

Interpretation of *The Jestings of Arlington Stringham* by Hector Hugh Munro

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Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to present a stylistic analysis of the short story *The Jestings of Arlington Stringham* by Hector Hugh Munro, which comes from the collection of satirical short stories *The Chronicles of Clovis*. The author of the story uses a variety of stylistic devices and language means which help create the full visual images of the protagonists. Therefore, it is important to determine their role in each specific context in order to reveal the peculiarities of the author's individual style.

Keywords: stylistic analysis, short story, stylistic device, artistic detail

Introduction

Hector Hugh Munro (1870-1916), a prolific British fiction writer, playwright, and journalist, better known by the pen name Saki, was overshadowed by his contemporaries and not familiar to a wide range of both domestic and foreign readers. Continuing the tradition of classical English literature and at the same time being an innovator, Saki embodied in his work the spirit of the Edwardian era (King Edward VII's reign), which is much less studied than the previous Victorian era (Gubbenet, 1981).

Saki is best known for his witty, exquisitely crafted and sometimes macabre short stories, which often satirize the mores of Edwardian society or describe the world of supernatural horror underlying the tranquil English countryside. He is considered a master of the short story and often compared to O. Henry and Dorothy Parker. His stories are always short but memorable, with delicately drawn characters and finely judged narratives.

Saki's creative work had an impact on P.G. Wodehouse, Noël Coward, and Evelyn Waugh, among others. It was appreciated by Graham Greene, A.A. Milne, and Will Self. However, as Byrne (2007) rightly mentioned, "the readership has expanded largely through personal recommendation rather than fame, and the fame tends to be restricted to short stories."

Although critics and researchers usually referred Saki to the above-described English literary tradition, the writer's uniqueness was often emphasized. His creative work was studied by such researchers as Langguth (1981), Thrane (1973), Spears (1963), Gillen (1969), Fogle (1985), Seymour-Smith and Kimmens (1996).

The purpose of the present study is to present a stylistic analysis of the short story *The Jestings of Arlington Stringham* by Hector Hugh Munro and determine the role of stylistic devices and language means used in each specific context in order to reveal the peculiarities of the author's individual style. The relevance of the study stems from the fact that it contributes to the development of methods for studying the linguistic component of the aesthetic significance of the artistic text, as well as complements and develops a line of research in the field of stylistics and linguo-poetics.

Methods

The methods used in the study include a linguo-stylistic and linguo-poetic analysis of the artistic text at the level of individual artistic examples in connection with the theory of narrative types.

Results and Discussion

Saki's story *The Jestings of Arlington Stringham* comes from the collection of satirical short stories *The Chronicles of Clovis*. The story is about the absurd social consequences of a joke made in the House of Commons. It is also a masterfully deft and very funny skewering of human hang-ups.

Saki is a wonderfully swift executioner, meting out punishments (usually of a deadly variety) to the deserving in a single sentence. Eleanor's overdose may seem a trifle harsh, and the irony runs through the entire book, but we should not forget it was her unkind words that pushed her husband into the clutches of Lady Isobel in the first place (Clark, 2006).

Eleanor becomes increasingly discontented with everything – her husband, his jokes and their relationships in general. She is insecure and jealous. Lady Isobel obviously poses a threat to Eleanor's peace of mind. She feels more alienated from her husband. Even the trivialities occupied Eleanor. We can see it, for example, when the wrong library book was brought to her. Therefore, it is not surprising that this story has such a denouement and Saki decreed her suicide – everything was leading to it.

The climax of the plot development is presented by the final dialogue when Eleanor got to know that the joke that Arlington had made during the debate was actually one of Lady Isobel's sayings. It made her take a decisive step.

The text is presented as the third person narrative in which the characters and events are described. The narrative flow is straight; the author informs us about the actions and sometimes declares his position and ideas in argumentation, so-called lyrical digression. For instance, he presupposes that the jesting of Arlington was unintentional; Clovis "*perhaps exaggerated the importance of curry in the home*"; Eleanor hated boys and "*it was perhaps the yearning of a woman who had no children of her own*" (Munro, 2015). In such a way he shares his own ideas with the reader.

The dialogic speech plays a vital role in the story. It helps the reader to get familiar with Eleanor's mother and her character. Only from the dialogues with her daughter it becomes understandable that she has no imagination and very little intelligence.

Using a small set of speech units, Hector Munro describes various situations. For example, the following dialogue emphasizes the misunderstanding and distance between Eleanor and Arlington:

"The country's looking very green, but, after all, that's what it's there for", he remarked to his wife two days later.

"That's very modern, and I daresay very clever, but I'm afraid it's wasted on me", she observed coldly... "You had better tell it to Lady Isobel. I've no doubt she would appreciate it" (Munro, 2015).

The remark, Arlington had made, evoked her condemnation, but she didn't know he said it whole-heartedly. And her behaviour injured his pride.

