

A Pragmatic Stylistic Analysis of the poem 'O Captain! My Captain!' by Walt Whitman

 <https://doi.org/10.31004/jele.v10i3.813>

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the poem *O Captain! My Captain!* by Walt Whitman using pragmatic stylistic analysis based on speech acts, deixis, and implicature. It adopts a qualitative descriptive analytic model and seeks to answer the question of how Whitman's linguistic choices affect the emotional and communicative dimensions of the poem. It's found that expressive, directive, and commission speech acts create feelings of grief, admiration, and a promise of remembrance. Personal, temporal, and spatial deixes emphasize the relationship between the speaker, the deceased leader, and the historical context. The message of the poem, the irony of victory hidden in deep loss, is revealed through implicature. This study shows that Whitman's choice of language in the elegy touches the hearts of the nation. The study reveals the importance of carrying out a pragmatic stylistic analysis of poetry to discover more meanings behind the text.

Keywords: *Pragmatic stylistics, speech acts, deixis, implicature Walt Whitman.*

Article History:

Received 09th April 2025

Accepted 19th May 2025

Published 30th May 2025



INTRODUCTION

Walt Whitman is remembered as one of the most renowned American poets. In 1865, he wrote "O Captain! My Captain!" to mourn the death of President Lincoln after his assassination. Unlike most of Whitman's poems, exhibits overwhelming emotion and compassion due to Lincoln's assassination, which averages around the attention Lincoln receives. As an elegy, this gives Whitman the chance to express grief alongside reverence and the loss the nation feels through the elaborate poem. This unique style, coupled with historical relevance, makes this poem quite popular among readers who seek to understand how words can symbolize loss and respect given to a person.

To appropriately analyze this type of poem, it's important to study the underlying meaning behind the words, along with the poem's structure. Stylistics serves as an important component in literary analysis, offering scholars the opportunity to study the process of meaning formation (Turan & Gökşen, 2023). It investigates the two sides while also addressing what is referred to as why certain choices or words are chosen and which literary

Literary analysis offers many methods to approach a particular poem, one of which is the stylistic approach. This is where the linguistic and artistic devices used by a poet are studied. For example, Hendayana and Abida (2022) prepared a stylistic analysis of Frost's poem 'The Door in the Dark' by analyzing its morphological, phonological, graphological, and semantic components. They explained how devices such as alliteration, assonance, metaphor, and symbolism used by Frost in the poem serve to enhance thematic interpretation. Their findings show that the poem's simple word choice and the stanzas' rhythmic pattern

contribute to its depressing lyrical tone, which depicts themes of struggle and disillusionment. This study proves the importance of stylistic analysis in uncovering the complex interaction between language and the meaning of poetry.

In addition to stylistic features, meaning in literature is also constructed by pragmatic considerations, which pertain to the use of language. In literary studies, pragmatic analysis has been used to understand how poets ignore explicit meanings. For example, Igwedibia (2017) used Grice's Cooperative Principle as a basis to analyze the pragmatic aspects of Audre Lorde's poetry, showing how Lorde follows and violates conversational maxims to criticize them socially and ideologically. This research work shows that some pragmatic aspects such as implicature and speech acts are important to understand the meaning of poetry texts, especially those that address issues of identity, power, and resistance.

Using this approach, it has become almost commonplace for researchers to integrate stylistic and pragmatic approaches in a single work of literary analysis. However, although there have been many studies on figurative language use, sound patterns, and structural features of poetry, very few studies in the field of stylistic pragmatics are concerned with analyzing speech acts, deixis, and implicature in poetic texts. The study of '*O Captain! My Captain!*' is arguably one of the most studied poems regarding its symbolic and stylistic features, while very little attention has been paid to how Whitman's pragmatic decisions affect the emotional and rhetorical impact of the poem. The poem is a long elegy that focuses on the death of Abraham Lincoln and, as such, contains a complex network of linguistic markers to instruct being in a state of deep sadness, astonishment, and mourning from the people. The questions immersed in this paper draw attention to the paucity of data that has been recorded on the poem *O Captain! My Captain!* Namely, the pragmatic aspects of speech acts, deixis, and implicature, especially about other passages, are crucial to the understanding of the emotional appeal of the poem, but most of the literature does not analyze these features.

