CHAPTER FIVE
THE PROPOSED STYLISTIC APPROACH: PRACTICAL APPLICATION

If linguistics can add to our comprehension of literature, someone trained in linguistics should be able to point out to us, in poems we already know well, significant features we have missed because of our amateurish ignorance of the workings of language.
- Vendler, 1966

Introduction

This chapter offers a practical application of the theoretical claims of the proposed stylistic approach in the shape of detailed stylistic analysis and pedagogical treatment of two poetic texts. The stylistic analyses and pedagogical treatments are carried out along the same lines outlined in the previous chapter. The texts selected are *Half an hour after* by the Australian poet Mark O’Connor and *Harlem (A Dream Deferred)* by the American poet Langston Hughes. Besides meeting the suggested criteria of text selection, the selected texts point out another important consideration. The first text is non-canonical. The choice of the text seems to imply a focus of shift from an exclusive concern with British and American poets to a consideration of all poets writing in English. This shift is warranted by the specified context of research. The foreign undergraduate class is mainly concerned with the English language. The choice of the second text, however, balances the focus. Canonical texts are not altogether excluded and the move towards poetry in English cannot imply relegating ‘English’ poetry to the periphery.

The aim of the chapter is a practical demonstration of theoretical arguments. For this reason, and due to constraints of space, the demonstration is limited to only two poetic texts. O’Connor’s poem was actually taught by the researcher to a sample of Taiz University students in December 2006. The pedagogical treatment of this text, therefore, is more of a report of the proceedings of those two classes. The chapter also presents the findings of two research instruments which were prepared by the researcher and used to assess the proposed stylistic approach. The first instrument was a Student Questionnaire and the second an Observer Questionnaire. The analysis of the findings of these two instruments concludes the chapter.

Procedures of Analysis and Teaching

Prior to the stylistic analysis of a text, a general interpretation of the text is proposed. This general interpretation, worked out from the poem’s title and one or two readings of the poem, serves as a working interpretive hypothesis. This interpretive hypothesis could take the form of a reformulation of the poem’s general theme (or themes), a summary of the poem’s ‘meaning’, or both. It is the reader’s (mine, the researcher’s) initial response to the poem guided by which schemata are activated on the initial readings. On later, slower readings more schemata are activated and more linguistic evidence discovered. Correspondingly, initial interpretive hypotheses could later be upheld, modified or even refuted in the course of the analysis. Proposing a tentative general interpretation is important for at least two reasons. Firstly, it gives the reader a sense of control over the text and a direction to take on subsequent readings. Secondly, it works counter to the popular misconception that stylisticians are always ‘detached’ from their interpretations in their quest for ‘objectivity and scientificty’. The subsequent detailed and systematic analysis is characterized by an unusually careful attention to language, which is appropriate for the purpose. It also combines bottom-up with top-down reading processes in order to suggest possible cohesive links and possible coherent readings. The attention to detail and the combination of models of text processing is important for two reasons. Firstly, it sets the stylistic analysis apart from the practices of literary criticism by narrowing down the concern with what a text means to a concern with what a text means to an individual reader and by extending it to account for the individual response by backing up with textual evidence. Secondly, it sets it apart from the practices of practical criticism by extending the practical critic’s interest in selective textual evidence into a consideration of all the linguistic evidence in a detailed manner that proceeds at every level of linguistic organization.

The proposed interpretive hypothesis is verified against the authorial linguistic choices, conventional and unconventional, at every level of language structure. Every stylistic choice which a poet makes is a conscious choice and is ‘regarded’ as stylistically significant. There are choices which are more conscious, and consequently more significant, but, in the interest of exhaustiveness, the poet is given the benefit of the doubt and all details are ‘treated’ as stylistically significant. The poems are read as though they were paintings. The details in a painting may very much ‘seem’ to replicate a familiar scene but the artistic effect of the painting is lost if
we take the painting to be no more than a replica of what we already know. Reading an artistic work is not about reading meanings off the structures, meanings which are ‘there’ and which we already know and we can easily accommodate within our schematic knowledge of the world. Instead, like with a painting, I will be reading meanings into the structures of a poem, thus maximizing the artistic value and communicative potential of their every linguistic detail.

In order for the analyses to be detailed and thorough (a distinguishing characteristic of all stylistic analyses), all the linguistic evidence needs to be considered. But considering all the linguistic evidence at a time could be frustrating. An alternative text attack strategy, one that is well established in the literature, is to ‘select’ those linguistic features which are more prominent and then move on to consider the less prominent authorial choices. In other words, the analysis starts with the linguistic features which have stylistic significance, i.e. those features which draw attention to themselves by virtue of their violation of our language expectations. In stylistic parlance, precedence is given to the linguistic choices which have been ‘foregrounded’ either by making an unpredictable choice (deviation) or by overusing a choice (repetition and parallelism). These choices are analyzed under ‘style as Deviation’. The analysis makes extensive, but not exclusive, reference to these deviant choices and, in due course, proceeds from style-as-deviation to a consideration of style-as-choice. The analysis then proceeds to ‘put the poem back together’ by integrating all the linguistic evidence into a ‘coherent’ interpretation. All linguistic choices need to cohere with one another and with the non-deviant choices in order to achieve maximum consistency of interpretation.

As it should be detailed and thorough, so should the analysis be systematic (also a characterizing feature of stylistic analyses). Systematicity is used here to refer to considering authorial choices (deviant and non-deviant) at one linguistic level at a time (e.g. syntax, semantics, discourse, etc.). There is no hard-and-fast formula for deciding the order of these levels. For some texts, choices at the semantic level may bear more directly to interpretation while for others it may be the choices at the discoursal or phonetic levels. The linguistic levels which are more directly relevant to interpretation will be considered first, followed by levels which are less directly relevant. At each of these levels, again in the interest of consistency and cohesion of interpretation, I make intra-level connections (connections between different choices
at the same level) and inter-level connections (connections between choices across different levels).

It is important to emphasize here that the interpretations proposed are strictly mine (the researcher’s). Any act of interpretation is a result from the interaction of the reader’s schematic knowledge about the world, language and the genre with the actual structural patterns and thematic concerns of the text. Accordingly, the identification of deviant structures, of significant lexical choices and the assigning of interpretive significance are all reader-specific operations. In the stylistic analyses I make, therefore, I identify what I find to be deviant structures and significant lexical choices and I describe why I find them interesting by reading interpretive values into them. I recover what I assume to be the omitted cohesive links in order to render the text coherent. I also provide what I understand to be the assumed background knowledge in order to achieve maximum coherence. The end product is strictly mine but is nevertheless one which in all probability will be accepted, at least in part, by any one carrying out a stylistic analysis of the same texts, provided we share sufficiently similar schematic predications about language, the genre and the world.

The stylistic analyses are then pedagogically ‘treated’ in order to suit the competence level and learning objectives of students. Classroom stylistic-oriented learning tasks are constructed in order to assist individual response and train learners to be independent readers of poetry. Like with the analyst, the readings made by learners also depend on their collective world, language and text experiences. No ‘definitive’ reading is possible but learners are expected to agree at least about a few things, given their possession of common schematic predictions. The tasks are carefully designed in order not to impose any schema on the learners and in order to encourage divergence of interpretation and make possible the individual response. The difficulty of the tasks and the degrees of demand they make on learners are also carefully graded. Learners may struggle with the tasks and experience difficulties on their first encounters with the approach but subsequent encounters will be more rewarding and less frustrating. The tasks should provide gradual and systematic training in how to perceive poetic significance and to account for it in interpretive terms. The learners’ exposure to the poems is graded by building the tasks in three learning stages, each with its own aims and a set of interpretive skills to promote. Continued exposure to and constant practice in these interpretive exercises should give learners practice in making individual interpretations of texts.
Text 1: Half an Hour After

The Poet

Mark O’Connor was born in Melbourne in 1945. He studied English-Classics at Melbourne University and graduated in 1965. He has taught English literature at several universities and has published fifteen books of verse. His poetry shows a special interest in environment. He has also published prose books on environment. His fullest collection The Olive Tree: Collected Poems of Mark O’Connor, was published by Hale and Iremonger in 2000; and his website is at www.australianpoet.com. In 2003 his poems were included in the 5th edition of Oxford University Press’s anthology Seven Centuries of Poetry in English (Mark O’Connor, 2007). The poem selected for analysis here was published in O’Connor (1976, p. 31).

The Text

“When you come to think of it,” sed Dr Hippo
“Much too late of course.” sed Professor Sprong, flicking off his trousers cuff
“—What’s just happened was all but inevitable.
We never stood more than a 40% chance, I thought, Of ducking the thing in our lifetimes.”
“It’s sad really,” sed Professor Sprong, watching the goldfish die in their broken bowl.
“The species, one thought, had such potential.”
“Well it’s no use crying over spilt uranium.” lisped Dr Hippo, regarding the ruins of the Senior Common Room
“Rum though, to think of all those bodies.
Out there, and no one around to bery them ever.”
“Not our job, thank God,” sed Sprong
“but if we last out the hour We’ll be able to finish this port. No more Anglo-Saxon declensions ever! And the funny thing is
I still don’t really feel enything.”

The conclusion
... and amiable Deth
in his rusty greenroom smoking jacket
adds one more grinning trophy
to his three-billion-year-long mantelpiece.

The Stylistic Analysis

General Interpretation

My initial reaction to the poem is that it depicts a conversation between two academics, Hippo and Sprong. The schema provoked at this stage relates to university professors. My expectation is of an educational setting and a highly formal and informative discourse. The conversation takes place half an hour after some disaster has taken place. The disaster was terrible and seems to have caused considerable damage and claimed many lives. The two academics say the disaster was inevitable but take no responsibility for it. Hippo feels it is no use lamenting the loss and Strong thanks God it is not their job to clear up the mess and says he does not really feel anything. At the close of the conversation, and the poem, “amiable” Death arrives on the scene to collect his “grinning” trophy.

