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Foregrounded Irregularities in T.S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men*

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Abstract

Poetic language as quite a discrete account of expression has been an old-age topic of debate and investigation. Most of the discussion in this field is carried out by literary critics. Literary stylistics, as it is thought to be a science, unlike conventional literary theory, studies the language of literature through maximally objective and non-intuitive standpoint. This approach employs the methodology of linguistics while analyzing and interpreting a piece of literature. This is a scientific study of style.

This paper focuses on the semantic and graphological deviations in the language of TS Eliot's poem *The Hollow Men*. Eliot's poetic art is much striking and fascinating, particularly in foregrounding. He deliberately omits punctuation marks, uses interesting parallel structures, makes use of semantically unconventional expressions, and some graphological pattern of irregularities. The researchers have tried to show all this Foregrounding by picking up some irregularities of Eliot's poetic expression, hence tried to look at the poem through a literary stylistic perspective.

Key Words: Literary Stylistics, Foregrounding, Linguistic Deviations, TS Eliot, The Hollow Men, Semantic Deviations, Graphological Deviations.

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Conceptual Framework

A piece of art diverges from the standard norms of language. An abstract painting for example, diverges from the established rules of art. Such a painting acts against the background of norms and it attracts in an extraordinary and unanticipated manner the curiosity and attention of the viewers. The viewers observe the artistic deviation as prominent from its background which comes into the foreground of their visual field. In the area of literature the linguistic deviation from the accepted norms of language is the foregrounded element against the background of normal language. Foregrounding is a translated term from Czech word 'aktualisace' (Malmkjær, 1991). Malmkjær (1991), while talking about Viktor Shklovsky's idea about foregrounding, writes that among diverse functions of art, 'defamiliarization' is most striking.

Halliday (1971) defines foregrounding as 'prominence that is motivated'. Mukarvosky (1932) distinguishes literature by the 'consistency and systematic character of foregrounding'. Halliday explains the concept of foregrounding as 'by foregrounding is meant the deliberate deviation from the rules of the language code or from the accepted conventions of its use which stand out, or is foregrounded, against a background of a normal usage' (qtd in Widdowson, 1973). Crystal (1997) defines foregrounding: "A term used in stylistics ... to refer to relative prominence in discourse, often involving deviance from a linguistic norm". Since the present research focuses on the semantic and graphological irregularities of language in Eliot's one of the most complicated poems *The Hollow Men*, Geoffrey Leech's book *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* (1989) has been taken as a model. Brian Southam's *A Student's Guide to the Selected Poems of T S Eliot* (1994) has also been utilized to interpret some parts of the poem.

Leech (1989), while discussing irregularities, includes Lexical deviation, Grammatical deviation, Phonological deviation, Dialectal deviation, Graphological deviation, Semantic deviation, and deviation of Register. While talking about Semantic deviation he mentions that all poetry has some 'irrational element'. A poetic piece is a 'sophisticated looniness' and 'inspired nonsense', hence semantically odd. A literary stylistician tries to explore this 'oddness' of the poetic language. Graphological deviation is the abandoning of the capital letters and punctuation marks, weird use of spaces, parentheses, and jumbling of words. These aspects of irregularities have been explored by the researchers.

The text of *The Hollow Men* as data for the present paper has been taken from *The Complete Poems and Plays of T S Eliot* (1975).

Patterns of Irregularity in *The Hollow Men*

1. Semantic Deviations:

The researchers find an example of semantic deviation in line 9 of the poem:

Or rat's feet over broken glass

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[V] A

This dependent clause is semantically foregrounded as no linguistic and semantic clues either in the context or out of context are found. No cataphoric or anaphoric references are found in the following or previous context, which can explain these lines. So these lines do not seem to us an immediate thematic development of the preceding theme. No linguistic clue offers us an opportunity to understand as to who the addresser is and who the addressee? So apparently irrelevant and insignificant use of this clause adds confusion to potential interpretation of the reader. This ambiguity is produced due to change of register: instead of normal poetic register, the day-to-day language is introduced. Hence foregrounding. This is an account of an extremely personal strange style of the writer.

