Text worlds in *Send My Roots Rain* by Edna O'Brien

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Defining stylistics

- Stylistics has been defined as a sub-discipline of linguistics that is concerned with the systematic analysis of style in language and how this can vary according to such factors as for example, genre, context, historical period and author.

- Analysing style means looking systematically at the formal features of a text and determining their functional signficance for the interpretation of the text in question.

- The predominance of literary texts as the focus of study within stylistics is reflected in some of the alternative names that stylistics sometimes goes by. These include **literary linguistics**, **critical linguistics**, **literary semantics**, **literary pragmatics** and **poetics**.

- When the term literary stylistics is used in contrast to linguistic stylistics, the distinction is not between the kinds of texts studied but between the objectives behind such analysis.
- Literary stylistics is concerned with using linguistic techniques to assist in the interpretation of texts.
- Linguistic stylistics is about doing stylistic analysis in order to test or refine a linguistic model in order to contribute to linguistic theory.

- Most stylisticians argue that what they do is a combination of both.

- As far as I am concerned, I tend to stick to literary stylistics, and this what we are going to do together today.

Defining cognitive stylistics

- The foundations of cognitive stylistics lie in cognitive linguistics and cognitive psychology.
- The basic premise is that all forms of expression and forms of conscious perception are bound more closely than was previously realised in our biological circumstances.
- We think in the forms that we do and we say things in the way that we do because we are all roughly human sized containers of air and liquid and because our main receptors are at the top of our bodies.

- Our minds are « embodied » not just literally but also figuratively, finally clearing away the mind-body distintion of much philosophy most famously expressed by Descartes.

- Within literary criticism the focus of attention has shifted around the triangle 'author- text- reader', with different traditions placing more or less emphasis on each of theses three nodes.

- Cognitive poetics is not restricted to one or other of the points.

- Concerned with literary reading, and with both a psychological and a linguistic dimension, cognitive poetics offers a means of discussing interpretation whether it is an authorly version of the world or a readerly account , and how those interpretations are made manifest in textuality.

- One of the foundations of cognitive stylistics is that it establishes a number of parallels between the reading process and common experience of the actual world.
- In order to use cognitive stylistics, we do not have to do away with traditional stylistics. We may simply be led to look into texts from a slightly different angle and to take context into account .
- Cognitive stylistics takes context seriously and it has a broad view of context that encompasses both social and personal circumstances.

Text World Theory

A Cognitive Approach to Literature

Introduction

- TWT is concerned with the global end of reading.
- How the reader's vast background knowledge is specified for application in any particular context of reading.
- The text world theory model suggests that those constraints are provided by the text itself.

- **Links with literary critical concepts**

  - Materiality of the words on a page (autonomic aspect: ground of traditional linguistic analysis "text-as-object" tradition).
  - Conscious participation of the reader

- Cognitive poetics must push the 2 focus-points together so that the reader's engagement is not an add-on feature but is inherently part of the analytical theory.

The reader's world (prior to reading)

- When an individual starts reading, the context he/she is situated in becomes partly irrelevant.
- We actually tend to forget about our current position in time and space, and also partly about our environment.
- This allows us to become very much aware of a different world.

- As far as we are concerned in this room, we can assume that we do share knowledge about the English language and culture.
- We have also experienced that our pupils or students do not necessarily share the knowledge we have about the Anglo-Saxon world.
- As a result, they do not spontaneously respond to the texts in the same way as we do.
- Our work as teachers is often to supply information to the pupils so that they become better informed and more qualified interpreters.

- However readers retain characteristics defining them as individuals or as members of a group.
- They have acquired a certain amount of knowledge through experience.
- The idea of shared knowledge is a key to the reading process and to also to the teaching process.

Discourse World

- It involves 2 participants and becomes actual when we start reading.
- It relies on the conception of reading as interaction.
- Hence the importance of beginnings. The first sentences of a text establish a special kind of relationship between author/narrator and reader.

- The language event that is the **discourse world** is the immediate situation, including the text, surrounding and including discourse participants.

- Text world theory asserts that only that information which forms a *necessary* context is used. Elements of context are **incremented** into the common ground in the course of discourse processing.

- **Text-drivenness**: the text itself provides linguistic and inferential information that narrows the search down to one or a very few specific domains of knowledge.

- Text World Theory

i) provides a specification of how contextual knowledge is actually managed economically.

ii) places text and context inseparably together as part of the cognitive process

iii) is founded on the analysis of entire texts and not sentences

Text World

- The text world consists of **world-building elements** and **function-advancing propositions**.

- *World building elements/ world builders* constitute the background against which the foreground events of the text will take place.
  - time (tense aspect, verbal system, temporal adverbs
  - location (locative adverbs, noun phrases specifying space)
  - characters & objects (noun phrases and pronominals)

- *Function-advancing propositions/advancers* propel the narrative world forward (states, actions, events, processes and arguments or predications made in relation to the objects and characters in the text word.
  - Relational/attributional predication [mental processes] ($\rightarrow$) (began to feel/needed sleep/did not want/gave her a feeling]
  - Material actions/events ($\downarrow$) (had left/came up/came in/vanished)

Sub-Worlds

- Sub-worlds represent a variation in the texture of the world in focus, without the sense of leaving the current world.