Detailed Stylistic Analysis

Style as deviation. The most notable deviation in this poem is at the semantic level. The poem is written in plain English and an average reader is able to make sense of it without reference to a dictionary. The words are commonplace and keep their habitual company. It is only in the tenth line that the reader is faced with a logically inconsistent meaning relation – “spilt uranium”. This is an instance of primary deviation of the determinate type. Although the words are relatively commonplace, this is not the habitual company readers would expect the two words to have outside the poem. Literal signification is challenged and the reader has to look beyond the conventional meaning for a coherent interpretation. Here is the analysis of this metaphor:

\[ L: \text{Well it’s no use crying over } \quad \text{spilt } \quad \text{uranium} \]
\[ F: \quad \text{Well it’s no use crying over } \quad \text{spilt } \quad \text{uranium} \]
\[ TEN: \text{Well it’s no use crying over } \quad \text{spilt } \quad [\text{milk}] \]
\[ VEH: \quad \text{Well it’s no use crying over } \quad [\text{bombarded}] \quad \text{uranium} \]
In terms of their primitive kernels of meaning (or semantic components), the two words are incompatible. Uranium is a hard, dense, silvery-white radioactive metal whose melting point is 1,132°C and boiling point 3,818°C. A metal that is as hard as this is impossible to spill at normal temperature. In semantic terminology, ‘spill’ requires a noun that is [- SOLID] while uranium is [+ SOLID]. The two words have clearly been ‘yoked together’ to trigger a particular reading of the line. In fact, this unconventional phrase is a corruption of the popular idiomatic phrase “no use crying over spilt milk”. This latter phrase is logically consistent in terms of the semantic properties of the constituent lexical items. The disruption of normal collocational range only in this line of the poem makes line number 10 the key line of the poem and the substitution of “uranium” for “milk” makes the word “uranium” the key word in the line. What could be the possible interpretive significance of these choices?

The use of this semantically deviant structure is significant for at least two obvious reasons. First, it makes clear the nature of the disaster that Hippo and Sprong have so far been only obliquely referring to. The idiomatic phrase “to cry over spilt milk” is used conventionally to advise someone not to dwell pointlessly on past misfortune. If something is lost, there is no good in complaining over the loss. Replacing “milk” with “uranium” gives a hint at the nature of the irrevocable disaster that has been unleashed upon the world of the poem – a nuclear war. Nothing else could claim so many lives and cause so much destruction. Secondly, it shows the attitude of the two academics, nuclear scientists by now, towards such a large-scale disaster. Rather than assuming responsibility for their own ‘miscalculations’, they seek consolation in the fact that the disaster has always been imminent and cannot now be undone. Hippo and Sprong are reckless and irresponsible nuclear scientists. Their indifferent attitude, given the context of massive destruction, is altogether inappropriate, and it is this incompatibility between action and reaction that accentuates the folly of nuclear scientists who are ultimately seeking not only their own death but the extinction of the human race at large. When I reached this line, I was tempted to re-read the poem and re-interpret it in terms of the connotative meanings evoked by the semantic deviance of the line.

My university-professor schema activated on the initial reading is getting disrupted here. Hippo and Strong are shown to be irresponsible and insensitive about the sufferings of others, a characterization which counters my stereotypical image of
university professors. The semantic deviation in the line also narrows down the focus to only professors of nuclear energy. My schematic expectation is of an even more highly formal discourse from these highly educated scientists. This schema is already disrupted at this stage. Another relevant schema activated at this stage relates to nuclear warfare. My mind goes back to the atomic bombings by the USA of the two Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. The immediate death toll in both cities was over 120,000 but the deaths from radiation were even more. I also recollect forceful arguments against “the nuclear peril” made by the American writer Jonathan Schell in his book *The Fate of the Earth and the Abolition*. A nuclear war is destructive not only to the warring countries but to life on earth at large. My expectation is that nuclear scientists realize this peril more than anyone else and that the world is safer in the hands of scientists than in those of politicians. O’Connor is already shaking this schematic expectation through this unfavorable portrayal of these two scientists. My initial interpretation, however, is upheld but with a few refinements. The nature of the disaster is now made obvious and the portrayal of nuclear scientists getting unattractive.

Another interesting feature of the poem is the absence of regularity at the *phonological* level. This is yet another genre schema being disrupted. The extra layer of rhythmic structuring that is characteristic of most poetry is missing. The poem is not metered and, because of its dramatic quality, its rhythm is more prosaic than poetic. That is, it is hard to single out any identifiable, recurrent rhythmic pattern. The lines do not rhyme either. The absence of orderliness at the level of sound helps to highlight the theme of disorderliness around which the poem revolves. In other words, the sense of chaos that the poem seeks to convey is enacted by the confusion at the metrical level and the absence of any regular rhyme scheme. In this sense, the poem’s prosaic rhythm and unrhyming lines are felt to be appropriate to the poem’s thematic concerns.

But the poem is not wholly without patterns. There are two instances of primary phonological deviation of the statistical kind. One identifiable regularity is the high density of stresses in the second part of the poem, compared to the wide distribution of weak forms and grammatical words in the first part. While the latter help to speed up the conversation and intensify the energy of the argument, the former slow down the rhythm and invite the reader to ponder over the ‘conclusion’ of what has been going on in the world of the poem. Another noticeable regularity that is
relatable to interpretation is the high incidence of fricatives in the first part of the poem. There are 57 fricatives uttered by the two professors and a total of 81 fricatives, including those that are not part of the conversational exchanges. But it is the two sibilant fricatives /s/ and /z/ that are of interpretive significance. Dr Hippo has a speech defect, a lisp, and pronounces both the sounds /s/ and /z/ like the /θ/ in ‘third’. The first part of the poem has a total of 41 alveolar fricatives but only 25 excluding those that are not uttered by the interlocutors. Hippo’s speech defect is withheld from the reader till line 11. On the second reading of lines 1 through 10, it was found that lines contain 16 alveolar fricatives and the reader is not explicitly told which of the two academics uttered lines 4, 5, 6 and 7. The effect of giving Dr Hippo a lisp and so many words containing alveolar fricatives is to create an unappealing image of someone who ‘bites off more than he can chew’. This side of Dr Hippo’s character adds a new dimension to O’Connor’s indictment of the irresponsibility of these nuclear scientists. On the other hand, denying the reader this information till half the poem and mixing up the conversational turns of the two speakers helps to multiply the sense of chaos that is mimetic of the central theme of the poem. My schematic expectation about nuclear scientists is getting further disturbed by this disapproving portrayal of Dr. Hippo but my ‘modified’ interpretation is upheld.

Analysis also reveals interesting graphological patterns. The poem is in twenty two lines and in two parts of unequal length. Part ‘A’, the conversation, runs into the first eighteen lines and every three lines are set off by a space. The second part occupies four lines, an instance of internal deviation that will be dealt with under the next heading, and is preceded by the introductory phrase “The conclusion”. In the first part, the poet uses double inverted commas to quote the ‘direct’ speeches of the two characters. The first line, though beginning with a question word, uses the ‘impermissible’ declarative-question word order and ends with a comma instead of a question mark. The basic structure is of a spoken question but the line deviates even from that structure. These graphological, and grammatical, deviations on the first line help to foreground the sense of informality right from the beginning of the poem. Professor Sprong’s answer to this question is preceded by a dash that is placed outside the inverted commas. This dash is an unconventional punctuation mark and might have been used here to indicate a pause or inexactitude, both of which suggest indifference on the part of Sprong, a reaction which is maintained throughout the poem by various linguistic means. After distorting the image of Dr. Hippo, O’Connor
has now started to show Professor Sprong in ‘his true colors’. The fourth line is also set off by a dash but this time it is placed inside the quoted speech, a more familiar typographical convention. Such a dash is used to introduce an afterthought or a surprise, both of which are feelings appropriate to the context. The use of this type of dash here suggests that Dr. Hippo is less indifferent than Professor Sprong, a suggestion that is supported by the linguistic choices in Hippo’s conversational turns. A third interesting graphological choice is the three dots that introduce the second part of the poem. There are two interpretive possibilities for the use of these dots. The first is that the poet has interrupted the conversation in order to give a conclusion to his poem. The dots become suggestive of conversational exchanges that have been interrupted. The second interpretation, and the more interesting of the two, is that death itself has interrupted the conversation and claimed the lives of the two academics as well, a grinning trophy. All these are primary deviations of the determinate type. They do not introduce new graphological features but they use existing ones in unattested ways. These new uses have the effect of building up the warning about the dangers of nuclear weapons and making uglier the portrayal of the two nuclear scientists. My modified interpretation is borne out by the findings of the graphological analysis.

After setting up predictable patterns, the poem deviates from its own patterns and creates points of internal secondary deviation of the statistical type at many levels. At the graphological level, the poem is structured in groups of three lines which are thematically related and set off by space. The third line of every group corresponds to the end of a sentence, grammatically and semantically. Line 12, however, which is the third line of the fourth group of lines, is ended abruptly. The poet uses a full stop at the end of the line even though the sentence is not complete. In a sense, the poet has chosen to conform to the established pattern of three-line groups but he has also broken another pattern set up by the poem, namely, that of ending the group at a point where full sense is made. Line 12, though set off by a full stop, runs in terms of meaning into the following group of lines. In other words, in stylistic words, the end of line 12 is arrested and released at the beginning of line 13. This graphological feature helps to create two points of foregrounding, one at each end of the two lines. The former, the one at the end of line 12, serves to underline the vast number of deaths and hence the magnitude of the disaster. The other, the one at the beginning of the next line, helps to create the sense of detachment from the disaster.
and its fallout that Dr Hippo is feeling. Another similar point of internal deviation at
the graphological level is found at the boundary between lines 15 and 16. This time,
however, the poet has not marked the end of line 15 by a full stop and the line runs
into the next grammatically and semantically. This absence of a divider creates a run-
on effect which speeds up the reading in order for the sense of the sentence to be
completed.

