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**A Stylistic Analysis of W.H. Auden's Poem: "The Shield of Achilles"**

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"The Shield of Achilles" written by W. H. Auden, was published in 1952 and was also the title of THE collection of poems *The Shield of Achilles*, published in 1955. It was awarded the National Book Award in 1956. Auden employs an alternating pattern of rhyme royal (ABABBCC) and ballad format (ABCBDEFE) respectively in the verse. A stylistic analysis of the poem would primarily focus on THE major lexical (vocabulary) items such as anaphoric and cataphoric reference, conjunction and lexical cohesion such as reiteration and collocation. In addition, the present study does not endorse any repudiation of the presence of other aspects of stylistic and linguistic aspects in the text. The current study would support the notion that the stylistic devices and features play a significant role in interpreting the multiple issues, themes, images, symbols, viewpoints, style and structure of the above-mentioned literary work. It is not restricted to the analysis of various lexical items but also includes a detailed analysis of various aspects of the socio-cultural contexts. By analysing different features of the rhyme, the study would help understand the aesthetic effect on the mind of the reader which is the primary objective of literature. It is an attempt to bring out the notion of language learning through literature that introduces the pedagogic advantages of the underlying research to the teaching community. In addition, the following analysis would equip the researchers with the varied tools and devices of stylistics to interpret the works of literature from the different perspectives. In this way, the reader would make observations which are primarily based upon the facts and figures. It is beneficial for the language learners (the students who reside in the hinterland and pursue their studies in the regional vernacular) who do read literature through the bilingual method and would substantially enhance their academic prowess and develop interest in English literature.

In the domain of stylistics, the word 'style' denotes language use in a text. It divulges the distinctive expression of language a writer exploits to convey the contemplated message to the



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concerned reader. In general, the style can be applied to the spoken and written language and a literary as well as a non-literary text, but the current research restricts itself to the written literary texts. A style reveals a writer's personality and simultaneously exhibits the varied choices of expressions of language s/he makes in lexical items, syntactic structure, figures of speech and thought presentation. So, the writer weaves a web of words to convey the intended message to the intended reader. Geoffrey Leech and Mick Short describe style as "the linguistic characteristics of a particular text" (11). The word has its origin in George Puttenham's treatise *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), but in the modern world, it is attributed to the language of a writer, to a particular period, to a particular genre (art, film, music and literature) and so on and so forth. On the contrary, an in-depth analysis of "The Shield of Achilles" crosses the underlying limited barriers and enjoys a fair amount of success in investigating the literary expression of the English language. Peter Verdonk states that "style is indeed a distinctive way of using language for some purpose and to some effect" (5). And stylistics applies linguistics to investigate the style of the aforementioned poem. It is important to note that the study would deconstruct the orthodox opinion that the counting of lexical items (nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs) is the primary job of a stylistician. On the contrary, a stylistician finds out how an author moves away from the conventional use of language to foreground the contextual aspects of a text (a comprehensive study of the double layers of meanings in a literary work by the dint of various tools and devices of stylistics). The students, researchers and theorists of stylistics have contributed significantly to make it a complete and distinct discipline. It is taught and researched extensively in the departments of language, linguistics and literature all over the world.

Stylistics utilizes the varied linguistic tools and devices to illustrate the distinctive expressions of the English language in a text which an author employs in the composition of a text to achieve an aesthetic effect on the intended reader. It validates this point that an author has access to the varied expressions of language but uses them according to the situation. These expressions primarily originate from the distinct varieties of a language—the English language. An important point to remember is that the varieties of language vary from one another—the dissimilitude between the spoken and the written English. Therefore, through the knowledge of infinite



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varieties of language one would be able to investigate the variance betwixt a doctor-patient face-to-face conversation and an extract from academic discourse. According to Peter Verdonk, “stylistics, the study of style, can be defined as the analysis of distinctive expression in language and the description of its purpose and effect” (4). As a consequence, stylistics provides various tools and devices to the reader to analyse and interpret a literary discourse from the linguistic viewpoint. Because stylistics is as an amalgamation of literary criticism and linguistics—the word ‘style’ is derived from literary criticism and ‘-istics’ from linguistics. As far as the above poem is concerned, the varied stylistics devices and tools have been used in the following section to demonstrate the pedagogic advantages of the study that establish a significant relation between an addresser and an addressee and construct an easier path for the reader to grasp the decoded meaning of text.

