

STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF THOMAS GRAY'S ELEGY WRITTEN IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD THROUGH FOREGROUNDING THEORY: DESCRIPTION, INTERPRETATION, AND EVALUATION

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Abstract

*This work systematically analyzes Thomas Gray's poem *Elegy written in a Country Churchyard* (1751) using foregrounding theory, as suggested by Mukarovsky (1964), Leech (1969), and Leech and Short (1981). The study is based on the close reading of Gray's poem, qualitative and descriptive analytical approach to study and analyze the foregrounding technique used by Gray. At the phonological level, the elegy shows variations in parallelism and deviation from the normal patterns; at the grammatical level, it shows variations in the exploitation of homophonic ambiguity and embedding, inversion, and opposition; at the semantic level, intending to create an elegiac discourse of its long-lasting philosophical and emotional effect. The analysis is divided into three different methodological steps: **Description** (what features are foregrounded), **Interpretation** (what sound is made), and **Evaluation** (how effective the art is). The study concluded that alliteration, breaking the rules of iambic pentameter, syntactic inversion, personification, and the use of archaic diction all work together to create a tone that is sympathetic and that the "rural poor farmer" feels like "all of us." This study finds that foregrounding features are the main reason this elegy has philosophical depth and cultural permanence.*

Keywords: systematic analysis, foregrounding theory, parallelism, deviation, description, interpretation, and evaluation, archaic diction

1. Introduction

Stylistics as a discipline relates linguistic analysis with literary interpretation and provides systematic means to analyze how literary texts achieve their aesthetic and emotional impact. One of these is a tool known as Foregrounding Theory inspired by the Prague School. It was developed by Leech (1969) and Leech and Short (1981) and is one of the most principled approaches to analyzing the linguistic strategies that writers use in the process of meaning construction. According to previous works, some studies use a complete three-stage foregrounding analysis (Description, Interpretation, Evaluation) of a whole literary text, though many have been done with canonical poems.

Elegy written in a Country Churchyard (1751) by Thomas Gray is one of the most lasting poems in English literature. It has become a well-known work of philosophical consideration on death, anonymity, and the value of common life. The poem is about the churchyard at Stoke Poges in Buckinghamshire, England. In a reflection on the 'graves of the unnamed villagers of the rural areas', it is a reflection on how death is equal for all, and it doesn't distinguish class, wealth, and ambition.

The *Elegy* has been well studied, but no systematic foregrounding analysis has yet been done in the three stages: Description through Interpretation to Evaluation, on the entire text. This study aims to fill this. It looks at Gray's foregrounding techniques in terms of the poem's elegiac mood, its philosophical content and its sympathy for the common man, covering phonological, grammatical, semantic and graphological foregrounding, based on the analytical framework developed by Mukarovsky (1964), Leech (1969), and Leech and Short (1981).

Paper Organization

A brief review of the theoretical literature presented in Section 2 is followed by a survey of previous stylistic work on the *Elegy* in Section 3. The theoretical framework is presented in Section 3. The method used in this research is presented in Section 4. The three-stage analysis

is presented in Section 5. The findings of this research are discussed in Section 6 and the results in Section 7.

1.1 Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. In *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, what phonological, grammatical, semantic and graphological features does Gray concentrate on?
2. How do the features you have identified as foregrounded contribute to the poem's mood, moral, or emotion (Interpretation stage)?
3. To what extent do these foregrounding strategies help in achieving the poem's artistic and philosophical aims (Evaluation stage)?
4. How do the foregrounding techniques of the phonological, grammatical, semantic and graphological aspects of the poem help to create the overall aesthetic effect?

