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**Criticism versus Stylistics: An Analysis of Their Areas of Overlap
and Contrast**

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Abstract

Literature, especially the imaginative type has as its major onus, to delight. However, if the only function of fiction is to delight, then it becomes a mere waste of effort to study it. Literature should be a mirror of the author's society and so, any literature that does not educate the reader should be regarded as a trivial one not worthy to take the reader's time. Literary writers therefore, write to entertain but more importantly, to educate. To write the type of literature that would perform the said functions, the writer follows certain laid down rules as well as apply his or her ingenuity to come up with a worthwhile work of art. The researchers in this paper affirmed that though stylistics overlaps with criticism in a number of areas, a great deal of discrepancy exists between them. This paper therefore, showed how criticism differs significantly from stylistics so that the illusion nursed by many that the two concepts are synonymous would be averted.

Key Words: Stylistics, criticism, appreciation, literature, linguistic choices

Introduction

Criticism and Stylistics are both tools for literary analysis. Without the two, there would be no basis for analysis and millions of unliterary works would be produced for the unwary audience. Criticism and Stylistics albeit, seem to overlap, a wide range of discrepancy exists between them. According to M. H. Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Stylistics has since 1950s, been applied to critical procedures which undertake to replace what is claimed to be the subjectivity and impressionism of standard analyses with an “objective” or “scientific” analysis of the style of literary texts. It is a branch of applied linguistics which has to do with the study and interpretation of texts in regard to their linguistic, structural and tonal style. Stylistics can be applied to an understanding and appreciation of Literature; the audience likes a work of fiction if he/she likes the style of the author. Otherwise, he or she spurn it. Criticism on the other hand, has to do with the analysis and judgment of the merits and faults of a literary or artistic work. Abrams sees Criticism as the overall term for studies concerned with defining, classifying, analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating works of literature. He goes further to state that Criticism concerns itself with the discussion of particular works and writers.

From the view of Abrams, Stylistics and Criticism are both concerned with the analysis of a literary work. With the analysis of the literary work, the ingenuity of the author in observing certain criteria in an attempt to pass across his message is made obvious. Criticism aims to fine tune a work and make it acceptable in the society. Stylistics therefore, is simply an appendage of criticism. As Abrams puts it, style is identified by the distinction between what is said and how it is said, or between the content and the form of a text. The issue here is that Stylistics is mainly interested in the form of a literary work and not basically, the content. This is not so with Criticism whose focus is both the form and the content.

Stylistics as a Branch of Criticism

According to Abrams, Stylistics is a branch of criticism which is interested in the writer’s diction. He makes it categorical that Stylistics is a hallmark of Literature. He observes that a mode of Stylistics has been prominent since the mid-1960s. According to him, “proponents greatly expand the conception and scope of their inquiry by defining stylistics as, in the words of one theorist, ‘the study of the use of language in literature,’ involving the entire range of the ‘general characteristics of language ... as a medium of literary expression’” (316).

In his *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Chris Baldick describes Stylistics as a “branch of modern linguistics devoted to the detailed analysis of *style, or of the linguistic choices made by speakers and writers in non-literary contexts” (247). Stylistics therefore, is an aspect of literary study that emphasizes the analysis of various elements of style such as metaphor and diction. It has to be noted at this point that style entails a particular way in which something is done, created, or performed. In writing, a particular author may be admired not basically because of his message in his literature but because of the techniques he

applies in writing his novel or any other genre of literary work. It is possible that an author may have just a trivial message in his or her work of art, but the way he handles the work will make the readers to appreciate the work. In creative writing workshop, many neophyte writers are given the same idea to develop, at last, only very few would be appraised. Those are the people whose stylistics are cherished by the readers. This goes to tell that Stylistics has to do with the writer's techniques in beautifying his work as to attract the readers' attention.

Major Discrepancies between Stylistics and Criticism: Achebe's Example

Criticism, as seen by Baldick, is the reasoned discussion of literary works, an activity which may include some or all of the following procedures, in varying proportions: the defense of *literature against moralist and censors, classification of a work according to its *genre, interpretation of its meaning, analysis of its structure and style, judgment of its worth by comparison with other works, estimation of its likely effect on readers, and the establishment of general principles by which literary works (individually, in categories, or as a whole) can be evaluated and understood (54)

Considering Baldick's view, criticism follows certain rules or theories propounded to ensure that a writer's work accepts recognizable standard. Stylistics on the other hand, follows no laid down standard. It is something that distinguishes a writer from the other. Kennedy, X. J, Dana Gioia and Mark Bauerlein, in their *Handbook of Literary Terms: Literature, Language and Theory*, for instance, have this to say about stylistics. "In emphasizing the verbal features of literature, stylistics treats styles as more or less distinct from content, while admitting that neither exists entirely without the other" (149). The writer thus, is at liberty to apply any techniques of his choice to entice his or her readers. Critics analyze a literary work to assess the stylistics of the writer as well as judge the literary worth of the work.

