

Stylistic markers of “serious relief” in Wilde’s Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime

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In this paper, I will analyze the issue of “serious relief” in Wilde’s novella *Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime* which has been the object of extensive analysis in Attardo (2001). In brief, the story relates the trials of a young man (Lord Arthur Savile) who is told by a cheiromantist (palm reader) that he will commit a murder. Lord Savile is upset by the news and wanders all night in the streets of London, in despair and horror. He then returns home and determines that he cannot marry his fiancé until he has committed the crime he is predestined to. He attempts unsuccessfully to murder two of his relatives and finally as he is about to give up, runs into the cheiromantist and murders him by throwing him in the Thames.

As mentioned above, the novella is analyzed in some detail in Attardo (2001). I did not however touch directly on the matters discussed below and in fact this analysis may call into question, at least partly, the previous conclusions. This is not the place to reproduce the analysis of the story, nor even its conclusions. I choose to focus instead on a particularly significant phenomenon, which I dubbed “serious relief”. It will be useful to begin by defining “serious relief”.

The definition of serious relief (obviously patterned on “comic relief”) given in Attardo (2001) was any stretch of text in an otherwise line-rich context that contains few or no jab lines. Thus essentially a serious relief section in a humorous text is merely a patch of text with little or no humor in it. In this context, we are not interested in the functions of serious relief, but merely in its identification and specifically, its determination on internal linguistic factors (i.e., we rule out, for example, cases in which the author tells us that a certain passage in a book was meant entirely seriously). The most significant example of serious re-

lief that I found in Wilde's text was a stretch of text covering roughly the end of chapter one, the very short chapter two, and the beginning of chapter three. To locate the passage in the story, this corresponds to immediately after Lord Arthur Savile has been told by the cheiromantist that he will kill someone, his wanderings in London at night, his return at home, and subsequent awakening the next morning. This passage consists of about 2,400 words out of a total of roughly 12,500 words (word counts are approximate, since the text has been obtained on the internet and the actual counting was done using Microsoft Word "word count" utility).

It follows from the definition of serious relief above, that there should be some linguistic markers of the "different" nature of the passage. I formulate the hypothesis that the occurrence of non-verbal adjectives¹ is not random in the text, and specifically that Wilde signals serious-relief by using a specific set of adjectives largely limited to that textual "domain". An alternative analysis would be to construe these passages as stylistic parodies and therefore as humorous passages, hence *not* cases of serious relief. We will try to adjudicate among these two hypotheses in the final analysis.

One could wonder why I am analyzing adjectives and not rather other stylistic variables, such as article frequency, etc. The answer is a compromise between authorial intent and the kind of subconscious features that are analyzed by stylometry. I believe that preserving a degree of authorial intent is important as the text is (supposed to be) humorous (or not, in this case) and this feature depends, at least to some extent and with due qualifications, on authorial intent.

Before starting the analysis, we need to clarify a few points. The analyses to follow are based on relative frequencies of occurrence of the adjectives. We will be primarily contrasting the frequencies of the adjectives occurring in the part of the text targeted as "serious relief" with those of the same adjectives occurring outside of serious relief. It is clear that in doing so we need to use weighed comparisons: since the text outside of serious relief is roughly six times more abundant than the text in serious relief, it follows that, if the distribution of adjectives is random, they should occur roughly six times more in the humorous part of the text. Indeed this null hypothesis is confirmed for a class of high frequency adjectives, exemplified in the chart below, which records the number of occurrences of the adjectives in the text.

1 I.e., *-ing* forms of the verb, used adjectivally have been ignored. Comparative and superlative forms have been counted, but not de-adjectival adverbs.

The overall ratio of the occurrences of these adjectives in and out of serious relief, is of 1/6.92, only slightly higher than the 1/6 predicted by the null hypothesis.

