poet has used colons effectively in the

selected poem. Colons are just used two times in the whole poem which is present in 16th and 52nd lines of the unbreakable poem. The purpose of the use of colons in the mentioned lines is to take a short pause.

2. Use of Commas:

Like colons, Commas have also been used in the selected poem. Commas, for example, have been used in eleven lines in the whole poem. The purpose of the commas also is to take short breaks in various stretches of the poem.

3. Use of Dashes:

Along with other punctuation marks, the poet has made a masterful use of hypens and dashes. Dashes have been used in eleventh and twenty fourth lines of the poem.

4. Use of Apostrophe:

Among the rest of the mentioned marks, the poem contains apostrophes as well. It has been used nine times by the poet. It has been used to serve possessive case i.e. boy's, sun's, earth's etc. and for abbreviation like doesn't and don't etc.

5. Use of Semicolon:

Finally, the poet has given place to semicolon at least one time in the poem. It happens in fifteenth line and serves a short break. Here the poet also seems to contemplate on what to say next.

6. Use of personal pronoun:

From grammatical perspective, the poet has utilized personal pronouns. First person pronoun, "I", for example has been used by the poet for himself. Similarly, second person pronoun "You" has also been used in fifth line of the poem i.e. "Often you must have seen them". Moreover, the poet has also not forgotten to use third person pronoun. Its use can be seen in fifth, seventh and sixteenth lines "They click upon themselves" and "They never right themselves".

6.6 Graph logical Analysis:

1. Stanza wise division of the poem:

Since the poem is in blank verse, therefore, it continues till end without any stanzaic division.

2. Capitalization:

The poet has usually used capitalization. Along

with the capital letters at the beginning of each line, letters at the beginning of statements occurring at the middle of the lines have also been capitalized. For example, in fifth line, after the period, first letter is capital "As ice-storms do. Often you must have seen them". Moreover, the same process is repeated four times in the rest of the poem.

3. Punctuation Marks:

In addition, various punctuation marks like apostrophe, semicolons, commas and dashes have been used profoundly. Punctuation marks are used for creating special poetic effects and are present in almost every line of the whole poem.

6.7 Phonological analysis:

1. Rhyme scheme of the poem:

The selected poem of Robert Frost is basically composed in blank verse and follows no proper rhyme scheme. Despite this, it still follows somewhat an irregular rhyming pattern due to the abundant use of consonance and assonance. Certain sounds are repeated in various lines of the poem. /K/ sound, for example is repeated in cracks and crazes, climb and carefully. In addition, /f/ sound is repeated in shed and shells.

2. Alliteration:

Alliteration is another figurative device that has been used in the poem. In Alliteration, the same consonant sound is repeated in the close series. The lines where alliteration is present are given below.

When I see Birches Bend to left and right

But singing doesn't bend them down to stay.

Some boy too far from town to learn baseball

Thus, the given lines are taken as instances that represent alliteration as /b/, /d/ and /t/ sounds are repeated in them. It is the quality of alliteration that gives a rhyming pattern to the poem despite the fact that it is composed in blank verse.

6.8 Analysis of Literary Devices in the poem

Literary devices are tools that authors and poets employ to express feelings, concepts, and beliefs. These techniques aid them in attracting readers to their texts. In order to make literary works

distinctive and appealing, authors employ several literary techniques (Khan et. al, 2023). Below is a study of a few of the literary strategies used in this poem.

1. Use of simile:

Figurative language has been effectively used by the poet. Along with other figures, the poet has used simile in the nineteenth line of the text. In the simile, the poet has compared the birch trees that have been bent down by the snow. The poet has compared the tress with the hairs of girls “trailing their leaves on the ground Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair”. Similarly, another instance of simile can be seen in lines “Climbing carefully with the same pains you use to fill a cup”. Moreover, another instance is also used when the poet wants his past childhood life once again as his adult life is full of weariness. Thus, he says “And life is too much like a pathless wood”.

2. Enjambment:

Along with simile, another device has also been used that is enjambment. It occurs in many lines in the selected poem of Robert Frost. Through the effective use of enjambment, the poet goes beyond the boundaries of the single lines. Thus, the ideas are continued in the preceding lines i.e. “But swinging doesn’t bend them down to stay as ice-storms do.”, “Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning After a rain.”

3. Imagery:

The use of imagery has also been made effectively. Imagery is the use of words to paint pictures and scenes in literature. Frost has used imagery throughout the poem so to create a vivid image of nature and its components. The poet, for example, has clearly depicted the scene of birch trees bowed down by snow i.e. “Often you must have seen them loaded with ice a sunny winter morning after rain”. So the whole poem depicts natural images in an efficient way

4. Anaphora:

Anaphora is a figurative device in which same words are repeated at the beginning of successive phrases, clauses or sentences. Its purpose is to give an emphasis on the repeated words or to

express some sort of strong feelings. In the selected poem of Frost, Anaphora is present in the eighth and ninth lines i.e. “As the breeze rises, and turns many-colored as the stir cracks and crazes their enamel”. In addition, the personal pronoun “I” has also been repeated in lines “So was I once myself swinger of birches. And so, I dream of going back to be.” Thus, the words ‘As the’ and ‘I’ are repeated in these lines.

5. Personification:

Personification is another stylistic device used in this sonnet. In personification, features of living things are attributed to non-living things for creating special effects in literature. Frost has made an effective use of this literary device in this poem. It occurs when the poet personifies the birch trees that he has encountered with human beings. This poetic device occurs in sixteenth line as “they never right themselves”.

6. Symbolism:

Like the rest of the poetic devices, frost also has used symbolism. It is a literary device in which something represents or stands for something else. So, the birch trees in the poem have been used to symbolize the mature life of the poet. The trees that have been bowed down symbolize the life of the poet as pressed by the worldly responsibilities. Similarly, the birch trees also stand for the connection between earth and heaven as evident in lines “You’d think the inner dome of heaven had fallen”. Moreover, the boy “Too far from the town” also symbolizes the poet’s keen desire to escape from the harsh realities and responsibilities of life.

7. Tone of the Poem:

The Selected poem of Frost is composed in a tone that creates the feelings of loneliness and isolation in the readers. The poet himself is feeling nostalgic as his childhood memories are aroused when he came across the bent birch trees. So suddenly he goes in imaginations to his past years when he was a small boy. The poet has also pointed to the factors that are responsible for arousing his emotions. These factors include the winter weather, snow, bent birches and the boy belonging to a far-off isolated farm. So, the tone of the selected poem is melancholic and the poet

seems dissatisfied with the existing world as it is evident throughout the whole poem.

8. Conclusion:

“Birches” is an irregular poem in which the poet has adopted a worried tone. On his seeing the bent birches, the poet suddenly recalls his youthful days. The poet feels melancholic about his past life when he was a kid was free of all worldly sorrows. He used to swing on the birch trees and was completely unaware of the harsh realities of life. In his present situation, the poet as a responsible man wants to flee and free himself from the real-life sorrows. Like Keats, he strongly seeks escape so to leave the sorrowful world and to become a child once again so to swing and play on birch trees.

The selected poem is a clear instance of the writer’s skillful use of words and his mastery over figurative language. The poet has utilized various literary devices in order to create an effective work. He has used imagery where nature and its components are presented in a glorified and real way. Similarly, the poet has used various symbols that stand for something else. In addition, Frost has amply adopted numerous other literary devices like personification, simile, enjambment, anaphora and alliteration etc. to present his ideas and feelings in an effective manner. Thus, the work at hand is an effort to analyze the selected work from the perspective of stylistics.

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