An Exercise in Literary Stylistics/Cognitive Poetics: "Humanity i love you" by *e.e.* cummings

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Abstract

Literature, poetry in particular, has always intrigued readers, especially those who have an interest in delving deeper into it with a view to appreciating and interpreting it, such as literary critics, linguists, literary stylists, and more recently, cognitive linguists. The literary critic looks at it from an aesthetic point of view whereas the literary stylist and the cognitive linguist from the linguistic point of view with the latter adding a cognitive dimension to their interpretation. The most prevalent approach to studying poetry in Pakistan is the literary criticism approach. Very few would study literature through linguistics. Intrigued by both literary stylistics and cognitive linguistics, we studied some very obscure poems through these two approaches and discovered that they indeed were helpful in illuminating some of the hitherto obfuscated areas of those poems. In this essay, we present an application of literary stylistics and cognitive poetics to a poem by *e. e.* cummings, "Humanity I love you."

Keywords: Literary stylistics; cognitive poetics; *e.e.* cummings; humanity I love you.

1.0   Introduction

Literature is no longer the darling of literary critics; linguists, literary stylists, cognitive scientists have all shown a profound interest in the language of literature. Short (1996:1) defines literary stylistics as "an approach to the analysis of (literary) texts using *linguistic* description." As such, literary stylistics is the study and

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description of the choices of linguistic expression that are characteristic of literary works. Referring to literature as "the uses of language in its most prestigious form," Stockwell (2009:26) argues that cognitive poetics as a discipline takes a holistic approach towards works of literature. However, he prudently cautions against believing that cognitive poetics has 'predictive power,' that it can offer interpretations (Stockwell, 2002:7). In his view, a "cognitive poetic analysis offers a raised awareness of certain [linguistic] patterns that might have been subconscious or not even noticed at all" (2002:7). Finally, Stockwell (2002) proposes that the analysis of literary works must try to bring "the dynamic and readerly aspects of texts" together, making the reader "an inherent part of the analytical theory" (p. 136).

For our analysis, we have chosen a poem by e.e. cummings, for he has a unique style of writing poetry. Most of his poems are difficult to understand and, therefore, often misunderstood. His poetry is marked by three unique features. First, the pronoun "i" is always used in the lower case. This may be interpreted as showing humility or an effacement of the "self" — all other pronouns, in sentence medial positions, are written in lower case; so what is so special about the first person singular? However, when he uses capitalisation, he means to emphasize certain concepts; such as, "Humanity i love you." Second is the absence of punctuation altogether, which sometimes vexes the reader. Third, Cummings uses a very unusual syntax, seemingly "incorrect," in order to elucidate the meanings of his poems. His poetry, therefore, is rich with features that have been the darling objects of literary stylistics, and now those of cognitive poetics; namely, deviation and foregrounding or *figure* and *ground* (Stockwell, 2002).

In this brief essay, we shall try to show, in the words of Short (1996:27), that "detailed and systematic stylistic analysis can be seen as an aid to our understanding and appreciation of the text under discussion as well as providing a rational language-based account *to support interpretation and giving insights into the processes by which we interpret when we read*" (emphasis added). Thus, Short (1996) and Stockwell (2002) seem to concur that literary stylistics and cognitive poetics do not interpret literature *per se*, but aid readers in their interpretation. Our analysis of the poem seems to confirm Toolan's (2010:203) assertion that poets can show us "how language works . . . what language can do" and that linguists can learn from poets about "our language and language-making potential."

2.0   Literary Stylistics

Stylistics or literary stylistics is a twentieth century phenomenon, particularly of the 1960s.   Since the term 'stylistics' derives from 'style' (associated with literary

criticism) and 'istics' (from linguistics), stylistics is at the interface of the two disciplines (Widdowson, 1984). Stylistic features are basically features of language, so style in one sense is synonymous with language, the manner of expression in writing (and speaking): for example, we can speak of the `language' of *Paradise Lost*, which implies that the language is in some way distinctive or significant for the design or theme of the poem. Style may also refer to the collective set of linguistic features peculiar to, or characteristic of an author. Hence, in literary criticism, we encounter such phrases as Miltonic style, or Shakespearean style. Literary Stylistics is, thus, concerned with discovering linguistic features peculiar to, or characteristic of an author as a whole or in an individual work. Vis-a-vis poetry, literary stylisticians focus on one paramount feature of poetry to achieve this goal: **foregrounding**.