	Serious Relie	Humorous Text
afraid	1	9
small	2	5
large	1	6
young	1	14
great	3	20
little	4	25
old	1	11
Total	13	90

If the distribution null hypothesis were valid across the board for all adjectives, then the hypothesis that we set out to investigate would have been proven wrong. However, a surprisingly large number of adjectives occurs *only* in serious relief. Often this is because the adjective occurs only once in the text. I have called these cases *hapax adjectives*. A list of hapax adjectives is presented in the appendix. *Prima facie* these cases would seem to strongly disprove the null hypothesis. However, careful consideration shows that the status of hapax adjectives is more complex. On the one hand, their uniqueness makes them naturally marked, but on the other, the lack of potential frequency comparisons prevents any statistical assessment of their degree of informativeness. Therefore, I tend to avoid relying on hapax adjectives for the bulk of the evidence in what follows. Conversely, a small but very significant class of adjectives occurs more than once and exclusively in serious relief. These are listed below:

polished	2
desolate	2
dark	3
shameful	2
silent	2
flickering	2
asleep	3
sombre	2
mad	2
monstrous	2

It seems reasonable to assume that Wilde's palette is here reflecting the "night of the soul" stereotype of romantic fiction. It is significant that among the adjectives that occur more than once only in serious relief are "desolate", "dark", "so-

mbre”, which reflect both the visual and emotional characteristics of the landscape and the character, in truly Romantic fashion. Furthermore, the occurrence of “shameful” extends the characterization to the moral sphere. “Silent” and “asleep” are of course explained because the narrative episode of which the serious relief consists largely takes place overnight. The only anomalous adjective in this context is “polished”, which seems to serve no expressive purpose.

From these preliminary notes, it follows that some partial support for the working hypothesis has been elicited. We turn now to the analysis of a few selected passages of Wilde’s *Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime*. The non-verbal adjectives appear in bold face.

All this time Lord Arthur Savile had remained standing by the fireplace, with the same feeling of dread over him, the same sickening sense of coming evil. He smiled **sadly** at his sister, as she swept past him on Lord Plymdale’s arm, looking lovely in her **pink** brocade and pearls, and he hardly heard Lady Windermere when she called to him to follow her. He thought of Sybil Merton, and the idea that anything could come between them made his eyes **dim** with tears.

Looking at him, one would have said that Nemesis had stolen the shield of Pallas, and shown him the Gorgon’s head. He seemed turned to stone, and his face was like marble in its melancholy. He had lived the **delicate** and **luxurious** life of a **young** man of birth and fortune, a life **exquisite** in its freedom from **sordid** care, its **beautiful boyish** insouciance; and now for the first time he became conscious of the **terrible** mystery of Destiny, of the **awful** meaning of Doom.

In Attardo (2001) I present a theory of humorous texts. This is not the place to elaborate on the theory, which is fully discussed in Attardo (2001), but the following explanations of the acronyms may be helpful. SO stands for “script opposition” the semantic foundation of the theory that postulates that all lines include two semantic scripts (a.k.a., frames) in a special relationship of antonymy (opposition). LM is the “logical mechanism” which provides the resolution of the incongruity of the SO, if any is present in the text. As it so happens, the present line does not have a LM, so the slot is left empty. The “situation” (SI) of the line is simply the setting in which the action happens. The “target” (TA) is roughly the butt of the joke, in this case Lord Arthur Savile. The “narrative strategy” (NS) is essentially the genre of the humorous text. These include options like “question and answer”, “tripartite sequence”, etc. Finally, LA stands for “language” and specifies the actual wording of the text.

According to that theory I analyzed the second paragraph as an example of diffuse disjunction as follows:

SO: high/low style; normal/abnormal

LM: none

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SI: Lord Arthur Savile (LAS) is struck by fear

TA: LAS

NS: register humor

LA: register markers: mythological names, personifications, "freedom from sordid care" "beautiful boyish insouciance".

