

Stylistic Peculiarities of Contextual Hyperbole in Sherwood Anderson's "The Book of the Grotesque" and "Godliness"



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The study of hyperbole in Sherwood Anderson's short stories is of great importance as hyperbole is a very powerful stylistic means which favors the formation of the writer's individual style at the same time emphasizing its peculiarities. It is a trope which consists of a deliberate and intentional exaggeration of an action, feature or quality which is accompanied by a specific prosodic pattern. As any other trope it allows to say more than is readily seen on the surface.¹ Hyperbole is a means through which literary personages are created. It helps to make the world of literature "colorful", becoming one of the most powerful and effective means of impact, stirring the reader's imagination and mind.

Hyperbole is not only a way of writing but also speaking. It makes the speech sound more exciting, more dangerous, better or worse than it really is (Hornby 2005:63). It is the result of a kind of intoxication by emotions which prevents a person from seeing things in their true dimensions. If the reader or the listener is not carried away by the emotion of the writer or the speaker, hyperbole becomes a mere lie. In this connection V.V. Vinogradov adds that hyperbole is the law of art which brings phenomena of life, diffused as they are, to the point of maximum clarity and conciseness (Vinogradov 1953:74).

Hyperbole is an irreplaceable stylistic means through which the most ridiculous, negative and sarcastic sides of life are expressed, hence it is often used for humorous or ironic effect. It is also one of the best stylistic means for describing characters and their individuality. The creative use of hyperbole in verbal art requires careful study and artistic effort.

The choice of Sherwood Anderson's short stories for evaluating hyperbole is not accidental: his literary prose abounds in different stylistic means, among which hyperbole has its peculiar place.

A literary text is considered a totality in which different stylistic means and allusive elements are embraced. Because of this the reader has to go into the depth of the text, observe its imagery thoroughly, find out those elements which are taken from another text, in this way assimilating the two texts together. The choice of Sherwood Anderson's short stories is attractive in this sense too. Anderson's literary prose is important for its stylistic value, and as Anderson's stories mostly reflect biblical elements, it is possible to observe the intertextual links through biblical allusion.

What we have especially focused on in the present paper by applying the notions of **background knowledge** and **vertical context** is the stylistic peculiarities of contextual hyperbole and its types in Anderson's short stories, particularly in "The Book of the

Grotesque” and “Godliness” and, in the case of allusive hyperbole, the cognitive and aesthetic significance of the phenomenon.

Observing instances, when hyperbole is combined with other stylistic devices in the context of Anderson’s short stories, the following types have been distinguished: **mixed hyperbole** (hyperbole combined with other stylistic means, shaped as instances of simile, pun, antonomasia, irony, personification, etc.), **non-mixed hyperbole** (hyperbole which is not combined with any other stylistic device) and **biblical allusive hyperbole**.

Anderson’s renowned novel “Winesburg, Ohio” was written in an old house in Chicago in a couple of months. While reading the short stories, readers can find glimpses of truth about rural American life. Through the stories Anderson expresses his disappointment with town life. His stories and what he describes in them are all grotesque and extravagant. He employs grotesque notions very nicely and skillfully, while his material is freighted with a sense of reality. The grotesques are those people whose humanity has been outraged and who had to suppress their wishes to love in order to survive in Winesburg. Anderson himself mentions that all the characters of “Winesburg, Ohio” are grotesques themselves. He defines “grotesque” in this way: “Truths are beautiful but when truths become fixed in people’s lives they turn people into grotesques – lonely, isolated distortions of people” (Anderson 1981). Hence, grotesqueness implies both deformity and failure of dreams and emotions.

The use of grotesque as a method by Anderson is not accidental. The opening story entitled “The Book of the Grotesque” is somehow symbolic in the sense that all the other stories are centered around it. It serves as a key to understanding the other stories because the latter are the thematic continuation of the former, i.e. the opening story. Giving the story such a title Anderson points to the possibility that all the ideas in his book should be interpreted in terms of grotesque and exaggeration.

“The Book of the Grotesque” is about an old writer, his feelings, emotions and thoughts. One of the central thoughts of his book is:

*In the beginning when the world was young there were a great many thoughts but not such thing as a truth. Man made the truths himself and each truth was a composite of a great many vague thoughts. All about in the world were the truths and they were all beautiful... There was the truth of virginity and the truth of passion, the truth of wealth and of poverty, of thrift and of profligacy, of carelessness and abandon. Hundreds and hundreds were the truths and they were all beautiful. And then people came along. Each as he appeared snatched up one of the truths and **some who were quite strong snatched up a dozen of them.***

(Anderson 27)

Here the whole extract bears an allegorical meaning, but in addition to this, the underlined part expresses hyperbolic meaning as well.² The word *truth* is an abstract and uncountable noun on the semantic level (in the meaning of the quality or state of being based on fact), while on the metasemiotic level; in the context of the present story, being used in the plural form, it becomes countable. Still retaining its abstract character it

acquires additional overtones: the truth is only one but when each person creates his own truth, the so-called **subjective truth**, the truth stops to be a general notion, it rather indicates falsehood, which is not truth at all. So, the use of an uncountable noun in the plural form brings about an obvious intentional exaggeration, which, in its turn, has an aesthetic impact on the reader.

