

Role of Form and Structure in Adding Meaning to a Piece of Literature

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Abstract:

Literature as a form of art is being produced since times immemorial. Literature is produced in various forms like poetry, drama and novel etc. The purpose of these forms of literature is to bring about understanding. A writer uses different devices like theme, style, plot, setting form and structure to convey his/her ideas in clearly. These devices make it easy for the reader to understand a piece of literature. In this research study the role of form and structure in adding meaning to a piece of literature is investigated. For this purpose a poem by contemporary American poet, Madhubati is analyzed in the light of principles of school of formalism and structuralism. And it was inferred that form and structure very fittingly simplified the meaning of the poem. Also in general both form and structure have been used by writers and in a way these components have always been a great help in manifesting the meaning of a literary text

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1 Introduction:

Human beings have been blessed with the gift of language; through the use of non verbal, verbal and written language they are able to convey their ideas feelings and expressions. In written text literature is used as a sophisticated means for the conveyance of the ideas and expressions and also it's a fact that literature is being produced since times immemorial and that too in as many varied modes as that of poetry, novel, drama etc. Different components like theme, style, plot, setting and characterization etc take part in the formation of a literary work; it is through the employment of these elements that a writer is able to convey his/her message in literature that is universal art form for expression of ideas and feelings. How successful a writer is in conveying his/her ideas depends upon his/her craftsmanship, the way readers receive his/her literary work and what meaning do they infer from his/her piece of work. In this article/essay the focus is

going to be on the form and structure of literary text and how they enhance the meaning of a literary text.

Literary critics have attributed worthiness of literature to various aspects. As in the opinion of Mathew Arnold worthy literature is one that is instructing and can help in improving the society. For Eliot worthiness of literature depends upon its blend of intellectual and emotive beauty. It means literature has to be written in some particular way that gives it beauty. A piece of literature is distinguished from the rest of writings because of its lofty thoughts and heightened language thereby it requires certain attitude to understand literature. The purpose of poetry and other forms of literature is to create meaning and bring about understanding. Critics have given different ideas for understanding of the literary text. Two important schools of criticism in this regard are formalism and structuralism advocating for the role form and structure play in adding to the meaning of text. The main propositions of both schools of criticism are explained in brief.

2.1 Formalism:

Formalism can be said to have begun with Greek philosopher Aristotle, who in his book *The Poetics* attempted to define the form of tragedy. Aristotle proposed that the tragic hero is an essentially noble individual who has a flaw in character that causes him or her to fall from a high position to a low position. The flaw in character (hamartia) is a kind of blindness or lack of insight that results from an arrogant pride (hubris). During the course of the tragic action, the hero comes to a moment of insight-today it might be seen as an epiphany-that Aristotle called *anagnorsis*. Thus the tragic plot moves from blindness to insight. Since it is an imitation (mimesis) of a serious action, the tragic plot has to be written in a dignified style. The effect of the tragedy is supposed to be catharsis or the purging of the emotions of pity and fear. All the elements of tragedy go together to produce a formal unity: this is the essence of the formalism. The twentieth century formalistic approach, often referred to as the New Criticism, also assumes that a work of literary art is an organic unity in which every element contributes to the total meaning of the work. This approach is as old as literary criticism itself, but it was developed in the twentieth century by John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, T.S. Eliot and others who came to be known as New Critics.

The formalist critic embraces an objective theory of art and examines plot, characterization, dialogue, and style to show how these elements contribute to the theme or unity of the literary work. Moral, historical, psychological, and sociological concerns are considered extrinsic to criticism and of secondary importance to the examination of craftsmanship and form. Content and form in a work constitute a unity, and it is the task of the critic to examine and evaluate the integrity of the work. Paradox, irony, dynamic tension, and unity are the primary values of formalist criticism.

Because it posits an objective theory of art, there are two terminologies central to formalist criticism i.e. Intentional Fallacy and Affective Fallacy. Intentional Fallacy confuses with what a writer wants to say in a piece of literature and Affective Fallacy is what the reader's emotional response is to that piece of work. Instead, criticism must concentrate upon the qualities of the work itself that produce such effects. The formalistic approach stresses the close reading of the text and insists that all statements about the work be supported by references to the text.