Baldick goes further to state that "Contrary to everyday sense of criticism as 'fault-finding, much modern criticism (particularly of the academic kind) assumes that the works it discusses are valuable; the functions of judgment and analyses having to some extent become divided between the market (where reviewers ask 'is this worth buying?') and the educational world (where academics ask 'why is this so good?') He further observes that the various kinds of criticism fall into several overlapping categories: theoretical, practical, *impressionistic, *affective, *prescriptive, or descriptive" (54). He goes further to state clearly that criticism is concerned with revealing the author's true motive or intention. This is contrary to stylistics' intention which is merely concerned with techniques.

Literary criticism as a matter of fact, is geared towards disambiguating a work of art. Since critics are not fault-finders, they have as their obligation, to follow certain theories to fish out the meaning of a literary work. This is why Chinyere Nwahunanya, in his *Literary Criticism, Critical Theory and Post Colonial African Literature*, states vividly that "Since literature is a complex area of human cultural development, major critics since Aristotle have tried to evolve theories that would help the literary adventurers explore the labyrinthine nature of the literary experience, and gain a better understanding of the substance of literary artifacts" (4).

Stylists attempts to analyze the aesthetic value of literature. This does not follow any rule hence there is no propounded theory. Stylistics is not geared towards interpretation of a literary work, it simply studies the devices in a language to determine the rate to which readers will appreciate or otherwise, spurn the literary work. Chinua Achebe's novels are mostly appreciated globally basically because of his stylistics devices. These include, above other things, his diction. It is a known fact that Achebe was not the first Nigerian to write a novel. Before Achebe, Amos Tutola had written his *Palmwine Drinkard*. Cyprian Ekwensi had also published some works of fiction. In fact he was the most prolific among his contemporaries but his works were criticized by some European critics and adjudged not being standard. This is not because his subject matters are bad but his stylistics; in his novels, he tells rather than shows. When for instance, he makes use o certain proverbs, he goes further to interpret them as contrary to the belief in Igbo that when a proverb is used and interpreted for the listener, then the bride price paid by his father to marry his mother is a waste.

In 1958, when Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* got published, the novel was appraised and seen as unprecedented in Africa. Today, the novel has been translated into many world languages. This is because of Achebe's Stylistics. Achebe believes that he is writing for his fellow Igbo audience and not for the foreign audience. He therefore, makes use of transliteration in his early novels. Transliteration is part of his style. Again, Achebe, rather than tell the episodes that transpired, shows the episodes and allows the reader to decode a lot of things by himself. Telling the reader everything rather makes the reader a mere puppet. An Igbo reading either *Things Fall Apart* or *Arrow of God*, greatly appreciates the novels because of the language and of course, by what they see the characters do and not by what the author tells about the characters.

The characters, like in real life conversation between typical Igbo elders, copiously make use of proverbs. In Igbo, proverb is seen as the oil with which the Igbo eat words. The proverbs used by Achebe in the novels are not in any way, "doctored." They are rather presented in the novels as they are used in the natural context in the real life. Again, Achebe's language is simple and natural. This is Achebe's style that places him above his contemporaries and his predecessors alike. We often hear people say that they enjoy reading Achebe's novels. This is because of his stylistics. The same novels could, apart from the analysis of the stylistics employed, be subjected to critical analyses. Here, the critic seeks to find out the theories adopted by the writer. *Things Fall Apart*, for instance, was published in 1958 and up till today, a lot of things are still said by critics about it. Since criticism is an attempt to disambiguate a literary work, critics analyze the novels based on the angles they perceive them.