The poem “The Shield of Achilles”, which has been written in nine stanzas by W. H. Auden (see Appendix), poses a challenge for the reader to grasp the intended meaning but by applying certain stylistic devices and tools, a receiver would be able to comprehend the significance of the poem. It is observed that the poet employs a complex lexis to disseminate the after-effects of the war (an allusion to the Trojan war in which initially Achilles did not participate due to some differences with the leader of the Greek forces, Agamemnon, but the killing of Petroclus, a close friend of Achilles, by Hector had instigated him to do the same). To do that, an anaphora (refers back to the preceding elements in the discourse) has been employed in the sentence, for example, “She looked over his shoulder”(repeated thrice in the text). In this, the personal pronouns “She” and “his” make a reference to the proper nouns “Thetis” (mother of Achilles) and “Hephaestos” (the god who makes weapons for her son) respectively. As can be seen, the anaphoric reference conceals the true identity of the dramatis personae till the end of the rhyme to achieve a climax and amuse the intended reader. A link has been formed between the various elements of the poem. A repetition of the sentence (“she looked over his shoulder”) creates lexicon cohesion across the rhyme and expresses the aspiration of Achilles’ mother who wishes for the carving of victory images and symbols on the shield. Subsequently, another anaphoric reference in the sentence (“But there on the shinning metal”), where the nominal phrase “the shining metal”



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refers back to the title (“The Shield of Achilles”) of the rhyme, comes up with an unanticipated result for her. So, the anaphoric function of the proper nouns “Hephaestos” and “Thetis” provide coherence to personal pronouns (reference) “his” and “her” respectively across the poem. The juxtaposition of the personal pronouns and proper nouns constitutes a text—they provide a texture (how the different parts of a text cohere together to make it a discourse) to the text.

Auden exploits the parallel anaphoric and cataphoric reference after the adversative conjunction (“But”) which is used to create cohesion between the previous information and that which is being provided. The presence of cataphora has been signalled by the colon—one of its principal functions (see Appendix). As can be seen, the cataphoric reference creates a direct contrast between the natural world (“For vines and olive trees”) and the dry place (“A Plain without a feature, bare and brown”); between a place of prosperity (“For ritual pities”) and a war torn world (“Barbed wire enclosed an arbitrary spot”), a world where people take participation in sports to achieve high goals (“For athletes at their games”) and a world where people are clueless what to do (“A ragged urchin, aimless and alone”). The description after the colon (see below) about specified spots and places sheds light on the carved images on the shield which make an aesthetic appeal to the reader. The semantic use of the above cataphora makes a cohesive chain in the interpretation of various imagined places which have been described against the wishes of Thetis—the mother of Achilles.

The repetition of cataphoric colon demonstrates three elucidations about the existential crisis of the modern human beings who are subject to cruel and inhuman treatment by the totalitarian state. It sheds light on the indifference of a totalitarian society towards the worth and the liberty of the individual—a central theme in Auden’s poetry. As can be observed, the poet attempts to draw a correspondence between the Homeric world and the modern world. First, the cataphoric reference “no one was cheered and nothing was discussed...to grief” depict the war mongering and territorial expansionism by the modern state. The presence of the hundreds of soldiers who are destined to follow orders is justified by the logic of “statistics”. The occurrence of the word “no” symbolises the negativity, hopelessness, apathy and pessimism of the individuals in the



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contemporary era. Second, “what their foes like to do was done ... their bodies died” delineates the sacrifice of Jesus Christ (three posts as a sign of three crosses) that was made for the society appears meaningless here. In contrast, it seems that the modern world has forgotten his sacrifice and Christ himself becomes a victim of this tragic situation. Ergo, Auden’s portrayal of the modern man demonstrates how the modern human being abandons traditional values in the era of capitalism and has been a stalwart supporter of superstition and irrationality. Lastly, the depiction of inhuman behaviour exhibited towards the girls and the boys (“that girls are raped, that two boys knife a third ... another wept”) symbolises the consequences of the immoral values which are followed by the people of the contemporary period.

