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Example of connections between textual analysis and the typical features of the Victorian Novel.

The extract is from Charles Dickens’ Oliver Twist, it’s from chapter two; the narrator is a third omniscient person narrator. The extract starts with the description of the setting of the novel; also the elements from which the narrator focus the attention “with a copper at one end”, copper refers to the material which the container of the children’s’ soup was made up. There are some unidentified characters mainly the master and two women, they are the people whose duty is to distribute the food during the meals. It is interesting to notice that the narrator does not identify the tree characters with a proper name, but the language used and the way to tell the story make the intelligent reader understand that this was a typical ritual during mill-times. So what is going to be narrated is not confined in a specific moment but it was generally a habit of the people there. The ritual of meal distribution is presented to the reader as if it was an exceptional event as one can understand the choice of the narrator to say, speaking about the master apron “in an apron for the purpose”, and also the choice of the verb “to assist” is particular interesting from the sematic point of view, because it sounds as if the distribution of single bowls of soup were an event of great importance, because generally we speak of an assistance when there is a very important action to be performed. The group of people are described as “festive composition”, so right from the start we see that we are going to read about a very important event, something that may made people happy. The narrator tells the reader that each boy taking part to the meal was given one” porringer” which is a bowl. What matters most in the narration about the container from which people will eat is that the narrator adds the expression “No More” to one porringer. Such choice is a stylistical device to anticipate what is going to happen next, and to create the suitable atmosphere, of the categorical mentality of that place. The idea of thinks going that way is reinforced by additional information anticipate by “except”, where “except” is followed by “ nothing ever changed in that bowl but except on some occasions of great happiness” or great public Joyce. That was what the children were given, what they used to receive everyday but on specifical occasions when there was something to celebrate. So the intelligent reader can also notice that the narrator interest is mainly focused on thinks, and goods, more than on identify characters. Indeed the master, the servant and the children at first do not show a specific identity, which means that they were all alike (all alike is one of the characteristics of Victorian people, people had to conform to certain rules). In addition the narrator plays on size quantity even before talking about what kind of food was going to be distributed. Because he tells the reader that on special occasions when children were given more food, they were given “two ounces and a quarter of bread besides”, which implies for the people who are intelligent readers that on common and ordinary days they just receive the very very little bread. So the narrator’s eye stops more on the bowls, that were to be filled with soup, that on the people; it seems that he was more interested describing the bowls of the soup than in describing the people. “the bowls never wanted washing” the intelligent reader observe the alliterative sound of –w in “bowls, wanted and washing”, which create the very coisive sensation. In addition the text implies that there was such a little food inside that not a single drop remains in the container which of course was to mean that the children were so hungry that they cannot left any lives. Than the camera of the narrator focuses on the biy’s actions. The boys are characterised by what they do, so what is the characterization of the boys like? The characterisation of the boys is made by what they do, directly and indirectly, because when the writer or narrator speak about the bowls that never wanted wasching, is indirecty told us that the children liked up all that was in the bowl. So they ate up everything, every single drop of soup; in order to reinforce the idea the narrator uses the verb “to polish” which is the verb that is generally referring to shoes in the English language, so that the intelligent reader can understand that the dish was not a dirty dish as it was supposed to be when you ate it. It is even more clean than before washing it. To convey the idea he uses the verb “to shine” in the simple paste because it intends that the bowls shone. “Again” is interesting because it means that they were shining when they were distributed to the, then they got dirty and the got shining again. Also the language that the narrator uses to say when the children have done back he uses the expression “performed this operation” ,si he uses an highly rhetorical language, a very high register, something that you use in the English language to describe very important operations. So they did contradiction between what they do and the language what they do and the language they use which is singled out by the double face nature of the Victorian novel and vitorian society (think to look one way in the surface but indeed they were very different behind the surface). If I speak about perform an operation, an intelligent reader may be aspect what I am going to describe, a difficult and impegnative action, not surely a cup of soup. Also he resources to the grotesque when he speaks about the spoons being “nearly as large as the bowls”; if the spoon is as large as the bowl I can say that the narrator is using exageration and hyperbole as rhetorical figures to make the scene he is depicting a bit comic and funny in a way to create a certain intrateinment effect in the reader. So what the consequence of such use of language and such narration, is that he makes us laugh. But he makes us laugh only if we are superficial readers, we don’t understand that the situation he is describing is really tragic; so the effect is to make laugh about something tragic, it has a tragic-comic effect, something that is expressed with the very technic which is pantomime. This is something that in litery is called “essay on humor” by Pirandello. What is the function of the grotesque? Since the grotesque is the exaggeration of tones, the use of hyperbole that make us laugh it is a device to make the reader bear the tragedy of the poor children so Charles Dickens is criticizing the eveils, the problems of society indirectly, the medium he uses is the grotesque, but such a stylistic choice does not prevent the intelligent reader to be emphatic with the children, to side with the children, to feel “phatos”. So “phatos” safeguards the reader’s emotions on one side and the grotesque provide an entertaining effect to be able to cope with such tragic figures. But all this together also explains why readers in that period could gain an alibi from this, they could gain an alibi because the situations described was so exaggerated and so tragic that they could feel superior in a way or another. Charles Dickens is one of the greatest novelist ever existed, he uses language and narrative strategies in a very intelligent way, because the devices the implois and exploit allowed him to criticize the … and the problems of the time, through certain narrative strategies and devices that are the grotesque (obtained through the exaggeration of tones, that can create characters instead of real people) and also having events told so that they can make readers empathise with what they read and so