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SEMANTIC DEVIATIONS IN "THE FLATS ROAD" BY ALICE MUNRO: A STYLISTIC STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study attempts to examine the short story "The Flats Road" by Alice Munro from the lens of stylistics. The short story is laden with semantic deviations as it consists of multifarious stylistic choices that adds in the emotional intensity of the story. The Flats Road, in the short story, is neither a metropolitan nor a rural area. The war-horrified people of the town showcase the symptoms of subjugation. All these themes are established by author's crafty usage of semantic deviations and stylistic devices. The study in hand is descriptive qualitative. Analytical portion of the study is based on the theoretical positions of Leech and Short (1981) from their famous work "Style in Fiction". The study is significant in a way that its findings will assist the readers in understanding the mechanics of language and making meaningful interpretation of fictional texts. This study will aid in augmenting the linguistic creativity and language practice. The study is instrumental in highlighting the functions of rhetoric and compositional techniques.

Keywords: *Alice Munro, The Flats Road, Semantic Deviation, Stylistic Devices, Style in Fiction*

Introduction

Stylistics, a branch of Applied Linguistics, is typically concerned with the study of style in language, which encompasses analysing how language is used in specific contexts to create certain effects on the audience or how it communicates particular meanings. It involves understanding and analysing the choices (both lexical and syntactic) made by the writer or speaker in terms of vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and other linguistic features to understand how these choices shape the message and impact its affordance. All these choices play their role in forming the style of language which serves as a vehicle through which we express our thoughts, emotions, ideas, make and shape our relationships, and perform cultural and societal duties.

Widdowson (1992) asserts that stylistics serves as a powerful means of establishing a symbiotic relationship between literature and linguistics, as well as language and criticism. He suggests that it is an interdisciplinary field which provides a way of mediation between different subjects. It plays a pivotal role in bridging the realms of linguistics and literature, facilitating a deeper understanding of how language is employed as an art form. In the realm of stylistics, the primary concern is the meticulous analysis of the vocabulary, syntax, and other linguistic elements utilized by writers and poets in their literary works. By closely scrutinizing the choices and patterns of words, sentence structures, and rhetorical devices within a text,

stylisticians seek to uncover the profound layers of meaning, nuance, and intention behind the written word. This analytical approach allows readers and scholars to gain a deeper insight into the artistic and communicative aspects of literary creations.

