

## THE LINGUOPOETICS OF EPITHET IN O. HENRY'S SHORT STORIES

**Sona Haroutyunian\***

*Ca'Foscari University of Venice*

**Amalia Haroutyunian\*\***

*Yerevan State University*

It is common knowledge that reading literature in the proper sense of the word is rather difficult as it presupposes the ability of the reader not to confine one's perception to what can be seen on the surface of the text only. The reader's ability to go deep into the text and reveal the intention of the writer is of prime importance. Many prominent philologists in different countries have referred to this question, and their investigations have established that the real understanding of a piece of verbal creativity is a step by step process and can be achieved only gradually. This, in fact, is the underlying methodological basis of the present research which aims at studying the use of epithets in O. Henry's short stories and their role in the linguopoetic organization of the stories. Of particular investigative interest have turned out to be *The Last Leaf* and *The Gift of Magi*.

**Keywords:** *verbal creativity, O. Henry's short stories, epithet, the linguostylistic method of analysis, the linguopoetic view of epithet.*

### Introduction

Investigations have shown that a work of verbal creativity is first of all an ordinary piece of speech based on the dialectical correlation of language and speech which can be revealed through the application of the linguostylistic method of analysis (Gasparyan, 1980; 2004; 2008; 2013). As stated by V. Zadornova, linguostylistics deals not only with tropes and figures of speech, or stylistic devices proper, but also concerns itself with the study of the ultimate units of language from the point of view of connotations, that is those

---

\* sona.haroutyunian@gmail.com

\*\* a.harutyunyan@ysu.am

Received: 14.06.2022

Revised: 10.07.2022

Accepted: 28.07.2022



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

© The Author(s) 2021

additional properties of linguistic units which are superimposed on the linguistic meaning proper. The study of connotations is based on a thorough investigation of the semantic structure of words. We are able to explain how this or that particular connotation is acquired by a word only if we understand its meaning on the 'emic' level (Zadornova, 1984, 1986; *A Manual of English*, 1989).

The understanding of a work of verbal art is a step-by-step process which is borne out by the well-known principle of the theory of cognition insisting on the process of cognition being a gradual one (Gasparyan, 2019).

Therefore, the first step in the process of understanding of a work of verbal art is taken on the semantic level where linguistic units are regarded as such, i.e. as parts of the emic system of language. Our attempt to understand the general linguistic content, or direct, nominative meanings of the linguistic units of the text paves a path to the metasemiotic level which is the level of speech, i.e. the level of style with all the additional expressive-emotional-evaluative overtones implemented into the text. Thus, when we are quite certain that we understand everything on the semantic level, we take the next step and analyze the ways linguistic units are used in the context, where they acquire additional, or 'meta'-content. As has been shown in different investigations, this 'meta'-content has no form of its own: the unity of the expression and the content of a linguistic unit as it appears on the semantic level becomes expression for the new connotative or metaphoric content. Thus, the universal method of the linguostylistic analysis including the semantic and the metasemiotic levels is aimed at revealing the dialectical unity of language and speech which any speech event is based on, irrespective of the register (Akhmanova, 1972).

When analyzing a text linguostylistically it is natural to begin with words, the basic building material of a work of literature. However we should be aware of the fact that it covers all the aspects of language: collocations, grammatical forms, patterns of major syntax, etc. There is not a single sound, word or word-combination in a natural human language which would be unable to undergo a metasemiotic transformation. Otherwise stated, the main linguostylistic category, i.e. the category of variation, which can be realized as either a paradigmatic phenomenon or a syntagmatic one, is capable of manifesting itself on all possible levels of language.

It should be added however that, when what we deal with is a piece of verbal art, our understanding can by no means be confined to the employment of the linguostylistic method of analysis, for imaginative writing is endowed by

some aesthetic value which can be perceived and estimated with the help of the method of linguopoetic analysis, the ultimate aim of which consists in showing how the use of different linguistic means (sounds, words, word-combinations, units of major syntax, etc.) results in a particular aesthetic or artistic effect. It is through the application of this very method that it becomes possible to appreciate the way a text is organized and shaped as a global whole, a global work of art. Otherwise stated, the linguopoetic approach avails the researcher of the possibility of studying the creative use of the language due to which the writer's intention is realized and the metameta-content or the global purport of the work of verbal art is created.

