

A Stylistic Approach versus a classical Literary Approach of Act 3, scene 3 of William Shakespeare's *Othello*.

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Abstract : Stylistics is a new course introduced in the curricula of English departments in Algeria. It stems from the LMD system which started eight years ago at some universities and has become widespread in recent years. The aim of this article is to introduce the field first by glancing at its main characteristics and then to illustrate it with an analysis of Act 3, scene 3 of William Shakespeare's *Othello*. We shall end with a comparison with a classical literary analysis of this same scene.

Our past research in the field of stylistics makes us draw the following characteristics: it is first an area of mediation between literary criticism and linguistics or between language and literature. It is mainly based on the relation between pattern and meaning, namely that structure and meaning form one. Besides, the areas stylistics is linked to are linguistics, civilization, history, psychology. It began in the 1960's with Roman Jakobson's Russian Formalism and the material studied is mainly literary. It is interested in a pattern in a clause, paragraph, or text at large which is purposefully repeated that might signal a **foregrounding**, namely, linguistic features are highlighted, made prominent for specific effects and contribute to the text's total meaning. Repetitive patterns of sound or syntax, for example, strike the reader's conscious attention as unusual. Foregrounding includes linguistic deviations, parallelisms, and repetitions which authors use for specific effect and communicative purposes and which contribute to the general interpretation of the text. In his book *Text and Discourse*, M.A.K Halliday defines it as *patterns of prominence in a poem or prose text, regularities in the sounds or words or structures that stand out or may be brought out by careful reading; and one may often be led in this way towards a new insight through finding that such prominence contributes to the writer's total meaning* (98). If we look at Act 3, scene 3, we are going to notice that there is a shift of pronouns from first- person to third –person and vice versa very repeatedly and from general statements to personal involvements in a conspicuously repeated fashion; this is what we call

‘foregrounding’ and studying them will unveil the key to the interpretation of each of the characters’ motivations and therefore will give us a whole interpretation of the scene and Iago’s skillfulness in manipulating his victim, Othello. This is what Katie Wales means when she mentions that *it is on this internal foregrounding that critical attention is largely focused* (157) or when M.A.K Halliday points out that *such prominence contributes to the writer’s total meaning* (98).

Act 3, scene 3 is a seminal scene in the play. One of its main aspects is how in Scene 3, Act 3, he is deceptively convinced by Iago of his wife’s adultery, how at the beginning of the scene, he is happy in his marriage and at the end of the scene, he wants to murder both Cassio and his wife. This shows how Iago has well done his job of insidiously half-concealing, half- revealing that his wife is being disloyal to him and that Cassio is his wife’s lover. This scene is important since it reveals how Iago is going to manipulate Othello and arouse his jealousy. In this scene, Othello will use an impersonal and indirect speech in an attempt to draw information Iago seems to hide from him. This third person reference can, of course, be understood as having first-person implication. It is as if Othello was raising a secret issue difficult to talk about openly and it is as if Othello’s very puzzlement and perplexity make him waver between the third person pronoun and the first-person reference, and it is this characteristic in Othello that Iago exploits to his own end: his progressive but destroying revelation that Desdemona has been unfaithful to him. As H.G Widdowson has put it:

This perplexity is inherent in Othello’s character and that Iago’s achievement is to project it into the world of actual events so that it becomes a force of self-destruction (51).

Thou dost conspire against thy friend, Iago

If thou but think’st him wronged, and mak’st his ear

A stranger to thy thought (109).

It is also a means of getting information from him. On the contrary, for Iago, expressing himself in generalisations enables him to make an indirect insinuation and attack, namely, he does not want to strike straightforwardly. It is as if Iago has also understood that Othello with his discreet reserve cannot talk of such a personal matter in the first-person and consequently, he will adopt the third-

person, but for Iago, this third person always has second-person reference; In the following extract, he is going to resort to generalizations to comfort his interlocutor that he is not the sole human being in this plight:

*As where's that palace, wherein foul things
Sometimes intrude not? who has a breast so pure
But some uncleanly apprehensions
Keep leets and low-days, and in session sit
With meditations lawful? (109).*