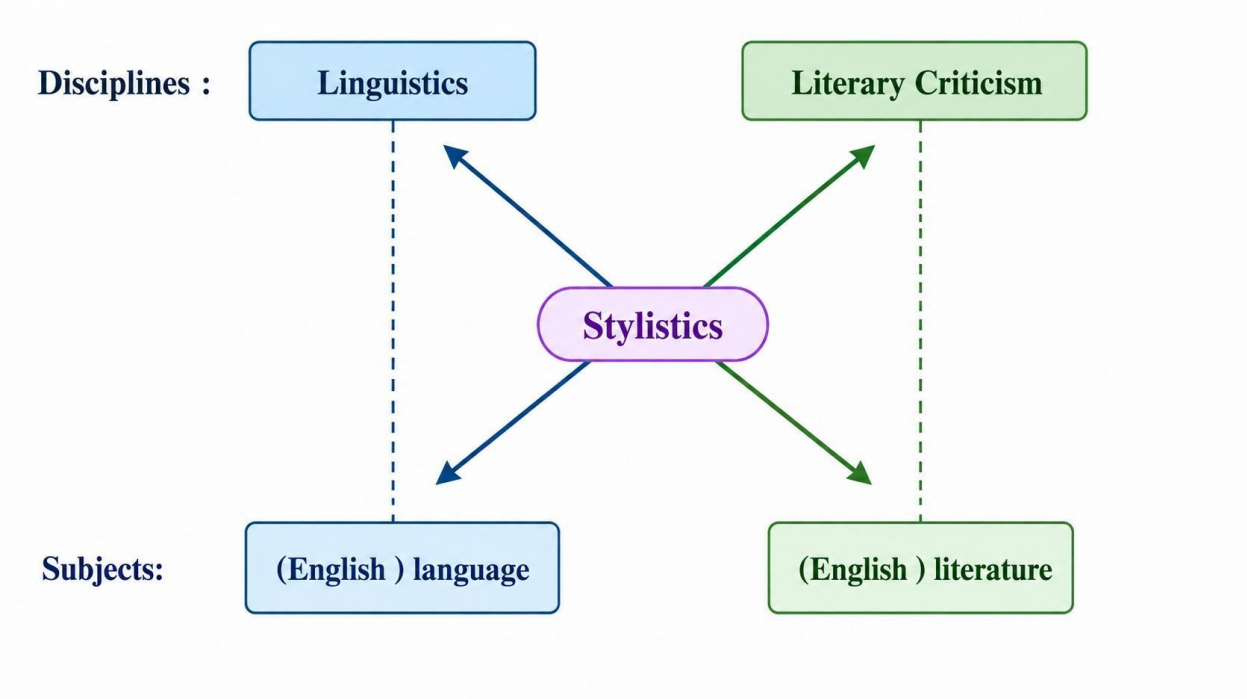


Figure 1. Adopted from Widdowson's Concept of Stylistics (2016)

Stylistics is concerned with the meaning making process through literary language adorned with various levels and devices of style. Stylistics is further bifurcated into multiple branches. Some of the branches of stylistics are listed below (Zhukovska, 2010):

- Literary Stylistics (study of literary genres and their stylistic features)
- Interpretive Stylistics (how various elements of style work together for meaning interpretation)
- Corpus Stylistics (studying frequency and authenticity of a text)
- Feminist Stylistics (studying features of Style common in writing of women and other written text that are intended to subjugate women and disseminate patriarchal values in the society)
- Cognitive Stylistics (studying about what happens in mind when it encounters stylistically rich texts)

Stylistic analysis occupies a pivotal role in the exploration of short stories. It lends us a lens through which we can appreciate the nuanced craft of storytelling. Short stories are usually condensed narratives, with limited number of characters, limited scope of character development and plot elaboration. They heavily rely on author's choices regarding language and style to convey the themes and messages of the story effectively. Though short stories are condensed narratives, yet they are capable of conveying profound messages, themes and emotions. Stylistic analysis of short stories allows us to uncover and understand the subtext or the hidden meanings. We can explore the concealed meanings, author's intentions, symbolism through stylistic analysis of the short stories.

Stylistic analysis not only helps us uncover the hidden meaning of the short stories, but it also helps understand the shift in narrative voice, character development, atmosphere and setting. It also reveals the rhetorical devices used by the author and the tone and language used by the author to evoke specific emotions among the

audience. It can be very rightly stated that stylistic analysis of short story has an invaluable importance for researchers since it deciphers the intricacies of storytelling. It allows us explore author's artistic style and choices and the impact of those choices on character development, atmosphere, emotional engagement and thematic exploration. Thus, stylistic analysis is a tool to gain deep and profound understanding of craft of short story writing.

The present study aims to analyse Alice Munro's short story "The Flats Road" from her collection "Lives of Girls and Women" stylistically. Munro is a Canadian shorty-story writer. She won Nobel Prize in literature in 2013. She is considered as the master of the contemporary short story. "The Flats Road" focuses on the experiences of the narrator (name is not mentioned in the story) and a friend, Owen, as they spend time with a mysterious man named Uncle Benny along the Wawanash river. They engage in activities like catching frogs and exploring the nature in their rural environment. Benny is not their relative but has a significant importance in their lives. The story discusses river, swamp, animals, and other natural objects. There are themes such as nature, rural life, childhood, a contrast between the live in urban and rural settings. The story is rich in its descriptive language. The aim of the present study is to explore the role of stylistic choices made by Munro in "The Flats Road" to unveil and appreciate her craftmanship through a meticulous examination.

Research Objectives

The following statements delineate the research objectives of the present study:

1. To explore the use of various stylistic elements and their significance in conveying the underlying themes in "The Flats Road".
2. To examine semantic deviations used by Munro in "The Flats Road".

Research Questions

Within the context of present study, two research questions have been formulated:

1. How do the author's stylistic choices work together to establish the theme of chosen text?
2. What semantic deviations are found in the short story "The flats Road" by Alice Munro?