A third, and more easily noticeable, graphological deviation occurs at the
second half of the poem. Unlike the first part where every three lines are thematically
grouped together, the second part brings together the remaining four lines of the
poem. This second part is also deviant at the levels of discourse and style. It is not
part of the conversational exchange between the two characters and appears to be the
words of the poet. Besides the difference in the number of lines, the second part is
also qualitatively different. The four lines of the second part are actually one long
sentence which stands in stark contrast to the preceding eighteen lines in terms of its
style. In general terms, the style of part two moves away from the conventions of
ordinary language composition towards the conventions of poetic composition. In this
sense, the first part of the poem deviates from the norms of the genre while the
second part returns to them but deviates from the norms of the text. Compared to the
informal structures and commonplace diction of the first part, part two exhibits more
‘poetic’ quality. The conversational features are absent and so are the idiomatic
expressions. Besides, the sentence structure is noticeably more complex
(...NP+PP+VP+NP+PP). These internal deviations, which make the second part
more perceptually prominent, impart a sense of solemnity to the poem. The more
poetic diction along with the elaborate sentence structure, foregrounded as they are
against the informal and interactive speech features of the first part, invite the reader
to view the serious aftereffects of nuclear wars against the carefree, at times flippant,
attitude of the decision-makers.

At the phonological level, the second part of the poem is also marked by
secondary statistical deviations. It has a high density of strong stresses in proportion
to the number of words. Out of a total 36 syllables, 16 syllables carry primary
stresses, 2 syllables carry secondary stresses and only 14 are unstressed. The first part
has a comparatively higher incidence of weak forms and grammatical words. While
these have a hurry-on effect on the reading of the first part, the strong stresses of the
second part create a slower rhythm and a delayed effect appropriate to the seriousness
of the ideas expressed. All these instances of internal deviation at the different levels of language organization bear out my modified interpretation and help intensify the poet’s indictment of nuclear scientists.

The poem has its share of discoursal deviations too. At the start of O’Connor’s poem, the reader is cast into the middle of a conversation between two nuclear scientists. The beginning of this poem seems to presuppose some previous conversational exchanges or some shared contextual information which is not disclosed to the reader. This fact is supported by the use in Line 1 of the indefinite pronoun “it” which could be said to make cross-reference to some previously mentioned linguistic expression (endophoric reference) or to refer out exophorically to the disaster in the immediate situational context of the speakers (deictic reference). In either case, the denotation of the situation-dependent referent of the pronoun is not specified and the reader is invited to read on to figure out the referent. In effect, the search for the withheld referent of the pronoun becomes the search for the poem’s meaning. This connection is declared even before the poem begins. The title suggests that the poem, or the conversation, is taking place half an hour after something has taken place but leaves the identity of that ‘something’ arrested to be released by the reader. The reader is therefore projected not only in the middle of a conversation but also in the middle of an event.

This deviation against discoursal norms serves to capture the attention of the reader and speed the conversation up. After the “after” of the title and the “it” of the first line, the reader is in search of a possible referent. Line 4 offers no clue, with the “it” cross-referenced by the relative pronoun “what”. In line 6, it becomes “the thing” and its identity remains withheld. In the middle of the search for a referent for the “it” of the first line, the writer shifts the attention onto the victims of that “thing” that has just happened. Before the reader is able to work out the first puzzle, he is faced with another. The poet could either be complicating the reader’s search by arresting one question and introducing another or he could perhaps be offering a clue. If the readers could recognize the victims, they are likely to figure out the referent of the “it” of line number one. The first victim is the “goldfish” (L 8) that have died in their broken bowl. The next line brings up “the species”, a phrase which could either be making cross-reference to the “goldfish” of the previous line or be referring exophorically to the human species. It is in line 10 that the reader is given a hint at the nature of the disaster, “spilt uranium”, and is tempted to go back in order to re-read and re-interpret
the pronouns, and the whole poem, in the light of this new information. Lines 11 through 18 reveal the consequences at the human level and the reactions of Dr. Hippo and Professor Sprong to the disaster and its consequences. Like it started abruptly, the conversation ends equally abruptly, with Professor Sprong asserting that he still does not really feel anything.

The conversational discourse, besides deviating from language norms by starting in the middle, does not typify poetic discourses. The poet is not the addresser and the reader is not addressed directly. In fact, the reader is positioned as an ‘eavesdropper’ on the conversation, and this distancing of the reader and the writer helps to hold the two academics, Hippo and Sprong, solely responsible for the tragedy that has befallen. My modified interpretation is borne out by the deviations from norms of language and the norms of the genre at the level of discourse.

**Style as choice.** The poem also exhibits interesting stylistic choices and style variations. O’Connor has exploited variations of medium, dialect, tenor and domain in order to highlight attitudinal concerns and maintain thematic unity throughout the poem. It may be noted here that the variation of style are also treated separately by Short (1996), the reason being that the variation of style is not restricted to certain phrases or lines, so it may be treated as foregrounding at the external level, but runs across the whole poem, which makes it difficult to treat it as an instance of ‘perceptual prominence’ at the internal level either.

First, there are variations of medium. My schematic expectation about poetry is that it is a prototypically written discourse, which is written in a formal register that has its own writing conventions. It is also disconnected from external reality and so it is self-contained and contains within it all elements needed for successful reading transaction. This poem continues to disrupt my schemata of the genre. The first part of O’Connor’s poem is a written representation of conversational exchanges between two interlocutors. The use of this ‘dramatic’ method involves borrowing the characteristics of spoken language and imposing them on a written text. The conversation is casual in terms of turn-taking, informal in terms of language and abrupt in terms of beginning and end. The superimposition of spoken structures over the written medium lends the poem, or the first part of it, an air of informality and casualness which is appropriate to the attitude of the interlocutors towards the subject of their conversation.
O’Connor has also made use of tenor variation. Because it is prototypically written language, poetry uses prototypically formal register. O’Connor departs from both these norms in the interest of bridging the gap between form and content in his poem. In terms of formality, there is a high incidence of informal expressions and structures in the first half of the poem. The lexis is simple and commonplace and there is no technical vocabulary (except perhaps for the word uranıum) that readers would expect in a conversational exchange between two nuclear scientists. The structures, uncharacteristic of poetic structures, are short and simple. The following is a list of these structures:

**Truncated structures**
- When you come to think of it. Line 1
- Rum though Line 12
- Not our job Line 14
- No more Anglo-Saxon declensions ever Lines 16-17

**Contracted forms**
- What’s just happened Line 4
- it’s no use crying Line 10
- We’ll be able to finish Line 16
- I still don’t really feel Line 18

**Informal expressions**
- more than a 40% chance Line 5
- ducking the thing Line 6
- Rum though Line 12

The effect of these informal structures and expressions is to create an informality about the poem that enacts the informality and indifference of the two speakers, and the dispersion of these structures from line 1 to line 18 helps to maintain the informality effect throughout the first half of the poem. In fact, the number of informal structures increases as the conversation proceeds, which helps to intensify the writer’s indictment of the negligence and irresponsibility of these nuclear scientists.

Another prototypical feature of poetry which is not observed is that it is written in the ‘standard’ dialect, which of course follows from its being prototypically written, formal language. Although the concept ‘standard English’ is problematic, readers can readily identify any instance of nonobservance of the established rules of
grammar and spelling. O’Connor has produced the following lexical items whose spellings do not conform to the corresponding established spellings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Line(s)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sed</td>
<td>1, 2, 7, 14</td>
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<tr>
<td>bery</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enything</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deth</td>
<td>20</td>
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These are proposed spelling reforms, not encoded in dictionaries, popularized in Australia by Harry Lindgren in 1969, the first proposal for introducing phoneme-by-phoneme adjustment of English spelling to the speech it records. The majority of literature in English is written in ‘standard’ English, which counts as the norm. The use of these non-standard spellings by the poet is meant to be interpretively significant. One possible significance of adopting these ‘Australian’ spellings is to suggest that the outlook in the poem represents an Australian perspective on the issue in question. The perspective could be the poet’s or the two nuclear scientists’, Dr. Hippo and Professor Sprong. If it is the scientists’ perspective, the conversational exchange could be said to represent the stand of Australian nuclear scientists, or possibly that of the Australian government, towards the issue of nuclear armament. By using ‘Australian’ spellings, Hippo and Sprong acquire an Australian identity and become spokespersons of Australian nuclear scientists. If, on the other hand, the perspective is the poet’s, it could be argued that the O’Connor is leveling an attack on the nuclear scientists who, represented by Hippo and Sprong, are shown to be imperfect at their job, irresponsible in their actions and ridiculous in their reactions. In the first case, the adoption of Australian spellings might be read to identify the nuclear scientists while in the other to express the attitude of the poet towards the scientists and the issue at large.

These stylistic choices of the poet continue to disrupt my genre schemata and continue to support my initial reaction to the poem and bear out the modified interpretive hypothesis.

In addition to the irregularities at the different levels of linguistic organization, the poet has made other, less irregular, linguistic choices which contribute to the poem’s overall thematic organization. It may be repeated here that the absence of regularities at any linguistic level enacts the chaotic mess that has been caused by the “spilt uranium”. These other authorial choices fall into three categories: a) those that reflect the author’s attitude towards the two academics, b) those that reflect the
attitude of the two academics towards the poem’s central concern, and c) those that achieve, and maintain, cohesion and suspense throughout the poem. I will deal with these three categories of linguistic choice in this same order.

The choice of names for the two academics shows the poet’s downright aversion to these two characters. A “hippo” is a large amphibious mammal that has a large head and a wide mouth, short legs, and a thick grey skin. The use of this name for one of the academics brings up an image of a stout, thick-skinned scientist who is indifferent to whatever is going on around him. This is not a sweet-sounding portrait. Coupled with this negative sketch is the naming of the second character. “Sprong” is a corruption of the adjective ‘strong’. The change of the second letter gives the name a mimicking effect and an implication of the opposite quality. The play with the two names indicates the disapproving attitude of the poet towards the two academics. But the disapproval does not stop here. The poet gives Hippo a lisp to add to the already unpleasant image and, at the middle of the poem, strips Sprong of his ‘Professor’ title.