1.2 Research Objectives

This research aims at:

1. Identify and list the foregrounding features in Gray's *Elegy* which are phonological, grammatical, semantic and graphological by analyzing the text deeply.
2. To identify the thematic significance, moods and thoughts evoked by foregrounding devices in the context of the poem's elegiac form.
3. To analyse the aesthetic qualities of the foregrounding in terms of aesthetic consistency, emotional qualities, and cultural timelessness of Gray's foregrounding choices.
4. To show how these several layers of foregrounding are unified into a unified system that helps to sustain the permanent quality and the philosophical depth of the poem.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Foregrounding Theory: Theoretical Background

The term foregrounding was coined in the Prague School of Linguistics as a systematic approach to literature. The apparently unrelated thesis of poetic language is different from ordinary daily language; Jan Mukarovsky (1964), *S.E. Standard Language and Poetic Language*, extended by highlighting certain features. It is not the norm of the language, but intentionally alters the normal language patterns in order to produce esthetic effects and to focus the reader's attention on itself. This theoretical understanding gave scientists and poets a scientific and linguistic way of analyzing and studying poetry, giving an account of how the language of poetry affects readers. Due to this theory, literary analysis became more scientific and systematic rather than confined to subjective impressions.

Geoffrey Leech made use of this framework in *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* (1969). He was able to differentiate between two main modes of foregrounding: qualitative foregrounding (deviation), where the writer veers away from the linguistic settlement, and quantitative foregrounding (parallelism), where the writer replicates a pattern of structure. Leech went on to note eight types of deviation: lexical, grammatical, phonological, graphological, semantic, dialectal, register, and historical. In their book *Style in Fiction* (later in Leech and Short 1981), Leech and Short defined foregrounding as "artistically motivated deviation". They claimed in this book that foregrounded structures are structures that the author, more or less intentionally, makes salient to the reader's understanding. Such structures are "the parts of the text which the author... is signaling as crucial to our understanding of what he has written," says Short (1996).

Since then, this concept has been widely used in stylistic research. The results from Miall and Kuiken (1994) indicated that foregrounded texts result in more affective and interpretive responses when compared to a series of non-foregrounded texts. Also, Jeffries and McIntyre (2010) have found that for an eclectic corpus, statistical frequency might be more appropriate, but qualitative methodology is recommended since it enables understanding of the underlying meanings because it is rich. These meanings are much more important than the

meanings given by frequency analysis of statistics. Foregrounding, as the main analytical concept, is also the most essential concept that connects linguistic description with interpretation and evaluation, according to Simpson (2004).

2.2 Prior Stylistic Studies of Gray's Elegy

There have been some productive studies conducted on the linguistic aspects of this Elegy, but the results fall short. Ufot (2013) did a phonaesthetic study that shows that in Gray's poems, the use of long vowels and diphthongs is not a superficial device for adding to the verses, but a means to create seriousness and thoughtful depth. The published studies in linguistics and literature journals have addressed the semantic aspects of the poem, such as presupposition, entailment, and lexical relations such as synonymy, hyponymy, and semantic echo (Hidayati et al., 2018). The Critical Discourse Analysis has revealed the ideologization of the rural poor in terms of power and society in the poem. It concludes that Gray's lexical and syntactical use subtly calls into question class hierarchies. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, however, no research has conducted a systematic three-stage foregrounding analysis of the entire poem, namely, Description, Interpretation and Evaluation. The current study aims to fill this gap by offering the first complete three-stage foregrounding analysis of the entirety of Gray's poem.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is conducted from a stylistic view, which can be broadly defined as the systematic study of the style in literary texts using linguistic tools and methods. In particular, it was based on Foregrounding Theory, originating from the Prague School, through the stylistics of the British school. The basic premise of this theory is based on the concept of automatized and realized language. In normal speaking, language is used transparently, with a lack of formal features of language being noticed consciously. In literature, certain properties are specifically highlighted so as to disrupt automatic perception. This gives rise to defamiliarization" (Shklovsky's term): seeing familiar objects in a new light.

This study is based on Leech (1969), who took a two-dimensional model.

- 1) Foregrounding or deviation: Qualitative deviation refers to deviations on phonological, grammatical, lexical or semantic level from the established linguistic norms.
- 2) Repetition or parallelism: This is a quantitative approach to foregrounding, that is, repetition for reasons beyond the basic communication situation itself. It is systematic and not natural. Parallelism is employed to impart an aesthetic effect.

Both these factors can go together, and in combination, it can generate the maximum literary effect. Analysis will be followed by Description → Interpretation → Evaluation:

- a) Description: What features are emphasized?
- b) Interpretation: communicative, thematic, and emotional meaning
- c) Evaluation how it can be used in a literary context

This structure is not only grounded in textual information, but also preserves interpretation.