Further, the conjunction (“But”) has been exploited in the beginning of the sentence (“*But* there on the shining metal”) to establish a relation between the preceding and the following information in the cited text. Here, the adversative (expressing opposite or antithesis) conjunction demonstrates a stark contrast between the expectation of Thetis and the deliverance by the god of weapons (Hephaestos). The adversative conjunction has been used thrice to demonstrate the hope and disappointment of Achilles’ mother and establish cohesion across the stanzas and an emotional appeal to the reader. In addition, it establishes a direct link between anaphoric and cataphoric reference throughout the discourse.

It is observed that the author uses the definite article “the” as a cohesive device to demonstrate the particular referential items in text that are identifiable in the proximity of the textual referent which seem somewhat unspecific and ambiguous.

- a. “But there on *the* shining metal”
- b. “In tones as dry and level as *the* place”
- c. “*The* mass and majesty of this world”

It can be observed that the preceding lines from the text contain a definite article “the” to indicate a signal of identity, in other words, the elements can be identified or recovered in the nominal group. In the first sentence (a), the definite article “the” makes a reference to the Head



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word “metal” in the nominal group which is a direct reference to the previous referent “shield”, modified by the pre modifier “shining”. The presence of the demonstrative reference restricts the second occurrence of the same noun (“shield”) in the discourse and subsequently achieves its specificity with the help of near-synonym “metal” (because “metal” and “shield” are near-synonyms). So, the presence of the definite article (“the”) in the noun phrase (“the shining metal”) alludes to Achilles’ shield which his mother intends to get from the armourer for a victory of her son in the Trojan war. In the second sentence (b), “*the place*” refers back to “a plain” in the second stanza of the text and refers to a place where “millions” of soldiers wait for the commencement of the war (an allusion to the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States and their respective allies). It is observed that the noun “place” through the defining elements “dry and level” interprets the social, political and cultural milieu of particular area where a sense of anguish prevails. Contrary to the particular spatial nouns, Auden uses the definite article (“the”) to identify the particularity of a wide geographical area as “dry” and “level” due to war and its immediate aftermath. In the third sentence (c), the definite article (“the”) with “mass and majesty” in the sixth stanza along with demonstrative reference “this” is certainly cataphoric because the author mentions the world where he lives at the present time. Simultaneously, the anaphoric sense of the definite article can be perceived when personal pronouns (“they” and “their”) refer back to “the mass and majesty”. Here, the exploitation of the definite article demonstrates that it modifies a noun in the nominal group and indicates the presence of the specified referent of the reference that is certain in the text for a textual coherence.

Next, the employment of lexical items such as adjectives by Auden draws a gloomy picture of the current Homo sapiens. A comprehensive lexical chain of adjectives has been provided to the readers such as “arbitrary”, “artificial”, “untamed”, “bare”, “brown”, “unintelligible”, “dry”, “ordinary”, “pale”, “ragged”, “aimless” and “alone” and so on. It is observed that Auden’s used lexical chain of adjectives corresponds to negativity, apathy and despondency which show a never ending conflict of the modern civilization that mars the growth of their progeny and reduces them to “ordinary”, “pale” and “unintelligible” multitude. The preceding lexical chain



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depicts the totalitarian nature of the modern world towards the burial of individuality that has been reduced to the statistical figures only. So it can be viewed that a situation of chaos and confusion around the world has been portrayed and expounded by the author through his vivid and artistic imagination. The present analysis of lexical chain affects the literary sensibility of the language learner and assists him/her to decode the meaning of the rhyme. In addition, the placement of adjectives with nouns provides a description of wilderness among those who seem confused and bewildered. The poet gives an apt description of a place that is “bare and brown” where hundreds of thousands of soldiers thronged to take up arms against unidentified enemies. The denizens of an “arbitrary” locale portrayed as “ordinary” seem unfamiliar with the ongoing developments. With this implying danger, the colour of crowd has turned “pale” which surely determines famine, fear and deprivation—an aftermath of the world war. Furthermore, the portrayal of waif has been provided by the use of adjectives, for example, “ragged, aimless and alone” who is a victim of the war. Here, the poet makes an emotional appeal to the intended reader through the reiteration of the near synonyms. It is observed that the lexical analysis determines the juxtaposition of the classical world with the modern one and comparison of the glorious past with the dishonourable present.

