

## **Foregrounding in E.E. Cummings' *your little voice*: A Stylistic Analysis**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Poetry defines and records the poet's views, opinions, and society to whom he/she addresses (Biclar, 2014). The study was conducted to stylistically analyze E.E. Cummings', *Your Little Voice*. Specifically, it answered the questions: what are the foregrounded parts in the poem of E.E. Cummings' *your little voice*? At what linguistic levels do they occur? How do the foregrounded portions of the text relate together and contribute to the interpretation of the poem? Through the descriptive-qualitative research, employing the Practical Stylistic Analysis, the findings and interpretations revealed that E.E. Cummings' *your little voice* is wholly foregrounded as a result of his choice to deviate from the linguistic norms and normal conventions of language. All the poetic lines in the poem exhibit absurdity and irregularity which made them difficult to understand. The linguistic deviations occur at graphological, lexical, grammatical, and semantic levels. There is a cohesion of foregrounding that contributes to the interpretation of the poem. By acting as links between themselves, all the items conferred a cohesive strength on the poem and make it functioned as a unified whole. The poem explains the persistent and strong desire of the poet for the addressee not within his immediate reach.

**Keywords** – foregrounding, poetry, literature, E.E. Cummings, descriptive-qualitative research, Capiz, Philippines

## INTRODUCTION

Stylistic studies give flavor to the kind of studies carried out by stylisticians and provides them useful indicators of approaches taken to analyze texts (Jeffries, 2010). He added that this would also become useful measures to students who would choose to do related stylistic studies.

Poetry defines and records the poet's views, opinions, and society to whom he/she addresses (Biclar, 2014). Several literary texts usually contain rare, unusual, and unfamiliar portions that manifest the poets' creativity in using the conventions of language in his advantage, personal choice and poetic styles.

Foregrounding as a strategy comes in two guises, namely: as qualitative (deviation from the norm), and quantitative foregrounding (parallelism). In foregrounding, there is deviation from the language code or from the conventions of the language to create something distinctive and significant in conveying one's personal and unique vision. Normally, it deviates from usual to unusual, making the expected unexpected, which according to Short (1996) creates a linguistic phenomenon that gives significant effect to readers and hearers.

Simpson (2004) defines *foregrounding* as a form of textual patterning which is motivated specifically for literary-aesthetic purposes. This stylistic analysis of E.E. Cummings' "your little voice" helps literary readers and students analyze poems with rare, unusual, and unfamiliar expressions. It also gives way to language-based approaches in the study of literature, making it a starting point for fuller interpretations. To literature teachers, it offers opportunities for pedagogic awareness on other literary discourses.

After comparison of poems to be studied, the researcher chose ee Cummings' poem because of its aesthetic properties in the texts. Looking at unusual literary styles challenged the researchers to make it their text for stylistic analysis.

In this study, the researcher specifically looks at deviation from the norm which means that she examined the peculiarities in the poem which give bearing to the interpretation of the text, and ee Cummings' "your little voice" perfectly manifested these characteristics that challenges the researchers to have this stylistic analysis in interpreting the language.

## **FRAMEWORK**

This stylistic research is anchored on the top-down approach in stylistic research which involves asking questions about the textual meaning of the poem and the reader's role in negotiating textual meanings.

According to Short (1996), it is sensible to begin a stylistic analysis by examining foregrounded parts of the texts because it is very important for whatever stylistic interpretation. As a stylistic approach to study of text, it is a technique for 'making strange' in language. In literature, foregrounding is derivation: violation of rules and connections.

Foregrounding as a strategy, proved that poems are open to several possible interpretations of the bearers as readers. It also helps in explaining parts and aspects of the text that readers may have missed.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE PROBLEM**

The study was conducted to stylistically analyze E. E. Cummings's 'your little voice'. Specifically, the study accomplishes the following objectives: 1) To determine the foregrounded parts in the poem 'your little voice'; 2) To determine at what linguistic level do they occur; and 3) To find how the foregrounded portions relate together and contribute to the interpretation and meaning of the whole poem.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study adopted the descriptive-qualitative research employing Practical Stylistics Approach defined by Carter (2010), as a process of literary text analysis based from the basic assumptions that the primary interpretative procedures used in linguistic analysis, learning about the language, and the workings of language in literature.