Introduced by Garvin (1964), *foregrounding* is a popular term in stylistics, which means "the throwing into relief, or the highlighting, of a linguistic sign against the background of expected norms of language use or against what is taken for granted in order to surprise or shock the reader with a fresh awareness."

Foregrounding is achieved by a variety of means, which are grouped under two main headings: **deviation** and **repetition**; or **paradigmatic** and **syntagmatic** foregrounding respectively (Leech, 1965). Deviations are violations of linguistic norms, grammatical or semantic. For example, unusual metaphors or similes come at once to the attention of the reader and hence are foregrounded. Repetition is also a kind of deviation, for it violates the normal rules of usage by over-frequency. Repetitive patterns (of sound or syntax) are superimposed on the normal background and so strike the reader's attention as unusual. Alliteration, assonance, consonance, parallelism and many other figures of speech involving repetition of lexical items and sounds are thus commonly used to achieve foregrounding.

Poets use language creatively by transcending the limitations of ordinary language, which takes it beyond the scope of linguistics (Leech, 2008: 26). However, Leech further argues that "meaning in literature cannot be studied without reference to the observable patterns of language" (p. 26) — which is a linguist's object of study.

A caution is warranted, though: the goal of literary stylistics is not simply to describe the formal features of texts *per se*, but to show their functional significance for the interpretation of literary texts; or to relate literary effects to linguistic 'causes' where these are considered to be relevant. According to Toolan:

> If I try to sum up what poets show and tell linguists it would be that language can always be adapted and refashioned, to meet and to articulate or construe new demands, new circumstances. No arena of

human activity so eloquently demonstrates the indeterminacy and impermanence of language, the potential specificity or uniqueness or newness of the meanings it enables, than literary art. (Toolan, 2010:201)

Let us now turn to a discussion of cognitive poetics and see how could it be useful to the study of literary texts.

3.0   Cognitive Poetics

While literary stylistics focuses its attention entirely on the workings of the text alone, cognitive poetics tries to understand the workings of the reader's mind by focusing on how the same text is cognitively perceived, processed and understood. According to Langacker (1998:1), cognitive linguistics looks at linguistic structure "in terms of more basic systems and abilities (e.g. perception, attention, categorization) from which it cannot be dissociated." Similarly, in his book, *The Poetics of Mind*, Gibbs, Jr. (1994) writes at length about human cognition, language, thought, and poetic thinking:

> human cognition is fundamentally shaped by various poetic or figurative processes. Metaphor, metonymy, irony, and other tropes are not linguistic distractions of literal mental thought but constitute basic schemes by which people conceptualize their experience and the external world. Since every mental construct reflects an adaptation of the mind to the world, the language that expresses these constructs attests to the continuous process of poetic thinking. (p. 1)

This is eloquently put. Our cognitive development kicked off as soon as we opened our eyes in this world. We began to perceive and experience the external world, conceptualising every experience cognitively through the medium of language, both figurative and non-figurative. When we encounter language, the reverse happens: we return to the same cognitive processes that were triggered off by our experiences of the external world in the first place. Doing cognitive poetics, as such, is based on "our experience of the world and the way we perceive and conceptualise it" (Ungerer & Schmid, 1996:x).

Since "metaphor is primarily an issue of conceptualisation" (Hiraga, 2005;25), metaphors in spoken, written and poetic discourse may be better interpreted and understood through a cognitive approach, metaphor being 'a cognitive process in which one set of concepts is understood in terms of another' (Deane, 1995:628 – as cited by Hiraga, 2005:26). Metaphors are cognitive "mappings across conceptual domains" (Lakoff, 1993:245). This happens because "the particular

content of a metaphor can be said to constitute an interpretation of reality in terms of mental icons that literally allows us to *see* what is being talked about" (Danesi, 1995:266, original emphasis).