Other choices reflect the flippant attitude of the two academics. Only half an hour after the disaster, Professor Sprong is shown “flicking off his trouser cuff” while Dr. Hippo “regarding the ruins” of the disaster, which he refers to as “the thing”. This attitude of indifference and inaction is reinforced by the choice of verbs. Almost half the verbs (9 out of 20) used by the two academics are non-finite verbs, i.e. verb forms that show no inflection for subject, tense or number. Of the remaining eleven finite verbs, four are used in reference to other entities, three are ‘thinking’ verbs and two verbs are negated. Such choices of verbs help to underline the inaction and unresponsiveness of the two academics. The remaining two verbs are used conditionally in the context of “port”. Hippo and Sprong are drunk and, in their intoxication, declare that they are more concerned about being able to finish the port they are sipping if they happen to survive the disaster. The reference to Anglo-Saxon declensions, in the context of port, conjures up an image of Oxford professors of language, an image which further accentuates the inactivity and passiveness of these nuclear scientists. This attitude of indifference reaches its peak in line 17 when Sprong finally reacts to his own irresponsibility only by calling it “funny”.

Against the background of human irresponsibility is projected “amiable Deth” that arrives on the scene to clear up the mess which the scientists caused and refused to clear up. Death, usually feared, becomes ‘amiable’ in the company of these nuclear scientists. It is shown as ‘active’, not killing but adding yet another trophy to its three-
billion-year-long collection of human beings. The image of the casually dressed
death-man patiently awaiting his trophy and taking good care of his collected trophies
contrasts sharply with the image of the careless scientists who not only endanger the
lives of others but fail to preserve their own.

The last group of authorial linguistic choices helps to achieve, and maintain,
suspense and cohesion throughout the poem. The poem’s title starts the suspense and
the reader reads on to find out what happened and what happened half an hour after
that. Reference to what happened remains oblique throughout the poem and can only
be worked out by a reader’s activating existing pragmatic knowledge of the world.
Repeated reference to the disaster (it, what’s just happened, the thing and spilt
uranium) and to victims of the disaster (the goldfish, the species, the Senior Common
Room, bodies, grinning trophy), along with reference to the temporal context (half an
hour after, last out the hour) all help to maintain the suspense and achieve cohesion
in the poem. It should be pointed out, as a last comment, that Professor Sprong’s
association of the human species with goldfish is a curious one. Goldfish, small
ornamental fish, produce a large amount of waste and release harmful chemicals into
the water in which they live. They poison their own environment. But unlike goldfish
which are trapped in these bowls against their will, human beings are their own
trappers and ultimately their own exterminators.

**Putting the Poem Back Together**

My initial reaction to the poem was that it depicted a conversation between
two academics half an hour after some terrible disaster had taken place. My
interpretive hypothesis was that Hippo and Sprong took no responsibility for the
mishap and feel no obligation to clear up the mess it had left behind. The poem ended
with death claiming yet another ‘grinning’ trophy. The schemata summoned at this
stage were of course my language schemata, my genre schemata and my schematic
knowledge of university professors and disasters.

On the initial reading, the poem lacked internal cohesion. I found it difficult to
relate such features as the ‘bizarre’ spellings, the reference to “goldfish”, “uranium”
and “Anglo-Saxon declensions”, and the graphological layout of the poem. Other
authorial choices such as the choice of names, the use of an informal register, the
unconventional use of punctuation marks were equally inexplicable. There were
many ‘gaps’ in the poem’s thematic and rhetorical organization.
Detailed stylistic analysis has borne out my initial reaction but refined my interpretive hypothesis in a number of ways. The gaps in the poem’s thematic and rhetorical organization have also been filled by details from my schematic knowledge of the English language, of the genre and of the world.

The semantic deviation in Line 10 makes clear the nature of the disaster, the academics’ specialty, and hints at the indifference of these nuclear scientists to the deaths and destruction around them. Subsequent analysis at the different levels supports this refinement. The secondary graphological deviations along with the primary discoursal deviations help underline the magnitude of the disaster and the extent of the chaos it has unleashed. The irregularities of rhyme and rhythm enact this confusion. The primary statistical regularities of sound along with the authorial choices of the academics’ names create an unfavorable image of Hippo and Sprong. The nuclear scientists’ indifferent and flippant attitude is accentuated by the primary determinate graphological deviations, by the variations of medium and tenor, and by the stylistic choices in the second part of the poem. Their inaction is highlighted by the choice of verbs and their identity by the use of Australian spellings. Making oblique references to the nature of the disaster till the middle of the poem enhanced the suspense created by the later references to the victims and imparts a sense of unity to the poem.

Referential information was useful in shaping my interpretation. The fact that O’Connor is Australian and the fact that that the ‘bizarre’ spellings used in the poem are proposed spelling reforms popularized by an Australian made me interpret the use of spellings as representing either the stand of Australian nuclear scientists, the stand of the Australian government, or O’Connor’s impatience with the nuclear scientists. Other referential information suggests that Australia is a country which does not have nuclear warheads and is today only considering its first nuclear power reactor. The poem was written in 1975. This new information makes me re-interpret the use of Australian spellings. O’Connor is probably leveling an attack against all nuclear countries and all nuclear scientists and the use of the spellings may either be part of the attempt to popularize the proposed spelling reforms or just accidental and of not interpretive value.

My schemata have been disrupted in many ways. My world schemata have been refreshed and this has been effected through the disruption of my language and genre schemata. The different types of deviations used in the poem, along with the
nonobservance of most of my schematic expectations about poetry, have at times refreshed my schematic knowledge and at other times reinforced them. The schemata refreshed relate to my knowledge of nuclear scientists and my expectations of their competence and sense of responsibility, whereas the schemata reinforced relate to my knowledge of the danger of nuclear weapons and the extent of damage that could ensue if they are misused or even mishandled.

The Pedagogical Treatment

This text was taught by the researcher to group B, third-year students of English at the Faculty of Arts, Taiz University. The text was taught in two classes on two consecutive days in December 2007. There were no visual aids available. Each class was of three hours’ duration. The researcher could not arrange more classes because it was about the end-of-semester exam time. This bad timing also explains the poor attendance. Out of a possible 55 students, only 27 (about 50%) turned up for the class and returned the post-test. The researcher’s aim was to trial the proposed stylistic approach and find out its effectiveness and suitability as an alternative pedagogy for use in foreign undergraduate classes of poetry. Below is a demonstration of how the two classes were conducted.

DAY ONE

The researcher acting as the stylistician-teacher (henceforth teacher) divided the class into five groups of about five members each. The groups were unisex groups in order to ensure maximum involvement and participation. The teacher briefed the students on the proposed approach and on their active, authorial role in making it work before he proceeded with the three-stage pedagogic formula. The teacher also made it clear that the tasks are used as teaching, indeed learning, rather than testing tasks and requested their uninhibited responses. The teacher chose to allow more group work than is recommended by the pedagogy in order to ease off the students’ nervousness at having to come out of their hiding in the classroom and participate as active readers.

STAGE ONE

- Teacher presented a derived version of the text (original not disclosed) and gave out two copies of it to each of the five groups.

“What has just happened was inevitable.
Who would have thought it possible?” said Dr Taylor
It all happened very quickly
I never thought it was likely.
The dying goldfish the broken bowl
The ruins of our room the smell so foul
The bodies all around
I can hear no sound
“It is no use crying over spilt milk.
Our job is done.
Is not it fun?” said Professor Williams

*The victims of Death*

*Increased by one*

- Students read the derived version silently (no dictionary work is encouraged at this stage)
- Students worked out in their respective groups what they thought the poem’s thematic concerns were. A volunteer from each group read out the group’s response. (all groups underlined the deaths and destruction and hinted at the possibility of war)
- Teacher asked direct questions on these thematic concerns in order to activate dormant schemata and build whichever absent ones are necessary. Students were instructed to back up their responses with evidence from the text.
  - What do you think happened?
  - What do you think these professors teach?
  - What do you expect professors to be like?
  - What could cause all this destruction? (students hinted at war)
  - What ‘destructive’ wars do you know of?
  - Have you been involved in any?
  - Do you know any victims of war?
  - Who are the victims of war?
  - Who are the winners?
  - Which line of the poem is the most expressive?
  - Which line is the most shocking?
  - Suggest a title. (suggested titles included *Death against Enjoyment, Nature of Death, and Mourning the Dead*)

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Teacher’s interference was minimal in order not to preempt students’ search for an interpretation.

After a short break, students reconvened into their respective groups. Teacher told the class the poem they read was derived by him and that they were going to meet the original text. The effect of this was twofold. The students realized that poetic texts are not sacred texts and that in the first half of the class they actually ‘made’ a poem by reading it like one. This is the authorial role they would have to replicate in the second half of the class.

- Teacher gave out two copies of the original text to each of the five groups.
- Students read the text silently and checked up the difficult words in their dictionaries (students previously instructed to bring them).
- Teacher read the text out and so did volunteers from each group (different volunteers were called on for different tasks).
- Students were asked to read and find out if the original poem made clear the nature of what has happened (the students’ original interpretive theses were largely upheld).
- Students were asked to nominate the ‘most important’ line? Four alternatives were provided: lines 4, 8, 10, 18. (most students opted for line 10).
- Students were asked to check up on “uranium” in their dictionaries. Teacher filled in gaps in students’ schematic knowledge about uranium (nature of ‘what has happened’ started to get clearer and students hinted at possibility of a nuclear war).
- Class exchanged views and experiences on the dangers of nuclear weapons (the first use of nuclear bombs by the USA on Japan was brought up by students). Teacher distributed photos of the devastation caused by the atomic bombing of Hiroshima.
Students were asked to choose a suitable title for the poem from a list of four possibilities (interestingly, the original title was not chosen by any student):

- Death the destructor
- The careless professors
- Half an hour after
- A terrible disaster

Students were given background information on the poet (the same information used by the stylistician-analyst (also the researcher)).

The class was dismissed at this point. The students took the background information and the photos home and were asked to re-read the text closely in the light of this new information and decide individually:

- What interpretation can be given to the poem.
- In what ways the derived text is different from the original (hint: lexical choices, structure of sentences, and structure of poem).