Significance of the Present Study

Conducting a stylistic analysis helps ESL learners to comprehend the subtleties of language. It enhances the cognitive, interpretative, creative, comprehension and critical thinking skills of students. They learn to interrogate about the what and why of a literary text that ultimately increase their comprehension and command on language. Working out the syntax, semantics, pragmatics and rhetorical devices of any literary text teach ESL learners about problem-solving and decision-making. Stylistic analysis encourages one to draw inferences from the text. The episteme obtained from stylistic analysis can practically be applied to many fields such as: content creation, advertisements, translation studies, composition, creative writing, forensic stylistics and persuasive communication.

Literature Review

Stylistics is an approach to analyse literary texts using linguistic descriptions (Khan et al., 2015). It is a broad field of analysis of usually but not limited to literary texts. Stylisticians use a range of linguistic tools to analyse literary texts on multiple levels of language analysis such as phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicology, semantics, pragmatics to explore and examine wide range of linguistic features such as symbolism, imagery, rhetorical elements, tone, mode and narrative style of the author. It deals with the distinct style of the characterization, language and setting of the narrative (Saadia et al., 2015). Leech and Short (2007) defined stylistics as the study of styles of language use for artistic functions. They propounded four categories of linguistic choices which define the style of written or spoken language i.e., lexical, grammatical, figures of speech and cohesion. According to them the purpose of stylistic analysis is to explore the interplay between language and its artistic function.

Stylistic analysis has a crucial importance in literary research as it helps not only in comprehending the substance of a literary text but

also how its language is employed (Benonguil, 2022). In the realm of literary analysis Hussain et al. (2022) have aptly encapsulated the essence of stylistics by labelling it modern form of rhetoric. They suggest that linguistics approaches are used to understand literature and the focus of stylistic analysis is on the word choice of the author or a poet. Its importance is evidenced by a plethora of studies in the field which explore the literary texts for their stylistic features. Researchers such as Khan et al. (2015) and Tarrayo (2020) also commented that there has been a growing interest in conducing stylistic study on fiction including novel and short stories.

Javed et al. (2020) describes that being a branch of applied linguistics, stylistics focuses on linguistic creativity and it has multiple levels of style. Some of them are described below:

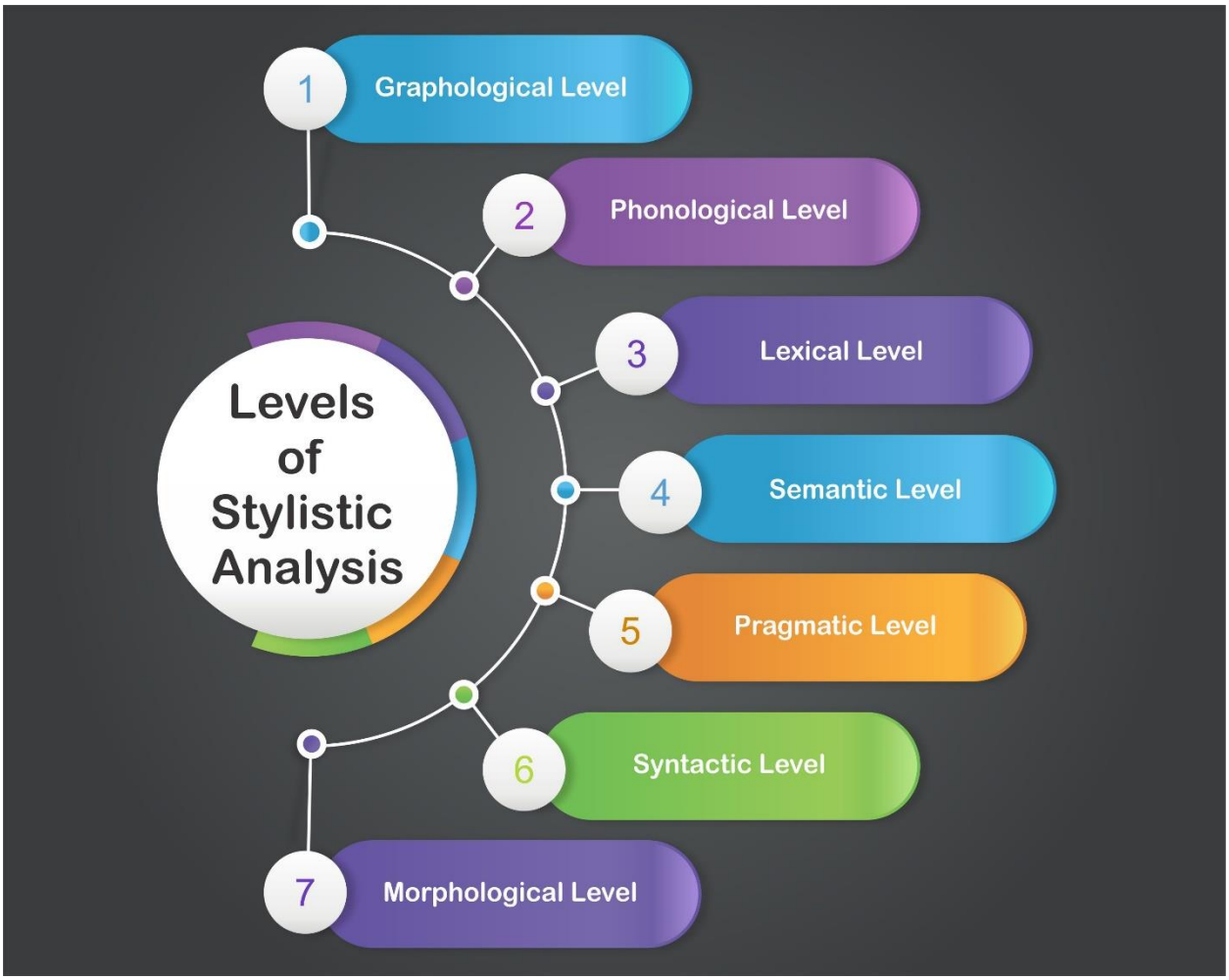


Figure 2. Levels of Stylistic Analysis, Adopted from Leech (1969)

1. Graphological level: this level of stylistics deals with the norms of writing such as handwriting, punctuation marks, keyboarding etc. When a writer chose to impart graphological deviations in the text then the text shows deviance from the general norms of writing like ignorance of capitalisation or usual usage of punctuation marks etc.

2. Phonological level: the way phonological devices like assonance, consonance, alliteration and onomatopoeia work together to enhance the stylistic flavour of the text, comes under the umbrella term of phonological level of style.

3. Lexical level: the way words, phrases and idioms are used in multiple contexts comprises the lexical level of style.

4. Semantic level: semantic level of stylistic analysis consists of dictionary, literal, denotative and social meanings of the words.
5. Pragmatic level: pragmatic level of stylistic analysis comprises of contextual and connotative meanings of the word where features like anaphora, cataphora and deixis are scrutinized.
6. Syntactic level: the arrangement of lexemes in the form of a sentence and then combining those sentences into larger paragraphs or texts consist of syntactic level of style.
7. Morphological level: morphological level of stylistic analysis involves analysing the word formation process, affixation, derivation and inflection.

Semantic deviation is the prime focus of this research paper. The concept of semantic deviation, according to (Leech, 1969), consists of three main constructs: (i) oddity (ii) transference (iii) honest deception. Pleonasm, periphrasis, oxymoron, paradox, tautology come under the broader category of oddity. Similarly, synecdoche, metaphor, metonymy and simile fall into the category of transference. Furthermore, hyperbole, litotes and irony are included in honest deception. However, the definitions of these key terms that are under three main constructs are as follows:

1. **Oddity**

- Semantically redundant words are called pleonasms that are used in excess either deliberately or unintentionally.
- Using longer words when shorter words can suffice as well is known as periphrasis.
- Use of two seemingly opposite words together is known as an oxymoron.
- A paradox is a contradictory proposition.
- The quality of repetitiveness where two words that have the same meaning are used in the same sentence is known as tautology.

2. **Transference**

- Synecdoche is a whole-part relationship.
- Using the nomenclature of one thing to depict another is called metonymy.
- Using direct comparisons by ascribing the qualities of one thing to another is called a metaphor.
- Using "like" or "as" for indirect comparisons is called a simile.

3. **Honest Deception**

- Exaggerating something to an extreme is called a hyperbole.
- Usage of words that are intended to mean the opposite of their surface structure is called irony.
- Litotes occur when you negate a positive to imply a negative as in "not bad".