This generalisation and indirect speech hint at the fact no one is pure, beautifully expressed in the metaphor of a palace defiled by foul things; Iago also refers to jealousy in general terms as the *green-eyed monster* which Othello applies to himself asking confirmation from Iago: *Think'st thou I'd make a life of jealousy(110)*. By going back and forth from general statements to personal implications, Iago not only arouses his jealousy but completely unsettles him. The best achieved convergence between third-person description and his first person condition is when he exclaims: *O misery(110)* as if he was suddenly realizing that Iago's general reference to jealousy as *the green-eyed monster(110)* in fact applies to him. After this metaphorical generalization where foul things may intrude, Iago in a detached fashion expresses that no one is pure, and Othello keeping this position of detachment will carry on referring to himself in the third-person:

*Thou dost conspire against thy friend, Iago
If thou but think'st him wronged, and mak'st his ear
A stranger to thy thought (109).*

In fact, Othello meant: 'thou dost conspire against me, honest Iago'. His third-person reference has a first person reference. He frankly though indirectly expresses that you (Iago) are hiding things from me and to comfort this idea, Iago adds that Othello *should spy into abuses* making him search for a culpability in his wife, but then again he retreats into a more general statement that othello should not take notice of what he has just said. This has the effect of destabilizing Othello completely, as a mere puppet in the hands of a manipulating agent. Having said that Othello should take no notice, he carries on that it is because of your good disposition and because of your respect and honesty, that he doesnot want to reveal his thoughts.

It is as if Iago injects his poison slowly, but surely, and back again he once more retreats into generalization which will combine a generalization with a personal reference in the same utterance:

*Good name in man, dear my lord,
Is the immediate jewel of their souls;
Who steals my purse, steals trash, 'tis something, nothing,
'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands:
Robs me of that which not enriches him,
But makes me poor indeed. (110)*

Contrary to the previous utterances where third-person reference had a first-person implication, here, it is the reverse: the first person reference acquires a *generalized third-person sense* (45) according to H.G Widdowson and results in a *blurring of the distinction between the experience of self and the observation of others, between first- and third-person reality* (45).

And again, in a moment of impatience, Othello uses the second-person addressing himself to Iago to ask for immediate clarification:

By Heaven, I'll know thy thoughts (110).

But Iago categorically refuses to comply and answer his request, which is a proof that he is hiding something concerning Othello, and he will again in general terms refer to jealousy in general terms so if we make the connection between something unstated by Iago, and his reference to jealousy, one can easily infer that it concerns Othello because why should he address Othello in general terms if it doesn't in fact apply to him that is why Othello's reply is an awareness that it applies to him in his famous *O misery*(110) from this same scene three. This simple exclamation is a revelation of personal involvement. There are in Iago's general reference to jealousy starting with the warning '*beware*' and in Othello's reply '*O misery*' a blurring of a general statement with a personal involvement. This shifting of third-person reality to first-person involvement is an ordeal being imposed on Othello, and is in fact the tactic Iago uses to put Othello on edge. But the latter is not going to be beguiled because Desdemona chose him:

*No, Iago
I'll see before I doubt; when I doubt prove;
And on the proof, there is more but this;
Away at once with love or jealousy!(111)*

Othello is trying to shake off his spirit from doubt, and tries to regain confidence and reason; to be convinced, he has to have a proof. Following his general's reasoning, Iago invites him to open his eye and insinuates in a general statement that often women in Venice hide things from their husbands, and so Desdemona is identified with the adulterous women of Venice. She even dared deceive her father, and so can she deceive her husband as well! Iago then leaves Othello, but he knows he has succeeded in planting the seed of suspicion in Othello since Othello starts regretting his marriage, and is persuaded that *Iago knows more, much more than he Unfolds* (113) since he recommends him to observe her well with Cassio (111). It is true that this rocking back and forth between general statement to private involvement or from the third-person to the first-person and vice-versa can be accounted for three main reasons: first, Othello is the general of the army, and he is discussing a private matter with his underling; second, he is not certain about his wife's infidelity as their marriage was founded on love; and finally, he has to keep his self-respect as a high-ranked general. Othello also wants to sort out the truth from the falsity of the allusion, the semblance from the reality. But Iago as the embodiment of Satan plays with his feelings of doubt and anxiety by using the same attitude of going back and forth from general statements to personal involvements to achieve his goal: Othello's insidious destruction.