4. Research Methodology and Data Collection

The type of this study is qualitative, descriptive, and analytic. A qualitative approach is more suitable for analyzing foregrounding features of the selected poems, as stated by Jeffries and McIntyre (2010). It can provide detailed interpretation rather than just count frequencies. The main data is Gray's Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard (1751), which has thirty-two heroic quatrains. The poem itself is the corpus. It is in line with the conventional approach of literary stylistics, which has as its object of analysis the literary text itself.

A multi-step close reading was used as a method for data collection. The initial task was to determine the overall atmosphere, content, and flow of the poem. Specific stanzas were analyzed, one by one, at the phonological, grammatical, and semantic levels. The accentuated features were created and juxtaposed in the foreground. Examples were chosen for their representativeness and not for their rarity, as they were required to demonstrate patterns

throughout the whole poem and not just arbitrary lines. Contextual and analytical support were provided through secondary sources.

5. Analysis

This is the fifth step in describing features. This is the 5th step for describing features that are foregrounded.

5.1.1 Phonological Foregrounding

5.1.2 The Elegy begins with features of the phonology that are immediately foregrounded:

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
Slowly o'er the lea the lowing herd wind.
The plowman homeward plods his weary way,
And gives up the world and leaves it to darkness and to me. (St. 1)

The theme of foregrounding is based on the multiple alliterations achieved by the addition of /l/ in "lowing" etc. and of /p/ in "plowman" etc. It makes the reading slower and with a melancholy rhythm. The rhythm of the tones is given by the regular iambic pentameter. Because of this steady rhythm, even a few stressed words stand out a lot, such as in "homeward plods his weary way" (through its clustered stresses the poet breaks the steady beat) to represent the tiredness of its speaker. The repetition of similar sounds is also regular with assonance. The use of words such as "long," "long," "tolls," "knell," "slowly," "o'er," and "weary," with long, open vowels, is dull-toned, matching the idea of "mourning. ABAB is a macro-level phonological parallelism forming a well-constructed audible rhythmic structure that suggests an easily predictable framework for reading, and therefore anything that disrupts it is likely to be memorable to readers.

In stanza 5, onomatopoeia is used to create a phonological deviation differently:

She said, "The airy call of incense breathing morns,
The buzzing of little swallows in the straw-built shed,
The loud clear call of the cock, or the sound of the horn.
No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed. (St. 5)

The words 'twittering' and 'clarion' willingly highlight the sound in them, as well as the sounds they describe. Even within the silence of the poem, there are gaps, and these are the pauses of silence that sufficiently contrast it; however, the richness of the phonology would suffice. This quality where silence itself becomes the sound offers enough poignancy and adds deep sadness.

5.1.3 Grammatical Foregrounding

5.1.4 Syntactic inversion is the most noticeable level of deviation in the grammar. Normally the word order is Subject-Verb-Object, but Gray regularly violates this structure to create rhetorical emphasis. In stanza 9, Gray's targets of direct speech are in an anaphoric accumulation:

Do not let Ambition scoff at their benefitting labour,
Their simple pleasures, their fate unknown;
Nor Grandeur heard, with a contemptuous smile.
The brief and succinct records of the wretched. (St. 9)

The abstract nouns "Ambition" and "Grandeur" are capitalized, thus providing graphological foregrounding. Gray also, by capitalizing these and using them as proper nouns, gives them the personality of a character and makes them appear as though they are social forces that are rather actual. This technique is repeated throughout the poem and is supported by the use of grammatical features which assign active roles to these personified ideas. The technique is further developed in stanza 11:

Chill Penury's noble rage suppressed,
And stopped the friendly stream of heart. (St. 11)

Gray has an active role in poverty, rather than it being a condition. It is depicted as a force which willfully restricts human capabilities. By using “repress’d” and “froze” to make poverty the subject of the verbs, Gray makes it a force that can be held accountable as a social structure. This is a type of social criticism that is structured into the grammar itself. Anaphora provides a further level of syntactically parallel structures. The two uses of the phrase “Full many” are found in stanza 14. By repeating the same grammatical structure, Gray creates a powerful cumulative effect:

Full many a gem of purest ray serene
The secrets of the dark unfathom’d caves of ocean bear:
Yet few are there left to bid fair,
And be lost to the winds of the desert. (St. 14)

The conscious repetition of the grammar brings more examples of not being acknowledged as beautiful and talented. It establishes this central democratic theme of the poem: unrecognized greatness is real greatness.

