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## ROBERT FROST'S POEM "THE ROAD NOT TAKEN": A STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

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### Abstract

The current research article primarily restricts to the stylistic analysis of underlying poem which is considered one of the best poems by American poet Robert Frost. The study exhibits the usefulness of stylistic tools and devices in the linguistic and literary appreciation of literature from numerous perspectives. First, it delineates that how varied distinctive expressions of language by the poet thrust meaning in the poem. To do that, the author deviates from the conventional use of language to foreground the contextual aspects of cohesion. The underlying analysis proceeds from word to textual analysis and demonstrates the wide-ranging narrative techniques of the poet that construct it a discourse. Next, the research paper incorporates the pedagogical aspects of stylistics which help the second language learner to achieve desired language competency in the English language. It will demonstrate how the underlying tools and devices of pedagogical stylistics are quite functional in classroom teaching where a pedagogue can apply the stated techniques and methods to teach literature through a detailed linguistic analysis of literary text. It is important to note here is that the current study will also be quite helpful for the language learners from the hinterland who do not find enough exposure to achieve language competency in the target language.

Keywords: Stylistics, foregrounding, estrangement, discourse, pedagogical stylistics

The full name of American poet, Robert Frost is Robert Lee Frost who received four Pulitzer Prize for his contribution to poetry. His two notable collections of poetry are *A Boy's Will* and *North of Boston*. Under the influence of Ezra Pound, Frost wrote poetry about man vs nature, human mind's rationality, complex social and philosophical themes. The current poem was written and published as first poem in his poetry collection titled *Mountain Interval* in 1961. With a perfect rhyme scheme 'ABAAB' and quintain (a stanza in five lines), this poem is primarily penned for his friend Edward

Thomas. It was written as a joke, and was called a very tricky poem by the poet himself. The researcher's aim is to undertake a stylistic analysis of the above-mentioned poem because of its considerable influence upon his methodology. The study primarily focuses on stylistic devices and tools, for example, the varied phrases, clauses, images, references (anaphoric and cataphoric), anaphora, lexical cohesion, reiteration and inversion. The research does not endorse any repudiation of other concepts of linguistics and literature in poem. It will support the notion that a stylistic analysis of the

forementioned verse helps the reader to interpret and analyze numerous themes, viewpoints and socio-cultural contexts. Through a detailed stylistic analysis of underlying concepts, it helps to understand the aesthetic effect, which is the primary objective of literature, on reader. Adherence to the above-mentioned tools and devices, the reader will be in position to deduce the intended message by writer from numerous viewpoints. Finally, it will assist the language learner from rural background to analyse a literary text by applying varied techniques, and enrich their vocabulary and communication skills in the target language.

In the domain of 'stylistics' style means the language use in a text; it depicts that a literary text embraces an intended meaning for an intended audience, and to convey that message s/he uses multiple distinctive expressions of language. Those days are long past when style's significance was only restricted to canonical literature/author, for example, Milton or Shakespeare's style, Epistolary novel, Eighteenth Century Literature and so on. In the contemporary era, it crosses the forged canonical boundaries of rhetoric, and pertains to exhibit the functional use of grammar in text. And stylistics means the scientific study of various distinctive expressions of language which have been exploited by the author to convey his/her intended message to an intended receiver. It establishes the author's access to the varied linguistic and literary expressions of a particular language during the process of writing and determines their employment according to the narrative situation (context). In this sense, s/he achieves foregrounding through deviation from the conventional use of language and uses certain distinctive linguistic and literary expressions of language to achieve aesthetic effect on reader which further establishes a communicative situation between him/her and reader. Stylistics or literary linguistics may be relevant to speech and writing, but the primary focus of the current study is solely restricted to the textual analysis of literary text. Its origin refers back

to poetics of the ancient classical world, especially, Aristotle's *Poetics*, Longinus' *On the Sublime* and the contribution of the Indian linguist and stylistician, Panini<sup>1</sup> who are considered the main source of inspiration for contemporary stylistics, but its sublime period in the present era is witnessed during the Russian formalism movement in 1915s when its two schools were founded, i.e., Moscow Linguistic Circle and Petrograd Society for the Study of Poetic Language (OPOYAZ) by their founder members such as Roman Jakobson, Viktor Shklovsky and Vladimir Propp respectively. Jakobson and Shklovsky have contributed to the development of stylistics to a certain extent: the former added three functions of communication to Bühler's tripartite model of communication (Addresser → Message → Addressee) which is provided below:

Context (Referential)

Addresser (Emotive) → Message (Poetic) → Addressee (Conative)

Contact (Phatic)

Code (Metalingual)

And the latter introduced the concept of 'defamiliarization' (also called 'estrangement') which means making of familiar things unfamiliar and their reproduction in new form to seek attention. Next, M.A.K. Halliday's model of functional stylistics contributed to the development of stylistics which introduced three functions of language: Ideational, Interpersonal and Textual. Ideational determines how the incorporation of varied ideas takes place in the formation of text; Interpersonal function establishes the communicative situation between an addresser and an addressee; and Textual function comprises the construction of coherence among linguistic units in text. Finally, the study also incorporates Michael Foucault's concept of discourse—an important aspect of deconstruction where the primary focus is upon the notion that readers learn to deduce the intended meaning of text because of their shared cultural codes which are beyond comprehension. He

<sup>1</sup> Panini's text *Astadhyayi* introduces the rules on linguistics, syntax and semantics which are quite functional in the linguistic analysis of literature.

describes distinctive discursive practices of discourse which are solely responsible for the construction of knowledge in text (discourse) through that the two-way communication occurs between addresser and addressee.

The poet in the beginning of poem narrates the whimsical attitude of the speaker who is unknown till the commencement of second line "And sorry I could not travel both". The exploitation of "two roads diverged" clause creates a mental image of space in reader's mind who himself/herself observes on the intersecting point of two roads s/he has to set foot on one to reach at an imagined destination. As can be observed, the underlying image of road can be perceived with the alphabet "Y"; the trunk of it embodies man's childhood, and two obliques of the alphabet represents two varied directions of life wherefrom modern man has to choose one, but reversal from the taken decision appears impossible. It seems that a man who stands at the critical juncture of life is confronted with the challenges constituted by space and time. Completely ignorant about the course of events in future, his choice has to have a significance in his own history. It shows that Frost is aware of the existential requisite of commitment. An autobiographical reading of his life reveals his taken decision for the "less travelled" which took him to England, and through this he got name and fame in the discipline of poetry. On contrary, the speaker's dilemma arouses curiosity in reader's mind to weigh the specified situation. Prepositional phrase "in the yellow wood" conveys the idea semantically but the pragmatics of the first line of stanza ("Two roads diverged in a yellow wood") of poem constructs the narrative that hard decisions require mental strength rather than physical one. The above phrase shows the presence of autumn season when the nature has covered her face with ripened fruits and flowers. The literariness of poetry cannot be replaced with popular literature. The adjective "yellow" in preceding phrase depicts a mental picture. At the same time, the use of conjunction "and" in the beginning of second line with "sorry" is uttered by the speaker again reveals the speaker's confusing state of mind in taking appropriate decision according to circumstances. Use of the first-

person pronoun "I" reveals the speaker's identity who may be the poet himself. The incorporation of noun "traveler" in third line of first stanza depicts the traditional definition of journey as journey of life, and no one is authorized to choose two paths but is required to select only one. The adjective "long" determines the decision taken by "traveler" not whimsical but the final outcome of deep contemplation; because the use of exclamatory "sorry" proves his stance on taken decision that walking over both paths seem beyond his physical and mental aptness. The phrase "bent in the undergrowth" refers to the common man and his way of life. Rejecting the first one, the poet leads towards the second one which is "less travelled" but both sounds equally fair to him which can be observed in the comparative phrase "as just as fair" in the beginning of second stanza. If we take into consideration the etymological sense of the word "fair" as beautiful and "just" as reasonable then it conveys his craving for the second road. The comparison between two roads "as just as fair" conveys an aesthetic sense in reader's mind about the fair choice made by the speaker. After applying Shklovsky's concept 'defamiliarization', it can be observed here that the image of forest is portrayed in an unfamiliar way to amuse reader. The natural maturity of the autumn season is compared with the rational maturity of the traveler to some extent.

