



## A Formalist Stylistic Reading of a Filipino Poem: Using Blake's Syntactic Approach

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### **Abstract**

Literature, particularly poetry, is a rich area to investigate in terms of its relations to linguistic structures. In this study, a poem written by a Filipino poet is subjected to a close textual analysis using Blake's (1990) syntax. The study employs the formalist stylistic approach (Jakobson, 1991) to conduct a close textual analysis of the sentence structure in Emmanuel Torres' poem *It is Difficult to Speak of Saints* (1972). One primary observation drawn from examining the poem is its deviation from conventional poetic norms, such as its use of unusual collocations, apposition, and irregular rhyming patterns. Further analysis of the sentence structure through Blake's (1990) syntactic framework seeks to unravel the predominant patterns in the poem and their effects on the reader. Blake's syntax categorizes sentence elements into five components: subject, predicator, object, complement, and adjunct, which were examined to understand their roles and their effects on the readers. In addition, noun groups and verb groups were analyzed to uncover their structural nuances. Upon analysis, the poem, structured as free verse with four stanzas, reveals a diminishing rhyming pattern, reflecting the persona's fading faith. Ultimately, analysis using Blake's syntax reveals how sentence structures and stylistic choices contribute to the poem's thematic depth and emotional resonance, ultimately guiding the reader to grasp its underlying message.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the general area of linguistics, although there is general stylistics that analyzes non-literary texts from diverse areas such as advertising, politics, religion, and daily conversations, the term stylistics stands to more commonly refer to the analysis of the literary language. Stylistics is a vital discipline that bridges the gap between language and literature. In its essence, stylistics is the study of linguistic features—such as syntax, phonology, morphology, and semantics—and how they contribute to the aesthetic and interpretive qualities of literary texts. The study of stylistics allows the readers to delve deeper into the artistry of language. Additionally, the field of stylistics reveals the subtle nuances and underlying structures that shape meaning and evoke emotional responses, two elements that make meaning.

Stylistics provides linguists with invaluable tools for analyzing a wide range of literary texts, ranging from classical literature to modern media. The linguistic tools examine the stylistic devices employed by authors, to gain insights into their unique voices, intentions, and the cultural contexts in which their works were produced. This analytical approach not only enhances the readers' appreciation of literary works but also equips them with the skills to critically interact with the linguistic choices of the authors.

In this article, the fundamental concepts of stylistics, various approaches, and practical applications, are explored to demonstrate the importance of stylistics in understanding the dynamic interplay between form and meaning in language.

### **1.1. Review of Related Literature**

Studies on stylistics, employing various approaches, have been done both globally and locally. An article (Khan, Hakeem & Memoona, 2024) used the critical stylistic approach to analyze Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*. As an approach, critical stylistics combines elements of literary criticism and stylistic analysis to examine how language and narrative techniques create meaning and convey themes in a text. Some of the key findings in the study pointed to the use of symbolism in the title, the narrative structure told through the main character's journal entries, the use of imagery, and the theme of the restrictive roles women play in their society. In a 2022 study done by Harrison and Giovanelli on Strout's novel *Olive Kitteridge*, the main character Olive was analyzed using the framework of cognitive stylistics. The main goal of the study was to examine the multiple representations of the main character and how her life is processed by the readers. The findings highlighted the author's narrative style of immersing the readers into engaging in mind-modeling, a concept typically used in cognitive stylistics (Stockwell, 2002). Using Cognitive Stylistics as the framework of his study, El-Sayed (2021) examined *The Exorcist*, a fiction belonging to the genre of horror. The main goal of the paper is to identify the features of the horror language that the author carefully selects to effect a change in the schemata of the readers. From the use of nouns, verbs, and adverbs to the selection of similes and metaphors, the mental spaces activated in the minds of the readers are those of confusion, chaos, and tension. These moods resonate with the main character. In a different study, Hardiyanti (2021) used a combination of textual and stylistic analysis in his investigation of Hemingway's *My Old Man*. In the study, he employed the pragma stylistic approach to create a realistic effect of interweaving the language used by the characters in the short story. The findings reveal the authenticity that Hemingway can achieve as a short story writer through the use of language. The stylistic analysis of Duari, Baskaran, and Afri (2021) on an ethnographic memoir authored by Mowat in 1952 examined the language choice of the author by looking at the lexical patterns and phrases used in the text. Additionally, an examination of the use of alliteration and collocation and their effect on the readers is discussed. In another study, Bell, Ensslin, van der Bom, and Smith (2019) offer a new method of using the reader response approach in stylistics to investigate a digital fiction adapted from *Bluebeard*. A total of 16 readers were asked to read *The Princess Murderer* and were told to answer a Likert scale addressing their comprehension of the second person pronoun 'you' being referred to in the fiction. The findings reveal that the readers relate to the pronoun 'you' if the description of the agent is more positive rather than negative.