The teacher reminded the students that there was no ‘definitive’ reading to any text and that their individual readings would have to be backed up by textual evidence. Students were encouraged to trust their own thinking and intuition and not to seek support from external sources.

DAY TWO

STAGE TWO

Teacher elicited the students’ individual interpretations (textual evidence was sought but no evaluative judgments were made at this stage).

Students re-assembled in their groups. Teacher distributed a table containing a checklist of features to be ticked off if found in either of the two versions. Students were also asked to find the relevant examples in the respective poems (teacher instructed the students on the Australian spellings used in the poem and asked the students to infer the significance of their adoption in the poem; students thought the poet was just using his dialect).
Table 5.1

Tick off the Features you Find in the Two Versions of the Poem

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Derived</th>
<th>Original</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Words</strong></td>
<td>Technical</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unusual collocation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unusual spelling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contracted</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Structures</strong></td>
<td>Truncated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rhyme</strong></td>
<td>Regular</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Irregular</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Students were asked to infer possible aesthetic effects of these authorial choices and integrate their conclusions into their interpretive hypotheses (the students managed to identify the choices but the guesses on their interpretive value went wild at times. Teacher regulated the activity by suggesting the ‘normal’ usage and inviting readings of the deviant ones).

- Students were asked to examine and compare the styles of the two parts of the original poem. Specifically, they were asked to examine the structure of sentences in the two parts, their tenor (formality or informality), their tone, and their poetic quality in general. The students were also encouraged to infer the possible significance of the style changes if they detected any (students suggested that the presence of death and the gloomy mood made the second part more ‘difficult’ and therefore more like poetry; their interpretations developed further).

- Teacher presented a list of authorial choices along with three alternative potential choices. Students were asked to defend the author’s choice against their own interpretations of them or, alternatively, choose one of the potential choices or one of their own if they found them to be more consistent with their interpretations (most students thought the authorial choices were the ‘best’ and sought ways of accommodating them within their interpretations).
### Table 5.2

*Assess the Author’s Linguistic Choices against other Potential Ones*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poet’s Choice</th>
<th>Potential Choices</th>
<th>Your Choice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr Hippo</td>
<td>Dr Taylor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dr Dolittle</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dr Strong</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flicking off</td>
<td>Folding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brushing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wiping</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than a 40% chance</td>
<td>A good chance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Any chance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More than a forty percent chance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ducking</td>
<td>Avoiding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stopping</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Escaping</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The thing</td>
<td>The disaster</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The problem</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The tragedy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goldfish</td>
<td>Fish</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Beautiful fish</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Helpless fish</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uranium</td>
<td>Water</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Milk</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bodies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisped</td>
<td>Sobbed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Said</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Suggested</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rum</td>
<td>Sad</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Difficult</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hard</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grinning trophy</td>
<td>Trophy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Victim</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Piece</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each group nominated a volunteer to read out their preferred choices and defend them.
Students were asked to look at all the linguistic details they have uncovered and integrate them into their hypotheses (no answers were sought from the students).

Students were asked again to nominate the ‘most important’ line in the poem (they stuck to their earlier choice, Line 10) and a possible title (the original title was still not selected but interesting choices included Victims, Not Me, and Inevitable Death).

STAGE THREE

Teacher asked the students to find out in their groups what they thought the general meaning of the poem was and back up their choice with linguistic evidence. Teacher offered four possible general readings.

- Two biologists are talking about a particular species of fish that died in big numbers due to their (the biologists’) negligence. The biologists regret their carelessness.
- Two drunken professors of Old English were messing around in a biology laboratory and caused the death of all the fish. They claim no responsibility for the deaths.
- Two nuclear scientists are discussing the consequences of nuclear wars and the destruction that may ensue. They think it is not their mistake if this would happen.
- Two nuclear scientists are indifferently regarding the ruins of a disaster they have unleashed upon the world. They are unfazed by its fallout.

Teacher asked the students in what ways the poem has refreshed their schematic knowledge of language, of poetry and of the world.

Teacher gave the students a take-home assignment. The students were asked to write an essay on their interpretation of the poem based on which of the proposed four readings they advocate. They were encouraged to include their individual perception of what the poem says and how it says it (hint: structure of argument, choice of words and sentence structure, variation of style, deviations from expected norms, etc.). Disappointingly, none of the students turned in the
assignment, which may be explained by the bad timing at which the approach was trialed, by the students’ unfamiliarity with the approach, and also by the uneasiness of the first encounter.

Text 2: Harlem (A Dream Deferred)

The Poet

Langston Hughes was an African-American poet, novelist, and playwright. He was brought up in poverty and often moved from city to city. His father was an attorney but gave up the struggle of trying to make a living in the USA and left his family in 1903 to live and work in Mexico. Hughes sometimes lived with his mother wherever she could find work and sometimes with his grandmother in Kansas. To supplement the family income he cleaned the lobby and the toilets at a local hotel.

Supported by his father, Hughes entered in the early 1920s the Columbia University, New York. To the disappointment of his father, Hughes soon abandoned his studies and enlisted as a steward on a freighter bound to West Africa. He traveled to Paris, worked as a doorman and a bouncer of a night club, and continued to Italy.

After his return to the United States, Hughes worked in menial jobs and wrote poems, which earned him scholarship to Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. In 1929 Hughes received his bachelor's degree. He was one of the most important writers and thinkers of the Harlem Renaissance, which was the African American artistic movement in the 1920s that celebrated black life and culture. Hughes’s creative genius was influenced by his life in New York City’s Harlem, a primarily African American neighborhood. In his writings, Hughes condemned racism and injustice, and celebrated African American culture. He offered astute commentary on the problems of being a poor black man in a racist society.

Hughes was one of the first black authors, who could support himself by his writings. His first novel, Not Without Laughter (1930), had a good reception and Hughes bought a Ford. In 1965 Hughes wrote of himself: “I have been underfed, underpaid, undernourished, and everything but undertaken - yet I am still here. The only thing I am afraid of now is that I will die before my time.” Hughes died of cancer on May 22, 1967 at the age of 65 (see Modern American Poetry, 2002).
The Text

What happens to a dream deferred? 1

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore—

And then run? 5

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over--

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load 10

Or does it explode?

The Stylistic Analysis

General Interpretation

My initial reaction to the poem is that it presents a series of questions on what happens to a dream if its fulfillment is postponed. The schema provoked at this stage relates to dreams, my dreams, and what has happened to those that were not fulfilled. Some of my frustrated dreams were postponed by me and some by external forces. I still have hopes of fulfilling the former but the latter will not materialize unless the oppressing force is eliminated. In this poem, an unfulfilled dream is described in terms of sweet and repulsive images. It is compared to a dried out raisin, a festering sore, rotten meat, and a hardened sweet. The speaker seems to be in two minds about what happens to a deferred dream. The images of the raisin and the sweet suggest hope and optimistic expectations of realization, whereas the images of the sore and the rotten meat suggest frustration and pessimistic expectations of fulfillment. The imagery then becomes less charged and the speaker compares a dream deferred to a sagging heavy load. At the end of the poem, the speaker becomes much less ambiguous. The series of images culminates with the explosion of a dream deferred.
Detailed Stylistic Analysis

Style as deviation. The most striking deviations in the poem are syntactic-semantic. One of the most interesting features of the poem is the abundance of questions. There is only one affirmative sentence in the whole poem, compared to six interrogative statements. All the six questions are polar questions (commonly known as yes-no questions). They are also rhetorical questions for which no formal answer is expected. The effect intended is rhetorical and readers are invited to work out their own reactions. Now which are the most likely reactions to these polar rhetorical questions, the positive or the negative reactions? An examination of the semantics of the images could provide a clue to the answers.

The poem revolves around the results from the deferral of dreams. The results are described in striking sensory imagery. Although the descriptions are made using the ‘straightforward’ simile technique, the connections are not quite straightforward. They are unconventional in the sense that they are least associated with dreams. The reader is invited to think up ways in which the connections can be established.

The first image is of a raisin dried up in the sun. The meaning relations between the words in the simile are consistent but it is only at the level of meaning connections that semantic deviation operates in the imagery. A grape is an edible fruit with sweet juicy flesh. When a grape is left in the sun for a long period of time, the heat of the sun sucks the juice out of the grape and dries it up. A possible meaning connection implied here is that when a dream is left unattended to for a long time, its energy is consumed and whatever talent the dreamer has dries up. Whether it is the abandonment or the consequent vulnerability to the heat of external forces, the effect here is one of transformation. A plump fruit is transformed into a dehydrated grape which has lost its juices and liveliness. In this sense, the reaction to the first polar rhetorical question would be negative. But there is another semantic side to the image. A raisin may have lost its juices and color but it has retained its sweetness and nutritious value. In fact, when people fear that grapes will spoil or when they want to preserve them for later use, they dehydrate them in the sun, which turns them into raisins. In this other sense, raisins are not really bad after all and so the reaction to the rhetorical question may indeed be positive. But I am inclined to prefer the first of these two interpretations because the image relates to the external shape of a raisin and makes no reference to its taste.
The syntactic-semantic structure of the first image does not stop here. The rhetorical question contains a structural ambiguity. The structure is best disambiguated by bracketing, as shown below.

a) [dry up like a raisin] [in the sun]

b) [dry up] [like a raisin in the sun]

The first reading is the more apparent of the two. In the first reading, ‘like’ functions as a preposition and the resultant reading can correspond to any of the two transformation readings suggested in the previous paragraph. In the two readings, a grape transforms and becomes like a raisin due to the heat of the sun. In the second reading, on the other hand, ‘like’ functions as a conjunction and the sentence may be re-constructed thus: dry up like a raisin does in the sun. In this second reading, there is no reference to the grape phase of the raisin. A raisin is already hard and dry and, when left in the sun, it becomes even harder and drier. The edible, sweet and nutritious fruit loses all its worth and is reduced to an inedible ‘tough nut to crack’. The reaction to this third reading is unequivocally negative. A deferred dream is totally drained and becomes totally unusable.