This paper seeks to fill the gap by looking at the pragmatic stylistic features in '*O Captain! My Captain!*' and provides new insights into how linguistic choices alter the emotional and rhetorical power of the work. The research investigates the relationship between stylistic elements and pragmatic functions to illustrate how Whitman's use of language in the poem goes beyond amplifying its elegant tone to deeply appreciating the poem's context in history and culture. This research contributes to the existing literature by analyzing Whitman's use of poetry as a technique to understand the unification of stylistic and pragmatic concepts, thus closing the gap between two different approaches in literary analysis.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive-analytical approach to examine the pragmatic stylistics of Walt Whitman's poem '*O Captain! My Captain!*' The qualitative approach is particularly relevant to this study as it provides an in-depth analytical approach to language use and meaning without the limitations of numbers or statistical data. The descriptive-analytical method in the poem enables the location and classification of stylistic elements, as well as an assessment of their contribution to the communicative value of the poem.

Pragmatic stylistic analysis is particularly suitable in this case due to the strong connection between the linguistic choices made in Whitman's poems and their meaning. Pragmatic stylistics focuses on language as the core of speech acts (Searle, 1969), deixes (Levinson, 1983), and implicatures (Levinson, 1983). There are so many emotions, metaphorical expressions, and indirect meanings in '*O Captain! My Captain!*' is rich in emotions, metaphorical expressions, and indirect meanings, bringing the meaning of the poem to life along with the language, making it a pragmatic, stylistic poem.

Instruments

This study utilizes a qualitative method of textual analysis by examining the words in the poems to uncover hidden pragmatic meanings. This approach is best suited for assessing

poetic language as it allows for a high-level reading of stylistic features and their communicative impact.

Moreover, this study applies pragmatic theories to decipher meaning from the text, such as Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), which helps categorize utterances based on their communicative meaning; Deixis Analysis (Levinson, 1983), which focuses on person, time, and space in the poem; and Grice's Cooperation Principle and Implicature (Grice, 1975; Levinson, 1983), which helps understand the indirect meaning of the poem as well as the depth of its interpretation. These instruments helped capture the complex emotions, authority, and respect expressed in the stylistic and linguistic features of the captain's poem.

Procedures

The data used for this study is limited to the poem 'O Captain! My Captain!' by Walt Whitman. The steps taken for the compilation process are as follows.

First, this poem was chosen because it has rich pragmatic stylistic elements and is historically significant. As an elegy for Lincoln, it's a poem full of depth that requires style and pragmatics to be analyzed.

Finally, the poem undergoes segmentation, considering the stylistic features of pragmatics. The segmentation is organized in terms of speech acts, deictic terms, and implicatures. This method ensures a comprehensive examination and evaluation of the poem's stylistic and pragmatic features

Data Analysis

The analysis of the poems was carried out in stages, consisting of defining and classifying speech acts, exploring deixis, and studying implicature. In defining and classifying speech acts, the study identified expressive speech acts that represent grief and lamentation, commissive speech acts that show commitment to the legacy of the departed leader, and some directive speech acts that call on the audience to appreciate the captain's actions (Searle, 1969).

The examination of deixis relates to personal deixis, such as the use of the pronoun "O Captain! My Captain!" which creates an immediate identification between the speaker and the captain. Temporal deixis relates to the journey of the ship and its arrival as well as the struggle. Spatial deixis makes a distinction between the speaker who is on land and the dead captain who is on the deck of the ship, thus emphasizing the contrast between victory and defeat (Levinson, 1983).

Finally, the examination of implicature considers the poem's indirect connotations and subtle emotional meanings. The captain serves as a symbolic representation of Abraham Lincoln, while the ship serves as a metaphor for the Union victory in the Civil War. In addition, the grief and celebration emphasized in the poem explain the paradox of victory and tragic loss. The purpose of this study is to explain, through Whitman's organized method and Whitman's considered cleverness, how his stylistic choices serve the poem and its emotional essence and meaning.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Speech Acts in 'O Captain! My Captain!'