Contrary to the sharp, incisive, stylistic perspective of concentrating on the linguistic items (here the shift of pronouns) which constituted a real insight into the comprehension of the types of relationship between Iago and Othello, a classical literary analysis will highlight a deep analysis of the characters or focus on one aspect of the scene; Gamini and Fenella Salgado will highlight Iago's special techniques in arousing othello's jealousy; we assume that following the reader-response theory, the two critics want to show what seems to be important in this scene, mainly Iago's manipulation of Othello, and they are going to show it through the various strategic techniques Iago uses to arouse 'the monster' in Othello:

The first technique is that he starts lying to Othello suggesting that Cassio, his lieutenant, goes out of the room like a thief and he puts suspicion into his mind by saying *I like not that* (104). One of the best qualities of a classical literary analysis is this search for an elegant, appropriate and literary type of writing which contrasts with conventional language and in this vein, our two critics write:

The stage is now clear for Iago to administer further doses of his deadly poison and watch as it takes effect, with ourselves as his fascinated accomplices (35)

He then asks whether Cassio knew of Othello- Desdemona romance and refuses to give a direct answer to Othello's question: *why doest thou ask?* (107). When Othello answers that *indeed* (107), Cassio knew of their romance, Iago is going to repeat *indeed* (107) implying that there is something not honest in Cassio's whole behavior especially when he adds that *men should be what they seem* (108). This triggers Othello's impatience and shows that Iago's technique has succeeded. Othello pleads Iago to speak his mind and *speak thy worst of thoughts/ the worst of words* (109).

Consequently, **the second trick is Iago's reluctance to speak his mind**: Iago implies that his thoughts are too horrible for utterance, implied in the metaphor of the *palace wherein foul things sometimes intrude not?* (p. 109). Iago makes him believe that he does not want to speak not to hurt him. Gamini and Salgado write all this while Iago has said nothing except that he believes Cassio to be a honest man! They mention Iago's skill and his creative villainy but without showing the stylistic devices used. Iago progressively gains Othello's confidence by telling him I haven't shown you any proof yet but I will.

Making him expectant of a proof, using rapid sweeping statements evading responsibility and increasing his victim's suffering is another strategy. He finally overtly says to him to *look to his wife and observe her well with Cassio* (111), namely, to spy on her and he also adds that his own wife can also spy on her. When Othello says he regrets his marriage, we know Iago has gained ground because this marriage was based on absolute personal commitment on the part of both. This analysis will enhance the importance of the handkerchief: it was Othello's first, special gift to Desdemona, asking her to take great care of it but upon Iago's request, Emilia, his wife, has stolen it from Desdemona and her reflection what *will he do with it heaven knows* (115) increases our anxiety especially when he says that *I have use for it* (116). This interpretation will study the different types of relationship between Othello whose psychological torment is immense to Desdemona's innocence who thinks that his headache is just physical and intends to bind his forehead with the

two-side handkerchief, instrument of his torture. The classical literary criticism will focus on images, tones, and similes (all the literary devices) in the text which Shakespeare uses to reveal, for example, how an external object, here the handkerchief is simply a cloth, but to Othello it is a confirmation of betrayal, and deepens his suspicion and emotion:

*Trifles light as air
Are to the jealous confirmations strong
As proofs of holy writ. (116)*

Besides, the idea that any medicine will no longer bring sleep to Othello is well conveyed (44). This may bear a relevant comparison with another tragic Shakespearean hero: Macbeth who has lost all tranquility after his murder of the king Duncan. Moreover, Iago 's other trick is once again to lie saying that he slept next to Cassio and in his dream, the latter believed he was sleeping with Desdemona but the dream is illusatory and the handkerchief, token of a deep love between Othello and Desdemona, a better proof. Our two critics are going to show that from then on he is going to turn into an insane revenger, though he retains a bit of his nobility, as in

*Yield up, O love, thy crown and hearted throne
to tyrannous hate! (121)*

Like Macbeth, he is the perfect illustration of a tragic hero. This is the longest scene in the play and in its structure and development, we see the shape and movement of the whole tragedy in little. At the beginning, Othello is in command of himself and the island and in harmony with Desdemona. By the close, he is not far from being literally insane and Desdemona is not aware of the situation yet and so it increases the drama to ensue. It is a scene of dramatic intensity showing the gradual development of Iago's domination over his master, just like the black slave Baboo overpowering his Spanish captain after a slave revolt against their master in the titled story *Benito Cereno* by Herman Melville.

