

Exercises in Style

London: John Calder

pp. 9–16, 19–26

Exercises in Style is an experimental literary work by the French author Raymond Queneau(1947). The entire book is built around a simple, everyday story that is retold in ninety-nine different styles, tones, and narrative techniques. As the translator Barbara Wright put it, this book represents a profound exploration into the possibilities of language. It is an experiment in the philosophy of language. I agree with this statement. The diverse retellings offer readers a fresh and unique reading experience while also demonstrating the endless possibilities for narrating a single event in various ways.

Therefore, I plan to create a glossary for six different narration modes of the “story” translated by Barbara Wright, using key elements such as time, setting, characterization, plot, tone and style and so on. By organizing and structurally analyzing these elements, I aim to reveal the diversity inherent in each version under the same narrative framework. Additionally, I want to compare how different narrative styles and language choices impact the overall expression and effect of the story. This analysis will further explore the characteristics of various narrative techniques and the unique interplay between form and content in the text.

Basic Plot:

On a bus, the narrator witnesses a young man having a minor dispute with another passenger. Later, in a different setting, the narrator encounters the same young man again and overhears him discussing the way to fasten a shirt button with a friend.

Glossary

A

Appellation (except third-person pronouns)

1. Notation:

“A chap”

2. Double entry:

“an old adolescent”

3. Litotes:

“A young man”

4. Metaphorically:

“A chicken”, “the fledgling”

5. Retrograde:

“This scraggy young man”

6. Surprises:

“The same fancy-pants !”

C

Characterization

1. Notation:

“a chap of about 26, felt hat with a cord instead of a ribbon, neck too long, as if someone’s been having a tug-of war with it.”

“A snivelling tone which is meant to be aggressive.”

2. Double entry:

“an old adolescent who was rather ridiculous and pretty grotesque”, “thin neck and skinny windpipe, string and cord round his head and tie.”

3. Litotes:

“a young man, who did not look very intelligent”

4. Metaphorically:

“a chicken with a long, feather less neck”, “a peace-abiding one”

5. Retrograde:

“This scraggy young man was the wearer of a ridiculous hat”

6. Surprises:

“How stupid and ridiculous that young man looked!”

P

Plot

1. Notation:

“The chap...gets annoyed...He accuses him of jostling him...”, “When he sees a vacant seat he throws himself on to it.”

“He's with a friend who's saying, 'You ought to get an extra button put on your overcoat.' He shows him where...and why.”

2. Double entry:

“...he says...in a lachrymose and snivelling voice...that his neighbour...is...trying...to push him...every time anyone gets off...He rushes...towards a vacant...seat.”

“He is...with a friend...who is...urging him to have a button...sewn on to his overcoat.”

3. Litotes:

“Spoke to the man next to him...then he went and sat down”

“he was with a friend and was talking about clothes.”

4. Metaphorically:

“...suddenly harangued one, a peace-abiding one, of their number...”, “...its parlance, moist with protest, was unfolded upon the airs.”, “Attracted by a void, the fledgling precipitated itself thereunto.”

“...drinking the cup of humiliation offered by a lowly button.”

5. Retrograde:

“You ought to put another button on your overcoat, his friend told him.”, “...left him rushing avidly towards a seat.”, “He had just protested against being pushed by another passenger...jostling him every time anyone got off.”

6.Surprises:

“And what was he doing?...trying to pick a quarrel with a chap...who...kept on pushing him!”, “...rushed off and grabbed a seat which had become free...instead of leaving it for a lady!”

“...being given some sartorial advice by a friend!”

R

Rhythm of narrative

1.Notation:

The narrative pace is concise and fast, with brief descriptions that quickly get to the point, giving the text a strong sense of record-like immediacy.

2.Double entry:

The narrative pace is relatively lengthy and complex, employing intricate long sentences and repeated phrases, which create a sense of pause and sluggishness, resulting in a somewhat chaotic rhythm. Through repetition and detailed descriptions, the narration is filled with trivial details, aligning with the content the text seeks to convey.