While significant research has been conducted globally, it is equally important to consider the unique contributions within the context of Philippine literature. Within the context of Philippine literature, the field of stylistics has been used by Filipino writers to celebrate the cultural diversity and distinct historical identities of the Filipinos and the nation. In one study, Caparas combines semantic (Biber et al. 1999), functional (Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Halliday, 1994) and syntactic stylistics (Blake, 1990) to contend three points. One, the meanings of words contribute to the overall message of the text. Second, language functions to achieve its communicative goals. Three, the structure of the sentence is intentionally crafted to influence readability and the aesthetic quality of the essay. In another study, Minoza, Sabijon, and Ibundas (2023) analyzed the occurrence of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, sentences, sentence length, structures, patterns, and voice, and local color, including nativist diction to propose guidelines for characterizing the writing style of Arguilla. Their study conducted a

frequency count of the functions of the words to determine the predominant word categories that the short story writer employs. They then proposed a description of the writing styles based on the examined text. One study (Tarrayo, 2018) explored the interface between language and literature in stylistics by examining the genre of flash fiction. His study used Leech and Short's (2007) concept of schema to examine lexical choices (such as the use of concrete and abstract nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs) and stylistic categories (like the grammatical structure and figures of speech) and how these elements aid in character development and establishing the meaning/theme of the flash fiction analyzed.

The studies just identified provide a rich avenue of literary genres that may be investigated using the lens of stylistics. Particularly in the Philippine context where the writers use language to define cultural diversity and to establish their distinct identities, the study of stylistics is even more relevant. The current study aims to explore the cultural nuances of meaning in a poem using the Formalist Stylistics approach propounded by Jakobson (1991). In particular, the analysis examines the poem *It is Difficult to Speak of Saint* written by Emmanuel Torres using Blake's (1990) syntactic approach under Jakobson's (1991) Formalist Stylistics.

## 1.2. Theoretical Framework

The study used the formalist stylistics approach (Jakobson, 1991) in its close textual analysis of the sentence structure in Torres' (1972) *It is Difficult to Speak of Saints*. Roman Jakobson, a prominent figure in the field of linguistics and stylistics, contributed significantly to the formalist approach to stylistics. His work, particularly in collaboration with other scholars, laid the foundation for analyzing the linguistic structure of literary texts.

The formalist approach to stylistics, influenced by the Russian Formalists, emphasizes the detailed analysis of the linguistic features of a text. Jakobson, along with colleagues like Lévi-Strauss, applied this approach to the analysis of literary works, focusing on formal elements such as phonology, syntax, and semantics (Jakobson & Lévi-Strauss, 1962).

The formalist approach (Jakobson & Jones, 1970) has been applied to various literary texts, including poetry and prose, to uncover the intricate ways in which language is used to create meaning and evoke emotional responses. By focusing on the formal aspects of language, this approach provides a systematic method for literary analysis. In particular, analysis using this approach covers understanding of the sentence patterns (Blake, 1990). Utilizing Blake's sentence patterns helps in discovering the meaning of the poem.

One primary reason for considering the formalist stylistic approach is that this poem deviates from the usual poetic conventions such as strange collocations, the use of apposition, or strict rhyming patterns. Ultimately, by describing the sentence structure using Blake's syntax, this study will realize what predominant patterns are used in the poem to create the desired effect/s such patterns have on the reader. Unraveling the effects the patterns create on the reader of the poem results in leading the reader to what the poem ultimately conveys.