One example of a stylistic analysis of a short story is the study of "Eleven" by Cisneros (2002). In this analysis was performed using a checklist of linguistic and stylistic categories proposed by Leech and Short (2007). This study focused on the lexical categories used by the author. Similarly, another example of use of pedagogical stylistic analysis of "A pair of Jeans" by Batool, Maqbool, and Salahuddin (2022). Pedagogical stylistics aims to enhance the ability of the students to analyse and interpret the literary texts as well as enhance their language skills. The analysis done by Batool et al. (2022) aimed to help the students in learning the methods of analysing and interpreting literary texts.

Stylistic analysis can be an effective tool to explore the narrative techniques used in short stories for aesthetic appeal in the story, as is done by Resen (2017) for analysing the short story "The Grandfather" by Winnie Ead. The analysis was focused on writing style and idiosyncrasies of the author. Stylistic analysis of short stories in English involves examining the language, style, and narrative techniques used in the text. It can provide insights into the literary devices employed by the authors and enhance our understanding of the underlying meanings in the text. By applying stylistic analysis, the researchers can unveil the intricacies of short stories and contribute to the field of literary studies.

"The Flats Road" is a short story by Alice Munro that showcases her mastery of narrative techniques and language resources (Quartermaine, 1987). The stylistic analysis of Munro's short story may reveal her artistic approach and help the readers comprehend the narrative as she uses and ambivalent narrative style (Chandio, Ahmed, &

Sajid, 2020). Munro's stories often contain autobiographical elements, she uses an indirect communication and changes self through fiction to demonstrate her skills in portraying the complexities of human emotions and relationships (Alshara, Panhwar, & Hasan, 2017). Overall, the stylistic analysis of Munro's work may highlight her artistic approach, mastery of narrative techniques and the impact of her storytelling on readers. Her stories invite multiple interpretations and engage readers through their literary qualities.

Research Methodology

The design of the study is descriptive, interpretive, and qualitative because it intends to generate the stylistic analysis of the short story from subjective viewpoint. The study comprise textual analysis. Primary source of data was the short story "The Flats Road" (1971) by Alice Munro while secondary source of data was the text by Leech and Short (1981) "Style in Fiction". Theoretical foundations of the study are based on the conceptual framework provided by Leech and Short (1981). Close reading of the primary and secondary texts was done to come up with the stylistic interpretation of the short story. The researchers have delimited the study to focus on semantic deviations only that consist of various stylistic devices that showcase the multifaceted nature of meanings found in this story. All these stylistic elements work together in harmony to provide thematic foundations of the story.

Discussions, Interpretations and Findings

During the process of data interpretation and analysis, various aspects of semantic oddity were found in the story. Semantic deviations refer to a violation or deviation from literal interpretation of a word, phrase, or sentence. Some of the aspects of semantic deviation found in the short story are:

a) Narrative Style and Voice:

The narrative is reflective and detailed, with a strong focus on characterization and storytelling. The short story "The Flats Road" is narrated in first person perspective to connect the readers intimately with the narrator's thoughts and experiences. It can be observed that the events of the story unfold to the reader in a chronological pattern. Del Jordan the protagonist is the narrator, and she is a participant in the events of the story. The readers see the world through the narrator's eyes. For example:

"We spent days along the Wawanash river, helping Uncle Benny fish."

Munro's narrative style in "The Flats Road" is simple and descriptive. We see she uses simple and straightforward language to depict the situations, events, and settings. For example, she uses words such as black, hot, and thick with thorny bushes to describe a dense overgrown area near Uncle Benny's house. She engages the reader's senses and emotions by using such detailed descriptions. The reader is able to form a mental image of the scene, setting and mood of the narrative.

The narrator has a reflective voice. We find the narrator often reflecting on past events and memories. This not only helps the readers understand narrator's thoughts and feelings but also moves the readers from flashbacks to flash-forwards. For example:

"We remembered her like a story and having nothing else to give we gave her our strange, belated, heartless applause."

Lastly, we find the narrator as a keen observer. She observes the people, places and objects around her very keenly and provides the reader with detailed descriptions. For instance:

"He had a heavy black moustache, fierce eyes, a delicate predatory face."