3.Litotes:

The narrative pace is relatively calm, utilizing simple sentence structures in the descriptions. The narration is brief, without excessive rhetoric or complex imagery, and the slow, understated rhythm aligns with the ordinariness of the events, giving the text a subtle sense of humor.

4.Metaphorically:

The narrative pace is complex and dynamic, with metaphorical descriptions that require the reader to spend more time understanding and visualizing the meaning of each metaphor, thereby extending the sense of narrative time.

5.Retrograde:

The narrative pace is steady and slow. The story is presented in a detailed and organized manner through the use of flashbacks and recollections.

6.Surprises:

The narrative pace is tight, utilizing numerous short sentences, exclamation marks, and rhetorical questions. This style makes the narration feel intense and dramatic, effectively conveying the tension and absurdity of the scene.

S

Setting

1.Notation:

“In the **S bus**.”

“I meet him in the **Cour de Rome**, in front of the **gare Saint-Lazare**.”

2.Double entry:

“I happened to be on and got on to the platform and the balcony at the back of **an S-line**.”

“I meet him and see him again in the **Cour de Rome** and in front of the **gare Saint-Lazare**. ”

3.Litotes:

“Some of us were travelling together.”(Implying a scene where people are traveling together on public transport)

4.Metaphorically:

“in a coleopter with a big white carapace ”

“in a bleak,urban desert”

5.Retrograde:

“in the middle of the **Cour de Rome**”

“this took place on the platform of an **S bus** which was full”

6.Surprises:

“on that **bus** platform”

“in front of the gare saint-lazare”

T

Time

1. Notation:

“In the rush hour.”

“Two hours later”

2. Double entry:

“Towards the middle of the day and at middday”

“Two hours after and a-hundred-and-twenty minutes later”

3. Litotes:

“Two hours later”

4. Metaphorically:

“In the centre of the day”

“same day”

5. Retrograde:

“that particular midday.”

6. Surprises:

“two hours after”

Tone and Style

1. Notation:

The tone is calm and objective, with direct language and an observer’s perspective.

There is no evident emotional embellishment.

2. Double Entry:

The tone is humorous and slightly exaggerated, with complex language that incorporates synonyms and detailed descriptions. Uncommon words and exaggerated expressions are used, creating an absurd and playful atmosphere.

3. Litotes:

The tone is understated and mild, characterized by concise language with minimal use of adjectives or elaborate sentences. Events are presented efficiently, with a subtle and indirect expression (e.g.using double negatives like “who did not look very intelligent” to convey meaning gently).

4.Metaphorically:

The tone is exaggerated and rich, featuring highly poetic descriptions. The language is filled with metaphors, such as comparing the young man to a “chicken,” creating a dramatic atmosphere and adding absurdity and complexity to an otherwise ordinary scene.

5.Retrograde:

The tone carries humor and irony, describing events in reverse order. The language is straightforward, using humor to satirize the trivialities and conflicts of daily life, with a mildly dramatic effect.

6.Surprises:

The tone is highly animated and satirical, with exaggerated expressions that heighten the drama of the narrative. The frequent use of exclamation marks and rhetorical questions intensifies the emotional tension and adds dramatic flair.

W

word count

1.Notation: 128

2.Double entry: 212

3.Litotes: 48

4.Metaphorically: 84

5.Retrograde: 82

6.Surprises: 110

Through the process of compiling and organizing the glossary, I gained a deeper understanding and appreciation of the six different narrative styles. The elements I categorized—such as time, place, and characterization—are explicit, but the variations in how these elements are presented across different styles reveal subtle, implicit details. For instance, the same time and place are portrayed differently depending on the narrative style, using distinct phrases, atmospheres, and intentions.

Moreover, this cataloging method has helped me uncover how different styles emphasize either the visible or invisible aspects of the narrative. Some styles focus on objective descriptions of actions or dialogue (visible parts), making the story appear more neutral and detached. Others emphasize characters' emotions or psychological responses (invisible parts), adding subjectivity and emotional depth to the narrative. Despite the identical plot, these varied approaches allow readers to experience the story in profoundly different ways.

Reference

Queneau, R. (1998) *Exercises in Style*. Translated by Barbara Wright. London: John Calder.