Blake's syntax (1990) proposes that the sentence structure may be divided into five clause elements. These five are the subject, the predicator, the object, the compliment, and the adjunct. The *subject* acts on the clause while the *predicator* is the verb that is performed or done by the subject. Meantime, the *object* is the one receiving the action. Next, it is the *compliment* which acts as the descriptor of the subject. Lastly, the adjunct of the sentence answers the questions *where*, *who*, or *how*.

Within the noun groups, the structure may be classified into five constituent elements. These are the head, the pre-determiner, the determiner, the modifier, and the qualifier. The

*head* is the only element that cannot be taken out from the noun group. The *determiner* belongs to the closed class of words in the sense that there cannot be two words in the same class following one after another. The *modifier*, on the other hand, belongs to an open class of words, which simply means that a series of modifiers may come before the head. While determiners and modifiers come before the head, the qualifier follows the head. *Qualifiers* are classified into three types: the prepositional phrase, the relative clause, and the apposition in the head. The prepositional phrase consists of a preposition and a noun phrase. The relative clause, on the other hand, is a clause that is commonly introduced by a subject, followed by the predicator and some other *sentence* elements. Finally, it is the apposition that makes up a noun phrase and it is this noun phrase that has the qualifier reversed its position to the head.

On the other hand, the verb groups consist of the auxiliary, the head, and the extension. To differentiate, the head is the only obligatory element of this group. The auxiliary, which comes before the head, may be a modal or it may act as the head of a verb group. The extension follows the head.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The study employs a qualitative design to arrive at a stylistic approach to examining the poem *It is Difficult to Speak of Saints*. The study is conducted in two phases. In the first phase, the analysis focuses on the poem as an act of communication. Utilizing Jakobson's (1991) Formalist Stylistic Approach, the poem is summarized using Jakobson's *Model of Communication*. This model incorporates six elements of an organic text: the addresser, the addressee, the message, the context, the channel, and the code. Each element is identified within the poem to understand its communicative structure. The second phase examines the poem using Blake's (1990) syntax. This phase involves a detailed discussion of sample extracts from the poem, revealing the meanings and thematic elements through an analysis of syntax. By examining sentence structures, grammatical choices, and word order, the study uncovers deeper insights into the poem.

## **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **3.1. The First Phase**

The first phase of the analysis uses Jakobson's *Model of Communication* to recount the communicative process in the poem. The poem begins as a man muses over his relationship with the saints of his younger years. In the poem, the addresser is a man at a spiritual crossroads over his religious convictions and the lure of a worldly adult life that is tempted by dark, sinful earthly pleasures. He reflects on this drifting relationship with saints. He himself is the addressee. The poem presents itself as the channel, unveiling a yearning for the innocence of childhood—a time when the saints seemed tangible and uncomplicated—contrasted with a life devoid of spirituality. While the addresser acknowledges such worldly temptations that compromise his faith, alongside feelings of envy and guilt, his longing for reconciliation with his spiritual past lingers. This desire is mirrored throughout the poem's use of religious imagery and the Latin language as its **code**, juxtaposed with contemporary terms that represent secular life. This duality, in turn, renders him as both the addresser and the addressee of his own reflections. Ultimately, the poem compellingly reflects on the struggle between holding onto faith and succumbing to the enticing distractions of contemporary life.

At the physical level, the poem is decidedly a free verse and is composed of four stanzas. Its first three stanzas consist of seven lines. Then, the final stanza only has three lines. Also, on the whole, the rhyming pattern is unevenly distributed with only the first and the fourth lines of the first stanza *saints/brows* as well as the second and the third lines *every/envy*

of the same stanza rhyming. The rhyming scheme becomes even more sparse in the second stanza with only the second and the third lines' *marriages/smiles* rhyming. The rhyming pattern totally disappears in the final stanza. The diminishing size of the rhyming pattern, from the first to the fourth stanzas, suggests the persona's diminishing faith and reliance on the saints.