John Searle and J.L. Austin introduced the Theory of Speech Acts, which plays an important role in the separation of form and content of literary works. The division of action in *O Captain! My Captain!* includes Whitman's works that represent speech acts such as expressive, directive, and commissive. These speech acts communicate a deep sense of grief, admiration, reverence, call to action, and commitment to remember the subject, thus giving the whole poem an emotional and pragmatic depth.

Expressive Speech Acts: Grief, Admiration, and Respect

Expressive speech acts reflect the speaker's principles, attitudes, and emotions. In *O Captain! My Captain!* mourning is expressed by lamenting the life of Lincoln, who is the main focus of the poem. In Whitman's *Captain! My Captain!* Grief is expressed mainly through direct and indirect means, and the grief reflects the pain that the speaker associates with the death of the leader.

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In the first line of the poem, there is a combination of feelings of admiration and respect while indicating loss:

| *"O Captain! my Captain! Our fearful trip is done,"*

The use of the phrase "O Captain! My Captain!" is a form of exclamatory expression that serves as an intensification of grief that shows the magnitude of honor due to the death of the leader.

Whitman also uses metaphors to emphasize the act of speaking. The phrase:

| *"Fallen cold and dead."*

in the refrain of the poem emphasizes the coldness of the final certainty of Lincoln's death. Whitman amplifies the sadness, making it a recurring and inescapable feeling throughout the poem.

In addition, the contrast between the atmosphere of celebrating victory:

| *"the prize we sought is won,"*

with the tragic acceptance of the loss underscores the duality of the feelings of the poet and, thus, the nation.

Directive Speaking Act: Calling the Captain and Audience Reaction

This is meant to encourage an action or response from the audience. In 'O Captain! My Captain!', Whitman uses a directive speech act to call out to the main captain, who he knows has no response for him. The direct address:

| *"O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;"*

serves to summon help from the nation's leader, who has unfortunately fallen too deep to hear. Throughout this statement, it remains very clear that Lincoln will never answer because he is unable to respond, although his speech sounds desperate.

Besides the captain, the act of speaking in this poem also involves the audience. Something like:

| *"Exult O shores, and ring O bells!"*

are used as phrases that celebrate England while mourning at the same time. The poet uses exclamatory verbs (exult, ring) in the case of imperative verbs in an attempt to draw the reader's attention to the wave of emotions in the poem. By comparing the speaker's pain with the mood of celebrating the nation, Whitman makes his audience feel sorrow for the departed along with him.

Commissive Speech Acts: Commitment to Honoring the Fallen Leader

Commissive speech acts emphasize the speaker's intention to adopt a certain position or do something in the future. In 'O Captain! My Captain!', Whitman has a decision to honor Lincoln. The poem doesn't contain any statements or promises that can be interpreted as direct pledges, but the speaker's despair and sadness towards the deceased Lincoln is a reminder of the promise to remember the departed. The phrase:

| *"Fallen cold and dead."*

is not only a reminder of the departed but also an indication of the promise to revive his legacy. It shows that, as a society, we must now bear the burden of the consequences that follow after his death. This implicit commitment suggests that a man must share the burden of action. However, the grief in this poem is not passive. Rather, it's an active and continuous loyalty to the man's vision.

Deixis in Poem

Deixis refers to an area of pragmatic language that deals with words and expressions whose interpretation is completely bound to context. In *O Captain! My Captain!*, Whitman uses personal, temporal, and spatial deixes to deepen the thematic and emotional content of the poem.

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Personal Deixis: "O Captain!" Change from First Person to Third Person Point of View

Personal deixis deals with pronouns and forms of address that refer to the status of the speaker and the referent. In Whitman's poem, the phrase:

| "*O Captain!*"

is used as a close but respectful form. The pronouns belong to the first-person plural:

| "*Our*" is used in "*our fearful trip is done,*"

captures the essence of the collective experience and shows how the speaker, audience, and country are united as one.