The second simile compares a deferred dream to a sore festering and then running. A sore is a painful skin infection or wound. When a sore in neglected and not treated in time, it deteriorates and festers. When a wound festers, it produces pus, i.e. a thick yellowish liquid consisting of dead white blood cells, dead tissue, bacteria, and blood serum. This is what comes out of a festering sore when it runs. The intensity of the arguments seems to be building up fast. The speaker has moved from the raisin to an altogether different level. The second image is unpleasant, indeed sickening. While with raisins the effect was one of transformation caused by abandonment, the effect here is one of exacerbation caused by negligence. A dream deferred is already a sore now which aggravates if not attended to. Negligence of a sore will only lead to inflammation and festering. Similarly, negligence of a people’s dream will only inflame the dreamers and lead to extremely unpleasant consequences. The use of the time adverbial ‘then’ and the graphological mark (the dash) is significant here. They both combine to produce an effect of prolongation. A festering sore takes a long time before it runs. The longer a sore festers, the filthier the pus discharged and the less likely it is to heal. In much the same way, the longer the deferral of a dream, the more exasperated the dreamers and the more unpleasant the consequences. Besides being an eyesore and besides causing excruciating pain, a
festering sore, if again not attended to, may cause so much damage to necessitate amputation. When this happens, the whole body is disfigured. In life, it is the society at large that misses out when dreams fester out of negligence. The second polar rhetorical question, therefore, seems to invite totally negative reactions.

The third sensory image is that of stinking rotten meat. The speaker’s protest seems to have intensified very sharply. A deferred dream is now compared to meat which has rotted and is stinking. When meat is forgotten somewhere or is unused for too long, it decomposes by the action of bacteria or fungi and gives off a foul, putrid stench. It is the most offensive and most nauseating of all odors. The effect here is one of putrefaction caused by unexploitation and/or carelessness. A dream which is not exploited in a proper and timely way will rot and cause ugly and undesirable repercussions. The speaker’s tone is getting very disapproving and the argument has probably reached its highest point. From a dried up raisin through a festering sore, an unfulfilled dream is now not only dead but stinks of rotten flesh. The reaction to this polar rhetorical question cannot be anything but negative.

The fourth image continues with the theme of unexploited potential. The imagery, however, is suddenly getting less disagreeable and the language making more pleasant connotations. The fourth image is of a syrupy sweet which has been left unused for so long that a hard, thick layer has formed on top of the sweet making it unfit for human consumption. The layers below the crusty surface may still be edible but the harmful bacteria may in all likelihood have made their way downward and corrupted the whole of the sweet. Although it is only the surface that has gone bad, the sweet as a whole is considered harmful. Likewise, a dream that has been put on hold for a long time hardens into a harmful mentality which could eventually consume the dreamer with depression. Like with the previous image, the effect is one of putrefaction caused by unexploitation but this image is less extreme and less disapproving. It is only the uppermost layer that has gone bad and the imagery is much less repulsive. This imagery creates an impression that the speaker is slowly coming to terms with the deferral of dreams and is perhaps willing to make compromises. The absence of a verb in this question supports this argument. The imagery lacks action and stops at the level of description, non-repulsive description. The response to the fourth polar rhetorical question, therefore, may be negative but not entirely negative.
The fifth image is different in many respects. The compromising overtones of the previous image are now becoming more explicit in terms of form and content. In terms of form, the polar rhetorical interrogative structure is replaced by the only declarative structure of the poem. The speaker seems to have found the answer to the previous questions and is ‘declaring’ it in a more assured manner. In terms of content, this fifth image is drained of all fight and resistance. The tone is one of defeat. The image is of a heavy load which is sagging. To sag is to bend downward usually through having to support excessive weight. The image is a little hard to disentangle. An interesting aspect of the image is that it is the heavy load, rather than the carrier of the load, which is pictured as sagging. But sagging under what? One way of explaining this anomaly is by reading it as a metaphor. This metaphor may be analyzed thus:

\[
\begin{align*}
L: & \text{Maybe a } \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
\text{ just sags} \\
F: & \text{'} \text{ } \text{ a deferred dream } \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
TEN: & \text{Maybe a } [\text{dreamer}] \text{ just sags} \\
VEH: & \text{'} \text{ } \text{ deferred dream } \text{ just } [\text{becomes old and weak}]
\end{align*}
\]

In this reading, the dream deferred becomes one with the heavy load, or, in other words, the heavy load becomes a metaphor for the dreamer (or the carrier of the dreams). The carrier here is sagging not under the weight of the load, for he is the heavy load himself, but perhaps because he is getting older and weaker. He has had to carry the heavy load of unfulfilled dreams all life long and is now being identified as this heavy load. He is sagging out of fatigue in the body and defeat in the mind. This curious blend of simile and metaphor suggests that the dreams have now lost all intensity and the dreamer all strength.

The last line of the poem does not use a simile but continues with the metaphor style started in the previous image. The line returns to the polar rhetorical structure and returns with a bang, literally. After the image of the sagging heavy load, the expectation was that the dreams and the dreamer will meet their ‘timely’ death at the close of the poem. But it seems it was the quiet before the storm. The poem ends with an explosion. Here is the analysis of this metaphor:
A dream whose realization has been deferred for a long time might, before the deferrer knows it, blow up in his face. But is it a benign or malignant explosion? The poem does not say. Structurally, all the previous images consist of two parts, the aspect of comparison and the thing to which a deferred dream is compared. In the last line, a deferred dream is not compared to anything. It just explodes, but like what? Like a bomb or like a firework? One possible reading of leaving out the aspect of comparison is that the explosion was so sudden and so strong that it has spared none and left nothing else to be said. The unexpectedness with which the explosion is introduced is perhaps meant to enact the unexpectedness of the explosion of deferred dreams in reality. The urge to actualize dreams gradually and slowly snowballs into a destructive force which may erupt any time. The progressive structuring of ‘deadly’ images in the poem helps enact this thesis. The reaction to the final polar rhetorical question is downright negative.

These syntactic-semantic primary determinate deviations have upheld my initial reaction to the poem but modified my interpretive hypothesis. The analysis suggests that the dreams in the poem are collective dreams which are frustrated by external forces. Another schema activated at this stage relates to the collective dreams of the Yemeni youth. They have the potential to contribute something to life but they are denied a context of realization. I know of many people with higher university degrees but who are laid off or forced to take up just any job. Their dreams of well-paid jobs, equal opportunities and marriage are continually deferred in a ‘democratic’, ‘oil-producing’ country. The dreams in the poem underwent the processes of transformation, exacerbation, putrefaction, and deformation before the final explosion. My schema concerning deferred dreams is preserved. The fulfillment of deferred dreams has been shown to be dependent on the elimination of the oppressing force. My interpretive hypothesis, however, is modified. The speaker is not really in two minds about what happens to a deferred dream. Analysis has revealed that the images of the raisin and the sweet do not suggest optimistic expectations of...
realization. All the images, in one way or another, indicate frustration and progressively lead to the final explosion.

At the morphological level, everything is conventional except perhaps for the absence of verb in line 7. The first four rhetorical questions all have a parallel structure, namely, (auxiliary verb) + (subject) + verb + like + NP. The fourth question, however, misses out the main verb. The speaker wishes to express the concept of the formation of an inedible hard thick layer of crust and sugar on top of the sweet. For lack of a verb, the speaker creates a concept-making phrase for the nonce. The nonce phrase “crust and sugar over” serves the purpose.

Another interesting set of deviations in the poem are the phonological deviations. At the level of phonology, the poem exhibits interesting patterns. Line by line the syllable count is as follows: 4,7,6,3,7,7,6,5,5,5. There is a tendency towards five- and seven-syllable lines but all the lines are quite short. Strong stresses outnumber weak ones. The average line contains 5 to 6 syllables and there is an average of three stressed syllables to every line. This rather heavy concentration of strong stresses is appropriate for the strong and compelling arguments made by the speaker. In addition, the poem has a high incidence of plosive sounds, which is also appropriate for the overall sharp and disapproving tone of the poem. The first five lines, where the tone of disapproval is only building up, contain only 14 plosives. In the last six lines, where the disapproval snowballs into an explosion, there are as many as 25 plosives, or explosives, to enact the mode and the thought expressed. In total, this 51-word poem contains 39 plosive sounds. Aside from these phonological regularities, there is not much to report. The rhythmic structure is irregular and no two lines share the same metrical make-up. I find it difficult to accommodate this inconsistency in a poem whose main and only concern is making a strong case against the deferral of dreams. The unity of thematic content is usually likely to be accompanied by regularity at the different levels of language organization. I can only rationalize this variation by referring to the progressively growing disapproving tone of the speaker in the poem. The rhyme scheme is also largely irregular (a b c d e f e g h h). The lines that rhyme are lines 3 and 5, 6 and 8, and lines 10 and 11. These rhyming lines help connect the images and lead them toward the final blow. Another phonological means of establishing thematic connectedness is the recurrence of alliterative patterns (e.g. dream/deferred/dry, sore/stink, syrupy/sweet).
The phonological regularities and the primary statistical phonological deviations bear out my initial reaction and modified interpretation. My schematic expectations about deferred dreams continue to be preserved and my schematic knowledge of the ‘wishful thinking’ of Yemeni youths is getting enriched.

\textit{Graphologically}, the poem is arranged into four stanzas of unequal length. The first and the last have one line each, the third two lines and the second seven lines. The arrangement of the lines is significant. As it looks, the first line makes a question which is answered in the last. The lines in between provide stages in the argument and degrees of dissatisfaction leading to the final ‘explosive’ line. The spellings and punctuation marks are conventional. Two interesting features are the two dashes in lines 4 and 7. The dash in line 4 has already been accounted for in terms of prolongation effect; the other one is used after a nonce verbal phrase that refers to the formation of a layer of crust and sugar. The dash might be a graphological representation of the layer that has formed.