In other words, I saw the second paragraph as being a case of register humor in which an inappropriately grandiose style is used to describe a mundane topic (however strange, i.e. Lord Arthur Savile's terror at having his death forecast by a cheiromantist). However, the first paragraph shows no obvious sign of exaggeration, as those listed in the LA knowledge resource above. Once we analyze closely the adjectives in the text, however, things change markedly.

Consider the distribution of the adjective "dim" in the text. The line numbers were generated by the concordancing program I used, they give a rough idea of the position in the text. Significantly, all four occurrences of "dim" are within the serious relief passage:

910	them made his eyes	dim with tears. Looking at him, one would have said that Nemesis
1113	though iteration could	dim the horror of the word. The sound of his own voice made him
1175	hardly knew. He had a	dim memory of wandering through a labyrinth of sordid houses, of
1221	out of the window. A	dim haze of heat was hanging over the great city, and the roofs

and "sordid" which occurs only twice in the text

917	in its freedom from	sordid care, its beautiful boyish insouciance; and now for the first
1176	through a labyrinth of	sordid houses, of being lost in a giant web of sombre streets, and

even "pink" which is not a mood marker occurs in "serious relief" only:

908	looking lovely in her	pink brocade and pearls, and he hardly heard Lady Windermere
1187	green jade against the	pink petals of some marvellous rose. Lord Arthur felt curiously

and such is the case for "delicate", which is also hardly a mood marker

908	looking lovely in her	pink brocade and pearls, and he hardly heard Lady Windermere
1187	green jade against the	pink petals of some marvellous rose. Lord Arthur felt curiously

and such is the case for “delicate”, which is also hardly a mood marker

- 916 He had lived the delicate and luxurious life of a young man of birth and fortune, a
1191 in the dawn’s delicate loveliness that seemed to him inexpressibly pathetic, and
1249 like one of those delicate little figures men find in the olive-woods near Tanagra

“exquisite”

- 917 and fortune, a life exquisite in its freedom from sordid care, its beautiful boyish
1236 The almost at peace. exquisite physical conditions of the moment had dominated him
1272 of his body thrill with exquisite joy, he recognised none the less clearly where his duty
1243 Noel’s ball. The small, exquisitely-shaped head drooped slightly to one side, as though

“awful” (one instance outside of serious relief):

- 920 of Destiny, of the awful meaning of Doom.
1267 upon to carry out the awful prophecy written in his hand? What manner of life would
be
2989 How awful it seems! I have now to go to the Dorcas, where I will read

“luxurious”, “boyish” are hapaxes (i.e., occur only once in the text, both in serious relief)

Against the hypothesis we find “young” which seems to be distributed randomly in the text:

- 272 secret of remaining young.
481 said a tall handsome young man, who was standing by, listening to the conversation
817 the hand of a charming young man. ‘Of course it is!’ answered Lady Windermere, ‘but
822 know.’ ‘All charming young men are,’
916 and luxurious life of a young man of birth and fortune, a life exquisite in its freedom
1141 He was still very young
2038 in his yacht. The two young men spent a delightful fortnight together. In the morning
2202 of odd rubbish, the young girl suddenly gave a little cry of delight. ‘What have you

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2386	his friend Rouvaloff, a	young Russian of very revolutionary tendencies, whom he had met
2444	and after shaking the	young Russian warmly by the hand he ran downstairs, examined
2607	Lord Arthur. Few	young men do nowadays.'
3112	shall never show you a	young lady's letter again! But what shall I say about the clock? I
3191	there with a party of	young men, and he was obliged
3411	They always felt	young. Some years afterwards, when two beautiful children had
3440	Windermere's lions are	young men who are lionized. They 'last only one season
3501	course I do,' said the	young man, smiling. 'But why?' 'Because I owe to it all the

as well as "terrible" with two out of seven occurrences in serious relief

919	conscious of the	terrible mystery of Destiny, of the awful meaning of Doom
1262	he was filled with the	terrible pity that is born of love. He felt that to marry her, with
1348	and	terrible though the task laid upon him undoubtedly was, yet he
1954	placed in a position of	terrible difficulty,
2225	gone through all that	terrible anxiety
2296	days to get over his	terrible disappointment, and for a time his nerves were
2761	have failed. It was a	terrible blow to him

and possibly "beautiful" with two out of six occurrences in serious relief:

157	looked wonderfully	beautiful with her grand ivory throat, her large
750	to one of the most	beautiful girls in London, because that appeared in the MORNING
918	from sordid care, its	beautiful boyish insouciance; and now for the first time he
1555	and sent Sybil a	beautiful basket of narcissus, with lovely white petals and staring
2196	once more bright and	beautiful, and all his old gladness came back to him again. One
3413	afterwards, when two	beautiful children had been born to them, Lady Windermere came

Summing up, we have nine different adjectives that occur only (or almost only) in serious relief, and a mere three that occur randomly. At first brush, the hypothesis of a difference in the distribution of adjectives in serious relief seems

to be supported by the facts, as far as these two paragraphs go. Therefore the distinction made in Attardo (2001) between the two paragraphs is not supported by adjectival distribution (this is not to say that other features may not support that analysis). Let us continue the present analysis, with the next paragraph.

How **mad** and **monstrous** it all seemed! Could it be that written on his hand, in characters that he could not read himself, but that another could decipher, was some **fearful** secret of sin, some **blood-red** sign of crime? Was there no escape possible? Were we no better than chessmen, moved by an **unseen** power, vessels the potter fashions at his fancy, for honour or for shame? His reason revolted against it, and yet he felt that some tragedy was hanging over him, and that he had been suddenly called upon to bear an **intolerable** burden. Actors are so fortunate. They can choose whether they will appear in tragedy or in comedy, whether they will suffer or make merrily, laugh or shed tears. But in **real** life it is different. Most men and women are forced to perform parts for which they have no qualifications. Our Guildensterns play Hamlet for us, and our Hamlets have to jest like Prince Hal.

Once more, we find evidence that the adjectives play a significant role in the text. "Mad" occurs three times, always in serious relief:

930	How	mad and monstrous it all seemed! Could it be that written on his
1116	its dreams. He felt a	mad desire to stop the casual passer-by, and tell him everything
1429	looked back upon his	mad wanderings

"monstrous" occurs twice, both times in serious relief,

930	How mad and	monstrous it all seemed! Could it be that written on his hand, in
1133	the puppets of a	monstrous show? And yet it was not the mystery, but the

"fearful" occurs three times, two of which are in serious relief:

932	decipher, was some	fearful secret of sin, some blood- red sign of crime? Was there
1269	Fate still held this fearful fortune in the scales? The marriage must be postponed	
1965	he had got rid of his	fearful entanglements,

there is also one occurrence of "feared" in serious relief.

1157	round, as though he	feared that he was being followed. At the corner of Rich Street
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and one occurrence of "fear" outside of serious relief.

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"Blood-red" is an hapax, but "blood" occurs once more, also in serious relief.

- 932 secret of sin, some blood- red sign of crime? Was there no escape possible? Were we
1078 detect the stain of blood already upon them, and a faint cry broke from his trembling

"Unseen" and "intolerable" are also hapaxes. "Real" occurs three times, once outside of serious relief.

- 940 or shed tears. But in real life it is different. Most men and women are forced to
1140 of the day, and the real facts of existence. He was still very young.
1666 that when the real man came up they black-balled him

It could be argued that the correlations I have been finding are mere statistical flukes due to the relatively small sample. However, the fact that the hypothesis is falsifiable lends it credence. Indeed, the idea that the adjectives occur non-randomly has been proven wrong in a number of cases. We saw "young" above. Consider now "hot" in which only one out of three occurrences is in serious relief:

- 641 improvements, and hot water laid on in every bedroom. Your Grace is quite right
869 but we may find some hot soup. François used to make excellent soup once, but he
1066 but his hands were hot with fever, and his forehead burned

In some cases a merely formal/statistical analysis fails to do justice to fairly obvious correlations, for example "sickly", a very strong characterization, is used twice, both times in relation to Podgers, the cheiromantist:

- 971 Mr. Podgers, with his sickly smile. 'The fair sex is apt to be impatient.' Lord Arthur's
3242 spectacles, the sickly feeble smile, the sensual mouth. Lord Arthur stopped.

