Chapter 1
What is stylistics?

In this chapter you will:

- Be introduced to the discipline of stylistics
- Understand the main principles of stylistic analysis
- Explore the advantages of adopting a stylistic approach to literature

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The Language of Literature: An Introduction to Stylistics

1.1 Introduction

In this chapter you will be introduced to the discipline of stylistics and explore how it differs from other approaches to analysing literature. The chapter will outline the main principles of stylistics and consider the benefits of this approach.

1.2 Defining stylistics

Stylistics is a discipline within the field of linguistics. This means that it is a particular application of knowledge about language, just like sociolinguistics (the study of language in social use) or psycholinguistics (the study of the psychology of language). Stylistics, as the name suggests, is interested in style in spoken and written language. It is underpinned by the idea that whenever we use language to talk or write, we are always – consciously and unconsciously – making choices about the words we use (lexical choices) and the order in which we use them (syntactic structure). These choices form a particular style and changing the choices changes the style. This is what stylistics explores: how authors create effects through their linguistic styles and how readers interpret those effects. Stylistics is thus 'simply defined as the (linguistic) study of style, which is the way in which language is used' (Leech and Short 2007: 1).

KEY TERMS

Stylistics: the study of style; a discipline within the field of linguistics that examines how every linguistic choice can influence the overall effect of a text

Lexical choices: choosing a particular word or phrase

Syntactic structure: the structure of a sentence

ACTIVITY 1.1

Style as choice

Consider the two versions of the haiku in Text 1A and Text 1B. How, in your view, have the distinct lexical choices changed the style of the text?

You might find it interesting to return to this activity at the end of the book and see how much you have learned.

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What is stylistics?

Text 1A

A tiger can smile

A snake will say it loves you

Lies make us evil

Extract from *Fight Club*, Chuck Palahniuk (1996)

Text 1B

The tiger may smile

The snake might say it loves you

Lies make us evil?

In this book you'll be looking at stylistics and literature, but it's worth noting right from the start that stylistics can be used to analyse and explore *any* text. This is because, as you'll see in more detail in section 1.4 ('Principles of stylistics'), stylisticians believe that there is no fundamental difference between literature and any other kind of text, even spoken conversations, because all 'texts' are made up of language.

Stylistics has its roots in rhetoric, dating all the way back to Ancient Greece and, later, Rome. Rhetoric was centrally concerned with exploring and examining the effects of language and how particular choices could make a speech more, or less, persuasive and compelling. The Greeks' interest in rhetoric began because, if you were accused of a crime in those days, you were not allowed to hire a lawyer or have someone else speak in your defence: you were required to speak for yourself. As such, a vested interest in speaking persuasively and effectively sprang up all over the country. The Romans, later picked up and developed the Greek interest in rhetoric, and so the rhetorical tradition was born. Today, stylistics mirrors this focus on examining the effects of language.

Stylistics inherited something else from the rhetorical tradition too: a central focus on the use of metalanguage. Metalanguage is best defined as terms we use to describe language itself, especially particular linguistic features such as nouns, verbs, similes, metaphors, and so on. If you'd like to find out more about rhetoric, and the many hundreds of items of metalanguage coined by this tradition, the best place is the fantastic website *Silva Rhetoricae: The Forest of Rhetoric*, at www.cambridge.org/links/esclit6001, run by Brigham Young University.

Metalanguage is important for transparency and clarity: if I label a word as a noun, or a determiner, or I say something is a metaphor, and we're both agreed on the definition of that specific term, it means that you are able to judge whether or not you agree with me. This is vitally important: if instead, I

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use a more impressionistic word and it is ambiguous what I might mean, then it becomes very difficult for anyone to disagree with me. Paul Simpson (2014: 6) offers an excellent illustration of this when he describes being at a talk and hearing a critic refer to a writer's style as 'invertebrate'. Simpson explains that, even if this feels like a good adjective with which to describe a writer's style, it doesn't really mean anything. Does invertebrate mean fluid and flexible, or does it mean weak and spineless? The lack of clarity makes the claim effectively unchallengeable. As such, stylisticians believe clear, consistent and precise use of metalanguage must be a fundamental part of any text analysis.