Freeman (2005) provides a non-exhaustive list of questions that cognitive poetics may try to address:

- What elements of literary discourse are common to human reasoning in general and what distinguishes the literary from the non-literary?
- What can literary creativity tell us about mind/brain processes and their emotional affects?
- What are the mechanisms that enable creativity to occur and to be recognized and understood?
- What can a cognitive study of literature contribute to the question of what cognitive strategies are universal and what culturally bound? (p. 3)

Hence, cognitive poetics "aims more to supplement than to supplant the current approaches and methodologies" (Richardson & Steen, 2002:2).

3.0   Approach and Material

3.1   Approach

Although a number of approaches to stylistic analysis are available (Leech, 1969; Widdowson, 1974; Cluysennar, 1976; Short, 1996, etc.), I will follow Short's approach (1996), being the latest, for the analysis of the chosen poem along with a cognitive commentary wherever applicable.

Short (1996) focuses on three areas of poetic discourse: a) foregrounding, b) style variation in texts, and c) sound, meaning and effect. Foregrounding is achieved through deviation and parallelism. Short lists seven types of deviations: i) discoursal, ii) semantic iii) lexical, iv) grammatical, v) morphological, vi) phonological/graphological, and vii) Internal & external deviation.

It is not probable that one will find all of these features in a single poem; however, I shall attempt to present, explain, and discuss whatever features I should be able to discover in the poem.

3.2   Material: The Text of the Poem

As mentioned in the introduction, I have selected "Humanity i love you" by e.e. cummings as the poem for analysis. In this poem, cummings illustrates the faults of

humanity through a combination of structural changes, figurative language, and ironic visual imagery. The poem is interesting in the sense that it begins with the words "Humanity i love you" which statement is then repeated two more times after regular intervals before it ends with the statement "Humanity / i hate you."

Humanity i love you

<u>Humanity i love you</u>
because you would rather <u>black the boots of</u>
<u>success</u> than enquire whose <u>soul dangles from his</u>
<u>watch-chain</u> which would be embarrassing for both

parties and because you   5
unflinchingly applaud all
songs containing the words country home and
mother when sung at <u>the old howard</u>

Humanity i love you because
when <u>you're hard up</u> you <u>pawn your</u>   10
<u>intelligence</u> to buy a drink and <u>when</u>
<u>you're flush</u> pride keeps

you from the pawn shops and
because you are continually <u>committing</u>
<u>nuisances</u> but more   15
especially in your own house

Humanity i love you because you
are perpetually <u>putting the secret of</u>
<u>life in your pants</u> and forgetting
it's there and sitting down   20

on it
and because you are
forever making poems in <u>the lap</u>
<u>of death</u> Humanity

<u>i hate you</u>   25

The **Old Howard** Theatre was a famous burlesque house located in Boston, Massachusetts, USA's erstwhile Scollay Square.

flush: well-off, in the money.

Quite cynical in nature, this poem describes cummings' disgust with classes in society and, obviously, humanity in general (due to his experience with war?). Cummings uses material metaphors to stress the selfishness of humanity. Watching blatant disregard for the downtrodden can cause one to repudiate humanity and despise it. In reality, what *e.e.* cummings is trying to say is "Humanity / i hate you."

4.0   Analysis and Discussion

The poem is straightforward as far as syntax is concerned. There are no glaring examples of syntactic deviations. When read aloud, one feels a flow that is characteristic of spontaneous speech. One may also note the abundant use of the conjunctions, 'and' (used seven times) and 'because' (used six times), which is again a feature of extemporaneous speech. Following is a phrase by phrase/clause by clause analysis of the poem.