Semantic deviation is noticed in lines 52 – 56:

The eyes are not here
There are no eyes here
In this valley of dying stars
In this hollow valley
This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms

The adverb of place ‘there’ in line 53 is a deictic item used for ‘far’. ‘There’ is used within the same clause with another adverb of place ‘here’, quite opposite in meaning as it is used for a near reference. The ‘eyes’ mentioned as such are near and far simultaneously. This type of linguistic use reveals inconsistent semantic relations (Short, 1996). In this two-sentence passage the lexeme ‘eyes’ is repeated twice which reveals its supreme importance, but the juxtaposition two opposite adverbs of place ----- there, here ----- has made the lines semantically deviant because the progression of thematic meaning is inconsistent. So through cognitive stylistics, the reader without any linguistic clues, can establish a link between the ‘eyes’ of lines 52, 53, and 62:

In this last of meeting places
We grope together
And a void speech
Gathered on this beach of the tumid river
Sightless, unless
The eyes reappear

[ll: 57 – 62]

The focal point of cognitive stylistics is reader’s mental analytical procedure for the interpretation of a literary work (Sperber & Wilson, 1986; Lakoff, 1993; Freeman, 1993). According to cognitive theories the linguistic form and meaning do not have a pre-set correlation between them. The reader through literary discourse makes inferences of meaning, hence he / she is considered the most vital tool for meaning construction process. Therefore, the lines 52, 53, and 62 are cognitively coherent to the reader.

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The researchers could not find more semantic deviations in rest of the poem.

2. Graphological Deviations

Lines 29 and 30 together make a complete sentence. Here in line 30 graphological deviation at the level of punctuation is noticed as the sentence boundary marker is absent:

Let me be no nearer
In death's dream kingdom
Let me also wear
Such deliberate disguises
Rat's coat, crowskin, crossed staves
In a field
Behaving as the wind behaves
No nearer -----

Not that final meeting
In the twilight kingdom

[ll: 29 – 38]

Similarly at the end of line 32 a punctuation mark, colon (:) is deliberately omitted by the poet. Again, in line 36 a dash (-) conveys the continuity of the theme of 'deliberate disguise' of line 32. The absence of sentence boundary marker at the end of line 38 is the extension of the message conveyed by dash (-) in line 36. These graphological deviations are not without purpose.

The absence of full stop (.) in line 30 intensifies the continuity of the theme of 'no nearness', 'no directedness' in twilight kingdom. The omission of colon (:) after 'deliberate disguise' promotes the fear of the ultimate vision. The presence of dash in line 36 and the absence of full stop at the end of line 38 refer to such a feared meeting in both Dante and Conrad.

In *Purgatorio xxx*, Dante at last meets Beatrice. It is a fearful meeting for him, since he faces here the Divine Beauty which reminds him of all his sins and failings. The River Lethe, which he has to cross to meet her, flows in 'everlasting shadow'.

In *Heart of Darkness*, there is the meeting between Marlow and Kurtz's fiancé where he hands her the letters and pictures left by the dead man. It is literally a 'twilight' meeting. Dusk is falling. This symbolizes Marlow's moral twilight. He had intended to tell her the bitter truth about Kurtz's life and death but under the compulsion of her innocent trust in Kurtz's goodness, he covers up, and falsifies the man's last words, reporting that he died with her name on his lips. This white lie is Marlow's own shameful submission to the heart of darkness (Southam, 1994). Eliot's symbolic collage style connects past with present, making the history as a single and unified object. The symbolic references of Dante and Conrad's protagonists refer to the moral 'twilight' of modern man, who is 'hollow' indeed.

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The opening lines of Section III are graphologically deviant:

This is the dead land
This is cactus land

[II: 39 – 40]

These syntactically and verbally parallel lines are without sentence boundary markers. Both the lines have simple sentence structure of SVC, hence complete and independent clauses. This absence of the full stops alludes to the absence of a proper spiritual system in this world where the 'stone images' (line 41) and 'broken stone' (line 51) are connected with idolatrous worship.

