

## A Stylistic Analysis of Oscar Wilde's *The Nightingale and the Rose* in the Context of Foregrounding

Siyuan Peng

Northwestern Polytechnical University, Xi'an, 710072 Shaanxi, China

**Keywords:** Foregrounding, Stylistics, *The nightingale and the rose*, Oscar wilde

**Abstract:** Oscar Wilde's fairy tale *The Nightingale and the Rose* is acclaimed for its aesthetic effects and profound themes. It is the various stylistic features that facilitate him to achieve such success. Foregrounding is an in-depth theory and a crucial means to analyze stylistic features both qualitatively and quantitatively. This paper reviews the previous studies on this fairy tale and the development of foregrounding and discusses the style of Wilde's language from different types of deviation and rhetorical devices such as parallelism and repetition, in order to attain a comprehensive view of the beauty of Wilde's language in this world-famous masterpiece.

### 1. Introduction

According to Verdonk's study<sup>1</sup>, Stylistics deals with the use of style in language, namely the distinctive expression along with its literary and aesthetic effect, based on in-depth interpretation of the original text. It reveals the relationship between the text and context and provides a confluence of linguistics and literary study to elaborate and evaluate certain pieces of literature in a linguistic approach<sup>2</sup>. In the field of Stylistic studies, researchers have proposed the concept of Foregrounding, which encompasses multiple rhetorical figures and readers' reaction to these raw materials out of which masterpieces are made<sup>3</sup>.

Oscar Wilde was an Irish poet and playwright in nineteenth century. He is renowned for his ideas about supremacy of aestheticism and his urbane literary creations. *The Nightingale and the Rose* was a fairy tale forged by Wilde in 1888, about an inimitable irony of how delicate self-sacrifice and pure love are in front of the class gap and reality. The story was written in a surprisingly romantic and erudite voice, delivering Wilde's ever-lasting passion for the art of language. As is universally acknowledged, Wilde's characterization embedded in this story still exerts huge leverage on literary creators and critics in modern times.

This paper aims at identifying and analyzing major stylistic features, mainly the utilization of quantitative foregrounding and qualitative foregrounding, in *The Nightingale and the Rose* to achieve a comparatively comprehensive understanding of this outstanding work and cultivate the appreciation of aestheticism in literature, which Wilde advocated for most of his life.

### 2. Literature Review

Many scholars have conducted meticulous research on *The Nightingale and the Rose* from literary, aesthetic and philosophical perspectives, where the significance of such a piece of work revealed<sup>4</sup>. Some dug the profound correlation between the brutal undermining of altruism and the class-based indifference back to the Victorian age where the story was generated<sup>5</sup>. Some illustrated the efficiency of certain expressions that Wilde created in light of contemporary linguistic theories such as pragmatics<sup>6</sup>. As for its diverse symbolic meanings, Wei exemplified the symbolic meaning of nightingale to demonstrate Wilde's artistic ideals, comparing with the previous poem *Ode to the Nightingale* by John Keats<sup>7</sup>; and the spiritual meaning of red rose was carefully discussed in Hu and Xiao's paper<sup>8</sup>. In addition, researchers have also attempted to unravel the magical power of Wilde's language from the stylistic perspective. Mahmood and Khalaf focused on the stylistic cohesion of this fairy tale based on the Halliday and Hassen's model<sup>9</sup>. Mugair and Abbas applied Xu's stylistic analyzing theory and focus on the figurative language to the characterization of main characters in

this masterpiece<sup>10,11</sup>. Zou recognized the elegance and refinement of Wilde's language on phonological, graphological, lexical, grammatical and semantical level<sup>12</sup>. Song identified prominent syntactic features and rhetorical devices that help Wilde express the deep theme and his value<sup>13</sup>. Liu and Wang paid attention to the application of the color intention, marked theme in this fairy tale, providing detailed analysis based on System-Functional Linguistics (SFL)<sup>14</sup>.