"Humanity i love you"

The poem begins with a pronouncement, reiterating the title of the poem. We know that *e.e.* cummings usually uses lower case letters throughout; as such, "Humanity" with a capital beginning is unusual and must be significant. It is also *deviant* from the norms of cummings' own style. The first person pronoun is in lower case as usual putting it in contrast with "Humanity" thus *foregrounding* "Humanity." Personified and apostrophised, 'Humanity' in sentence initial position due to inversion stands out as the 'figure' against the 'ground'.

"because you would rather black the boots of / success"

"*Black the boots of/success*" refers to the shoe polishing trade in the streets of the United States. Cummings may be cynically referring to the way it is done: the person getting his shoes polished keeps the shoes on while the person (usually a boy) polishing his shoes sits on the ground in his feet. The word, "black" seems to have double *entendre* since these boys/persons are commonly black. "Success" is used as a personified **metonymy** for successful people, the elite class. A phrase in English, '*to lick the boots of*' means to be servile, obsequious, flattering towards someone. One declares one's love usually bending on one knee and offering a rose while looking up at the beloved. Is the speaker doing the same here? But what if he said that 'dear I love you because you are so ugly?'

than enquire whose <u>soul dangles from his</u>
<u>watch-chain</u> which would be embarrassing for both
parties

"To dangle" has two meanings: to hang freely and to display as an enticement. The souls of the unsuccessful/downtrodden dangle from the watch-chains of the successful; perhaps, trying to invite the attention of humanity to its precarious condition. Why watch-chain? Watches display time, but here the souls of the distressed are displayed. It may also mean that time has forsaken these people forever. Just as the hands of a watch tick continuously without any apparent change, these downtrodden continue with their struggle without being recognised by the 'Humanity'. In Cummings' times, men had pocket watches with chains that kept them secured by hooking them to the coat buttons. Hence, 'dangles from his watch-chain' is a **neologism**.

Embarrassing for which *both* parties — *Humanity* and *the suffering soul* or *Humanity* and *success* whose boots it is polishing — licking?

Cummings seems to be distancing himself from the Humanity that he is describing as cruel, senseless, selfish — in short, as a monster (cf. "pity this monster, manunkind / not").

and because you
unflinchingly applaud all
<u>songs containing the words country home and</u>
<u>mother</u> when sung at <u>the old howard</u>

Country, home, mother are words that indicate patriotism — *homeland*, *motherland*? But "when sung at the old howard" — and not at other places or otherwise? The **Old Howard** Theatre was a famous burlesque house located in Boston, Massachusetts, USA's erstwhile Scollay Square. Hence, it indicates Humanity's love for rhetoric and ostentation, pomp and show — again characteristics of the successful. Spelled in lower case, the poet seems to ridicule *the old howard.*

Humanity i love you because
when <u>you're hard up</u> you <u>pawn your</u>
<u>intelligence</u> to buy a drink

When *hard up* (for money), Humanity can stoop so low as to mortgage its intelligence for frivolous things, such as a drink, but it does not use its intelligence

to ameliorate the lot of the suffering souls. '*Hard up*' is informal. '*Pawn your intelligence*' is fresh and original, and arrests the attention of the reader at once. The phrase is thus **foregrounded**.

> and <u>when</u>
> <u>you're flush</u> pride keeps
>
> you from the pawn shops

When flush (well off in terms of money), Humanity puffs with pride and keeps away from the same pawnshops. It seems to be a comment on the hypocrisy of Humanity. '*Flush*' is also informal. Note that the two lexical items dealing with money are both *informal*.

> and
> because you are continually <u>committing</u>
> <u>nuisances</u> but more
> especially in your own house

The poet accuses Humanity of "*committing nuisances*" which may mean perpetrating acts that are obnoxious or injurious to people at large. What may "*but more/ especially in your own house*" mean? Humanity is doing so within its own ranks. Probably, it means that Humanity (the haves) is causing injury to humanity (the have-nots) itself! We write humanity with small 'h', here, to refer to the have-nots.