Lines 45 – 49 show graphological foregrounding:

Is it like this
In death's other kingdom
Waking alone
At the hour when we are
Trembling with tenderness.

[II: 45 – 49]

The deliberate omission of colon (:) at the end of line 46 sharpens the theme of unreflecting love and care. It intensifies the sense of loneliness, void, emptiness and despair exactly at the moments of extreme desire. It alludes also to Marlow's world, 'we live, as we dream ----- alone'.

Lines 52 – 60 are three sentences: line 52 is first complete sentence. Lines 53 – 56 make up the second complete sentence, and lines 57 – 60 are third complete sentence. But the deviation at graphological level ----- the absence of the sentence boundary marker at the end of lines 52, 56, and 60 ----- is not without a purpose. Consider the lines:

The eyes are not here
There are no eyes here
In this valley of dying stars
In this hollow valley
This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms
In this last of meeting places
We grope together
And a void speech
Gathered on this beach of the tumid river

[II: 52 – 60]

The first sentence has simple SVA structure. The second sentence has AVSAAAA structure. Here the last adverbial phrase (This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms) is actually a prepositional phrase, so here it is syntactically deviant as the preposition 'in' is ellipted in the beginning. The third sentence has ASVAConj.VO structure with 'ed' participle clause (line 60). This sentence has two clauses: first in lines 57, 58 and second in lines 59, 60 joined together with a coordinate conjunction 'and'.

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Again, one further graphological deviation: a comma (,) at the end of 59 is also deliberately ellipted. Also, Eliot's poetry is replete with repetitive expression despite the fact that he does not follow the rules of versification. In the above passage the use of lexeme 'eyes' in lines 52, 53 and 62; the anaphoric repetition of 'in this' in lines 54, 55 and 57; phonological congruence between 'stars' and 'star' (lines 54, 63) provides the linguistic cohesion along with musicality and ceremoniousness.

The absence of sentence boundary markers, the ellipted preposition 'in', absence of a comma at the end of line 59, and all the cohesive linguistic clues in the passage provide continuity and a pace to the thematic march of the poem. Now there are no similitude of the eyes, and the 'fading' (line 28) becomes a 'dying' star. The land is a hollow valley which carries a ghostly reflection of the human physiognomy in decay, ending as the broken, inarticulate reflection of the lost kingdoms of the Old Testament. And with this declination comes the awareness that the indirect meeting found in aspects of beauty must yield to the direct meeting which has been shunned. The hollow men now avoid speech. The contrast with Section I is clear, and the river suggests that of Dante's Inferno. But they have no eyes, no vision, unless 'the eyes' return as the 'perpetual', not a fading or dying, star. But for empty men this is only a hope.

Last four lines of *The Hollow Men* (lines 95 – 98) are graphologically deviant:

This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but with a whisper.

[ll: 95 -98]

First three lines have the same syntactic structure: SVC OV. These are three sentences. Each sentence has two clauses: first clause (This is the way) while shifting its rank here can be considered Adverbial, as it answers the question, 'How the world ends?' These lines are graphologically deviant also. First two sentences are without sentence boundary markers and the third sentence has a colon (:) absent at the end of line 97. These graphological deviations refer to the free writing way of the writer where he combines different linguistic materials from different textual sources, all in a collage style. As these lines are a parody, combining a line from the children's song, 'Here we go round the mulberry bush' ----- This is the way we clap our hands' ----- with the phrase 'Word without end' from the prayer: 'glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen' (Southam, 1994). This relationship between the theme of these last four lines of the poem and the children's song mentioned above, and the Prayer just mentioned emerges in the minds of the readers only due to the deliberate graphological deviations made by the poet.

Conclusion

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The irregularities of expression are overwhelmingly dominant in TS Eliot's poems. *The Hollow Men* shows Eliot's innovations of irregular patterns in typographical and punctuational practices.

Parallelism of expression, Eliot's preferred poetic feature, is beautifully employed to produce musicality and ceremoniousness. Eliot's semantic and graphological poetic irregularities bring about the difference between the language of conventional literature and that of the modern / experimental one. These deviations create desired imagery in the minds of the readers.

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