Proceeding further, three times reiteration of conjunction "and" in the first stanza stresses upon the various available choices for "traveler" to commence his journey as soon as possible. The substitutive determiner "both" determines speaker's access to two roads as well as his inability or confusing cognitive state to select the right one symbolizes modern man's life surrounded by varied difficulties where daily affairs require homo sapiens to undergo litmus test. An inversion "long I stood" can be observed in the third line which maintains rhyme scheme of the given poem intact; otherwise, it could have pruned its rhythmical structure. The couplet beginning with personal pronoun "I" definitely manifests the real personae of poet who first confronts with the thought of choice through the inversion of simple sentence "long I stood" and reveals the choice made by him after second

inversion “long I thought”. A systematic construction of inversion in poetic lines shows the deep thought process of speaker who next makes choice over the less travelled road. Next, phrasal verb “look down” demonstrates the speaker’s deep thought process (which determines the speaker’s meditative personality) about choosing the right one. The pronoun “one” is substituted for the first path which leads straight to forest. It is also important to remember that one line in each four stanzas of poem is diverse from remaining four lines in accordance with rhythmical pattern which demonstrates the thoughtfulness of poet’s mind. Through the use of simple English, the poet introduces the daily life’s challenges and tasks which are braved by human beings across the globe for survival. It also depicts the real situations of few who do not have a hold over life. Adverb “then” points toward another road that has its own negative and positive repercussions. The use of various lexical devices manifests the writer’s command over the English language because each line here indicates the rational thinking of the narrator/speaker who has provided all spatial details which further narrate the situation of his mind’s space.

Next, a comparison between the first and the second road is established by the author through exploitation of simile, for example, “as just as fair” that the second road which is yet to be explained by the speaker appears an assumed and wanted one by him, because the growth of unwanted grass and plants demonstrates the unexploited condition of path. Conjunction “because” in the third line of second stanza surely states a reason of unused condition of the path where the presence of long grass requires the feet of human beings to walk upon but fails to draw attention of traveller. At the same time the earlier statement is changed by the author after noticing the equal condition of unused path in forest—a place which seems the modern world where mental dilemma of the modern man has been shown evidently by poet.

Thereafter, the third stanza begins with conjunction “And” and substitutive pronoun “both”, and the use of the preceding words establishes coherence between the second and the third stanza. It is important here to note that the reconstruction

of the first two lines of poem could have reversed the entire rhythmical sequence of sentences; for example, “and both equally lay that morning” and “no step has trodden black in leaves” which had failed to arise aesthetic experience in the implied reader. A sudden change in the speaker’s attitude towards choice between roads “oh, I kept the first for another day!” shows his/her cognitive dilemma over choice that changes the simple theme of narrative into complex and ambiguous, exerting stress upon the mind of receiver to comprehend an implied meaning. The incorporation of adverbial “yet” in fourth line of third stanza manifests the direction of author’s thoughts (“knowing how way leads on to way”) on abstract human situation and circumstances in modern world, that is, full of uncertainties and ambiguities which restricts the appropriate functioning of rational mind during difficulties. The end line of stanza “I doubted if I should ever come back” recalls the same cognitive condition of *Robinson Crusoe*, a novel written by Daniel Defoe, who had chosen sailing as lifelong career instead of merchandise against the wish of his veteran father who tried to convince his son the hardships and difficulties of sailing life that require cognitive and physical vigour to face the underlying challenges. The same thoughts of reversal from taken decision occur in Robinson’s mind during his landing on a desert island after shipwreck. So, the development of thought again reiterates the agony of decision-makers’ choice about chosen path of life which evidently be remembered and told to upcoming generation with “sigh” that is ambiguous, inexpressible and beyond comprehension. To a certain extent, the above-mentioned noun expresses the poet’s inner feelings about the road which was not taken previously.