### 3.2. The Second Phase

In the second phase of the analysis, Blake's syntax (1990) is used to identify the sentence structure. In terms of sentence structure, the poem is broken down into ten sentences. What is notable is the pattern of distribution in the number of sentences in each of the poem's first three stanzas. It may be observed that each stanza, from the first to the third, contains three sentences while the fourth stanza only has one sentence. Additionally, this one sentence begins in the last line of the third stanza and is continued in the remaining three lines of the final stanza. Furthermore, except for the first two simple sentence constructions in the eighth (fourth sentence) and the twentieth line (ninth sentence), the rest of the sentences are expressed as compound-complex sentences.

The first sentence (stanza 1) is a compound sentence that extends to the first line of the first stanza. Its first clause starts with the conjunction *because* followed by the subject *I*. Following the subject is the adjunct *no longer*. This structure is continued by the predicator *worship*. The first clause ends with the object of the sentence *saints*.

The opening line of the second stanza (line 8) marks the fourth sentence of the poem. Composed of four lexical items, the simple sentence has the structure of adjunct in *now*, subject in *it*, predicator in *is*, and complement in *different* (ASPC). The simple sentence is followed by the justification of the persona as to why *now is different*. Composed of eighteen words, the fifth sentence (line 8) also has a complex structure. This sentence extends to the eleventh line of the same stanza. Its pattern is subject – predicator – object (SPO). It is the qualifier of the object *asperities* expressed as two prepositional phrases that make the structure decidedly complex.

*5 I stumble into asperities*  
*Of having to keep sanity and breath together.*  
*Always into the banality of haste we work in*  
*And the sham smile of my employer.*

The sixth sentence (line 12), comprising 25 words and reaching the 14<sup>th</sup> line of the second stanza, starts with the subject *there*, followed by the predicator *is*. The structure is completed by the complement of this *walking into strange/Unsilent wants of women* and the qualifier *without end/To whom it is hard to say no with a bald face*.

The opening line of the third stanza (line 15) starts with the connector of consequence *thus*. The inversion of the auxiliary *do* and the subject pronoun *I* is another indicator of the poetic convention that the poet employs. This seventh sentence is the longest with 34 lexis. Except for the initial inversion, the structure, a complex- compound, follows the subject – predicator – object (SPO) pattern. This is connected to another clause that starts with an archaic *lest* which is equivalent to *otherwise*. The second clause of the seventh sentence is patterned following subject – adjunct – predicator – complement (SAPC).

*7 Thus do I encourage the praying of women*  
*Lest my neglected saints still have power*

*To curse my fortune, such as it is, in envy*

*Of my potency and laic love of marriages.*

The qualifiers of the object, expressed as prepositional phrases, complete the pattern. The eighth sentence (19<sup>th</sup> line), extending to another line, has a shorter structure of fourteen lexis. Beginning with the complementizer *if*, the rest of the pattern follows subject – predicator – object – adjunct (SPOC).

*8 If only I could lock them up in the gilt*

*Of missals forever,*

The 9<sup>th</sup> sentence (20<sup>th</sup> line) is a simple sentence following a subject – predicator – complement' (SPC) pattern in its lexical makeup 'it is not that simple'. Finally ending with twenty-nine words, the 10<sup>th</sup> sentence (21<sup>st</sup> line) extends up to three more lines, and follows the same subject – predicator – complement' (SPC) pattern. The last 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> lines of the final stanza contain the complement of the subject. The complement is separated by a comma meant to replace the conjunction *and*. Another conjunction *but* of an adversative nature, appears after the second complement, this time to introduce the break of the sentence pattern in the tenth sentence. The structure, when completed, has the structure a subject – predicator – complement' – object (SPCO).