In addition, the literary work is open to whoever chooses to read it according to the most appropriate theory(ies) from the reader-response to the psycho-analytical theories... and bestow on the work of art a particular interpretation. Whatever interpretation the critic or reader comes up with, it is the very manner and arguments he sets forward that will be his most convincing assets. Of course, the themes, the plot, the

character, the figures of speech will be impregnated with different meanings according to the perspective or literary theory he chooses to read the work of art with. For works of drama, like those of Shakespeare, a classical literary criticism may focus on the notion of tragedy, which like the Greek tragedies, will see the irreversible Fall of a noble and great character of great stature. The fate of Othello and his imagining that his wife could be unfaithful to him will cause great suffering and death not only of his wife, but of himself. As Act 3, scene 3, being an epitome of the whole play, a classical literary analysis may look at *Othello* as one of his greatest tragedies since in it, Othello from a caring husband will become a killer of the person he loves most: his wife. To ascertain that Shakespeare elaborated a conception or theory of tragedy, no one can tell, but as A.C. Bradley puts it:

Shakespeare in writing tragedy did represent a certain aspect of life in a certain way, and that through examination of his writings we ought to be able, to some extent, to describe this aspect and way in terms addressed to the understanding(23)

In fact, A.C. Bradley wanted to write about the substance of tragedy which is, of course, just one aspect of his work and as Shakespeare looked at it differently according to the various plays such as Hamlet or Henry 4th or Cymbeline, we cannot ascertain that he had one conception of tragedy. The latter in Shakespeare has always a great hero in high position and prosperity dying at the end, after having suddenly suffered a troubled life. The hero is in the grips of great torment and anguish, and his life, once happy becomes tragic because it will lead to his death. This aspect of the hero's life will inspire tragic emotions and pity, and it will have widespread consequences around him; he will leave the world with the sense that he has accomplished his duty in life as in *Othello* who is the General of the Army. The great hero's accidental fall, derived from the actions of men, and from his own actions, will unremittingly reveal man's powerlessness in the face of Fate. These are some of the feelings and ingredients expressed by Shakespeare's tragedies. Studying Shakespeare's sense of exterior and in particular interior tragedy with spiritual forces animating the hero's struggling mind is already a mighty theme to tackle although many more aspects can be analyzed such as the contrast between appearance and reality or the theme of light and darkness, evil and good as represented literally in the dark complexion of the moor and the white and pure face of Desdemona. These literal complexions are coupled with the figurative connotation

of the devilish blackness of the moor behind a noble stature and the whiteness of Desdemona which hides the blackness of sin. As Kenneth Muir, in his introduction to the play *Othello*, writes *Othello is described as a blacker devil for murdering the angelic Desdemona* (43). Therefore, the contrast between lightness and darkness is quite complex, and it is this mirroring of blackness and darkness, evil and good which will undoubtedly leave their imprint in the works of two great 19th-century American renaissance writers: Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville.

In addition, a classical literary criticism will generally focus on universal themes and make strong links between authors enhancing the continuing literary tradition that perdures in time as when A.C Bradley makes a continuation with medieval narrative tragedies illustrated in Chaucer. References will also be made to well-known characters in the past literature, to ancestral, primeval myths and religion; this has the effect of reinforcing the sense of a literary tradition and of a culture: that of the western, Anglo-saxon civilization and literature.

In conclusion, and to come back to Gamini and Fenella Salgado, they chose to study the different techniques Iago chooses to transform Othello from a loving and caring husband into a monster bent on revenge in Act 3, scene 3. So a critic will concentrate on one main aspect at a time. Briefly, the stylistic analysis was sharp, incisive, and precise and worth focusing on since we had a real insight into the text. It can also be said to be objective since the stylistician has looked at the shift of pronouns from the first to the third reference and from the private statements to the generalizations explaining the reasons for these changes. The field of stylistics is an interesting and reliable method of analyzing the text since as Mrs Vendler (qtd in Simpson) has mentioned: literature is language(148). It can help the students find his way through the meandering paths of the literary text where signs are cryptic and needs decoding. Stylistics is going to look at the essence of the text and what makes a text literary such as the linguistic deviations, parallelisms, repetitions which authors use for special communicative effects. As most literary texts belong to 'literature as discourse', namely, using a special language for a communicative purpose, stylistics is needed to unveil the peculiarities of literary language, especially for EFL students; consequently, it is a necessary step before progressing towards 'literature as discipline'. Finally, nothing is higher and more elevated

than a well wrought, classical literary analysis or criticism in both its depth and style of writing, and although the stylistic approach was essential in providing a real insight into Act 3, scene 3, the student of literature's ultimate goal is that of literature as discipline because a classical literary analysis rings so much true to our ears and hearts.

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