Over the years, people who use defamiliarization in the course of textual analysis tended to emphasize too much on literary innovation and diversity, which radicalized stylistic theories<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, linguists have formulated and developed the concept of foregrounding for a holistic understanding of some prominent points in certain utterances<sup>16</sup>. Foregrounding stemmed from Russian Formalism, improved by Prague Structuralism and later refreshed by British Stylistics. At the outset, linguists primarily concentrated on the verbal props, whereas the influence of common readers was unintended. Mukarovsky, a representative scholar of Prague School, regarded foregrounding as "de-automatization" which violates the traditional scheme<sup>17</sup>, later widely accepted as "deviation"; meanwhile, he also apprehended the existing artistic effects of parallelism under the guidance of conventional literary norms. Leech further elaborated these two terms respectively, which can be interpreted as follows; deviation smashes traditional expressions and serves as a kind of qualitative foregrounding; parallelism over-obey the regularity and works as a kind of quantitative foregrounding<sup>18</sup>. Even though there are various types of deviation and parallelism, the fundamental function of foregrounding is to impress readers of all times and stimulate them to extract traces of intelligence between the lines. Many subsequent studies verified the feasibility and importance of engaging foregrounding into stylistic analysis. Hakemulder's study manifested the functions of foregrounding which promotes aesthetic appreciation and individual perception<sup>19</sup>. Gregoriou suggested that the role of foregrounding as the basis for distinguishing literary and non-literary language<sup>20</sup>. Galay-David further elucidated the extensive impacts that foregrounding could make in organizing short stories and fictions<sup>21</sup>. In a nutshell, as the limitation of defamiliarization emerged, foregrounding was put forth in stylistic analysis containing deviation and parallelism, which could be applied to any level of language, produce irreplaceable stylistic values and build dynamic interactions among authors, readers, and discourses.

### **3. Overview of the Nightingale and the Rose**

The Nightingale and the Rose was first published in the collection *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*. The story starts from a lamenting poor young student who fails to woo the professor's daughter because he could not acquire the red rose, that she desires. Although he is taunted by a lizard, a butterfly and a daisy, his plight and pure love moves a nightingale intensely. The nightingale scours the garden and visits several rose trees, only to find no blooming red rose in the freezing cold winter. She was noted that, to produce a red rose for the helpless student, the only way is to sing the sweetest song while impaling herself to the thorn of roses and painting the flower with her fresh heart-blood. As a votary of true love, the nightingale carries out the ritual painfully and accomplishes the deadly task. Ironically, the young student with the glistening red rose is still rejected by the professor's daughter as she has already taken an invitation of a man of generational wealth. In the end, the red rose is crumpled by a wagon along with the young student's belief in true love.

Major themes of this tale appear to be rather obvious. Comparing the natural red rose and jewelries, Wilde depicted the direct conflict between aestheticism and utilitarianism. The passion of nightingale resonates with the deep theme "Art is for Art's sake", and the cruel upshot criticizes the materialistic civilization which murders the purity of love. From the reactions of the minor characters, the indifference and snobbery of the society at that time were explicitly displayed.

## **4. Stylistic Features of the Nightingale and the Rose**

### **4.1 Qualitative Foregrounding**

Normally, people obey the basic rules of standard language during communication to achieve understanding easily. Notwithstanding, in the world of literature, these conventional norms may be renounced or reproduced under different circumstances, which engenders unique expressions. Linguists named such phenomena “deviation”. Leech and Short claim that creative authors share the freedom to violate the public norms and organize their own messages in an either blunt or subtle language for the betterment of contexts<sup>22</sup>. As is stated in their study, deviation can be categorized into phonological deviation, graphological deviation, semantic deviation, grammatical deviation, lexical deviation, dialectal deviation, and deviation of register. In this part, typical features of phonological deviation, graphological deviation, semantic deviation and grammatical deviation will be discussed.

#### **4.1.1 Phonological Deviation**

Phonology is the study of language’s sound system, which analyzes a piece of text based on its structure, distribution, and sequencing of speech sounds and the shape of syllables. In this tale, Wilde utilizes onomatopoeia with distinctive imagery to construct the atmosphere and enhance the quality of description. For instance: “*So the Nightingale sang to the Oak-tree, and her voice was like water bubbling from a silver jar.*” He associates the sound of bubbling water in a valley with nightingale’s singing voice so that the readers could literally feel the beauty of nature. As water runs with rhythm, the nightingale’s sound waves also reflect the vitality of love inside the young student’s heart. Afterwards when the captivating voice grows fainter, it serves as an obvious ill omen of the whole love story.

#### **4.1.2 Graphological Deviation**

Graphology is a stylistic instrument which enhances the peculiarity of writing, dealing with the different forms of visual expression. Wilde altered the graphs of words flexibly by capitalizing the first letter of some abstract words, which grabs readers’ attention and reinforces the power of these words. For instance: “*Bitter, bitter was the pain, and wilder and wilder grew her song, for she sang of the Love that is perfected by Death, of the Love that dies not in the tomb*”... “*What a silly thing Love is,*”... “*It is not half as useful as Logic.*”... “*Yet Love is better than Life, and what is the heart of a bird compared to the heart of a man.*” In these sentences, *Death, Love, Life, and Logic* are all abnormally written as their first letter capitalized. Their broad connotations were shrewdly compared and contrasted by Wilde in order to elevate the theme, which is to eulogize love even if one has to sacrifice his or her logic and valuable life.