Library resources, website references, and internet-based articles were compared considering aesthetic properties present. Looking at the literary styles of the authors, the researchers found E.E. Cummings poetic styles unusual which made it an excellent source for the said stylistic approach. As discussed in the book of Short (1995) *Exploring the Language of Poetry*, it was mentioned that stylistic analysis is one of the perfect ways for linguistic description which begins by examining foregrounded parts of the text.

The top-down stylistic approach was used to ask questions like the following: what are the foregrounded parts, what linguistic levels do they occur, and how the foregrounded parts relate together and contribute to the meaning of the whole poem. The researchers also adopted the steps in conducting stylistic analysis of Short which start from accounting, examining, identifying, and noting down foregrounded parts, and counting for frequency.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To understand the significance of the verbs, the poem was divided into three divisions from which each division contains them. Lines 1-12 is one division, lines 13-17 is another division, and lines 18-24 is the third division. Dividing the poem into three divisions showed the moods of the poem.

### A. Line 1-12

- [1] your little voice
- [2] Over the wires **came leaping**
- [3] and I **felt** suddenly
- [4] dizzy
- [5] With the **jostling** and **shouting** of merry flowers
- [6] wee **skipping** high-heeled flames
- [7] **courtside** before my eyes
- [8] or **twinkling** over to my side
- [9] **Looked** up
- [10] with impertinently exquisite faces
- [11] **floating** hands were **laid** upon me
- [12] I was **whirled** and **tossed** into delicious **dancing**

Examining the verbs in this group of lines, most denote a lively and dynamic action. This observation may mean that the poet intends to put a vigorous mood in this group of lines to show his jubilant experience. Main verbs used in this group of lines are in past tense to relate experiences that happened in the past to further show the recollection of experiences for emotional realization.

### B. Line 13-17

- [13] up
- [14] Up
- [15] with the pale important
- [16] stars and the Humorous
- [17] moon

The omission of verbs suggests an impression of weightlessness and suspension in free-floating relationship with each other and with the space surrounding them. Additionally, the absence of verbs in lines 13 to 17 leads to sentence fragment which shows the poet's strategy to signal the ending of his recollection of a jovial experience. The effect of combining lexical items that leads to sentence fragment was used by the poet at his disposal to end his reminiscing of experience quickly and the 'voice' which is the focal subject in the poem is nowhere to be heard. Thus, lines 13 to 17 were used as transition lines to direct the readers to his emotional realization in lines 18 to 24.

### C. Line 18-24

- [18] dear girl
- [19] How i was crazy how I **cried** when I **heard**
- [20] over time
- [21] and tide and death
- [22] **leaping**
- [23] Sweetly
- [24] your voice

Lines 18-24 reflects the grammatical deviations, specifically on sentence and rules of capitalization. The pronoun 'I' which according to rules of capitalization be in the upper case even found at the middle of the sentence.

Another deviation noted was on transitive verb *heard* that supposedly needs an object to follow as receiver of the action. In this instance, the reader is prompted from asking what is heard. This also gives the reader the chance to think and find a missing word in order to find meaning to what he/she is reading.

This is the original appearance of the poem in the printed page.

“**your little voice**”

E.E. Cummings

- [1] your little voice
- [2] **Over** the wires came leaping
- [3] and I felt suddenly
- [4] dizzy
- [5] **With** the jostling and shouting of merry flowers
- [6] wee skipping high-heeled flames
- [7] courtside before my eyes
- [8] or twinkling over to my side
- [9] **Looked** up
- [10] with impertinently exquisite faces
- [11] floating hands were laid upon me
- [12] **I** was whirled and tossed into delicious dancing
- [13] up
- [14] **Up**
- [15] with the pale important
- [16] stars and the **Humorous**
- [17] moon
- [18] dear girl
- [19] **How I** was crazy how I cried when I heard
- [20] over time
- [21] and tide and death
- [22] leaping
- [23] **Sweetly**
- [24] your voice

It was found out that all the poetic lines in the poem are foregrounded due to Cummings’ choices of conventions that fall outside the language system, exhibiting a sense of absurdity and irregularity which made the poem difficult to understand.

The deviations in the poem occur graphologically, lexically, grammatically, and semantically.

**Graphological.** There is anomalous use of indentions and margins which made the appearance of the poem strange on a printed page. This does not conform to the typographical rules of poetry. Some lines are aligned left; others are highly indented to the right which made the appearance of the poem absurd. The highly indented to the left and right show absurdity because it deviates from what is familiar that all lines in many poems are highly indented to the left. This allows for introspection and hanging effect. When analyzed, it gives you the idea that a missing link has to be provided. It all depends on the creativity of the reader/interpreter for whatever interpretation anyone gives is always accepted.

