

LANGUAGE THROUGH POETRY: A STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF THOMAS HARDY'S «THE RUINED MAID»

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The use of literature, as Martin and Hill stress, is unfortunately still “something of a novelty (albeit a rediscovered one)”¹ in the EFL context and poetry, in particular, has for too long been considered a taboo field. On this present occasion I shall examine language through poetry by presenting a stylistic analysis of Thomas Hardy's “delightfully comic poem”², “The Ruined Maid”.

To borrow Geoffrey Leech's definition in *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* by “stylistics” what is meant is simply “the study of the use of language in literature”, that is the investigation of “the general characteristics of language, and especially the English language, as a medium of literary expression”³. As Katie Wales remarks in her *Dictionary of Stylistics*, this subject is also “sometimes called confusingly **literary stylistics** or **linguistic stylistics**; *literary* because it tends to focus on literary texts; *linguistic* because its models are drawn from linguistics ... Because of its eclecticism”, she rightly comments, “stylistics has increasingly come to be used as a teaching tool in language and literary studies for both native and foreign speakers of English”⁴.

This stylistic analysis of Hardy's poem begins with a general approach. The poem is first seen as a whole and then its different levels, namely its lexis, cohesion, syntactic structure and phonological features are examined in detail. In other words, a text-centred methodology is offered. Simultaneously, I shall try to show how the poet makes use of all those component parts to convey to his readers the message of his poem, thus reinforcing what Wales puts forth in the following terms: “The goal of most stylistic studies is not simply to describe the **FORMAL** features of texts for their own sake, but in order to show their **FUNCTIONAL** significance for the **INTERPRETATION** of the text”⁵.

The Ruined Maid

— “O'Melia, my dear, this does everything crown!
Who could have supposed I should meet you in Town?
And whence such fair garments, such prosperi-ty?” —
“O didn't you know I'd been ruined?” said she.

¹ Alex Martin and Robert Hill, *Modern Poetry*, p. 8.

² R. P. Draper, “The Feminine Voice in the Poetry of Thomas Hardy”, p. 76.

³ Geoffrey Leech, *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry*, p. 1.

⁴ Katie Wales, *A Dictionary of Stylistics*, p. 438.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 437-438.

- “You left us in tatters, without shoes or socks,
Tired of digging potatoes, and spudding up docks;
And now you’ve gay bracelets and bright feathers three!” —
“Yes: that’s how we dress when we’re ruined,” said she. 1.5
- “At home in the barton you said “thee” and “thou”,
And “thik oon”, and “theas oon”, and “t’other”; but now 1.10
Your talking quite fits ‘ee for high compa-ny!” —
“Some polish is gained with one’s ruin”, said she.
- “Your hands were like paws then, your face blue and bleak
But now I’m bewitched by your delicate cheek,
And your little gloves fit as on any la-dy!” — 1.15
“We never do work when we’re ruined”, said she.
- “You used to call home-life a hag-ridden dream,
And you’d sigh, and you’d sock; but at present you seem
To know not of megrims or melancho-ly!” —
“True. One’s pretty lively when ruined,” said she. 1.20
- “I wish I had feathers, a fine sweeping gown,
And a delicate face, and could strut about Town!” —
“My dear — a raw country girl, such as you be,
Cannot quite expect that. You ain’t ruined,” said she.

Thomas Hardy, 1866

THE POEM AS A WHOLE

“The Ruined Maid” is a poem about women and more particularly about the “fallen woman” as is explicitly shown in its title. What first strikes us in Hardy’s comic poem is the unconventional form in which the theme is presented: a simple dialogue between two old acquaintances who unexpectedly meet in town. A face-to-face verbal interaction between two persons is thus offered to us. One of them is immediately introduced since her name “Melie” is placed in an outstanding, vocative, position at the beginning of the first line. One soon finds out that in fact she is the central character. She is Amelia, the “ruined maid”. The other person who plays an important part since he/she leads the whole interaction is at first undefined. The reader knows nothing about him/her in the beginning of the poem. He/she appears as “I” in opposition to “you” referring to Amelia: “Who could have supposed I should meet **you** in Town?” (1.2). However as we read through we gradually perceive that this person is also a young woman. Part of the subject of their conversation — Amelia’s lady-like appearance and clothes — and her eager interest in Amelia’s transformation lead us to that conclusion. This will be corroborated in the final lines: “a raw **country girl**, such as you be” (1.23).