Objective 5.1.3: Use semantic and lexical foregrounding.

On a semantic level, the Elegy emphasizes meaning through the use of lexical deviation and repeated metaphors. The diction of Gray is old-fashioned, elevated, and referenced. Thus, it differs markedly from the poor old farm folk who are anonymous in their death. In this opposition between fancy language and humble subject matter, there is semantic deviation. In this contrast, the poem is ironic in dignity. The noble words are used in the description of common people. Semantic deviation of the first line is “knell” being used for “parting day” rather than death. This semantic shift represents the transition in time as a fatal occurrence. Such an extended metaphor (day is death; nature is mourners) persists throughout the poem. This results in a semantic parallelism which is ubiquitous.

Stanza 6 contains the word “glebe” which is used to indicate a parish church’s land. Archaic-lexical deviation with religious connotation is introduced, allowing a slight connection between the lands of the villagers and the ground of the sacral church, and connecting with the religious connotation of the term. This semantic echo (glebe as labour and grave) emphasizes light power. The last stanza of the poem works at several levels at once:

The person who rests his head on the lap of Earth
A Youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown;
But not on his poor birth;
And Melancholy mark’d him for her own. (St. 30)

The use of synecdoche and personification combine to make the act of burying tender. Synecdoche and personification are used at once to turn the act of burial into a tender act. The speaker is sad, but he is also marked by the emotion to be its own: Melancholy mark’d him for her own. (Allegorical ownership: the speaker is claimed and defined by the emotion.) Personification is reinforced in the grammatical analysis with capitalization. It demonstrates the interaction of foregrounding levels.

5.1.5 Graphological Foregrounding

5.1.6 Throughout the Elegy, there is a consistent graphological foregrounding, a deviation at the level of visual and/or typographic characteristics. The most common device is capitalization of abstract nouns. Throughout the poem, the words “Ambition,” “Grandeur,” “Penury,” “Melancholy,” “Fortune,” and “Fame” are rendered in a capital letter, which is not the standard usage for prose. This typographic foregrounding brings abstractions to life. It makes them look like proper nouns, and thus emphasizes the grammatical personification discussed in §5.1.2. The reader perceives these abstractions as agents and not just concepts.

The heroic quatrain (ABAB) is a regular stanza-like rhyme that forms a visual symmetry on the page at the level of the stanzas. It reflects the main themes of the poem – order, repetition,

inevitability. A graphological parallelism is provided by the uniform stanza structure. The equality of vis-à-vis corresponds to the equality of democracy in the poem; each quatrain is seen equally. This is how every man or woman, every stanza, is on the same measure on the page. In the elegy, Gray uses some unusual punctuation. The use of dashes and semicolons makes for visual breaks that slow the reader's pace through the text. It accords with the contemplative mood of the poem. The graphological foregrounding and the phonological foregrounding are most apparent here. These visual pauses have been directly inspired by the phonological pauses and stressed syllables of the poem's 'acoustics of mourning'.

The Foregrounding: What it Means

This "acoustics of mourning" is created by the use of phonological foregrounding, alliteration, long vowel assonance, onomatopoeia, and controlled iambic rhythm. Heavy consonants, long vowels, and plodding meter don't just accentuate the themes of the poem; they also execute them, giving the reader the impression of very slow and irreversible motion in the process of reading. Materializing death as acoustic silence is the result of a deliberate negation that is taken up by the phonological silences that follow acoustic richness, as in stanza 5: "No more shall rouse them."

There is a social and philosophical implication to grammatical foregrounding. Gray gives these forces "active" names – "Chill Penury" – and makes them responsible entities, thereby giving rise to "implicit social critique. The "full many" stanzas are syntactically parallel and make a moral argument. It takes the same syntactic form to compare hidden gems and unrecognized human talent, so parallel syntax is a means of the philosophical claim; that is, it gives it the same form.