Furthermore, "sick" and "sickening" occur both in serious relief:

- 1172 The thought made him sick with horror. He turned on his heel, and hurried on into the
906 over him, the same sickening sense of coming evil. He smiled sadly at his sister,

"Shameful" occurs twice, both times in serious relief, but "shame" occurs four more times, all in serious relief. It would be tedious to continue to present in

detail the analysis, which is necessarily repetitious. I will therefore merely present the conclusions, while reproducing in appendix the listing of all adjectives, with their frequency inside and outside of serious relief.

Conclusions and results of the analysis

What is then the overall picture that emerges from the analysis? First and foremost, the distribution between humorous parts and serious relief of some adjectives is clearly not random. It seems to be the case that Wilde is deliberately, or if not deliberately, unconsciously, marking the serious relief passage by using a different "palette" of adjectives. As we saw, not all adjectives are used in this marking function and in fact a significant number of high frequency adjectives is used randomly across the text.

A significant issue is whether the non-random distribution of the adjectives can be attributed to authorial intent, or merely to the fact that the serious relief passages deal with a different subject than the rest of the text. In other words, whether this is a stylistic issue or merely the reflections that different "realia" require different terms to describe them. I believe that only the comparison of the data found for this text with those of other texts can answer definitely this question. However, as pointed out in the text, some of the adjectives that function as markers of serious relief have little if any correlation with the dark and dramatic mood one may attribute to the subject matter at hand (a meditation on life and death). For example, "pink", "delicate", "dim" and "exquisite" seem hardly appropriate to characterize a "night of the soul" passage. In truth, several adjectives seem quite appropriate to the circumstances: e.g., "awful", "terrible", "mad", "monstrous", "fearful", and others. Therefore, we must conclude that, while the subject matter may be partially or even largely responsible for the shift in adjective choice, it cannot account for it entirely. In this difference we must therefore recognize the authorial intent to mark the passage in the text as different from the rest of the text and as contributing stylistically to the slow down of the frequency of humorous episodes in the text. In other words, the stylistic differences we have found support and help achieve the effect of serious relief.

Limitations and further studies

The first and greatest limitation of this work is that it focuses only on one part of speech (however justified the choice, see above). This limitation is of course

due to the hand-tagging required to identify the relevant parts of speech. A comparison of all lexical elements in humor and serious relief could not have been accomplished manually. A computational analysis is in the planning stages. It will be interesting to see if the results found for adjectives are confirmed by those relative to other parts of speech.

Another obvious limitation of the analysis presented is that it is based on only one text, consisting of a mere 12,000 words, hardly a statistically reliable sample, when lexical statistics are based on corpora of millions of words. However, it should be emphasized that any validity for the hypothesis tested is programmatically restricted to the text in question. Therefore the main force of this objection is lost on account of the restricted nature of the hypothesis. It is obvious that the frequency patterns within a text may provide some text-internal evidence (with the exception of hapaxes, as discussed in the text).

It would be interesting to compare other humorous texts by Wilde to the frequencies found in *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime* in order to determine whether the conclusions found in this text hold also for other texts, or whether, as seems likely, each text sets up a humorous/serious pattern of opposition.

A subtler limitation of this analysis is that it may be so text-specific as to be irreproducible: perhaps the presence of a serious relief of about one-sixth of the text is a unique feature of this story and no other story will have a distinct part that could be thus analyzed. A jab-by-jab classification, analyzing each sentence as either including a jab (and hence humorous) or not (and hence serious) and then comparing the stylistic features of the two classes seems possible (computationally) but perhaps too detailed to yield useable results. Only time will tell, of course.