Formalism got inspired from Russian Critics like Shklovsky. According to Bertens(2001), Shklovsky was the lead critic of the Russian Critics and he contributed a well-known concept of defamiliarization."Defamiliarization" is one of the crucial ways in which literary language distinguishes itself from ordinary, communicative language, and is a feature of how art in general works; by presenting the world in a strange and new way and allows us to see things differently. Poetry defamiliarizes through use of devices like that of metaphors, symbols, forms of repetition, rhyme etc that we do not find in our ordinary language. It is these devices that turn attention to the text itself and reveal its message.

2.2 Structuralism:

Like New Criticism, Structuralism sought to bring to literary studies a set of objective criteria for analysis. "Structuralism" can be viewed as an extension of "Formalism" in that both "Structuralism" and "Formalism" devoted their attention to the matters of literary form (i.e. structure) rather than social or historical context; and that both bodies of thought were intended to put the study of literature on a scientific, objective basis. Structuralism based initially on the ideas of the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure regarded the signifier (words, marks, symbols) as arbitrary and unrelated to the concept, the signified, to which it referred. A particular society uses language and signs, meaning is constituted by a system of "differences" between units of the language. Particular meanings are of less interest than the core structures of signification that make meaning itself possible, often expressed as an emphasis on "langue" rather than "parole." That is parole is related to grammatical rules that we have and langue refers to actual use of the language that how langue actually works. Saussure adopted diachronic instead of historical or synchronic approach, in so doing stressing upon the arbitrariness of the relationship between words and what they refer to. It means that words keep on changing their use with the passage of time as explained by the example of change of "weg" to "way" in English over a period of time resulted in the forming of a new word though the concept remains the same. It is also to be pointed out that this change becomes part of the language when it gets acceptance among the speakers. In structure we see the concept of interrelatedness and interdependence within the text and coherence and logical movement of an idea within the text that gives it a beauty. The word as we see it objectively and the way writer writes it objectively also the use of devices give a text a structure. It is not just use of the devices but their function that brings out meaning from a text, the repetition of sounds, words and for what purpose the writer as does that it makes meaning clear.

It is difficult to bring out major difference between form and structure but as Bertens said (2001) "*Form is inevitably bound up with meaning; structure however, is what makes meaning*

possible.” (Bertens: 55) No matter whatever can be the differences among form and structure, in actual they both go hand in hand in making the meaning of text clear and conveying the point of view of a writer and both rely upon the text itself without taking into consideration of any external factor.

3. Analysis of Poem:

To see whether the form and structure actually help in enhancing the meaning of a piece of literature the below mentioned poem by a contemporary American Poet Madhubuti is analyzed.

For the Consideration of Poets

*where is the poetry of resistance,
the poetry of honorable defiance
unafraid of lies from career politicians and business men,
not respectful of journalist who write
official speak void of educated thought
without double search or sub surface questions
that war talk demands?
where is the poetry of doubt and suspicion
not in the service of the state, bishops and priests,
not in the service of beautiful people and late night promises,
not in the services of influence, incompetence and academic
clown talk?*

Haki.R.Madhubuti

To start with form, the poem is a lyric poem as it is a personal poem in which poet is presenting his personal view points and ideas. The very use of the lyric as a form draws attention to the fact that poet wants to share something very own of his. And it is evident from the way he put forward such irregularly long questions. The poem consists of 12 lines and can be divided into

two parts that can be assumed as two stanzas. The poem is based on two questions that are asked by the poet, one is of seven lines and the other is of five lines. These things draw attention to something unusual indicating that the poet has coded some important and implicit message within the poem that needs to be explored. These two long questions introduce the complexity and intricateness of the situation, with the intention of drawing attention to something of seriousness. In the title the poet has brought forth attention of the poets and gave it a title *For Consideration of the Poets*. As poets and other literary artists are very sensitive people of the society and to address them for consideration means there is sensitivity in the meaning/message that poet wants to convey. The use of the phrase *poetry of resistance* in the very first line shows certain kind of agility and poet's asking "*where is the poetry of resistance*" strikes the sight as well as mind and prepares reader for the rest of the poem. Next, the use of adjective honorable with defiance intensifies the situation and makes this adjective noun collocation a binary opposition. As for the meter or rhyme scheme, is concerned, the poem is written in free verse. since poet wants to speak out his mind and wants to probe certain questions which are actually the harsh realities confronted by the poets in contemporary American society, free verse seems to be apt vehicle for this conveyance of message as it can allow poet to convert his thoughts on piece of paper.