Thematically, the poem is equating nature and death throughout. It universalizes death by making the end of the day and that of animals equivalent to that of humans, symbolically speaking, by providing shelter. It puts death back in its natural context. The rhetorical style, which is old-fashioned and pretentious, is used for lowly objects and makes the boldest assertion of the poem. The plowmen are portrayed in the complete repertoire of classical elegy. So, Dignity is the argument that Gray proves, not that he argues for the poor to be dignified.

Students will be evaluated based on the artistic effectiveness of their work.

The foregrounding in the Elegy shows steady artistic achievement on all levels of analysis. Gray's selections are very carefully managed at the phonological level. Slow vowels, plodding consonants, and metrically weighted lines actually perform the ideas of the poem, rather than just elaborating. When a reader reads "The plowman homeward plods his weary way", he feels the weariness before understanding it intellectually. This is known as an "aesthetic surplus" according to Leech (1969). This uniformity in phonology produces an acoustic environment throughout the poem.

Stressed clusters, feminine endings, and syntactic line-breaks become noticeable and emotionally moving against the background of a stable acoustic color and regularity that is constructed with iambic pentameter. The selection of the heroic quatrain is a subtle choice on Gray's part. It sets a framework to make all variations from it significant. The form is not an end in itself, but is its precondition for foregrounding.

The ideologically and emotionally effective foregrounding of the grammar. The use of "Chill Penury" instead of "the oppressor" or any specific individual enables the social criticism to be grounded but still widely applicable. Perhaps the most artistically successful device in the poem is the anaphoric "Full many" construction in stanza 14, which creates the syntactical equivalence of hidden gems to unrecognized human talent that no direct statement could, as effectively, achieve.

The verdict in the archaic lexical register is more complicated. It puts lowly things on a pedestal, but it also involves a kind of tension, for the educated voice, representing the rural

poor, is not in a position to eradicate its privilege. This irony, in which language itself does what the poem asserts, however, might be a successful ambiguity rather than a lack of success. The poem is still enduring three centuries later, which is the best evidence that its foregrounding strategies are effective. Human equality is also graphologically foregrounded through the use of capitalized abstractions and repetition of the stanza structure, as well as the poem's social critique and philosophical statement.

6. Findings

The analysis reveals four main findings. The first point is that foregrounding in the Elegy is systematic; that is, the phonological, grammatical, semantic, and graphological mechanisms reinforce each other, and are coordinated by what Leech (1969) calls the literary "dominant" – the elegiac impulse to dignify, mourn, and accommodate mortality. Secondly, the reader's body and mind is involved in a phonological foregrounding that creates an acoustic and sensory aesthetic experience, which can be supported by the phonaesthetic findings of Ufot (2013) in various aspects. Third, foregrounding through grammar is an ideological statement: making social conditions into actors subverts the eighteenth-century class-based ideology of the society that produced the poem. 4. The level of graphological foregrounding (capitalization, stanzaic regularity) also helps to support the philosophical and social matters the poem asserts at the visual level, in conjunction with the other foregrounding levels, to form a whole, complete artistic unity.

The results of this research, once again, make it clear that the aesthetic effect of the Elegy is not independent of its systematic use of language. The poem lives not just in the themes, but in the linguistic resources that reveal and make those themes palpable.

7. Discussion

The results of this study validate the foregrounding as the main organizing principle of Gray's Elegy. Not a monolingual system. Rather than that, it operates on the phonological, grammatical, semantic, and graphological levels at the same time, creating the elegiac tone of the poem. This multi-level operation backs Leech and Short's (1981) claim that literary style is not determined by any single feature but by several foregrounded ones.

On the phonological level, Gray's alliteration, assonance, and iambic rhythm create what this study has termed an "acoustics of mourning." The poem is not a description of bereavement. It does it via sound. The weight of death is embodied in heavy consonant clusters and slow vowel sounds. This is consistent with Miall and Kuiken (1994) who found that foregrounding the words' phonology resulted in heightened affective responses among readers. It also supports Simpson (2004), who has written that foregrounding brings to the fore a link between linguistic description and lived literary experience.