- *Deictic sub-worlds*: include flashbacks, flashforwards, any departure from the current situation such as direct speech, or any view onto another scene (watching a play, television)
- Always involves a variation in one or more world-building elements (usu. Shift in time and location)

- *Attitudinal sub-worlds* include alternations due to desire, belief or purpose (constituting desire worlds, belief worlds, purpose worlds). (See wish, hope, dreamed, want /believe, know, think / promises, threats commands, offers, requests).

- *Epistemic sub-worlds* deal with possibility and probability. Hypothetical words are triggered by modality (would, will, should, conditional constructions if/then). They can contain shifts in time, location, character or objects.

- Some sub-worlds are accessible to the participants, others only to the characters.

- TWT accounts for the continuity between the extralinguisitic reality and the fictional world.
- TWT allows to account for phenomena that narratology tends to separate.
- An analepsis, for example, or the the fact that a character expresses an intention of doing something, are analysed along the same lines, using the same tool, TWT.

Edna O'Brien (1930-)

What to bear in mind

- Strong autobiographical component of O'Brien's work, either fiction or non fiction i.e. continuity between the world of the author and the textual world.

- An omnipresent Irish context. Most of the time suggested or alluded to. What kind of reader is targeted? A reader able to make sense of specific allusions.

- The importance of interior life. True about the author but also of many characters, especially women , but not exclusively. A related feeling of loneliness, of being cut out from the rest of the world.

- « The raw stuff » or being at one with nature. A sense of what is fundamental in life. Awareness of our basic needs as human beings. One of the ingredients of sympathy for the characters.

- All these aspects are to be found in Edna O'Brien's latest collection of short stories, published before her autobiography.

Saints and Sinners
Faber and Faber 2011
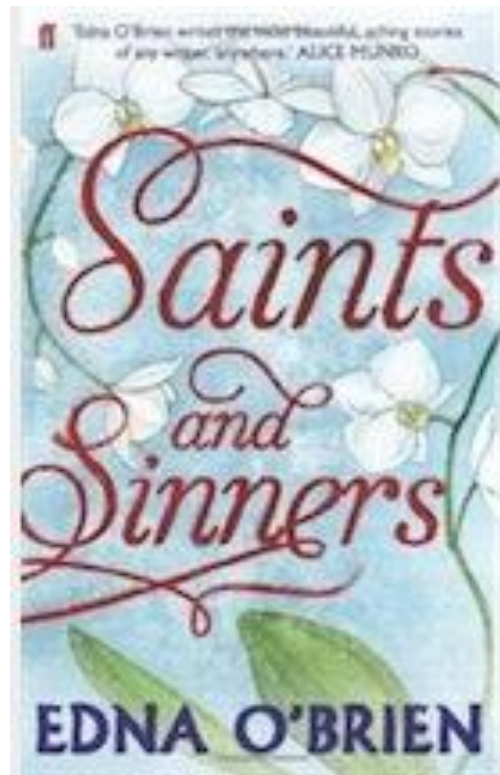
« Send my Roots Rain »

- A spinster who is a librarian in a small Irish town comes to a luxury hotel in Dublin in order to meet one of the poets she admires most and with whom she's been in contact for some time. She is ushered into a lounge where she can wait for him, away from the agitation of the entrance hall. While waiting, she thinks of various episodes of her past life, most of them painful to remember because they highlight unrequited love and a sense of lonliness.

- We learn that she is very much into poetry, both as a reader and a writer. There are constant shifts from her private interior life and her actual environment and at some point she realises that the poet she has been waiting for is not going to turn up. She then decides to leave the hotel and go back home by bus, as she had come.

- The structure of the story is extremely complex because there is hardly any plot to rely on and most of the action takes place in the mind of the female character who is the main reflector or focaliser but not the narrator of the story.

- The progression of the story hinges on subtle shifts from one time to another, one perspective to another, one wish to another.

- TWT appeared to be a particularly relevant way of dealing with such a story which is in many ways characterisitic of the themes frequently tackled by Edna O'Brien and also of her specific often introspective style.

Discourse world

Title

- It is usually considered that the author – and not the narrator – is responsible for the title of a short story.

- « Send My Roots Rain » is enigmatic when we start reading unless we do know Hopkins' poem by heart. Shared knowledge between author and reader or not.

- The enigmatic aspect of the title stimulates the reader's curiosity. An incentive to read further in order to discover the meaning.

- Discovery is postponed until page 157, last but one paragraph: 'O thou Lord of life, send my roots rain.'

- **'Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend'**
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- By Gerard Manley Hopkins 1844–1889 Gerard Manley Hopkins *Justus quidem tu es, Domine, si disputem tecum; verumtamen*
  justa loquar ad te: Quare via impiorum prosperatur? &c.

- Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend
- With thee; but, sir, so what I plead is just.
- Why do sinners' ways prosper? and why must
- Disappointment all I endeavour end?
- Wert thou my enemy, O thou my friend,
- How wouldst thou worse, I wonder, than thou dost
- Defeat, thwart me? Oh, the sots and thralls of lust
- Do in spare hours more thrive than I that spend,
- Sir, life upon thy cause. See, banks and brakes
- Now, leavèd how thick! lacèd they are again
- With fretty chervil, look, and fresh wind shakes
- Them; birds build – but not I build; no, but strain,
- Time's eunuch, and not breed one work that wakes.
- Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain.
- Source: *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems and Prose* (Penguin Classics, 1985)

- A case of implicit embedded story that may either lead the readers to project themselves into the world of Hopkins or be lost on them, depending if the final line of the poem rings a bell or not.
- Readers either remain on the surface of the text or plunge deeper into a subworld from the very title.
- In that case the title is not a very efficient introduction into the fictional world. We thus have to move to the opening sentence.

Opening paragraph

- An omniscient narrator providing information about place and people.
- Dublin. A luxurious hotel.
- Two characters and two reflectors: Miss Gilhooley (imagined…) and Pat the Porter (noticed her …).
- The incipit is the moment of the switch from discourse world to text world. Readers are drawn into the text world through discourse world.

Last sentence

- Discourse world ends with the final full stop. « The rest is silence. »
- In SMRR, the end of text world and discourse world coincide. It is not always the case.

Throughout the short story

- Discourse world remain active throughout the text, even if readers often tend to forget about it to concentrate on text world.
- The question of shared knowledge between author and reader resurfaces occasionally.
- P.150: 1916 and the Irish constitution.
- P.153: the changes that had occurred in their country.
- P.154: a statue of Wolfe Tone.
- P.159 : Robert Emmet
- P.162: Yeats cf Hopkins
- P.167: Conrad

Text world

World building elements

- **Time**: point of reference is the very first sentence: « Men and women **hurled** themselves through the revolving doors ».
- Temporal progression uses this as the starting point.
- P. 151: She was about to come face to face with a great poet…
- P.152: Now she was here picturing him arriving… (deictic expressions)
- P. 154: one of her cheeks was now scalding…
- P. 155: Though feeling hot…
- P. 163: The poet was late…
- P. 164: She consulted her watch…

- P. 164: The heat in the room…
- P. 165: All of a sudden she pictured her own hallway…
- P. 165: It was not at that moment …fifteen minutes later.
- From stasis to movement. Rythm of the narrative speeds up from that point. The librarian becomes the subject of action verbs.
- Narrative progression of the short story. The reader perceives the passage of time through the consciousness of the main character.

- **Place** or **location** also plays a crucial role.
- Many descriptions of the hotel.
- Reader penetrates into the hotel at the same time as the main character, and leaves it in the same way: p.166: He steered her through the revolving doors.
- Preparing the reader some time in advance to exit the text world.
- Reader follows the character on her journey back home. (p.166)
- Change of location also indicates narrative progression.

- **Characters** contribute to the building of the text world.

- Although we mentioned two reflectors in the opening paragraph, the main one throughout the story is the spinster, even though she's watched by the employees of the hotel and especially by Pat the Porter (p.166)

- Most of the story is contained in the time the main character spends waiting in the hotel lounge surrounded by people.
- Yet we also follow the librarian when she leaves the place to go back home.
- A way of reintroducing movement but going back is a regression.
- It does not counterbalance the feeling of disappointment and emptiness.

Sub-worlds

Deictic sub-worlds

- Flashbacks: so numerous it is hard not to miss some.
- P. 151: Again and again…
- P. 152: One Autumn night…
- P. 155: She had been in love more than once…
- A long flashback retracing various episodes in the life of the protagonist from her youth to her coming by bus to Dublin. From depression to resurrection.
- The woman is remembering her past life. The voice of the narrator merges with the thoughts of the woman.

Attitudinal sub-worlds

- These can sometimes be created within a single sentence expressing an intention, a wish or a dream. In that case, the shift is not necessarily noteworthy, but they can also be more developed.
- Two main examples in SMRR.
- P.156-157: the protagonist wishes her lover to come back and does her best to prepare the house for his return.
- P.167: the nightmare she has on the bus.

Epistemic sub-worlds

- Same remark as for attitudinal sub-worlds.
- P. 163: And yes, she **would** have said yes…
- P. 166: Pat the Porter imagines what the poet has been doing in the last few hours. No traces of conditional and yet clearly a series of hypotheses.
- Notice that sub-words are not mutually exclusive and that they remain part of the text world. They present a variation of the text wold, without the sense of leaving the current world.

Conclusion

- I hope to have shown the relevance of TWT to deal with the very complex structure of SMRR.
- The general idea of embedded worlds can be used to deal with many literary texts.
- Using TWT with pupils and students is a good way to draw their attention to the detail of the text (where and how do we shift from one world to another) and also to insist on the importance of taking a broad view/ a bird's eyeview of the text.