The first stanza introduces the young girl’s encounter with Amelia. Her words (1.1-1.2) indicate that she is surprised in seeing Amelia in such a place as town and that she immediately notices she is changed (1.3). In the second stanza the girl recollects Amelia’s former life in the country and her departure from it (1.5-1.6). She stands her past situation in contrast with her

present one and the expressions “in tatters, without shoes or socks” (l.5) relating to the past and “you’ve gay bracelets and bright feathers three” (l.7) relating to the present clearly indicate the differences. The third stanza gives an account of another change in Amelia: her altered language. The differences between Amelia’s former way of speaking (l.9-l.10) and her new better way of expressing herself — “but now / Your talking quite fits ‘ee for high compa-ny!” (l.11) — are pinpointed. In the following stanza Amelia’s old village friend describes her former poor physical aspect, “hands like paws, ... face blue and bleak” (l.13), and then she contrasts it with Amelia’s new appearance, her face now displaying a “delicate cheek” (l.14). In stanza 5 Amelia’s old sad feelings about her country-life (l.17-l.18) and her new feelings (l.19-l.20) are made known.

As the reader goes through these stanzas he/she becomes aware of their similar structure. Thus in each stanza whilst the first three lines present the girl’s speech the last produces Amelia’s ironic reply concerning her ruin. This structural parallelism occurs throughout the poem till stanza 6 is reached. In the last stanza this former parallelism is broken since here the subject of the girl’s speech is changed: presently Amelia’s past is no longer recalled. In spite of Amelia’s successive answers about her ruined condition the girl tells her she yearns to be like her (l.21-l.22). Amelia’s ironic, pungent reply in the two final lines — “My dear — a raw country girl, such as you be, / Cannot quite expect that. You ain’t ruined,” said she.” — points out that the young girl’s inexperience. “a raw country girl, such as you be” is incompatible with such a longing, thus shattering the girl’s naive expectations.

LEXICAL FEATURES

In “The Ruined Maid” one rapidly notes that many of its lexical items belong to distinct language-user and language-use varieties. For instance we observe that many of the girl’s words — the poet’s main female interlocutor — clearly disclose the regional and social background of both young women.

The initial clipping of the name Amelia — the standard form of the ruined maid’s name — at once indicates the poem’s homely register (i.e., language variation according to use). The tenor of discourse (i.e., relationship between the participants) is an informal one which in fact suits the inner situation of the poem: a spontaneous dialogue in an unexpected meeting. The adaptation of the common expression “this crown’s everything!” (l.1), for instance, evidently pertains to this same informal tenor of language-use varieties.

Distinct language-user varieties such as geographical, social and temporal dialects clearly appear in the poem. As Leech explains, these dialects or “different “Englishes” ... are distinguished by special features of semantics, vocabulary, grammar, sometimes even of pronunciation”⁶. Terms such as “thee”, “thou” (l.9), “thik oon”, “theas oon”, “t’other” (l.10) and “‘ee” (l.11) definitely belong to a regional dialect. Their occurrence in such a successive form can only be purposeful. Through this device the poet draws the reader’s attention to one of the characteristics of country people that most delighted him. It is of course well-known that Hardy was an interested observer of country folk, of their speech and idiosyncracies. His fondness for regional dialect and uncouth language is evidently foregrounded in these lines.

Other expressions such as “digging potatoes”, “spudding up docks” (l.6) and “barton” (l.9) belong to a rural lexis and enhance the young women’s social origin, simultaneously evidencing that they come from a low, rural social class. In spite of her outward transformation

⁶ Leech, *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry*, p. 10.

and apparently improved language Amelia's solecisms "you be" and the final "you **ain't** ruined" comically heighten such low social origins.

The modern reader may also notice that some of the lexical items from the poem are nowadays considered out-of-date. We can say that while the second person singular pronoun "thee", "thou", for instance, has long been obsolete, other expressions such as "garments" (l.3), "sweeping gown" (l.21), "sock" (l.18) and "ruined" (l.4) are part of a temporal dialect related, no doubt, to Hardy's epoch: The Victorian Age. "Sock" in the sense of "sulk" is also dialect.

Another lexical aspect to be noted is the concentration of items pertaining to the same lexical sets. Terms such as "bracelets", "feathers" (l.7), "dress" (l.8), "gloves" (l.15) and "sweeping gown" (l.21) share the same components of meaning. They all are associated with women's clothing and can be regrouped under a lexical set labelled "female clothing". Along with these semantically related terms Hardy uses repeated expressions and words usually connected to femininity such as "my dear" (l.1, l.23), "delicate cheek" (l.14) / "delicate face" (l.22) and "feathers" (l.7, l.21). By doing so we can affirm that the theme of womanhood is enhanced.