The sentences are short and intermediate – up to 30 words. It testifies about action development and dynamics of events. The sentence structure is quite distinctive. There are several short sentences, so-called pointes, which foreground the causal relationship between sentences. Their high accentual, intonation and sense concentration imparts them with special expressiveness. For example, "*Things often begin in that way*"; "*And of course Arlington never knew*" (Munro, 2015).

The text segmentation is realized by such punctuation marks as commas, inverted commas, hyphen, semicolon, exclamation and interrogative marks and full stops.

The tone of this piece of literature is informal, vigorous and dynamic. Such shortened forms as "I've no doubt", "you can't have", word-combinations "dozens of times", "the censorious said", "at a time", detachments "naturally", "of course", "surely", and ellipses "What lute?", "Because you can't have an abyss in a lute" point out at the informality of speech.

There are some words related to environmental science, namely to flora and fauna. For example, the names of birds (yellow-hammer, whitethroats), plants and trees (fern, bramble; rowan tree). Such a stylistic phenomenon as the morphological transposition of adjectives in the word-combination “a pair of *lesser* whitethroats” evokes picturesque connotations.

In the work Hector Munro uses such a technique as allusion. Eleanor told her mother, “*I'm afraid it's the beginning of the rift in the lute*” (Munro, 2015). The phrase “rift in the lute” is borrowed from the poem *Merlin and Vivien*, written by Alfred Tennyson (a cycle of twelve narrative poems *The Idylls of the King*):

*It is the little rift within the lute,
That by and by will make the music mute,
And ever widening slowly silence all.* (Tennyson, 1859-1885)

The rift in the lute means a sign of disharmony between people, especially the first evidence of a quarrel that may become worse.

The writer made allusion because of the emotions and ideas that readers may associate with the work. In this case the author underlines the abyss between the couple and makes the reader get ready to dramatic and excited denouement.

In the story Arlington Stringham uses other people's jests without attribution. It is also some kind of allusion. While speaking of the island of Crete he says that the place “*produces more history than it can consume locally*” (Munro, 2015). Such borrowings entail great troubles in the end.

Such **phonetic stylistic phenomena** as alliteration and assonance are used in the following extract ([ɪ], [i:], [e], [l], [p], [f]).

I is possible that it was unintentional, but a fellow-member, who did not wish it to be supposed that he was asleep because his eyes were shut, laughed. It was the tragedy of his life that he should miss the fullest effect of his jesting.

These phonetic *stylistic devices* make sentences more pleasing and interesting. They not only impart a melodic effect to the utterance but make speech expressive and help the reader imagine the characters and events better. For example, the repetition of the vowel [ɪ] as well as the light sonorant [l] makes speech sound quiet and calm.

To create additional expressive, evaluative, subjective connotations, to make description of the characters picturesque Hector Munro used a number of **lexico-semantic stylistic devices**:

– epithets (“insufferable monotony”, “uncomfortable circumstances”, “conscious humour”, “brilliant performance”, “unpleasant wit”). Many epithets are metaphorical and contribute to the image of the characters and the description of events. Thanks to them we may perceive the emotional attitude of the narrator towards the objects and phenomena. There are also some epithets which are expressed not only by traditional adjectives and participles but by qualitative adverbs (“intensely irritating”, “fearfully overstocked”); they are so-called two-step epithets;

– metaphors (“chaste and callous indifference”, “rift in the lute”, “the thorny path of conscious humour”, “abyss between them”, “nourished an obstinate conviction”, “regrettable chronicle of ill-spent lives” – emphasized by the epithets) which help not only reveal the author’s individual vision of the characters and relationships but at the same time do it in a rather economical manner;

– simile (“*To say that anything was a quotation was an excellent method, in Eleanor's eyes, for withdrawing it from discussion, just as you could always defend indifferent lamb late in the season by saying "It's mutton"*”; “*struck her as an imputation on her intelligence*” (Munro, 2015) which makes speech visual. Moreover, the protagonist, Eleanor, constantly compares the relationship with her husband to the rift in the lute, the abyss: “*I'm afraid it's the beginning of the rift in the lute*”; “*The rift is widening to an abyss*” (Munro, 2015);