The images used in the poem are not very typical ones unlike those given by romantic poets like that of beauty of nature. Rather it evokes images of politicians, businessmen, journalists taken from surroundings around. The role of politicians, businessmen and journalists is pivotal in a contemporary society. And the trio is a crucial factor in important decisions related to the lives of masses. The next image is fairly abstract as poet gives image of poetries rendered for different purposes that could be for the religious purposes, patriotism, for the sake of praising beauty or love etc. So, this creates images which are not concrete so the poet is not creating any concrete images rather he is giving hints to the reader in delineating images.

Regarding the question of structure, the poem can be said to have been composed of two stanzas of irregular lengths. One is that of seven lines and the other is that of five lines. Few lines are longer and others are very short. Beginning of the first line with a letter in the lower case gives poem an unusual structure; the two stanzas are actually two long and intricate questions that are asked by poet. Even at the end of first question the second one that begins from line number eight does not start with upper case letter. The stanzas are of varied length so are lines within the stanzas. At the end of first line "*where is the poetry of resistance*" the second line "*the poetry of honorable defiance*" starts after a pause that draws attention to the fact there is certain thought provoking idea here for which poet wants readers to stop and think. The third line "*unafraid of lies from career politicians and business men*" is longer than usual that can enhance the fact that as the length of the line is more so is the influence of politicians and businessmen in the contemporary society where the statesmen and businessmen are the movers and shakers of a society. The poet deliberately commits mistake of subject verb agreement when talking about

journalist who write official speak void of educated thought thereby highlighting the so called uneducated or sightless thought of journalists who write and speak under the state and government influence and are not able to do justice with the current debates on war that require in depth analyses. The shift in thought can be seen from one stanza to another where one question is followed by another question. The question again begins with a lower case letter and once more the lengths are different, the line number eight “*where is the poetry of doubt and suspicion*” gives a pause to the reader and then there are three lines with longer lengths, the long length of these lines can be because of the ideas presented in them as poet is talking about patriotic, religious, romantic and love poetry hence bringing home the point that more poetry has been on these themes as compared to other issues in the world. The repetition of *not in the service of* three times stresses the fact that this poetry i.e. poetry of patriotic, religious and love themes should be avoided as it has been written much and now the poets are supposed to write poetry of doubt and suspicion or more or less poetry related to the current themes since the world today is full of suspicion and doubt consequently it ought to be reflected in the poetry of contemporary poets. A shift in the second last line is observed where the plural form of service is used. Alliteration in *influence* and *incompetence* stresses upon the fact that how incompetent people are influencing every field and the genuine people with intellect cannot find their place in the world. The last line is just two words *clown talk* and that also after a long pause that brings reader to think at the significance of these words makes reader come to the reality that poetry today is as ineffective as clown talk signifying nothing.

As form and structure go hand in hand for explicating meaning of a literary text, similar observation can be made over here where both form and structure help in enhancing the meaning of the poem and also clarifying what the poet wants to say. The poem is about the poetry and Madhubuti is trying poets to consider some thought provoking ideas while composing poetry instead of writing the poetry that had been composed previously about love and romance. Instead he wants that there should be poetry of resistance and poets should write poetry that should not be under the influence of politicians, businessmen or media no matter these influences are overwhelming as can be inferred from the way poet has managed it with the length of the line. Rather it should be poetry that could resist oppression in the world. Oppression of any kind should be critiqued by poetry and poets are supposed to consider this point while composing poetry. In my opinion the form and structure of the poem has enhanced the meaning and helped poet in guiding reader in getting the message that he wants to convey.

4. Conclusion:

In a nut shell it can be said that literature has been used as a vehicle to convey one's ideas expression and feelings since times immemorial and in that regard different elements including theme, plot setting etc. have gone in helping writers clarifying their point of view to the readers. Two such important components are form and structure that have been utilized by writers and in a way these components have always been a great help in bringing out the meaning of the text as

it had been inferred from the above mentioned discussion and later elucidated by the analysis of poem by Madhubuti where the form and structure very aptly enhanced the meaning of the poem.

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