References

- Attardo S., 2001, *Humorous Texts: A Semantic and Pragmatic Analysis*, Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter.
- Wilde O., 1909, *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime*. Text available from the internet, at various locations.

Appendix

List of hapax adjectives: greenish-yellow, straightforward, petulant, flash, gilt-edge, professional, blanched, fur-coated, striped, bitter, keen, drunken, frighte-

ned, trembling, tremulous, slumbering, casual, narrow, painted, shrill, damp, crook-backed, predestined, incoherent, medium, billy-cock, check, wretched, sick, sunburnt, curly, grey, jangling, chubby, battered, tight, marvellous, good-humored, nonchalant, fiery-coloured, rude, hob-nailed, awkward, midday, peach-colored, thin, cool, finely-wrought, dainty, exquisitely-shaped, reed-like, tender, soft, Greek, (54 total)

List of adjectives occurring in serious relief, with frequencies in serious relief (SR) and in the rest of the humorous text (HT):

Adjective	SR	HT	Adjective	SR	HT
coarse	2	1	anxious	1	5
fat	1	3	afraid	1	9
greenish-yellow	1	0	sickly	1	1
straightforward	1	0	fair	1	1
petulant	1	3	impatient	1	1
poor	1	3	asleep	3	0
gold-rimmed	1	2	small	2	5
flash	1	0	odd	1	3
dull	2	2	black	2	4
low	2	1	deep	1	1
gilt-edge	1	0	medium	1	0
professional	1	0	billy-cock	1	0
quick	1	1	check	1	0
polished	2	0	wretched	1	0
small	2	5	sick	1	0
ready	2	1	sordid	2	1
blanched	1	0	giant	1	1
wild	2	1	sombre	2	0
fur-coated		0	bright	1	2
large	1	6	great	3	20
striped	1	0	white	4	5
bitter	1	0	pleasant	1	1
cold	1	2	sunburnt	1	0
keen	1	0	curly	1	0
hot	1	2	huge	1	2
drunken	1	0	grey	1	0
frightened	1	0	jangling	1	0
faint	2	2	chubby	1	0
trembling	1	0	battered	1	0
desolate	2	0	tight	1	0
dark	3	0	little	4	25

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Adjective	SR	HT	Adjective	SR	HT
tremulous	1	0	green	3	3
slumbering	1	0	pink	1	1
mad	3	1	marvellous	1	0
casual	1	0	delicate	2	1
narrow	1	0	rough	1	1
shameful	2	0	good-humored	1	0
painted	1	0	nonchalant	1	0
shrill	1	0	fierce	2	0
damp	1	0	fiery-coloured	1	0
crook-backed	1	0	horrible	1	2
strange	2	4	rude	1	0
predestined	1	0	heavy	3	3
monstrous	2	0	hob-nailed	1	0
incoherent	1	0	awkward	1	0
shallow	2	1	midday	1	0
young	1	14	ivory	1	1
silent	2	0	peach-colored	1	0
long	1	7	thin	2	0
flickering	2	0	cool	1	0
solitary	1	1	finely-wrought	1	0
dainty	1	0	fearful	2	1
old	1	11	awful	2	2
exquisitely-shaped	4	0			
reed-like	1	0			
sweet	1	1			
tender	1	0			
soft	1	0			
Greek	1	0			
rare	1	1			

Właściwości stylowe reliefu serio w "Zbrodni Lorda Artura Savile'a" O. Wilde'a

Autor w strukturze opowiadania O. Wilde'a wyróżnia części o reliefie serio i reliefie komicznym. Poddaje analizie fragment – dość wyjątkowy w opowiadaniu – w którym elementów humoru jest bardzo mało. Brak humoru stanowi tu wynik celowego zamiaru Wilde'a i został uzyskany m.in. poprzez użycie określonych przymiotników, innych niż w innych partiach opowiadania.