It is generally assumed that there is something in a work of fiction, which has variously been described as 'theme', '(literary) message', '(global) purport', 'metametacontent', etc., i.e. what the writer wants to convey to his readers. Obviously nothing can be achieved unless we understand the global purport of the text.

But if a text is a piece of imaginative writing, a philologist should be interested in not only what the writer conveys to his readers, but also how he speaks about what he has chosen to convey. Thus, the linguopoetic analysis is aimed at appreciating the way a piece of belles-letters is organized as a global work of art. The linguopoetic interpretation of the text depends on our ability to appreciate the unity of the written and oral forms of verbal art. It has been experimentally established that when a writer is creating a text, he arranges the words and chooses the syntactic constructions in accordance with a certain 'melody' which conditions the lexical, syntactic and stylistic organization of the text. Prosody is not only an indispensable characteristic feature of oral speech but also an inherent quality of the written text (Shcherba, 1957).

The linguopoetic analysis depends to a great extent on the ability of a competent reader to 'hear' the prosody of the text in his 'inner' speech even when reading silently (Gasparyan, 2013).

The relationship between the two kinds of analysis (the linguostylistic and the linguopoetic ones) is again dialectical. We cannot approach a work of fiction linguopoetically unless we first and foremost understand it as a piece of ordinary text, unless we are aware of all the stylistic devices and the ways the words are brought together. But if we stop at the linguostylistic level it will be a formal approach to literature, and the understanding and appreciation of its aesthetic value will be neglected (Gasparyan, 1980; 2008).

### O. Henry and his short stories

In the present article the above-mentioned linguostylistic and linguopoetic methods of analysis have been applied to the use of epithets in O. Henry's Short Stories. Like other authors, O. Henry also tries to embellish the narration with different stylistic devices endowing them with a variety of expressive-emotional-evaluative overtones which enrich his stories with additional shades of meaning and support the realization of his literary-aesthetic and ideological intentions.

O. Henry (1863-1910) was a prolific American short-story writer<sup>9</sup>, a master of surprise endings, who wrote about the life of ordinary people in New York City. A twist of plot, which turns on an ironic or coincidental circumstance, is typical of O. Henry's stories. O. Henry's short stories are roughly organized into a framework chronicling a human life; the main idea of them begins with younger protagonists, and then moves forward into stories with increasingly aged men and women. Although this is a broad generalization, the stories also tend to increase in complexity.

The use of stylistic devices in his short stories, like in any other piece of work of belles-lettres style, is justified by the author's intention of making his speech more vivid, imaginative and colorful. As the use of the stylistic devices is closely connected with the aesthetic taste of the author, we see our task in trying to understand these devices and epithetic expressions in particular to reveal those feelings, thoughts and emotions, which have brought about the creation of the given piece of work.

O. Henry shows considerable talent in his short stories when he speaks about the truth of life. Almost in all his short stories the need reigns and it is reflected in the daily life (*The Gift of Magi*, *A Service of Love*, etc.). The prevailing notions in many of his short stories are that the two loving hearts sacrifice the most valuable things of their life for each other. And at the same time they keep their feelings in the highest peak of the human morality though in contrast with this there are cases when he makes hints about the cruelty of the world where it is very difficult to have sincere feelings and devotions to each other (see, for instance *An Unfinished Story*), problems of moral decline and upbringing (e.g. *The Guilty Party*). However, the central line in his short stories is the attitude of his heroes towards life, expressed in obviously sad tones.

### The linguopoetic value of epithets in O. Henry's short stories

The above-mentioned sad overtones are evidently displayed in O. Henry's *The Last Leaf* where the psychological state of the heroes, their feelings and desires to struggle for life are revealed. Two unfortunate artists with different understandings of life are victims of failure. Johnsy is a sick girl, who has a hope to be cured but she doesn't struggle for her life. The falling leaves of the trees and the last leaf which is vividly represented in the title of the story symbolize her death. The other painter-Behrman, dreams about having a masterpiece, but considering himself an unsuccessful man who does not have an opportunity to carry out his dream, he sacrifices his life for the girl's, painting the last perpetual leaf on the wall opposite Johnsy's window to make her believe that her life will still go on, and his visual trick becomes an unexpected masterpiece.