Overall, we find Munro's narrative style and voice very simple yet elaborative. She uses clear and unambiguous sentences in first-person perspective and provides every little detail in a reflective and observant manner. This helps the readers imagine themselves as a part of the story.

b) Imagery:

Vivid imagery is used in the short story by Munro. She describes the setting, characters and events in the story creating a rich and detailed picture for the reader. For instance, the descriptions of Irene's white hair and pale skin, Uncle Benny's attire and appearance before his trip to Kitchener, riverbank, the swamp, various animals and objects in Uncle Benny's house are described so vividly that the

reader starts visualizing all of the above mentioned objects.

c) Simile:

Munro uses similes for comparing unsimilar objects so the reader may visualize the events and environment such as she compares quicksand hole to a dangerous and mighty object that may engulf a heavy object just like a bite of breakfast and comparing raccoons with cats for their friendly behaviour in phrase "coons as tamer than cats". We find many other examples of simile in the text such as "fat as something carved out of ivory soap" to describe Louie Hall and "like a figure partly hidden in a mosaic" to describe Charlie Buckle and "little grey donkey, like the illustration to a Bible story" to describe Sandy Stevenson's donkey which was very dear to him and "drunken rooster" for comparing Irene Pollox's behaviours to that of a drunken rooster and acting strange. These and other such comparisons help in creating vivid images and emphasize particular characteristics of the characters of the story or objects.

d) Metaphor:

We find metaphors such as "you're not going to your own hanging" to express the idea that Uncle Benny had choice to change his mind if he didn't like the situation at hand and "juicy adolescents" to describe young green frogs. Similarly, the metaphor "bootleggers on the Flats Road" for suggesting that Mitch Plim and Potter boys were engaged in illegal activities. We find phrase such as "a dirty little spy-bugger" by Madeleine to insult the narrator. Uncle Benny's journey's description "lost among factories, dead-end roads, warehouses, junkyards, railway tracks" is metaphorical and create a vivid image of his surroundings.

e) Personification:

Personification is skilfully employed in the text to infuse life and human-like characteristics into various non-human objects. The frogs, for instance, are portrayed as possessing a level of knowledge and consciousness akin to human beings when they are described as "stay out of our way". The attribution of personification is not limited to frogs only, we find other examples such as the clutter and dirt are given the ability to swallow light. Moreover, we find some examples of supernatural elements being manifested through personification such as "dishes shattering" and "stew taking flight from the stove". Emotions are also personified in text. One notable example is "Madeleine's rage" which is attributed to possess human-like qualities such as requiring time to remember and reassemble its forces.

f) Hyperbole:

Hyperbole is a prevalent feature within the text of the short story. It is manifested through various exaggerated expressions and claims. For instance, Uncle Benny boldly asserts that he is the sole explorer of the entire swamp. The narrator describes Uncle Benny's affection and emotional affiliations for the trivial items by stating that he "valued debris for its own sake". The hyperbolic expressions extend to vivid descriptions such as the insects whirling in "galaxies" and a quicksand hole that can devour a "two-ton truck like a mere breakfast bite", amplifying the intensity of these scenarios. Even social interactions are subject to hyperbole, as the narrator uses phrases like "calling out greetings to ladies who turned with surprise, though pleasant faces" to exaggerate the ladies reaction to the greetings. Similarly, the statement "I was bloated and giddy with the revelations of evil" are capable of heightening the emotional impact of the text.

g) Irony:

We find examples of situational irony in the text such as Uncle Benny claims that the river is not anyone's, then the riverbank he fishes is considered "ours" by the narrator. We can also identify the irony of Uncle Benny's readiness to accept the letter from a stranger even without knowing the woman's name or having met her. Then Uncle Benny's readiness to embark on a mission to find Diane, despite apprehending legal repercussions is also ironic while earlier he was reluctant to involve police.

h) Foreshadowing:

The mentioning of Uncle Benny's fascination with unusual business ventures in the beginning foreshadows that these elements may play a

significant role in the story's development. Then Uncle Benny's inability to find a map and absence of certainty in his quest to find Madeleine and Diane foreshadow the difficulties he might encounter in Toronto. We can also find a hint of Madeleine's fading significance in the lives of others from Benny's disconnection with her and the way they all remember her as a distant story, almost like a legend.

i) Repetition:

The stylistic device of repetition plays a significant role within the text for instance the utterances such as "not his" and "he is not our uncle" emphasize the notion that Uncle Benny is perceived as an outsider. We also find the repetitive use of courtesy words such as "yours truly" in Benny's letters and responses, highlighting the significance of politeness which he maintained in his communication. We also see that in rage and anger Madeleine repeats "dirty little spy-bugger" to express her aggression. These and other such repetitions serve as a chief characteristic of semantic deviation within the text contributing to the emphasis on specific themes, events, and ideas in the narrative.

j) Alliteration:

Alliteration is strategically employed throughout the story to achieve a rhythmic and melodious effect, enhancing the narrative's impact and making certain phrases more memorable. Munro has deftly integrated alliteration into the text as evidenced by the phrases like "deep, deep layered clutter", "stove-lid lifter", "bred budgie birds" ,"thick with thorny", throwing things", "long legs", "dark dry-goods", good grammar, "proud poverty". and "can of corn" etc. These instances of alliteration serve to create a rhythmic quality in the story enhancing its overall flow

k) Setting and Atmosphere

The story is set-up in a rural (or semi-rural) environment where the characters live and work on farms. The atmosphere is remarkably characterized by a sense of alienation and isolation from city life. The narrative takes place during different seasons including winter and spring. By providing such details as environment and seasons the author sets the tone and mood of the story.

l) Symbols and Motifs

i. The Flats Road

"The Flats Road" is in itself a multifaceted motif in the story that represents power imbalances, gender stereotypes and the demarcation between underprivileged and the privileged. The locale is portrayed as quite marginalized and is a symbol of hostility and animosity as Del's mother does not own her residence at this road. Rather, she says that she lives at the end of the road. Moreover, this is the land of oppressed people who are terrified by ongoing wars. People here are portrayed as eccentric and ambiguous.

There are elements of sexual looseness, misogyny, patriarchy and body-shaming among the residents of Flats Road. There are instances of women objectification in the text that are reflected in these lines, "A woman like that might be a handy thing to have around". Moreover, the narrator comments with acridness about the physical stature of women that fat women ought to be good cook, but they can eat a lot while the skinny ones are unpredictable. By quoting these lines, the narrator wants to highlight the society's expectations from women.

"The Flats Road" as a motif serves as a reflection to various other themes of the story that are described below:

ii. Family and Relationships:

The story explores the complex family dynamics. Particularly we find out that the relationship between Uncle Benny, Madeleine, and Diane is complex. The themes of responsibility and sacrifices are evident.

iii. Justice and Morality:

From the instance of Benny's readiness to take up the case of Diane's protection to the police also highlights the importance of justice. Though initially we found him reluctant to be indulged into legal issues but for the safely of Diane, he considered seeking legal help.

iv. Isolation and Alienation:

We find a sense of alienation due to characters' tendencies for isolation particularly in rural settings. The city and its complexities are portrayed as something threatening and unfamiliar.

v. Journey:

Benny's journey to find Madeleine and Diane represent not only physical journey but also a moral and emotional one. It represents his navigating through life's challenges and uncertainties and inner struggles and determination. Confusion, disorientation and unpredictability is found in the city.

m) Geographical Landscape:

Symbols such as Wawanash River, Grenoch Swamp and various animals in Uncle Benny's house represent different aspects of the characters' lives and experiences. Similarly, his new cloths and improved appearance symbolizes his plan to seek a potential partner. Here, Munro chooses to graphologically deviate as well by using changed spellings of the names of these regions than their dictionary spellings. By deviating from the usual norms of writing, the author strives to interact with the text and offers wide opportunities to the readers for the text's literary interpretation.

Conclusion

Stylistic analysis of "The Flats Road" has demonstrated about the clarity, richness and profoundness in the style of Alice Munro. Plethora of semantic deviations are found in the text such as excessive usage of hyperboles, motifs, repetition, alliteration. All these literary devices harmonize with the text in such a way that it artfully establishes the main theme of power imbalance, sexual cognizance and patriarchal bend in the society. Munro's literary craftsmanship serves as a tool to highlight the issues of gender and identity reflected in her short story. The style of her narrative technique allows the readers to delve into the experiences of protagonist's self-discovery. Patriarchal oppression, pervasive effect of gender roles, sexual awareness etc. are some of the themes that are reinforced by adroit use of stylistic elements of foreshadowing, narration, setting, irony and personification. In a nutshell, the thematic depth of the story is strengthened by Munro's stylistic choices.

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