Nwahunanya states clearly that primarily, literary criticism pays attention to literary texts, but it does not hesitate to fall back on extra-literary sources for information that would help elucidate a text (9). To some critics, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* are mirror of the way of life of the Igbo in the recent past. Thus, the novels are analyzed using the

Sociological approach. A French critic, Hippolyte Taine (1828 – 1893) is credited with the father of the Sociological Criticism. Sociological Criticism has three major factors – *race*, *milieu* and *moment*. By the term, race, Taine meant national characteristics that are typically found in works of art produced by the creative artists of a given country (Culture). By milieu, Taine meant environment – the sum total of the artist’s experience including family background, education, travel, marriages and love affairs. By moment, he refers to the less personal influences in a writer’s life. One analyzing Achebe’s novels using the Sociological approach has to trace where the three factors appear in the novel. This critical examination of the novels is made, irrespective of the technique (Stylistics) applied by the author.

Soyinka’s *The Interpreters*, could as well, be analyzed using the same approach. One reading, for instance, Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* and Soyinka’s *The Interpreters*, may consider them as sociological novels. What however, makes the reader, for instance, to appreciate Achebe’s more than Soyinka’s is their different stylistics.

Stylistics Analysis of *Arrow of God*

Achebe makes use of symbolism, Imagery and Allegory to beautify his work. As a master craft man, the imageries and symbols used by Achebe are apt and vivid. The python symbolizes the old gods in conflict between Christianity and Umuro’s religion. The python, it must be recalled, is the religious icon that the catechist seizes upon and urges his followers to kill. Oduche, a new convert imprisons a sacred python in his box to die. He is afraid of killing the python despite his faith in the new religion.

The people of Umuro are predominantly farmers. The men boast of the number and size of yams they are able to produce in their farms. Growing yams is labour intensive, and the size of a man’s yam farm symbolizes how strength and hardworking he is. In Igbo land, men are known for their indefatigability and not for their laziness. Laziness is abhorred in Igbo land. That is why Unoka, Okonkwo’s father in *Things Fall Apart*, is regarded as a loafer and Okonkwo dreads being compared with his father.

Another major aspect of stylistics that needs to be talked about is Achebe’s diction. *Arrow of God* is not a quick read. As in real life, the listeners among Achebe’s characters listen and try to decode the message passed by the speaker. There is intense use of dialogues. Characters sit and talk and the elders, when they interact, punctuate their speeches with Igbo proverbs. For instance, when Ezeulu is blamed for sending his son, Oduche to join the new religion and for testifying against his people over a land in dispute with Okperi people, Nwaka uses a proverb to indict him. Thus, he says “a man who brings home an-infested faggots should not complain if he is visited by lizards.

Criticism of *Arrow of God*

This aspect of analysis centres on dissecting the work for the intended meaning of the author is known. For instance, Ezeulu, the chief priest is of Igbo origin. He says the truth concerning the land dispute between Okperi and Umuro people. Ezeulu testifies against his people

because as the chief priest, he is not expected to speak lies. He would be struck by Ulu if he should tell lies. He is so dedicated to Ulu and that is why he refuses to be the warrant chief to the white man. According to him, he can only be a chief to Ulu and not a priest for any man. Undoubtedly, *Arrow of God* reflects Achebe's rejection of the European stereotype of the alienated artist. Achebe in this novel, attempts to create art that is communal, functional, and utilitarian. This is why the novel is analyzed as a sociological novel. *Arrow of God* aptly centres on socio-cultural aspects of the Igbo society. According to the Wikipedia free online dictionary, Achebe's purpose for writing *Arrow of God* is to discuss the effect of colonialism on the people of West Africa. The central conflict is the clash between the civilization of the Igbo and the British bringing colonialism and their Christian religion to West Africa.

Conclusion

This paper, no doubt, has affirmed that in a number of ways, Stylistics and Criticism overlap. However, the two concepts are not synonymous. Criticism, as a process of the examination of a literary work, analyzes a phenomenon through evidence gathering, valid reasoning, and moral, philosophical, and ideological reflections. Criticism, does more than collect information and accumulate knowledge, it evaluates them. This is not the concern of stylistics.

A work of art could be read and enjoyed by the reader despite its emptiness of contents. The stylistics employed by the writer could make the reader sit for hours reading, trying to get what happens at the end. He finds it difficult to drop the novel, but in the end, he may discover that the novel after all, has no message at all. It is the stylistics of the writer that makes the reader curious. Criticism on the other hand, aims to analyze not only the techniques but also the contents. While Stylistics focuses in the aesthetic quality of a work, Criticism aims to disambiguate the work and x-ray the view of the writer. The two concepts therefore, are very indispensable in the literary appreciation.

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