To have a thorough understanding of the use of epithets in *The Last Leaf* we prefer to analyze some of them within the context and reveal the author's intentions.

*That was in May. In November a cold, unseen stranger, whom the doctors called Pneumonia, stalked about the colony, touching one here and there with his icy fingers. Over on the east side this ravager strode boldly, smiting his victims by scores, but his feet trod slowly through the maze of the narrow and moss-grown "places".*

*Mr. Pneumonia was not what you would call a chivalric old gentleman. A mite of a little woman with blood thinned by California zephyrs was hardly fair game for the red-fisted, shortbreathed old duffer. But Johnsy he smote; and she lay, scarcely moving, on her painted iron bedstead, looking through the small Dutch window-panes at the blank side of the next brick house. (The Last Leaf, p. 81)*

Pneumonia, an abstract notion from the sphere of Medicine, in fact a severe infectious disease, being endowed by the author with human features in the context of the story, hence, personified (*Mr. Pneumonia*) becomes a kind of negative personage (*unseen stranger, old gentleman, icy fingers, ravager, etc.*) ravaging the health of his victims in the story. This helps the writer strengthen the idea of the coming danger. The epithetic word-combination *red-fisted, shortbreathed old duffer* is the embodiment of the disease which doesn't spare

anybody on its way. The adjective *red* which is an ordinary color term, acquires negative connotations in the context of the story and is meant to symbolize cruelty, blood, death. Its use shows the girl's state of a victim who was jaded by Mr. Pneumonia and could hardly move in her painted iron bedstead. The mournful atmosphere is intensified by the use of the epithet *the blank side of the next brick house*. The girl's unhappy and sad feelings make the walls of the house look blank, and the place where the girl lies – *a painted iron bedstead*. The lack of any sign of vitality in the room seems obvious. The use of the adjectives *cold, unseen, old, icy*, with the nouns *ravager* and *gentleman* strengthen the negative image of *Mr. Pneumonia*. It is notable that the non-verbality of the above-mentioned epithets is realized within contexts where their use is unpredictable for the reader. Out of the context they may lose the expressiveness.

Special interest arises when, through the use of stylistic devices and expressive means, the author tries to convey the hero's feelings, thoughts and emotions. The use of the epithets is so natural and vivid that they help the reader understand and evaluate the atmosphere of the story, the miserable feelings of the female characters and Johnsy in particular.

*Sue looked solicitously out of the window. What was there to count? There was only a bare, dreary yard to be seen and the blank side of the brick house twenty feet away. An old, old ivy vine, gnarled and decayed at the roots, climbed half way up the brick wall. The cold breath of autumn had stricken its leaves from the vine until its skeleton branches clung, almost bare, to the crumbling bricks. (The Last Leaf, p.82)*

O. Henry is a real master of creating characters. He describes Johnsy's last temptations towards life. Even in agony she notices the decline and death of the nature. Everything for her comes to an end. "Her eyes can only see *a bare, dreary yard*, which is waiting for its decay as the *cold breath of autumn* has already stricken the leaves, and there are only *skeleton branches* clung. By using the epithet *bare, dreary yard* the author does not tend to present the description of the yard but rather the emotional state of the sick girl who in fact seems to be a victim of the fate. For Johnsy her life is so gloomy and uninteresting that she is psychologically prepared to abandon it little by little with every leaf falling off the branches.

In the following passage we deal with adherent connotations, which are hidden behind the lines and become apparent and tangible only when being thoroughly studied within the context.

*“Tell me as soon as you have finished”, said Johnsy, She closed her eyes, and lay white and still as a fallen statue, “because I want to see the last one fall. I have done enough waiting. I’m tired of waiting. I’m tired of thinking. I want to turn loose my hold on everything, and go sailing down, down, just like one of those poor tired leaves”.* (The Last Leaf, p.83)