KEY TERMS

Rhetoric: the art and study of effective or persuasive speaking or writing

Metalanguage: terminology used to describe language features

In more recent years, stylistics has undergone an evolution commonly referred to as 'the cognitive turn', reflecting an explosion of knowledge about language and the mind (Gavins and Steen 2003; Stockwell 2002). As a result, a significant strand of research involving the 'application of cognitive science to literary reading' (Stockwell 2012), sometimes called 'cognitive poetics', has developed (Gavins and Steen 2003; Stockwell 2002). Cognitive poetics is a discipline which borrows from many others, including psychology, cognitive science and neuroscience. Cognitive poetics adopts the position that 'literature does not exist unless it is read' (Stockwell 2012). You will have the opportunity to explore this branch of stylistics in detail in Chapter 4 ('Stylistics and the mind').

1.3 Why stylistics?

So why should you adopt a stylistic approach to your literary analysis?

In many ways, stylistics is a discipline which emerged in the middle of the twentieth century as a reaction to what many perceived as the vague and impressionistic nature of much literary criticism, of the kind demonstrated in the example above. As an approach, it offers an ideal balance between your own interpretation of a text and close reference to the language to support your analysis.

A metaphor frequently engaged to characterise the stylistic approach is the idea of a 'stylistics toolkit' (Leech and Short 2007; Wales 2014). Katie Wales argues that stylistics is a discipline which is 'hands-on' and 'requires 'spade-work', which is 'the systematic close reading and analysis of quite specific elements' (Wales

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2014: 32–3). Stylistics is democratic and liberating in this sense: the 'toolkit' is comprised of frameworks, theories and models, all of which use clear and specific metalanguage, and once a person has mastered those terms, everyone is on an even footing. It doesn't matter whether you've been a stylistician for weeks, months or years – we all use the same terms so we are all able to assess and critique each other's analyses.

The emphasis on using clearly defined metalanguage within the toolkit thus creates 'a common currency of technical terminology' (Stockwell and Whiteley 2014: 5). This ensures that all the stages of any analysis are open to scrutiny by other researchers in the field: an agreed vocabulary means that interpretations are disputable because it is clear how they were reached. Peter Stockwell (2012) explains: 'an emphasis on textual evidence […] ensures that claims made are open to agreement or falsifiability, are open to verification and checking for accuracy, and are fundamentally testable'.

Stylistics sits between language and literature, seeing them as closely related and mutually dependent. That is, it neither asks you to label linguistic forms and features in a text for the sake of it – a practice often negatively referred to as feature spotting – nor does it allow you to make sweeping claims about literary interpretation without grounding it in textual evidence.

> ### KEY TERM
> **Feature spotting:** labelling features in a text with metalanguage with no further comment or any reference to the effects that feature creates; a practice to be avoided

1.4 Principles of stylistics

Paul Simpson (2014: 4) explains that stylistics can be thought about as conforming to the following three basic principles, cast mnemonically as three 'Rs'. The three Rs stipulate that:

> Stylistic analysis should be **rigorous**.
>
> Stylistic analysis should be **retrievable**.
>
> Stylistic analysis should be **replicable**.

This means that stylisticians present literary analyses by showing all their working out. The analysis will be 'rigorous' in the sense that it will look holistically at a text and not cherry-pick particular examples which suit the argument the stylistician would like to make. If a stylistician calls something *invertebrate* – like

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the critic in Simpson's example above – they define what they mean and point to evidence in the text to support their claim. This means that the analysis is also 'retrievable': you can see how all interpretations have been reached – the logic and reasoning as to how those interpretations have been reached is explicit and explained. In other words, there is full transparency – at no point do you have to guess how or why a conclusion has been reached, nor do you have to 'take the analyst's word for it' that their point is accurate, because you can see it for yourself. Thus, too, the analysis will be 'replicable': if you were to take the same text and apply the same tools from the stylistics toolkit, you too should be able to draw the same conclusions.

Wider reading

You can find out more about the topics in this chapter by reading the following:

Gavins, J. and Steen, G. (2003) *Cognitive Poetics in Practice*. London: Routledge.

Leech, G. and Short, M. (2007) *Style in Fiction* (Second Edition). London: Longman.

Simpson, P. (2014) *Stylistics: A Resource Book for Students* (Second Edition). London: Routledge.

Stockwell, P. (2002) *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction*. London: Routledge.

Stockwell, P. and Whiteley, S. (eds) (2014) *The Cambridge Handbook of Stylistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.