Finally, the incorporation of phrase “all the difference” in last stanza evidently depicts the rationality, conscience and wisdom of traveller who after picking the “one less travelled” shows the courage and determination of rational human being who first denies to choose the “less travelled” but later embraces it because s/he is of the opinion that wandering of the mind can be controlled only by rational decision, otherwise, its lingering will never be at a standstill. A comprehensive analysis of the

above phrase “all the difference” refers to the state of poet’s mind who remains in-between two choices, and his taken one makes the difference where the courage and strong determination are primary requisite. Hence, a stylistic analysis of above-mentioned phrase helps the reader to deduce the intended message by poet. It also makes an anaphoric reference to all preceding lines of verse because the prime meaning of the above poem is only accessible to reader through a thorough reading till end.

As can be observed, the utilization of aforementioned tools and devices of stylistics in classroom teaching helps the language teacher to enhance language competency of the target language learner especially those from rural background who do not receive their formal education in the foreign language (here the foreign language is restricted to English only). First, a pedagogue can teach learners the employed inversion in the above poem to demonstrate how the writer has used unorthodox sentence structure to achieve foregrounding through defamiliarization. The incorporated inversions help the target language learner to identify numerous patterns of estrangement (defamiliarization) in other pieces of literature also through multiple instances and to enhance his/her communication skills, especially, reading skill. Second, the learner will learn to ascertain horizontal and vertical connection between poetic lines which show how and why the writer has used varied expressions of language semantically to achieve coherence in text. This technique will definitely assist the learner in identifying various expressions of language which are quite functional for him/her to use the underlying in their daily classroom and homework tasks. The pedagogue may ask students to construct sentences on given words and phrases which would certainly help them to enhance their writing skill—a command over the preceding skill is the first and foremost requisite in every domain. Next, a teacher first must recite the whole poem and further the target language learner must be asked to follow the applied method to enhance their listening as well as speaking skills, because the rhythmic drill of the given poem will make them understand the

intonation and a good practice for their vocal cords and tongue whereof the words for speaking will come out fluently according to situation. Further, a pedagogue asks the learners to compose paragraph with the help of constructed sentences by learners where the latter will be able to discern anaphoric and cataphoric references, various types of lexical cohesion, ellipsis, substitution, etc.

As can be seen, the current study finds that stylistic analysis helps the reader in decoding the intended message by the author, for example, the underlying poem which seems very simple at first look turns into a complex one which contains metaphorical meaning of forest—an imaginary world which has been compared with the modern world which is full of complex dilemmas, and one can overcome the cited difficulties only through a deep thought about them. A rhyme scheme and stanzaic form is chosen to encode an intended message for reader. Anaphoric references, substitution and lexical devices draw cohesion across text which compel a reader to hold information till end of poem to deduce the overall intended meaning. It is also established that the exploitation of the above-mentioned stylistic tools and devices are quite functional in the target language classroom teaching to enhance communication skills and literary sensibility of the second language learner.

To sum up, it can be argued that the poem can be understood and explained solemnly through the use of stylistic tools and devices. It is established that the study does not restrict itself to mere counting of noun and verbs; on contrary, it proceeds from language to literature where literary assumptions are supported by factual linguistic data. The stylistic analysis of Frost’s poem “The Road not Taken” helps the language learner especially from hinterland to deduce intended meaning through various viewpoints. And through this knowledge gaining process, s/he also enhances the communications skills in the target language.

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**Appendix:**

“The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;  
  
Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,  
  
And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.