The orientation of the passage towards the girl’s psychological world is obvious here. The author reveals the inner feelings of the heroine. The thoughts of imprisonment, powerlessness and resentment are all intertwined. A talented girl, whom the future could possibly confer a title of a painter, turns out to be a helpless and poor creature. This becomes apparent from the very beginning of the story. She endures humiliation in the end lying in her iron bedstead, and this comes to prove that a person, living in such conditions, can never have a cheerful expression of a face, and that is why the author tends to enrich the description, choosing a proper expression like *a fallen statue*. The genius of the author has penetrated into the inner world of the girl and can see that she is completely with no vitality. It is so symbolic to draw a parallel between the character and *a fallen statue*. The inconsolable state of the character is so obvious that the author himself is sure she will never be able to outlive the grave situation. Her best friend, who is always next to her, encourages Johnsy never to lose her last hope, but she herself cannot be sure if it is realistic to anticipate even a weak ray of sun to appear in the gloom of their life. The use of the epithet *poor tired leaves* conveys the depressive state of the sick girl to whom the world seems completely dark and unhappy. The epithetic properties of the word-combination *poor tired leaves*, interwoven with personification enhance the description of the situation. Autumn leaves usually qualified with such adjectives as yellow, wet, dry, but never *poor* and *tired*, are turned in the context of the story into living beings whose behavior is perceived as decisive for the sick girl. The adjective *poor* is first and foremost associated with a human being, for, as confirmed by Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (p. 1169), it expresses the quality of not having enough money for basic needs. It is obvious that this intertwining of the epithet with personification is by no

means accidental. This condensation of devices is meant to create the image of poverty reigning in the life of the young girls, Sue and Johnsy, who were deprived of the possibility of realizing their professional dreams because of the social circumstances they were in. Thus, the choice of the given epithet-personification in making the speech more emphatic provides success in the realization of the author's intention of depicting the image of the social discrimination the young girls have encountered.

The image of the heroine is not depicted "directly" by the author. It is done through the decline of the nature. The description of Johnsy's unearthly condition is highly "poetic". It abounds in metaphors and similes which call for "lyrical" timbre; tempo is slowed down, loudness – diminished, the voice acquires the quality of breathiness. The lexical repetitions and the regulated alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables, (bare - dreary - yard; blank - brick; old - ivy - vine - gnarled - decayed; cold - breath; clung - bare - crumbling - bricks ) in the passage creates a well-organized rhythmical pattern which adds to the linguopoetic impact of the story.

Another remarkable case is the story *The Gift of Magi*. The theme revolves around the main problems of the society – poverty, class differences, rank, morality. However, the story reveals the beauty and devotion of the sacrifice of a married couple. Della sells her hair to buy a golden chain for her husband. She sacrifices her personal "beauty" for love, and it is especially manifested in the description of Della's hair: *Had the Queen of Sheba lived in the flat across the airshaft, Della would have lit her hair hang out the window to dry just to depreciate her Majesty's jewels and gifts. Della's hair overweighs all jewels of the world, and by selling it for merely twenty dollars she overtly shows the sincere devotion and love she feels towards her husband. The use of epithets reinforces the beauty of her devotion with great accuracy.*

*So now Della's beautiful hair fell about her rippling and shining like a cascade of brown waters. (The Gift of the Magi, p. 33)*

The epithet *brown waters* acquires expressive-emotional-evaluative overtones when used with the simile *rippling and shining like a cascade of brown waters*. The expression makes the reader immediately imagine the charm of Della's hair which is like a brown waterfall. It should be taken for granted that the intonation here is of paramount importance. The expression *rippling and shining like a cascade of brown waters* is uttered in a slow and melancholic

tempo, temporally having pauses to make it more vivid. The author makes the meaning of the epithet *brown waters* stronger changing it into *brown cascade*. On the metasemiotic level the epithet acquires positive adherent connotations, thus helping the reader to imagine the beauty of Della's hair: *Down rippled the brown cascade*.

*She held it out to him eagerly upon her open palm. The dull precious metal seemed to flash with a reflection of her bright and ardent spirit. (The Gift of the Magi)*

Though Jim lost his watch, he was convinced that he had another gift, and that was the love of Della. The use of the non-verbal epithet *bright and ardent spirit* reinforces the atmosphere showing that the flash of precious metal is nothing as compared to Della's *bright and ardent spirit*. The figurative use of the adjectives *bright* and *ardent* in the context endows them with additional expressive-emotional overtones changing them from ordinary attributive to epithetic use to reflect the pure and intimate sensations of the heroes, their mutual love and sincere devotion. Devoted love overwhelms over poverty and sickness.