Syntactic inversion and anaphoric parallelism function at the grammatical level both esthetically and ideologically. The repeated "Full many" construction is not just to establish rhythm. It speaks a philosophical message of the equal value of all human beings. This builds on Leech's (1969) work and demonstrates that the Elegy's foregrounding of the grammar has an ideological dimension other than that of aesthetics. Syntax is a means for Gray to make social commentary. In previous stylistic analysis of this poem this dimension has not been sufficiently explored.

The semantic analysis revealed that Ambition, Penury, and Fortune in Gray's poem are personified abstractions, which represent a kind of social criticism. Through granting this agency to forces of poverty and circumstance, Gray makes these structural social conditions into accountable presences. As far as literary criticism has gone, the Elegy has been primarily interpreted as a contemplation on death. This is also a social text, according to foregrounding analysis. The language of this poem is in this sense ideological, and this aspect of the poem's language has been largely neglected in the scholarship.

On the graphological level, with the capitalization of the abstract nouns and the uniform heroic quatrain pattern, a visual argument of equality is created. Each stanza is the same length on the page. This reflects the philosophical statement of the poem that all human life should be equally recognized in death. In this case, the graphological foregrounding is not made for the purpose of decoration. It is a linguistically and conceptually enriching thing.

The conflict between the democratic content of the poem and the lexical register should be emphasized. Grammatical and semantic foregrounding dignify the rural poor. But their old-fashioned diction comes from an educated upper-class. This is not an oxymoron; it's a productive irony. It is in some sense the restraint of Gray's social position in history, as well as increasing the intricacy of the poem's politics. Foregrounding analysis is ideally suited to the perception of this tension because it observes at the same time what the language is doing and how it is doing it.

The findings have implications for stylistic methodology generally. The three phases of Description, Interpretation, and Evaluation were useful as they allowed for claims of interpretation to be made only after sufficient linguistic description had been provided. This discipline is particularly useful in the analysis of canonical texts where previous critical analysis might unconsciously influence the way in which the text is analyzed linguistically. In terms of previous research, the study extends the study of Ufot (2013) which applied a phonaesthetic analysis to the research by incorporating the second level of the multi-level framework which is Semantic Backgrounding, and extends the study of Hidayati et al. (2018) that applied a semantic analysis to the study by incorporating the interaction between Semantic Foregrounding and the other two levels of the multi-level framework, namely Grammatical Strategy and Graphological Strategy. The three-stage process of methodology has not been captured in previous partial analyses in terms of an analytical account.

The results have important implications for stylistic scholarship. The foregrounding that is demonstrated at the four inter-dependent linguistic levels of description, interpretation and evaluation lends credence to Simpson's (2004) theoretical stance on foregrounding as a primary analytical concept underpinning the relationship between description and interpretation and evaluation. It is not only a theoretical reality, but a textual reality: the poem's strongest effects occur in the confluence of several foregrounding levels, such as in the grammatical parallelism, semantic metaphor, and graphological capitalization, all occurring simultaneously in the passage "Full many" of stanza 14.

8. Conclusion

This systematic three-stage foregrounding analysis has shown that the lasting impact of Gray's *Elegy* is no coincidence. It is the result of conscious and interwoven foregrounding of phonological, grammatical, semantic and graphological methods that create a unique Buckinghamshire churchyard as a universal arena of reflection on the human condition. The churchyard does not serve as a setting or a structural device; it is one which makes each reader's mortality felt and treated with dignity.

The study makes a contribution to existing studies in the following ways: it is the first study to analyze the entire poem in terms of three stages foregrounding analysis, and it extends the understanding of the interaction of the linguistic levels as a result of close textual demonstration. Further studies might continue the work by comparison with other eighteenth-century elegies in a corpus-linguistic analysis; they might also be continued through reader-response methodology in an attempt to empirically test the affects suggested here; or they could be pursued in a contrastive stylistic analysis of Gray's other poems to establish whether the affect-foregrounding strategies here discussed are typical of the *Elegy* as a genre or of Gray's other poetry.

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