However, the first person and third person references change. The direct address to the captain shows the speaker's emotional pain, while the phrases:

| "*My Captain does not answer*" and "*captain lies,*"

signify emotional and psychological distancing. The upheaval between direct reference and detached reference express their difficulty accepting Lincoln's death.

Temporal Deixis: How Past and Present References Help Magnify Loss

The temporal deixis applied in *O Captain! My Captain!* is very relevant to loss. There is a clear juxtaposition between past and present in:

| "*The ship has weather'd every rack*" (past achievements) and,

| "*O Captain! My Captain! rise up*" (present plea)

Lincoln's achievements are expressed through the past, while his absence is emphasized through the dire present.

Spatial Deixis: The Ship as a Metaphor for the Nation's Journey

In this poem, spatial deixis is important because the ship in the concept serves as a metaphor for the United States. The mention of:

| "*The port*"

is meant to remind the reader of the conclusion of the Civil War. The sharp spatial contrast created by the captain's position, lying lifeless on the deck, illustrates the price of victory.

Implicature and Hidden Meanings

Whitman uses implicature to lead multifaceted interpretations. The opposing concepts of victory and loss reflect that victory comes at a significant cost. The poem unites the citizens of the nation but also reminds them of the cost they must pay to be united. The phrase:

| "*the prize we sought is won,*"

has an underlying message of success, but at what price? Whitman makes Lincoln's loss unquestionable by not mentioning his name, which puts the lens on deeper considerations of leadership, sacrifice, and national identity.

Stylistic and Pragmatic Interplay

The extended metaphors, repetition, and other stylistic features of this poem serve its everyday purpose. The act of directly addressing the captain ("*O Captain!*"), imperatives ("*Rise up,*"), and the many expressions of grief all serve to enhance the performative quality of the work, transforming it from a private elegy to a public expression of grief.

Pragmatic stylistic as a strategy and explains how Whitman's words position the reader so that they must experience grief through the lens placed by Whitman, answering all their questions. The Civil War, combined with Lincoln's assassination, gives more dimension to this poem, defining it not just as a private grief but as a collective national heartache. With its interwoven stylistic and pragmatic features, *O Captain! My Captain!* is more than a dedication; it serves as a timeless reflection on leadership, sacrifice, and the nation's history through triumph and tragedy.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has conducted a pragmatic stylistic analysis of "O Captain! My Captain!" by Walt Whitman by explaining how the choice of language use contributes to the emotional and rhetorical effects of the poem. The study examines the integration of stylistics and pragmatics with speech acts, deixis, and implicature and how they give meaning to the poem which focuses on the fundamental themes of grief, honour, and national mourning. The analysis of the speech acts reveals that the poet's feelings of grief and admiration for Abraham Lincoln are captured through expressive, directive, and committed speech acts. Expressive speech acts show the speaker's grief that goes beyond the grave. Directive speech acts evoke a sense of longing for the departed leader. Implicit commitment speech acts identify a willingness to honor Lincoln's legacy implicitly. It is also noted that deixis plays an important role in Whitman's style and his pragmatic approach. The author's deixis associated with the direct address, "O Captain! My Captain!" invites the reader to feel an emotional connection to the departed commander as he moves between first- and third-person point of view and attempts to cope with the loss. The speaker's grief is temporally deixis against Lincoln's achievement, while the speaker's grief is spatially deixis, underscoring the ship, the symbol of America, and the price of victory.

In addition, the study of implicature reveals other nuances and meanings in the poem. The combination of feelings of triumph and sadness reflects the paradox of victory: while the nation rejoices over the end of the civil war, it's at the same time burdened with the sadness of losing a leader. Whitman's use of indirect meaning makes the poem personal and national in a way that makes it a modern elegy. Ultimately, this study contributes to literary studies by demonstrating the way language and context work together in poetry to strengthen its emotional core and historical significance. It demonstrates that pragmatic stylistics is not only an approach to literary analysis but also, it's an approach to understanding how poetry conveys meaning beyond words. Through stylistic and pragmatic analysis, this study emphasizes the role of language in evoking strong emotions, in the formation of national identity, and the representation of political leaders in poetry.

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