### Conclusion

Thus, O. Henry shows the reader a piece of his heroes' life, their relations and emotions. He scrutinizes his attention on minute things and conveys his intention of showing the subtleties of life which sometimes turn out to play rather a decisive role in one's destiny. Epithets in O. Henry's short stories are prevalingly transferred, based on the use of metaphoric adjectives and tend to endow the object with additional imaginative characteristics. In O. Henry's epithets the subjectively emotive meaning introduced into the text obviously suppresses the denotational meaning of the words, creates aesthetically valuable images which help the writer realize his intention through revealing the problematic aspects of the social life: poverty, class differences, isolation and defeat.

### References

- Akhmanova, O. (Ed.). (1972). *Linguostylistics: theory and method*. Moscow: MSU Press.
- Akhmanova, O., & Aleksandrova, O. (Eds.). (1989). *A manual of English*. Moscow: MSU Press.

- Gasparyan, S. (1980). Dialekticheskoe edinstvo lingvostilisticheskogo i lingvopoeticheskogo izucheniya khudozestvennoy literatury [The dialectical unity of the linguostylistic and linguopoetic study of verbal art], *The Dialectics of the individual, special and the general in the science of language*. Moscow: MSU Press, pp. 149-171.
- Gasparyan, S. (2008). *Lingvopoetika obraznogo sravneniya* [The linguopoetics of non-verbal simile], Yerevan: Lusakn Publishers.
- Gasparyan, S. (2013). *Figura sravneniya v funktsional'nom osveshchenii* [The figure of simile in the functional-communicative light]. Yerevan: Lusakn Publishers.
- Gasparyan, S. (2019). A Methodological mechanism for applying the hermeneutical approach. *Armenian Folia Anglistika. International Journal of English Studies*. 1 (19), 9-29. <https://doi.org/10.46991/AFA/-2019.15.1.009>
- Hornby, A.S. (2005). *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 7<sup>th</sup> edition, Oxford: OUP Press.
- Shcherba, L.V. (1957). *Izbrannye raboty po russkomu yazyku* [Selected works on the Russian language]. Moscow: Uchpedgiz.
- Zadornova, V. (1984). *Vospriyatie i interpretatsiya khudozhestvennogo teksta* [Perception and interpretation of a literary text]. Moscow: MSU Press.
- Zadornova, V. (1986). *Stilistika anglijskogo yazyka* [Stylistics of the English language: methodological guidelines]. Moscow: MSU Press.

### Sources of Data

- O. Henry. (1977). *Selected Stories*. Moscow: Progress Publishers.

### ՄԱԿԴԻՐԸ ՈՐՈՒՅՍ ԼԵԶՎԱԲԱՆԱՍՏԵՂԾԱԿԱՆ ՀՆԱԲ Օ. ՀԵՆՐԻԻ ՊԱՏՄՎԱԾՔՆԵՐՈՒՄ

Մոնա Հարությունյան  
Ամալյա Հարությունյան

Հայտնի է, որ կարդալ ու հասկանալ գեղարվեստական գրականություն բառի իսկական իմաստով, հեշտ չէ, քանի որ բավարար չէ սեփական ընկալումը տեքստի «մակերեսով» սահմանափակելը: Ընթերցողի՝ տեքստի խորքերը թափանցելու և գրողի բուն մտադրությունը բացահայտելու կարողությունն այս դեպքում առաջնային նշանակություն

ունեն: Հարցին անդրադարձել են բազմաթիվ ականավոր բանասերներ, և նրանց ուսումնասիրություններով հաստատվել է, որ գեղարվեստական ստեղծագործության ընկալումն ու հասկացումը աստիճանական գործընթաց է, և դրան հնարավոր է հասնել քայլ առ քայլ: Սույն հոդվածում մեթոդաբանական այս ելակետից էլ ուսումնասիրվում են մակդիրի կիրառությունները Օ. Հենրիի պատմվածքներում և դրանց դերը պատմվածքների լեզվաբանաստեղծական արժեքի ձևավորման մեջ: Հետազոտական առումով՝ մասնավոր հետաքրքրություն են առաջացրել «Վերջին տերևը» և «Մոզերի նվերը» պատմվածքները:

***Բանալի բառեր՝** գեղարվեստական ստեղծագործություն, Օ. Հենրիի պատմվածքները, մակդիր, լեզվաոճաբանական վերլուծության մեթոդ, մակդիրի ընկալում լեզվաբանաստեղծականի լույսի ներքո:*