#### **4.1.3 Semantic Deviation**

Semantic Deviation deals with the significant linguistic effects caused by deep unusual structural deviations, that can be discerned in rhetoric. It concentrates on the use of metaphors, antithesis, and other figures of speech. Wilde adopted various rhetorical devices to achieve artistic and semantic effects in this story, such as simile and personification. For instance: “*She passed through the grove like a shadow, and like a shadow she sailed across the garden*”... “*Pearls and pomegranates cannot buy it (Love), nor is it set forth in the market-place.*” The first sentence contains the use of simile, describing the high speed of nightingale’s movement, which indicates the student’s yearning for love. The second sentence is formed by personification; as the jewels and fruits represents fortune, and it implies the immeasurable value of true love. Such use of the rhetorical devices is believed to shape Wilde’s extraordinary style of language and reflect his practice of aestheticism.

#### **4.1.4 Grammatical Deviation**

Grammatical Deviation refers to the violation of acknowledged syntactic rules in the practical literary creation. According to Leech (1969), grammatical deviation belongs to the surface-structure deviation, mainly adjusting the order and components of certain sentences. Wilde frequently broke the grammar framework to make his sentences more concise, flexible and understandable. For instance: “*No red rose in all my garden!*”... “*I have read all that the wise men have written, and all the secrets of philosophy are mine, yet for want of a red rose is my life made wretched.*” Wilde

utilizes the technique of inversion which effectively emphasizes the predicament and burning desire of the young student. This striking contrast satirizes the inefficient social mobility at that time.

## 4.2 Quantitative Foregrounding

Quantitative Foregrounding is a term for the unanticipated frequency of particular expressions in a piece of writing, which nurtures readers' empathy and promotes its readability. In quantitative foregrounding the writer, instead of taking a wider choice available in the language code, deliberately restricts himself to a selected pattern to produce uniformity. If the recurring frequency of a linguistic item in a discourse is much higher than others, it can be regarded as quantitative foregrounding. Linguists have embraced parallelism and repetition into the study of quantitative foregrounding, because of their typical ideographic functions, making the language more persuasive and systematic.

### 4.2.1 Parallelism

Parallelism generates from the close resemblance between two or more units of surface structure, mainly on syntactic, lexical, and phonological level<sup>23</sup>. It serves as an indispensable literary device, enhancing language expressiveness considerably. Most of Wilde's language in this tale is constructed by parallelism, from which the characters and theme are built. For instance: "...as white as the foam of the sea, and whiter than the snow upon the mountain", "...as yellow as the hair of the mermaid who sits upon an amber throne, and yellower than the daffodil that blooms in the meadow", and "...as red as the feet of the dove, and redder than the great fans of coral that wave and wave in the ocean cavern." The above three sentences describe three different colors of roses, demonstrating the beauty of nature in that garden. Originally the scene Wilde built is harmonious; however, the demanding task of finding a red rose in the chilly winter smashes it into pieces. The bumpy journey to the rare red rose equals the hardships for a low-born to achieve his or her life-goals, which implies the destiny of the student's love.

### 4.2.2 Repetition

Repetition is a figure of speech that shows the logical emphasis on drawing readers' attention to a key-word or a key-phrase in a text. It entails repeating sounds, words, expressions and clauses in a certain succession or without regard for the placement of the words, to stress a single point<sup>24</sup>. Wilde is proficient in repeating units to achieve artistic effects while avoiding the dullness that overusing repetition might cause. For instance: "*If I bring her a red rose she will dance with me till dawn. If I bring her a red rose, I shall hold her in my arms, and she will lean her head upon my shoulder, and her hand will be clasped in mine.*" Wilde utilizes the Anaphora and Framing to build these sentences, the repeated parts "*If I bring her a red rose*", "*I shall*", and "*she will*" indicate the ideal state of student's love, which genuinely moves the nightingale to sacrifice her life and produce the red rose for him. The use of repetition imparts a melodic effect to the utterance with pause and transition, and it also shows the beauty of Wilde's language.