> Humanity i love you because you
> are perpetually <u>putting the secret of</u>
> <u>life in your pants</u> and forgetting
> it's there and sitting down
>
> <u>on it</u>

"*putting the secret of life in your pants*" — why pants, why not pocket? Is it a disguised allusion to procreation, organ of reproduction? And then forgetting it and sitting down on it; stifling the very life that Humanity is supposed to nurture? The very clause is striking which results in foregrounding the meaning. Placing 'on it' in a separate line not only helps foreground it but also creates a visual effect of someone in a sitting position.

> and because you are
> forever making poems in <u>the lap</u>
> <u>of death</u>

Rather than valuing life (previous stanza), Humanity is producing "*poems in the lap of death*" — poems of death, in praise of death to be sung at the old howard. Humanity is bringing death to humanity by supporting whatever causes death. It may also mean that whatever Humanity is doing, it goes in the service of death.

. . .   Humanity

i hate you

Finally, the poet declares what he intended from the very beginning — "Humanity / i hate you" and we learn that "Humanity i love you" was an ironic declaration. One graphological deviation is the division of the clause into two lines: 'Humanity' in one line and 'i hate you' in a separate last line with some space between the two that creates a dramatic pause, known in rhetoric as *aposiopesis* (Gk. 'becoming silent'). It shows the speaker standing at a distance from 'Humanity', pausing, as if recalling what he just said, evaluating it, maybe regaining his breath, and then declaring 'i hate you.'

When we reach the end of the poem, we notice that the poem is *deviant* in a very interesting way. It is deviant in the sense that the arguments are a complete turn over with respect to the title — what the reader expects does not happen; rather the opposite happens. The speaker, so to speak, utters 'Humanity', stands up, steps back and declares, 'I hate you' leaving the erstwhile beloved in utter shock (?).

Cummings also uses **parallelism** throughout to effect foregrounding. We have already noticed that the conjunction '*because'* is used six times. Let us see how the argument is structures:

Humanity i love you because . . . . and because . . . .

Humanity i love you because . . . . and because . . . .

Humanity i love you because . . . . and because . . . .

We can replace the word 'love' with 'hate', which is what Cummings intended from the very beginning. The speaker is someone who stands at a distance from 'Humanity,' or from the society, mocking and denouncing the hypocrisy and pretensions of its members; a 'Humanity' that is bent upon destroying 'humanity'. Humanity, head down, is too busy in blacking the boots of the haves to notice the souls of the have-nots dangling from the watch-chains just above its head. To me,

it appears a love/hate relationship, rather than just hatred for Humanity: love for 'humanity' (the lesser one) and hatred for 'Humanity' (the elite one).

The central idea of the poem is that 'Humanity' is hypocritical and indifferent to life unless it serves some purpose to it. It seems to be a comment upon the behaviour of the world powers how they treat the suffering 'humanity.' They ignore the suffering lot unless and until it serves their purpose in some way. For example, they intervened in East Timor ten years ago, but have been ignoring the plight of the Kashmiri people and the Palestinians for more than half a century. Cummings became disillusioned with humanity late in his career due to his war experiences. His later poems are almost all misanthropic in nature, describing the indifference of the haves to the sufferings of the have-nots. His poems should act as a wake-up call to mankind — 'manunkind' to be correct — to change its behaviour and help those in need unselfishly. If 'Humanity' is to survive, it needs to raise its head and reach up to rescue the dangling souls of the 'lesser' humanity.

5.0   Conclusion

The purpose of this exercise was to see what role Literary Stylistics and Cognitive Poetics could play in our understanding of a poem. It is obvious that both approaches were helpful in bringing to light some obscure aspects of the poem. Even if we did not know anything about e. e. cummings and his style, we still would have reached the same conclusion: 'Humanity' is hateful because it kills its own kind, the 'lesser' humanity.

Our analysis of the poem also leads us to concur with Toolan (2010:189) that "poets continually show linguists about language, things of which linguists themselves can easily lose sight: especially our power through language to rethink everything and anything." In short, "Poets, by their non-conventional use of metaphors, lead their readers beyond the bounds of ordinary modes of thought" (Hiraga, 2005:26), which aspects literary stylistics and cognitive poetics try to foreground.

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