- hyperbole (“dozens of times”, “It is the tragedy of human endeavour”) which aims at creating a strong impression on the reader;
- personification (“lines of disapproval deepened on her already puckered brow”, “Fate had beckoned him”, “anger prompted her to a further gibe”) which gives human quality to the phenomena, gives them a kind of “life”. In this way it adds vividness and dynamics to the described events;
- synecdoche (“papers noted”, “the House was quite pleased with it”) which makes speech economical;
- irony (“*It's a mercy that they [meringues] haven't [souls]... they would be always losing them, and people like my aunt would get up missions to meringues, and say it was wonderful how much one could teach them and how much more one could learn from them*” (Munro, 2015));
- oxymoron (“positively offensive”) which points out contradictory and complicated nature of Eleanor’s character;
- zeugma (“It was a thin House, and a very thin joke”) which means that few people were present, but the joke was not meant for all as well. The author creates a humorous effect which is achieved by means of contradiction between the similarity of two syntactic structures and their semantic heterogeneity;
- antithesis – the author implicitly contrasts Eleanor with Lady Isobel; he compares their characters (while Eleanor is annoying with Arlington’s jokes, Lady Isobel likes to jest herself; Eleanor depends on public opinion, while the other one doesn’t care (she is seen everywhere with a fawn-coloured collie at a time when everyone else keeps nothing but Pekinese). It should be noted that despite the fact that we don’t get acquainted with Lady Isobel (she doesn’t even appear on the pages), we get to know a lot about this character. Therefore, we can say that Hector Munro was able to make a thorough description of his characters in order to create a deep impression on the reader’s mind.

On the **morphemic level** we can observe the repetition of the root morphemes:

- “a laugh” – “laughter” which was used by the author to emphasize a certain quality of the papers and such repetition causes some difficulties in the process of translating.

The author described the characters and relationships between them using the following **syntactic stylistic devices**:

- reiteration (the word “joke” was repeated 5 times, Eleanor repeated “it's very modern and very clever” 4 times in order to prove her awareness and modern views; she also repeated “the rift [or abyss] in the lute” to emphasize her anxiety about the relationship with her husband; “lines of disapproval deepened on...”) which aims at drawing attention to the personality traits of the protagonists. The author makes the reader see the characters he describes as he himself sees them;
- ellipsis (“why shouldn't I mention it to any one?" "Because you can't have an abyss in a lute.”) which makes speech dynamic and unofficial;
- detachment (“of course”, “besides”, “after all”, “naturally”, “and you may see”) which results in logical emphasis on the components of sentence structure;
- nominative and exclamatory sentence (“The insufferable monotony of the proposed recreation!”) which makes the description of the events dynamic.

Strong position includes the beginning and the end of the story as well as its title.

The beginning of the story *The Jestings of Arlington Stringham* gives the idea of what is going to happen for the rest of the story. We can say that this story starts with an action scene, and the beginning introduces the protagonist, *revealing at least one trait of his character – a good sense of humour* “Arlington Stringham made a joke in the House of Commons” (Munro, 2015). And it was “a very thin joke”. At the beginning the author also acquaints the reader with

Arlington's wife, Eleanor, who is discontented with the jesting of her husband. The author is dropping the reader in the course of events, forcing him to ask: What are the consequences of it? How's it going to end? Thus, we may get the feeling that something is about to happen.

The end turns out to be hardly unpredictable because everything was leading to such a denouement. The ending is pretty dark for a Saki story. Eleanor, who had "domestic sorrow" and was very anxious about the relationship with her husband, dies "from an overdose of chloral". The author implicitly shows us the grief of Arlington saying that "he should miss the fullest effect of his jesting".

The title of the story is very meaningful. It sets a tone and creates an expectation. The title actualizes the category of anthropocentricity because it includes both a personal name and a description. It focuses on the main character, and the common noun "jesting" reveals the trait of his character. The appearance of the character name before being introduced to the reader creates the effect of "the beginning from the middle". Thus, the title plays a great role in the story.

As for proper name actualizing, Arlington's last name Stringham is a speaking name itself. "To string" is a polysemantic word and one of its meanings is to jest, to trick someone. Thus, from the very beginning we can guess what kind of man Arlington Stringham is.

In the story we can find a number of **artistic details** which can help create the full visual images of the protagonists:

- When describing Lady Isobel the author pointed out that she "*was seen everywhere with a fawn-coloured collie at a time when everyone else kept nothing but Pekinese, and she had once eaten four green apples at an afternoon tea in the Botanical Gardens*" (Munro, 2015). He wanted to show that this person was extraordinary, and Eleanor envied her a little, knowing that her husband and Lady Isobel had a great deal in common.

- Instead of the latest sensational novel, Eleanor was confronted by a book of nature writings. She was discontented and angry. This artistic detail means that even the trivialities occupied her. Moreover, it testifies to the fact that she felt boredom with the wonders of nature and was plainly literal-minded.

- Curry in the story serves as the evidence that there is still a bond between the wife and the husband, they still have similar opinions.

- Eleanor hated boys, perhaps because she had no children of her own. Maybe it was the reason why she was angry with her husband.

Conclusions

Thus, the story *The Jestings of Arlington Stringham* contains a great number of stylistic devices of all levels (phonetic, morphemic, lexico-semantic and syntactic) which make the text a whole unity and contribute to the individual author's style. Hector Hugh Munro used them to make the description of his characters interesting, bright and exciting, to evoke emotions and feelings in readers as well as to convey his ideas in unusual ways.

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