## 5. Conclusion

From the analysis above, Oscar Wilde's masterpiece *The Nightingale and the Rose* embodies many quintessential stylistic features. His language enables readers to imagine the memorable scenarios full of emotions and thoughts. He composed the delicate harmony between the applied language and the value of aestheticism. This paper follows the previous stylistic studies on the foregrounding and analyzes the diversity of stylistic features in this fairy tale based on Leech's contributions from the perspectives of foregrounding. Undoubtedly, these artistic effects echo with Wilde's famous remark "Art is for art's sake."

## References

[1] Verdonk, P. (2002). *Stylistics*. Oxford University Press.

- [2] Leech, G., & Short, M. (1981) *Style in Fiction*. London and New York: Longman. pp.23-31.
- [3] van Peer, W. (2007) Introduction to foregrounding: a state of the art. *Language and Literature*. 16(2), pp.99-104.
- [4] Yan, C. (2005) Analysis on Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tale *The Nightingale and the Rose* from the literary, Aesthetic, Philosophical Points of View. *Journal of Xian University of Arts and Science*. 8(5), pp.35-39.
- [5] Fonseka, E.G. (2020) Sacrifice Unacknowledged: A Literary Analysis of "The Nightingale and the Rose" by Oscar Wilde. *American Research Journal of English and Literature*. 6(1), pp.1-8.
- [6] Emir, E. (2008) Analysis of *The Nightingale and the Rose* by Oscar Wilde via Contemporary Linguistic Theories. *Rebuilding the Tower of Babel: Global Language in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. 11, pp.329-332.
- [7] Ping, W. (2018). The Symbolic Meaning of Nightingale in *The Nightingale and the Rose* by Oscar Wilde. In *Proceedings of 14th International Conference on Humanities and Social Sciences (IC-HUSO 2018)*. vol. 336341.
- [8] Hu, Y. & Xiao, B. (2017) The Symbol of the Red Rose in *The Nightingale and the Rose*. *Value Engineering*. 36(2), pp.205-207.
- [9] Mahmood, S.A., & Khalaf, M.S. (2020). A Stylistic Analysis Of Wilde's "The Rose And Nightingale" In Terms Of Halliday And Hassan's Cohesion Model. *Ilkogretim Online*. 19(4), pp.5071-5084.
- [10] Xu, Y. (2005) *English Stylistics*. Shandon Education Press.
- [11] Mugair, S.K., & Abbas, A.J. (2016). A Stylistic Analysis of Oscar Wilde's the *Nightingale and the Rose*. *International Journal of Social Sciences & Education*. 6(4), pp.389-395.
- [12] Zou, T. (2003) Stylistic Analysis of *The Nightingale and the Rose*. *Journal of Jiaozuo Teachers College*. 19(3), pp.26-29
- [13] Song, Y. (2018) A Stylistic Study of *The Nightingale and the Rose*. *Journal of Qiqihar Junior Teachers' College*. 160(1), pp.49-51.
- [14] Liu, Y. & Wang, L. (2019) On the Constructive Function of the Syntax to the Theme in *The Nightingale and the Rose*. *Journal of Lanzhou Institute of Education*. 35(11), pp.72-74.
- [15] Miall, D.S., & Kuiken, D. (1994). Foregrounding, defamiliarization, and affect: Response to literary stories. *Poetics*, 22(5), pp.389-407.
- [16] Ungerer, F. & Schmid, H.J. (1996). *An introduction to cognitive linguistics*. London: Longman.
- [17] Mukarovsky, J. (2003) *Standard Language and Poetic Language*. Twentieth Century Western Critical Theories. Ed. Zhu Gang. Shanghai: Foreign Language Education Press.
- [18] Leech, G. (1969) *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry*. London: Longman Group.
- [19] Hakemulder, J.F. (2004) Foregrounding and Its Effect on Readers' Perception. *Discourse Processes*. 38(2), pp.193-218.
- [20] Gregoriou, C. (2009). *English literary stylistics*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- [21] Galay-David, K.A. (2012) *Foregrounding in Fiction: A Stylistic Reading of Selected Works of Fiction by Leoncio P. Deriada*. Ateneo de Davao University Faculty of the Humanities Division.
- [22] Leech, G. & Short, M. (2001) *Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- [23] Sopher, H. (1982). Parallelism in modern English prose. *Taylor & Francis Online*. 63(1), pp.37-48.

[24] Kemertelidze, N., & Manjavidze, T. (2013). Stylistic repetition, its peculiarities and types in modern English. *European Scientific Journal*. 9(10), pp.1-8.