COHESION

In Hardy's poem a certain number of lexical items are reiterated. Besides the repetitions previously signalled, others also call one's attention: "fits — fit" (l.11, l.15), "socks — sock" (l.5, l.18), "quite" (l.11, l.24), "Town" (l.2, l.22). Their amount is quite significant and the use of such a stylistic device appears as intentional. Repetition acts in fact as a cohesive element linking items together and bringing elements to the attention of the reader.

Since they all share the same semantic components words such as those previously mentioned under the lexical set "female clothing" also give rise to collocation (i.e., association). In line 7, for instance, a strong collocation is to be noted: "gay bracelets and bright feathers" (gay — bright / bracelets — feathers). These two semantically linked couplets can actually be seen as a combination of two collocations. "The Ruined Maid" is a poem that is full of collocated words. By creating associative chains between items from the same lexical set, collocation as well as repetition confers a deep lexical cohesion on the poem.

Apart from lexical cohesion we can recognize other types of cohesion. Terms like "my", "this"; "I", "you"; "such"; "she"; "us"; "that"; "we"; "your"; "one"; "now" and "then" are deictics whose purpose is to form cohesive links. For example, in "'**you** ain't ruined," said **she**" (l.24), "you" obviously designates the first interlocutor, Amelia's country girlfriend, and "she", Amelia herself. "You" and "she" are therefore anaphoric terms that function as reference within the poem.

Hardy frequently makes use of conjunction, another type of cohesive element. The reiteration of internal sentence conjunctions such as "and" and "but" is significant. "And" appears, for example, on thirteen occasions. Since they bind parts of sentences together, conjunctions add cohesion to the poem. By acting as links between themselves, all these items confer a cohesive strength on the poem and make it function as a unified whole.

SYNTACTIC STRUCTURE

I shall start by affirming that much of the poem appears to be built in parallel structures and that mainly two types of parallelism within the sentences are to be detected. Following the

We note that a variation within this [ASPC] clause structure occurs because the [SP] elements of the clause have been omitted in line 20 (ellipsis). These subordinate clauses that have been systematically placed at the end of the stanzas are the clauses in which the reasons, explanations for Amelia's changes are given. "....., said she", at the end of each stanza is an example of thematic ordering. By inverting the [SP] clause pattern into [PS] the poet places the pronoun "she" in a foregrounding position.

PHONOLOGICAL FEATURES

In this short phonological survey I begin with the analysis of the metrical form of the poem.

1.1 $\begin{array}{ccccccc} x & / & x & x & / & x & x & / & x & x & / \\ /O'Me/ia, & my & dear, & this & does & e/ & verything & crown./ \end{array}$

1.2 $\begin{array}{ccccccc} x & / & x & x & / & x & x & / & x & x & / \\ /Who & could/ & have & supposed/ & I & should & meet/ & you & in & Town?/ \end{array}$

After the scansion of a few lines we realise that we are in the presence of anapaestic tetrameters / X X / / with a pattern variation. The introduction of an iambic foot / X / / (as in $\begin{array}{c} x \\ /O'Me/(lia) \end{array}$) at the beginning of the lines produces that variation. This combination of iambs and anapaests gives way to a lively rhythm, a rising rhythm, well-suited to the dialogue-aspect of verbal interaction presented in "The Ruined Maid". The succession of monosyllabic words in most of the lines and the occurrence of one stressed monosyllabic word at the end of these (exception made for lines 3, 11, 15 and 19 all ending with polysyllabic words with the sound /i:;) also contribute to such a marked beat. Line 13 is a good example of this:

$\begin{array}{ccccccc} x & / & x & x & / & x & x & / & x & x & / \\ /Your & hands/were & like & paws/then, & your & face/blue & and & bleak/ \end{array}$

As far as rhyme patterning is concerned, two types of rhymes are to be distinguished. In the first two lines of each stanza we have masculine rhymes — single stressed syllables — such as "socks - docks" (l.5-l.6). In the two other lines it is the final vowel of the ending words that rhymes — C V. The sound of this final vowel, which throughout the poem is /i:/ such as "be - she" (l.23-l.24), forms a full rhyme.

The complete rhyme-scheme of "The Ruined Maid" is as follows:

1	2	3	4	5	6
a } aʊn a }	c } oks c }	d } aʊ d }	e } i:k e }	f } i:m f }	a } aʊn a }
b } i: b }	b } i: b }	b } i: b }	b } i: b }	b } i: b }	b } i: b }

inclusion of "The Ruined Maid" in Thomas Hardy's collection "Poems of the Past and the Present" (1901).

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