In the \textit{discourse} situation of this poem, the speaker and the poet are one. ‘Harlem’ is a post World War II poem, published in 1951 as part of an extended body of poems on Harlem life entitled “Montage of a Dream Deferred”. Hughes probably intended the poem to focus on the dreams of African-Americans living in the Harlem neighborhood in Manhattan, New York. The poem describes in a series of sensory images the consequences of the withholding or denying by the whites of the blacks’ rights to equality. As an African-American himself, Langston Hughes is voicing his own and his fellow African-Americans’ views on the personal and social consequences of the denial or deferral of civil rights and social justices. The poet is not directly addressing the reader, nor does he seem to be addressing any audience at all. He is only musing on what happens to these dreams (and dreamers) when they are denied realization. The poem’s end hints at the racial and ethnic conflict which erupted later in the USA, leading to an ‘explosion’ of civil rights activities and the subsequent formation of The African-American Civil Rights Movement (1955-1968) to confront discrimination against African-Americans in the USA.

The poem’s discoursal structure and referential information about the poet make another refinement to my modified interpretation. The poem seems to have a specified situational context. In my initial interpretation, I understood the poem to be making a case against the deferral of dreams in general. The use of non-specific noun phrases and the simple present tenses lent support to my interpretation and even
stirred memories of my own frustrated dreams. I also made reference to the dreams of Yemeni youth. The referential information about the poem’s discourse situation does not invalidate my initial interpretation.

The poem has its own share of internal deviations too. The poem establishes a technique of polar rhetorical questions but the series of questions is interrupted in lines 9 and 10 before it is restored in the final line. The interpretive significance of introducing a declarative statement in the midst of six interrogatives has already been highlighted. Another point of internal deviation occurs in line 7 where the [(auxiliary verb) + (subject) + verb + like + NP] structure is disturbed by leaving out the main verb. The interpretive significance of this deletion has also been pointed out. A third internal deviation, whose significance has also been referred to earlier, occurs in the last line of the poem. The ‘something happens like another’ image is suddenly cut off. The line offers a metaphor but no simile, inviting the reader to provide the aspect of comparison and forcing a metaphorical reading of the first part of the previous five images. In short, the poem establishes three predictable patterns and then violates from them to effect foregrounding of certain thematic aspects.

**Style as choice.** Besides the deviant choices, there are less deviant authorial choices which also contribute to the poem’s aesthetic effect. All the words in the poem (except for ‘syrupy’) are either monosyllabic or disyllabic. The choice of short length words have the effect of accelerating the rhythm and, together with the high proportion of primary stresses, produces a kind of staccato rhythm which is appropriate for the forceful arguments made and the speed and unexpectedness of the blowup with which the poem ends. It also captures the rhythm of the African-American vernacular, making it easier for the intended readership to identify with the poem’s thematic concerns.

The choice of verbs is also interpretively significant. The poem contains seven active verbs (happens, dry up, fester, run, stink, sags, explode) and one passive verb (deferred). The object of the passive verb is ‘a dream’. The active verbs, on the other hand, are all intransitive. The subject of all these verbs is also ‘a dream’. But the subject in these seven cases has an ‘affected’ role that is elsewhere typical of the object. Grammatically it is the subject but in terms of action it does not really do anything. Instead, it is always at the receiving end of the action. Something or the other always happens to it. The choice of verbs is quite appropriate because it highlights the theme of the repression of dreams and dreamers. Even when the dream
explodes, it did not do so by an act of choice by the dreamer but rather under the intensity of mounting pressure.

The choice of images is also significant. The images appeal to the five senses: sight (dried up raisin), touch (festering sore), smell (rotten meat), taste (syrupy sweet) and hearing (exploding dream). Engaging the five senses has the effect of intensifying the oppression and eliciting strong disapproval of it.

Another interesting observation concerns who suffers the consequences of the deferral of dreams. In the first image, it is the dream itself that suffers by getting drained of all its ideals. In the second image, the damage extends to reach the dreamer who is left sore about the oppression of his dreams. The third and fourth images return to direct the consequences at the dream, which rots and hardens. The fifth image leaves the dreamer sagging under the load of the dreams. So far so good for the oppressor. The pendulum seems to be swinging between dream and dreamer. The final image, however, presents a sudden blast which is likely to unleash large-scale damage that transcends the dream and the dreamer to the oppressor and beyond.

The choice of consecutive questions in the poem is also significant. It produces an effect of deferral of answer, an effect which enacts the very theme of deferral in the poem. The introduction of a new question defers the answer to the previous question. The deferral continues till before the end where a positive statement is introduced. Just when we think that the deferral is ended, the poet introduces yet another question with which the poem ends.

My final observation on the authorial choices regards the poem’s overall linguistic choices. Existing literature on and by Hughes suggests that the poem focuses on African-Americans’ life in New York in the 1950s. The poem, however, is couched in English which does not confine it or drag it back to that period. The poem is written in an ethnic-free idiom, making it about both individual and collective dreams in general and the consequences of denying their actualization.

The poem’s stylistic choices bear out my initial reaction and refined interpretation. They also back up my timeless, context-free ‘generic’ reading.

**Putting the Poem Back Together**

My initial reaction to the poem was that it presented a series of questions on the fate of a deferred dream. My initial interpretive hypothesis was that the poet was wavering between optimistic and pessimistic expectations until the last line of the
The poem where the image was downright pessimistic. The schema provoked at this stage related to my own frustrated dreams.

Detailed stylistic analysis has borne out my initial reaction but modified my interpretive hypothesis. The examination of the syntactic structure and semantic content of the images suggests that a dream deferred undergoes transformation, exacerbation, putrefaction, deformation and self-destruction, all of which are processes with negative connotations. This observation is reinforced by the primary statistical phonological deviations. The phonological regularities and atypical densities of ‘explosive’ sounds create a rhythmical effect which enacts the force of the arguments and the mode of disapproval. The poem’s graphological shape enacts the structure of its thematic content. The choice of images and verbs enhance the poem’s theme and effect. Finally, the choice of questions rather than statements creates an effect of deferral of answer, an effect which enacts the central concern of the poem.

Referential information contextualized the poem and enriched my world schemata. The poem was written by a black American and published in 1951. I learnt about the African-American civil rights movement in the USA in the 1950s and 1960s. The poem beautifully expresses the concerns of African-Americans living in an unjust, racist society. The contextualization of the poem, however, does limit the poem to this context. The poem represents the fate of suppressed dreamers anywhere at any time, and this observation is borne out by the use of indefinite articles and the ‘timeless’ present tense.

The poem largely conforms to my schematic expectations about the genre and language. It has also refreshed my schematic knowledge about dreams and the consequences of the denial of their realization.

*The Pedagogical Treatment*

**STAGE ONE**

- Teacher asks direct questions on the life experiences represented in the poem in order to refresh and build relevant schemata. No ‘right’ answers are expected and there can be no ‘irrelevant’ experiences.
  - We all have dreams in life. Tell me some of yours.
  - Have any of these dreams materialized? Any frustrated or deferred? What was the reason?
  - Tell me some of your collective dreams?
  - Have any been achieved yet? Any deferred/ frustrated?
What is your biggest individual and collective dream?
What would happen to this dream if it was deferred?
What would happen to you? Describe this effect in a simile or a metaphor (students are asked to keep track of the images they built of a dream deferred).

STAGE TWO
- Teacher projects the first three lines of the poem onto the white board. The word “raisin” (L 3) is left out.
- Students are given time to read it silently and check up the difficult words in their dictionaries before they complete the table below.

Table 5.3
*Complete this Table in Reference to the First Image*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Missing word</th>
<th>What does the image say?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Structure of the simile:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thing compared</td>
<td>Thing compared to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the image positive or negative?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which word or phrase makes you feel so?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does the speaker’s image compare to yours?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the image answer the speaker’s question?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What linguistic features of the image do you find interesting?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What features of the image cannot you understand or explain?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Students are asked to compare their responses with those of their neighbors. Teacher monitors the activity and provides assistance if and when it is needed.
- Teacher projects the next two lines onto the board but leaves out the word “sore”.
- Students repeat the same task they performed on the first image. A few questions are added to the first table in order to relate the discussion of the second image to the discussion of the first and to the discussion generated by stage one (table is repeated here for ease of reference).
Table 5.4

*Complete this Table in Reference to the Second Image*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Missing word</th>
<th>What does the image say?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Structure of the simile:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thing compared</th>
<th>Thing compared to</th>
<th>Aspect of comparison</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Is the image positive or negative?**

**Which word or phrase makes you feel so?**

**How does the speaker’s image compare to yours?**

**How does the image compare to image number 1?**

**Is this one more positive or negative?**

**What word or phrase makes you feel so?**

**Does this image answer the speaker’s question (L1)?**

**What linguistic features of the image do you find interesting?**

**What features of the image cannot you understand or explain?**

- Again, students are asked to compare their responses with those of their neighbors. Teacher also monitors the activity and provides the necessary assistance.
- Teacher projects Line 6 onto the board with the phrase “rotten meat” left out.
- Students repeat the same tasks they performed on the second image with the addition that they would be required to check image three against the first two. Students compare responses and teacher watches over the activity.
- Teacher projects Lines 7 and 8 onto the board with the phrase “syrupy sweet” left out.
- Students repeat the same tasks they performed on the third image with the addition that they would be required to check image four against the first three. Students compare responses; teacher monitors activity and provides assistance if and when needed.
- Teacher projects Lines 9 and 10 onto the board with the phrase “a heavy load” left out.
Students repeat the same tasks they performed on the fourth image with the addition that they would be required to check image five against the first four. Students compare responses and teacher watches over the activity.

Teacher projects the last line onto the screen. Students complete the table below.