Moving further, lexical cohesion has been achieved in the cited text through the medium of reiteration and collocation. In general, lexicon cohesion seems ‘phoric’ and establishes itself through the medium of reiteration and collocation: reiteration means the repetition of the same lexical item or the reoccurrence of the synonym or near synonym that demonstrate the contextual integration of a text. Collocation exhibits the juxtaposition of two lexical items which may be synonyms or may be conjoined through a hyphen (with or sans the context of reference) to achieve aesthetic effect in a work of literature. As far as the present piece of literature is concerned, the reiteration of the near synonyms “plain ... place ... spot”, “millions ... multitude” and “no ... nowhere ...nothing” have been exploited in the context of reference. The repetition of the lexical items (“plain, place and spot”) provide a description of the various locations where (“multiple and multitude”) a large number of warriors and persons gather without a particular purpose (“no, nothing, nowhere”). The portrayal of the negative connotations presents the



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gloomy facial expression of Achilles' mother because of the carving images which do not reflect the approximation of her sole intention. So, it can be observed that the occurrence of the repeated vocabulary semantically as well as contextually contributes to an effective cohesion across the rhyme. Because, it makes the reader anxious to identify the existence of contextual references which are present somewhere in the environment of the text.

Collocation also appears as a major stylistic device of the word formation in the cited poem that seizes the reader's imagination during recitation. The following lexical items "well-governed", "dancing-floor" "weed-choked", "thin-lipped", "iron-hearted" and "man-slaying" have been constructed through the insertion of a hyphen (-) between the words. As can be seen below, the juxtaposition of the two different words contributes to the evocation of two types of images: visual (for location) and auditory (for individual—Achilles).

**Figure 1:**

Visual	Auditory
Well-governed	Thin-lipped
Dancing-floor	Iron-hearted
Weed-choked	Man-slaying

Here, the collocative adjectives ("well-governed", "dancing-floor" and "weed-choked") have been devised to establish a visual representation of the place. Auden also exploits auditory images such as "thin-lipped", "iron-hearted" and "man-slaying" to denote the muscular physique of Achilles—the son of Thetis. It is important to note that Auden deviates from the conventional use of language and foregrounds the contextual aspects of poem to make lexical cohesion through the creation of the following collocation: "untamed seas", "artificial wilderness", "sweet limbs" and "shining breasts" etc. The juxtaposition of the unusual collocation sheds light on the lexicon deviation: for example, the adjective "tame" can be placed with the noun "beast"; "limbs" cannot be "sweet"; "wilderness" cannot be "artificial" and "breasts cannot be "shining".



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The foregrounding has been achieved here with the help of linguistic deviation to amuse the reader because the image of a happy land for Achilles (who meets an unexpected result in the near future) turns into a wild and barren place. The preceding reference alludes to the war mongering of the modern world that leads to the creation of the theatre of war where mutilated and disfigured bodies of warriors lie unrecognised. In this way, the stylistic analysis of the lexical collocation produces the cohesive effect and the author achieves his desired objective through the semantic and linguistic deviation and foregrounding.