to create phatos (where phatos means “I am suffering with the children). Why does he use language this way? Why does not he say is forewad? Because this was not allowed in Victorian mentality which was a mentality of classes generally evil classes lower and higher that cap them balance between compromise, between what has to be seen and what appeared and what reality was really like. Also a very important element that Charles Dickens exploits in his stories, and is telling here, is to tell about the behaviour of the children, which is indirectly inting at is that they almost liked their bowls since they became as shining as a pair of polish shoes; the second one is when he tells the reader how the children locked at the copper (the copper was introduced right from the start which sounds like a statue of welcome in a all, but to tell the truth the copper is the material out of which the container of the soup is made). The narrator says “they would be staring at the copper with such eager eyes”, where the narrator plays the alliterative sound –s and with the alliterative sound –r as well as the attonant –i. So all the devoices just quoted create a very compact, coisive unity of discourse that create a scene as if you were right there, as if you could see, so the intelligent reader never has to be in accords to create a mental picture of what had been told. Dickens plays with his reader’s imagination and an intelligent reader is always an imaginative reader. The effect and the function at the same time for description is to create an imagine. The imagines that Charles Dickens proposes to the reader are generally exaggerated, created trough hyperbolic use of the language and sound, in a few words he creates grotesque images and the reason why he does this is to make concrete reality a bit distant from what the readers read. This distance allows the reader to create an alibi an tell themselves that they are better of what he told them. This explains the other concepts that I said are the seminal concepts of the Victorian novel: the grotesque, phatos, exaggerations, caricature and alibi. There is one more thing that Charles Dickens does of which you could be aware of because are the features of the Victorian Age. Charles Dickens uses the conditional to express repeated habits in the past can be conveyed in the English language either to the expression “used to” or to would to + infinitive. this implies that this was not an exceptional day, “Whit such eager eyes as if they could devour the very brakes of which was composed”, in describing the children eyes, the narrator is actually giving us a specific piece of information, the children are so hungry that are on the point of starvation. Starvation was the ordinarily situation of the children. Which is in such statement is confirmed by the verb “to devour”, it is refer to the copper, he plays on the colour because the colour of copper is the same colour of the red bricks of which the house is made, he plays on colour, he plays on sight. It is manly affecting sight, the language of sense expression, the sense he appeals to is mainly sight. “Employing … sucking their fingers…” taste is another sense he appeals to. In the adverb “assiduity” which means very frequently, there are actions that are so high unsuitable for such a stupid and rude action, is not polite to lick ones fingers. There is the coirence of juxtaposing high register to express very simple actions, it is the language of contradictions (which is in line with the contradictions of the victorian age). “with the… of tracing up every .. splashing” again here Dickens appeals to the onomatopoeia to create an almost unbelievable feeling , they were not given food. Since the spoons were as large as the bowls how could them eat splashes? Splashes are an onomatopoeia the refers to a big quantity, it is referring not to the soup that may enter the bowls but to some little drops of soup the master dropped out of the copper container. So they were so hungry that they liked everywhere, they were like dogs; they are described like dogs, like animals. Children here are described as they were little predators, because they are so hungry, and then there is this intelligent statement that apparently has no reason to be there “Boys have generally excellent appetite” it create a humour, to make you laugh, but what you should really do is crying. He use irony to create the opposite feeling. Why does Charles Dickens use “excellent”? Excellent is an adverb that you usually use to evaluate a performance, even in the juxtaposition of language Charles Dickens expresses the typical contradictions of Victorian fiction and Victorian society. After all this apparently unidentified group of people description there comes the time when the third person omniscient narrator presents a boy, we have the proper name Oliver Twist (something not balanced that moves). This is the proper name and his companions, Charles Dickens uses a language “suffered the torture of long starvation”, again the use of language is hyperbolic, in a way or another it seems to be comic, fanny even if you should not be happy with that situation; fictions and novels were a form of entrainment and they also help people form their opinions. “For three months” the function of that additional piece of information is an indirect way to inform the reader that this was the ordinary situation, was not something going on just on that moment. “Across.. they got… as one boy who was tall for his age… happen to eat the boy who slept next to him” what happened is that apart from perceiving that the narrator is describing the children who are really desperate with starvation; we understand also another very important element from the fiction is that hunger in this case make the children became cruel because they develop a cruel imagination like one became potential cannibal. If I am on the point of dying, angry makes me cruel and aggressive. There is an additional information, Charles Dickens tell us that Olive Twist was taller for his age, it has not the function to create the imagine of how tall he was, but to tell us something settler, that he was not used to this situation, before this situation he was better, and indeed his father had a small shop. Oliver’s father said, according to the purist and Calvinist mentality among the damned, people who were not blessed by God, fallen down the ladder, who had been therefore guilty and damned (according to the Manichean mentality). He was taller for his age in comparison to the others in the house because since he could ate better before getting there, he could also grow better. Another interesting thing to see how Charles Dickens works is register; the intelligent reader understands that the narrator those not adopt the language of the children in this text, he adopts the language of readers and narrator. He wants to make the language of narration ridiculous, comic; and so it becomes more than a description on a first level of reading a caricature, but on a deeper level of reading a pntomine, a tragic-comic story to be told, soothing that makes us think. “To eat the boy who slept nekt to him..tender..”, Oliver Twist simbolizes a potential cannibal who is taller than his companions, that could eat much better, and who might he eat the tender young boy. It is a poetical contradiction (William Blake “sons of innocence”: lamb and “sons of experience” :tiger) between the lamb who is good and on the other side there is the tiger, who has also experienced evil. We have the contradiction good and evil, Manichean society, a very aggressive society. Oliver Twist is the son of a father who was not able to progress, he lost the shop, so he was damned and this was the end of Oliver Twist in a workhouses.