Table 5.5

Complete this Table in Reference to the Sixth Image

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What does the image say?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the image positive or negative?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which word or phrase makes you feel so?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does the speaker’s image compare to yours?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does the image compare to the previous images?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is this one more positive or negative?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does this image answer the speaker’s question (L.1)?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What linguistic features of the image do you find interesting?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What features of the image cannot you understand or explain?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Add one line to the poem beginning with “like”.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure of the simile:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Teacher projects the whole text onto the screen and students compare their gap fillers with the original authorial choices.
- Students work out their responses to the authorial choices by answering the following choices:
  - Do your gap fillers or the author’s choices make the images more expressive? Which ones? Why?
  - Do the authorial choices change your perception of the positivity or negativity of the images? In what ways? Do you like the author’s choices?
  - Is the overall tone of the poem pessimistic or optimistic? Provide supporting textual clues.
  - Is the speaker’s first question answered?
Does the poem’s representation of what happens to a dream deferred consistent with yours? Or does it refresh your experience of the deferral of dreams?

- Volunteer students read the poem out to the class.
- Teacher asks the students to predict a title *(a volunteer students draws up the list on the board).*
- Teacher writes the original title and the more frequent title on the board and asks students which one they like more.
- Teacher projects the name and photo of Langston Hughes on the board along with some referential information on Hughes and on Harlem and reads it out.
- Teacher asks the class if the referential information changes their impression of the poem or makes it more specific to the poet’s experience (hints: use of tenses and use of nouns).
- Teacher directs attention to the arrangement of the poem on the page and invites views on its possible significance (expectation is that the students have already noticed it).
- Students are asked to account for such features as the use of repeated questions, the absence of transitive verbs, the absence of verb in L. 7, the absence of a regular rhyme scheme and a regular meter? (the hope is that students have noticed these absences and attempted to account for them in interpretive terms).
- Students are asked to consider the interpretive significance of the only positive statement in the poem (Lines 9 and 10).
- Students are asked to nominate the ‘most important’ line of the poem according to their respective interpretations of the poem.

STAGE THREE

- Teacher provides two possible interpretations of the poem and asks students to compare the two interpretations and choose the one they find ‘more acceptable’ and ‘more defendable’ (students should be able to adduce textual evidence for every detail of the interpretation which they subscribe to).
A) The speaker in the poem is considering possible effects on dreams if they are continually deferred. The poem begins with a question and the subsequent five questions are in effect possible answers to the first question. The first of these ‘question-answers’ presents the image of a raisin dried up in the sun. A raisin is a hard and dry grape. When a raisin is left to dry up in the sun, it becomes stiff and inedible. The image suggests pessimistic overtones, which are carried over and developed in the subsequent images. The second image is even more negative. A deferred dream is now a sore which has festered and is running. The image created by the second simile is rather disgusting. The pessimism reaches a new height in the third image. A deferred dream is compared to meat which has rotted and is stinking. The image created here is downright negative. The fourth image is negative too. A dream is compared to a syrupy sweet which hardens and spoils if not used timely. The next image is presented in an affirmative statement. The series of question-answers is interrupted with perhaps the definitive answer. A deferred dream is compared to a sagging heavy load. The image obviously extends the series of negative images. The last image of the poem takes negativity to its peak with the explosion of the dream (or perhaps the dreamer). The image also returns to the question-answer technique, which helps maintain unity of theme and form throughout the poem.

B) Langston Hughes is wondering what could happen to a dream deferred. Hughes’s poem takes the form of a series of rhetorical questions. The first line poses the question and the subsequent questions keep delaying the answer and create a ‘deferral’ effect which enacts the central concern of the poem. The first rhetorical question creates a positive image. A deferred dream is compared to a raisin. When a grape is left to dry up in the sun, it loses its moisture and brightness but becomes sweeter and more durable. The implication is that a deferred dream undergoes transformation but it is not always negative transformation. The second image, however, presents negative transformation. A deferred dream is
compared to a festering sore. There may be positive overtones about the image, though. When a festering sore runs, it may start to heel. The next image is negative without a doubt. A deferred dream has transformed here into stinking rotten meat. The fifth image continues with the transformation effect but returns to the positive ‘sweet’ images. The image here is of a syrupy sweet which develops a hard, thick layer if left unattended to for a long time. In a similar way, a dreamer whose dream has been deferred may develop a layer of negative thoughts but there is always positivity and ‘sweetness’ down under. The fifth image also presents a transformation effect through a blend of simile and metaphor. It also disrupts the rhetorical question techniques and presents a more affirmative answer. The dreamer has become an old, weak man who is sagging under the weight of the heavy load. The heavy load is the load of the deferred dream which the dreamer has had to carry all his life through. The image is negative but there is hope as long as the dreamer is still alive. The last image of the poem returns to the rhetorical question technique but obliterates all traces of positivity and of the dream and dreamer. The poem ends with the explosion of the dream. The use of rhetorical questions and the concomitant deferral effect maintain the poem’s thematic unity.

- Teacher invites students to re-write the interpretation they did not select so that it becomes more acceptable and defendable. Students are also asked to add a few lines on their individual reactions to the poem and the way(s) in which it has refreshed their schematic knowledge of the world, of language and of poetic discourse.

**The Post-tests: Analysis and Interpretation of Results**

**Student Questionnaire B**

This is the first of two instruments which were prepared by the researcher in order to record opinions and evaluations of the proposed stylistic approach. The respondents to this questionnaire were the 27 students who attended the two classes in which the proposed approach was trialed in the teaching of O’Connor’s poem *Half an hour after*. The questionnaire was administered in the last fifteen minutes of the second class in order to ensure that the respondents’ opinions were fresh and their
judgments representative of their opinions. The questionnaire is reproduced here in the analysis of the responses and so it will not be repeated in the Appendixes.

The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The objective of the first section is to rate three aspects of the proposed pedagogy, namely, the selection of the text, the use of language activities, and the choice of the activities. These aspects were rated on a poor to excellent scale. Analysis of the students’ responses reveals that the pedagogy was well received by the students. The component of the pedagogy which was most liked by the students was the use of language-based activities. The other two components were also well-liked. The actual ratings of these aspects are reported in table 5.6 below.

Table 5.6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Fair</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The selection of the poetic text</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The use of language activities</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The choice of the activities</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second section of the questionnaire consisted of seven questions. The aim of these questions is to elicit the students’ response to the overall approach. The questions were carefully phrased so they duplicate the theoretical claims of the proposed approach. The aim is to ascertain the extent to which these claims have been satisfied and the degree of enthusiasm and positivity with which the approach has been received. The responses to these questions are also rated along a scale.

Analysis of the students’ responses to these seven questions suggests positive reception. The majority of the sample enjoyed the class and wanted to see all poetry classes conducted along similar lines. Some of the students were less enthusiastic and less motivated. This reaction was not unexpected for two reasons. Firstly, and this has been mentioned earlier, the ‘experiment’ was conducted around the time of the end-of-semester exams. The students were understandably more concerned about preparing for the exams than taking ‘genuine’ interest in an experimental class. Secondly, the students’ previous encounters with poetry have all been different and less demanding. The pedagogy demanded that the students assume ‘authorial’ roles. The students were unfamiliar with and inadequately prepared for the new role.
Overall, however, the pedagogy was welcomed and had a favorable reception. The students’ responses to the seven questions are reported below in Table 5.7.

Table 5.7
Ratings (in numbers) of the Overall Approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Yes, very much</th>
<th>Yes to an extent</th>
<th>Not much</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did the ‘new’ pedagogy help you express your viewpoint?</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did it encourage you to concentrate on the text?</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did it make the learning of poetry more interesting?</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can it help you improve your language skills?</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can it help you read and appreciate poetry on your own?</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does it encourage you to read more poetry?</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you like to see all poetry classes taught in this way?</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Observer Questionnaire

The observer questionnaire is the second instrument used to assess the validity of the proposed pedagogy. The two classes during which the approach was trialed were also attended by two observers, who were teaching staff at the same department. The questionnaire consisted of fifteen items to be assessed on a four-point scale. Again, the items were carefully phrased so they duplicate the theoretical claims of the proposed approach. The aim is to ascertain the extent to which these claims have been satisfied and the degree of enthusiasm and positivity with which the approach has been received. The questionnaire is also reproduced here in the analysis of the responses and so it will not be repeated in the Appendixes.

The questionnaire was structured around three main areas: the selection of the text, the pedagogy, and the effect of both on the students’ response. The observers
agreed that the selection of the text was appropriate and that it triggered the desired response. They also agreed that the activities used prior to the teaching and the language focus of these activities were good “to an extent’. They were both satisfied with the choice and grading of the activities and with the response elicited from the students. They reported that the pedagogy involved most of the class and involved them actively in making meaning. They also reported that the activities returned the students all the time to the text and that all responses were valued if they were backed up by textual evidence. However, the two observers expressed reservation about the capacity of the students to replicate similar analyses and suggested that teachers provide enough practice and guidance at the initial stages. The observers’ responses are reported below in Table 5.8.

Table 5.8
Reactions of the Observers to the Proposed Approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Observer 1</th>
<th>Observer 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Was the language of the text selected ‘easy’ for the students to follow?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes, to an extent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did the text produce the desired response from the students?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did the teacher use activities prior to the teaching of the text?</td>
<td>Yes, to an extent</td>
<td>Yes, to an extent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did the activities underline the students’ lived experiences?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes, to an extent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did the teacher and students read the poem aloud?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did the teacher use language-based activities to help students negotiate poetic meaning?</td>
<td>Yes, to an extent</td>
<td>Yes, to an extent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did the activities encourage students to concentrate on the texts?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were the activities graded enough to include most of the class?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes, to an extent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did the students respond to the activities?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did the pedagogy involve the students as active participants in the making of poetic meaning?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were the students encouraged to express their own viewpoints?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.8 (continued).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did the students adduce evidence from the texts to support their interpretations?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was the focus more on skills of interpretation than on information to be retrieved after the class was over?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes, to an extent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was the class largely student-centered?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes, to an extent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did the pedagogy relate the learning of poetry to the learning of language?</td>
<td>Yes, to an extent</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary

This chapter has presented a practical demonstration of the main tenets of the proposed stylistic approach. The texts selected have rewarded the effort involved in the stylistic analysis and pedagogical treatment. The analysis of the two post-tests has also revealed positive reception by the participant students. The next chapter sums up the findings and conclusions of the study and presents its implications for the poetry classroom and suggestions for future research.