Moving further, it is obvious that the stylistic analysis of the above rhyme has pedagogic importance for the teachers as well as the language learners especially those who reside in the hinterland and receive education in their respective mother tongue. The cohesion through anaphoric and cataphoric reference ('endophoric'—a general term for the reference) assists the learner to find out the various textual references that contribute to cohesive effect in the text. The grammatical cohesion (reference and conjunction) in the current analysis would definitely make the students aware of the various elements of the English language which create a direct interconnectedness in a discourse from the beginning to the end. Lexical cohesion such as reiteration and collocation appear significant in the vocabulary expansion of a language learner. For example, the occurrence of the synonyms and near synonyms would motivate the learner to find out their respective meaning in the dictionary and use the found vocabulary in his/her own manuscripts. Generally, the learner resorts to the 'core vocabulary' but a sound knowledge of the complex lexis would enable to establish a connection between the numerous difficult lexical items which contain textual and situation reference. Through the medium of deviant collocation, the student would find them in a literary work and make a connection of the lexis across the text to make the discourse meaningful semantically as well as metaphorically. An understanding of the foregrounding through deviation assists the student of literature to identify the literal (tenor) and the figurative (vehicle) expressions which create an aesthetic effect in literature.

It is found that stylistics motivates the language learner to learn the English language by dint of literature. As can be seen in the above analysis, the literary assumptions are supported and



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illustrated by the factual data provided by the applications of stylistics. For example, the negative sense of the employed adjectives draws a gloomy picture of the modern world where hope follows disappointment. The anaphoric and the cataphoric reference such as the personal disclose the hidden identity of the dramatis personae (the occurrence of pronouns “his” and “her” determines the presence of “Hephaestos” and “Thetis” respectively). The repetition of colon, which has been used as cataphora, provides a detailed description of (place, person and things) carved images and symbols on the shield across the poem.

To sum up, it can be said that cohesion plays an important role in the texture of a poem. The author has used the varied expressions of the English language, especially linguistic deviation to disseminate the intended meaning. The employed tools and devices of stylistics reveal the real personality of the author who has apparent indifference to the capitalism that brings prosperity at the cost of destruction. As can be seen, the stylistic analysis of “The Shield of Achilles” assists the students of language and literature to define and interpret literature and develop their literary and communication skills.

**Appendix:**

***The Shield of Achilles* by W. H. Auden**

She looked over his shoulder  
For vines and olive trees,  
Marble well-governed cities  
And ships upon untamed seas,  
But there on the shining metal  
His hands had put instead  
An artificial wilderness  
And a sky like lead.



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A plain without a feature, bare and brown,  
No blade of grass, no sign of neighborhood,  
Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down,  
Yet, congregated on its blankness, stood  
    An unintelligible multitude,  
A million eyes, a million boots in line,  
Without expression, waiting for a sign.

Out of the air a voice without a face  
Proved by statistics that some cause was just  
    In tones as dry and level as the place:  
No one was cheered and nothing was discussed;  
    Column by column in a cloud of dust  
    They marched away enduring a belief  
Whose logic brought them, somewhere else, to grief.

She looked over his shoulder  
    For ritual pieties,  
White flower-garlanded heifers,  
    Libation and sacrifice,  
    But there on the shining metal  
Where the altar should have been,  
She saw by his flickering forge-light  
    Quite another scene.

Barbed wire enclosed an arbitrary spot  
Where bored officials lounged (one cracked a joke)  
And sentries sweated for the day was hot:  
    A crowd of ordinary decent folk



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Watched from without and neither moved nor spoke  
As three pale figures were led forth and bound  
To three posts driven upright in the ground.

The mass and majesty of this world, all  
That carries weight and always weighs the same  
Lay in the hands of others; they were small  
And could not hope for help and no help came:  
What their foes like to do was done, their shame  
Was all the worst could wish; they lost their pride  
And died as men before their bodies died.

She looked over his shoulder  
For athletes at their games,  
Men and women in a dance  
Moving their sweet limbs  
Quick, quick, to music,  
But there on the shining shield  
His hands had set no dancing-floor  
But a weed-choked field.

A ragged urchin, aimless and alone,  
Loitered about that vacancy; a bird  
Flew up to safety from his well-aimed stone:  
That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third,  
Were axioms to him, who'd never heard  
Of any world where promises were kept,  
Or one could weep because another wept.



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The thin-lipped armorer,  
Hephaestos, hobbled away,  
Thetis of the shining breasts  
Cried out in dismay  
At what the god had wrought  
To please her son, the strong  
Iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles  
Who would not live long.

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