*10 One of them on a sill of silence smiles,*

*Eager for reconciliation with my worldliness,*

*Wishing to speak with me, but only in beautiful Latin I have since forgotten.*

The poem itself, on the surface level, is easy to read as the addresser speaking in the pronoun 'I' and using a conversational tone, makes mockery of the traditional devotion of Catholics to saints. Except for one or two strange collocations, as exemplified in the last line of the second stanza (*bad face*), all collocations are in their typical word combinations. For instance, there is nothing that jolts the normal level of interpreting noun phrases in combinations like *beautiful faces*, *graceful gestures*, *cool brows*, and *rumbling life*. Even the *sham smile* of the persona's employer is classified as conventional. These word combinations create an atmosphere of normalcy, and of simplicity in the poem. This simplicity, the persona recounts, as he brings back childhood memories where the images of the saints are his constant companions. However, by combining the modifier *bald* and the head noun *face*, he can create a mocking tone in the poem. This mockery, he directs at the saints. The combination of the modifier *graceful* and the head noun *gestures* appears ordinary but when used to describe the images of the saints creates a tone that reverberates with mockery, even to the point of insolence. The insolence is felt because the images do not move; they have to be carried by devotees. Similarly, the element of paradox is achieved in the interplay of emotions of mockery and insolence directed at the commonly revered images of the saints. Additionally, the descriptions of elegance projected by the saints are a paradox to the toughness of the persona's realities. There is that feeling therefore that these images are after all uncaring despite their *graceful gestures*, *beautiful faces*, and *cool brows* as the addresser endures the hardships of *having to keep sanity and breath together* and the *banality of haste we work in*. Even the complement of the sixth sentence (line 12) is as dark as the persona's experience of *walking into the strange, silent wants of women without end*.

The resolution that the author provides in the beginning logical connector of line 15 appears half-meant as the suggestion expressed in the noun phrase format that *the praying of women* creates inactivity instead of the act of praying preferred in the infinitive *to pray*. What the addresser wants to do with the saints is described in the hypothetical statement (line 19) immediately following this half-meant suggestion. Then again, he retracts this statement in the simple structure of the 9th sentence (line 20). He continues this pun against the saints in the clause element *complement* followed by the *object*. The object of the 10th sentence (line 24) establishes the distance that the addresser now has towards his companions of old as he ignores any reconciliation ever transpiring between himself and the saints.

The sentence structures, as earlier analyzed, belong to the following patterns: SAPO, SPO, SPCA, SCPO, ASPC, SAPC, SPOA, SPC, and SPCO. Except for the three patterns just identified, all the sentence patterns have the adjunct as an additional sentence element. The presence of the adjunct *still* before the verb *envy* weakens the mockery that the persona directs at the saints as the poem reaches its end in the 7th sentence (line 19). The adjunct *forever placed* at the end of the clause heightens the sense of disillusionment that the persona feels towards the saints. It is observed that, though both *still* and *forever* are adjuncts, they have different functions in relation to the message being expressed by the persona. As a form of attack of sarcasm, the first adjunct serves to weaken the impact of the persona's remark. As a form of self-expression, like an internal monologue, the second adjunct *forever* heightens the feeling of disillusionment the persona feels. Even in the persona's heightened disillusionment, the persona remains tentative as he uses the modal auxiliary *could* followed by the verb *lock* thereby weakening the strength of the action.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In summary, this paper has described the sentence patterns in the poem's ten sentences. Analysis reveals SAPO, SPO, SPCA, SCPO, ASPC, SAPC, SPOA, SPC, and SPC. For most of the sentence patterns, it is noted that the adjunct as a clause element serves to weaken the focus on the verb. The other elements like the noun phrase and the prepositional phrases are also observed to take the attention from the verb. As a whole, the study provided the students of linguistics with an alternative stylistic method of analyzing a literary text through examination of the writer's lexical choices and use of sentence structure and how these choices combined create the meaning of the text.

It is Difficult to Speak of Saints

Because I no longer worship the saints  
 With beautiful faces and hands of ivory,  
 I do not despise them. I still envy  
 Their graceful gestures, beautiful faces, and cool brows.  
 O companions of my childhood, it was easier then:  
 The air browsing in your goldleaf halos  
 Had no rumors of a rumbling life...

Now it is different. I stumble into asperities  
 Of having to keep sanity and breath together,  
 Always into the banality of haste we walk in  
 And the sham smile of my employer.  
 There is, constantly, this walking into strange,  
 Unsilent wants of women without end  
 To whom it is hard to say no with a bald face.  
 Thus do I encourage the praying of women  
 Lest my neglected saints still have the power

To curse my fortune, such as it is, in envy  
Of my potency and laic love of marriages.  
If only I could lock them up in the gilt  
Of missals forever. It is not that simple.  
One of them on a sill of silence smiles.

Eager for reconciliation with my worldliness,  
Wishing to speak with me, but only  
In beautiful Latin I have since forgotten,

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