This according to Hunt (1985) creates a psychological effect to the reader he considered stylistic variation, evoking or an exciting feeling. This is the beauty of foregrounding as stylistic analysis because it strikes the readers as interesting and captures their attention. Hunt also termed this “discourse evaluation.”

**Lexical.** There is invention of new words termed as Neologism. Vigorous and lively emotions are seen on lines *jostling and shouting of merry flowers, wee skipping high-beeled flames* with sentimental winks and sad ones on *tide and death leaping sweetly your voice*.

The use of word ‘*courtesied*’ is unknown to English vocabulary. Although it functions as verb in the poem, its meaning is also absurd. Cummings maximized the utilization verbs to significantly stress the shifting of the moods in the poem – from vigorous and lively emotions, to sentimental, weak, and sad one.

**Grammatical.** There is rejection of the rules of capitalization, punctuation, sentence structure, and the rules of the language which resulted to deviations. Excessive use of line breaks contributed to the arousal in readers’ interests creating an arrest and suspension of additional information that they could supply as they continue reading. This also allows for uninterrupted movement and transition of actions in his poem which resulted to enjambment. The omission of grammatical Subject, Predicator, and Complement also leads to sentence fragmentation. The “I” in its lower case which appeared four times violated the conventional rules of grammar. The use of the lower case *up* and upper case *Up* to intensify the tone and movement of emotion from weak to vigorous.

**Semantical.** There were combinations of semantically incompatible words and phrases indicative of non-conceivable literal reference to reality. He combined what needs to be separated, and oddly separated what needs to be combined in normal code. The use of metaphorical expressions is also exercised by Cummings in the poem. Absurdly observed in the normal conventions of language use, he successfully made use of this strategy to present his unique vision of narrating

lovely experience in the past.

Semantically incompatible words are seen in lines 1 and 2 *your little voice/over the wires came leaping* provided absurd meaning. How can a little voice over the wires come leaping, when leaping can made a movement and voice that is too little can be seen to be moving? *In pale important stars* and *humorous moon*, how can pale stars become important when it means stars are not shining brightly and how can a moon be humorous? The adjectives *pale* and *humorous* can only describe a persona, not a thing like star nor a moon.

The occurrence of linguistic deviations in lines 18 to 24 upheld the most significant interpretation of the poem. There was a strong element of foregrounding in the group of lines. It was found out that the four linguistic deviations, namely: graphological, grammatical, lexical, and semantical worked significantly to reveal that the poem “your little voice” is about Cummings and his sentiments towards a girl. In its entirety, it explained the persistent and strong desire of the poet for the addressee not within his immediate reach.

The foregrounded parts of the poem contributed to the richness and variety of interpretation. The foregrounded parts when critically analyzed give the readers challenging and unique interpretation very vital in providing students the chance to share the art and skills of doing unique interpretations different from other interpretations. As Leech (1965) pointed out, another art as technique of analyzing a literary text is making the objects or elements “unfamiliar” in order to increase difficulty and prolonged the process of interpretation.

## CONCLUSIONS

The poem is wholly foregrounded as a result of Cummings choice to deviate from the linguistic norms and normal conventions of language use. All the poetic lines in the poem exhibit a sense of absurdity and irregularity which made difficult to understand. The foregrounded parts of the poem are linguistically deviant: graphologically, lexically, grammatically, and semantically. The foregrounded portions of the text relate together through the cohesive elements such as synonymy and conjunction, and through the simultaneous occurrence of linguistic deviations. The poem “your little voice” is about Cummings and his sentiments towards a girl. The poem in its entirety explains the persistent and strong desire of the poet for the addressee. Cummings uses foregrounding in his poem as a technique in presenting his unique vision of telling an experience about a girl who is so much attached to him. The previous analysis of E. E. Cummings’

poem *'your little voice'* shows how one can make use of stylistics to uphold an interpretation of a poem, and how stylistics can also highlight elements of a poem that one might otherwise miss. By using a systematic analytical technique like stylistics, ensures that a given interpretation is explicit, objective and grounded in facts.

## TRANSLATIONAL RESEARCH

The findings of this literary criticism could be translated into a conceptual manual that draws the relationships between the grammatical components and literature in unveiling the aesthetics and meaning of the text. The conceptual manual drawn can also be evaluated by the stakeholders alike for acceptability and impact.

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