

The New Historical Stylistics

Case-study: Frost at Midnight (interpreting an 18th century chronoclect)

Tools: Diachronic representative corpora (e.g. Helsinki and ARCHER); diachronic literary corpora (e.g. LION); period corpora (e.g. ECCO); OED in electronic version (online or on disk); *Cambridge History of the English Language* (aka *CHEL*), vols 3 (ed R.Lass) and 4 (ed S.Romaine).

1. the shall-will contrast

Therefore all seasons *shall be* sweet to thee

The Lowth 'rules' (1762): *shall* + 1st pers = prediction; *shall* + 2nd/3rd person = threat or promise.

- a) I shall drown and nobody will save me
- b) I will drown and nobody shall save me

No, you unnatural hags,
I will have such revenges on you both
That all *the world shall* -- *I will* do such things --
What they are yet I know not, but *they shall be*
The terrors of the earth! You think *I'll* weep...
(*King Lear* 2.iv.278-82)

'You shall sign a statement that it was all utterly false.'
'*Shall* is summat of a hard word, Captain. When you say a man *shall* sign this and that and t'other, Captain, you order him about in a grand sort of a way'
(Dickens: *Our Mutual Friend*)

It *shall be* found, sir -- I *promise* you that if you will have a little patience *it will* be found.
(Conan Doyle: *The Hound of the Baskervilles*)

2. the subjunctive-indicative contrast

Whether the summer *clothe* the general earth With greenness, or the redbreast *sit* and *sing*

Harris (1771): the indicative is selected 'to assert what we think certain', the subjunctive used for a 'contingent' or 'potential' event, something 'that may never perhaps happen'.

Whether this *be* or *be* not, I'll not swear
(*The Tempest* 5.i.123)

Alike in ignorance his reason such
Whether he *thinks* too little or too much
(Pope: *Essay on Man* 2, 11-12)

That Reason which remains always one and the same, *whether it speaks* through this or that man (Coleridge: *The Friend* 1.335)

3. *kinds of condition: the whether-if contrast*

whether the eave-drops fall ...Or if the secret ministry of frost/ Shall hang them up

- a) you will be happy whether it thaws or *whether* it freezes
- b) you will be happy *even if* it freezes
- c) you will be happy *on condition that* it freezes

4. *if and the future*

if the secret ministry of frost/ Shall hang them up

- a) *if* the frost *hangs* them up
- b) *if* thy brother *shall* trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault... *if* he *shall* hear thee, thou hast gained a brother (*King James Bible*, 1611)

5. *shall* and 18th century 'poetical diction'

Ward (1765) on the semantic value of *shall*: 'the words *it is irrevocably ordained-decreed*' are 'left to be understood'; on the stylistic value of *shall*: a part of 'poetical and sublime language'.

ratio of *will:shall* in 18th century literary usage:

percentage of *will*-fulness by genre:

Gray (serious poetry)	9%
(verse drama)	33%
(comic verse)	60%
(prose)	100%

percentage of *will*-fulness by age:

Collins (b.1721):	12%
Wordsworth (b.1770):	56%
Coleridge (b.1772):	59%
Southey (b.1774):	53%
Shelley (b.1792):	62%
Keats (b.1795):	65%

for fuller discussion of this case-study, see Adamson, Sylvia (1998) 'The Code as Context: language-change and (mis)interpretation' in *Context in Language Learning and Language Understanding*, ed. K.Malmkjaer & J.Williams, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.137-168.

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FROST AT MIDNIGHT

The Frost performs its secret ministry,
Unhelped by any wind. The owl's cry
Came loud -- and hark, again! loud as before.
The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,
Have left me to that solitude, which suits
Abstruser musings: save that at my side
My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.
'Tis calm indeed! so calm, that it disturbs
And vexes meditation with its strange
And extreme silentness. Sea, hill, and wood,
This populous village! Sea, and hill, and wood,
With all the numberless goings-on of life,
Inaudible as dreams! the thin blue flame
Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers not;
Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,
Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.
Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature
Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,
Making it a companionable form,
Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit
By its own moods interprets, everywhere
Echo or mirror seeking of itself,
And makes a toy of Thought.

But O! how oft,
How oft, at school, with most believing mind,
Presageful, have I gazed upon the bars,
To watch that fluttering *stranger*! and as oft
With unclosed lids, already had I dreamt
Of my sweet birth-place, and the old church-tower,
Whose bells, the poor man's only music, rang
From morn to evening, all the hot Fair-day,
So sweetly, that they stirred and haunted me
With a wild pleasure, falling on mine ear
Most like articulate sounds of things to come!
So gazed I, till the soothing things, I dreamt,
Lulled me to sleep, and sleep prolonged my dreams!
And so I brooded all the following morn,
Awed by the stern preceptor's face, mine eye
Fixed with mock study on my swimming book:
Save if the door half opened, and I snatched
A hasty glance, and still my heart leaped up,
For still I hoped to see the *stranger's* face,
Townsmen, or aunt, or sister more beloved,
My play-mate when we both were clothed alike!

Dear Babe, that sleepest cradled by my side,
Whose gentle breathings, heard in this deep calm,
Fill up the intersperséd vacancies
And momentary pauses of the thought!
My babe so beautiful! it thrills my heart
With tender gladness, thus to look at thee,
And think that thou shalt learn far other lore,
And in far other scenes! For I was reared
In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim,
And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.
But *thou*, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,
Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores
And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
Of that eternal language, which thy God
Utters, who from eternity doth teach

Himself in all, and all things in himself.
Great universal Teacher! he shall mould
Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask.

Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,
Whether the summer clothe the general earth
With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch
Of mossy apple-tree, while the nigh thatch
Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eave-drops fall
Heard only in the trances of the blast,
Or if the secret ministry of frost
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.

February, 1798.