Moreover, in the word-combination *a dozen of truths* we have not only exaggeration but also contrast because the word *dozen* indicates a group of twelve of the same things, while in the context a group of different things is presented. Thus, for instance: *there was the truth of virginity, the truth of passion, the truth of wealth and poverty, the truth of thrift and profligacy, of carelessness and abandon*. So, it is here that not only hyperbolic shades, but also the author's ironical attitude become even more obvious. In the following sentence – *Who were quite strong snatched up a dozen of them* – the hyperbole becomes more effective; the primary meaning of the verb *snatch* is itself very expressive: “to take something quickly and often rudely and roughly, by force” (Hornby 2005).

In fact truth is not visible and because of this it cannot be taken. So, at this level the metaphoric and hyperbolic meanings are merged, combined with each other. In another sentence we read: *Man made the truths*. The verb *made* is used in the meaning of “create”, whereas the truth cannot be made or created and a man, correspondingly, cannot be a truth-maker. This usage enhances the metaphorical and ironical aspect of the utterance. Considering that in the context the truths created by men are vicious, the word *truth* has acquired its opposite meaning, that of untruth or falsehood.

The use of hyperbole interpreted in terms of irony helps to understand the whole meaning of the story; through the use of hyperbole and irony Anderson expresses his disappointment with the town and people living in it.

In the following extract taken from the same story, another example of hyperbole is found. It is formed in a very peculiar way – by bringing together words which are not semantic synonyms, but rather function as contextual synonyms:

*In his bed the writer rolled over on his side and lay quite still. For years he had been beset with notions concerning his heart. He was a hard smoker and his heart fluttered. The idea had got into his mind that he would some time die unexpectedly and always when he got into bed he thought of that. It did not alarm him. The effect in fact was quite a special thing and not easily explained. It made him more alive, there in bed, than at any other time. Perfectly still he lay and his body was old and not of much use any more but something inside him was altogether young. **He was like a pregnant woman, only that the thing inside him was not a baby but a youth. No, it wasn't a youth; it was a woman, young, wearing a coat of male like a knight.** It is absurd, you see, to try to tell what was inside the old writer as he lay on his high bed and listened to the fluttering of his heart. The thing to get at is what the writer, or the young thing within the writer, was thinking about.*

(Anderson 1981:25)

Here we have an example of simile based on hyperbole. The old writer is beset with different kinds of notions and thoughts which disturb him all the time. To show the writer's excited emotional state the hyperbole emphasizes the troubling condition in which the writer is. The contrast between the sick and old writer's physical state and his young spirit is revealed through the notion of **young thing – youth** expressed by the lexical units *baby*, *youth* and *young woman*.

The exaggeration is formed by the change of the word *baby* into the word *youth*, and the word *youth* into the word *woman*, which, in fact, turns into synonymic condensation. The word *baby* means a very young child. We also know that briskness, liveliness, quickness and vivacity are typical features of babies, as well as of young men and women. The word *youth* indicates the time of life when a person is young, especially the time before a child becomes an adult. As if trying to find the right definition of his inner state, his ego, the writer finally, through gradation, arrives at the notion of *a young woman wearing a coat of male like a knight*. Interestingly, the writer chooses *young woman* instead of *young man*, thus pointing to another contrast in the image (male person with a female soul), and enhancing the hyperbolic simile – *he was like a pregnant woman*. On the other hand, the three words *baby*, *youth*, and the word *woman* in combination with the adjective *young* become synonyms on the metasemiotic level as all of them are contrasted to the notion of *old dying man*. The synonymic condensation gives not only extra emphasis, a kind of meta-effect to the utterance, but also secures the gradual formation of hyperbole.

An example of hyperbole combined with another trope may be observed in the following sentence:

Winesburg had forgotten the old man, but in Doctor Reefy there were the seeds of something very fine.

(Anderson 1981:33)

This is an example of antonomasia plus an exaggerative meaning. Instead of saying *people living in Winesburg had forgotten the old man* the writer uses the place name *Winesburg* but, of course, he does not mean the town itself. Through the name of the place he refers to its people. On the other hand, however, we should take into consideration that not all the people living there had forgotten the old man, but perhaps only a part of them, and this is where hyperbole lies. Moreover, this example of hyperbole may also be regarded as a case of metonymy based on some kind of association connecting the two concepts: *people* and *Winesbug*. Additionally, there is an element of personification: the human quality of forgetting is ascribed to a city which is an inanimate object and is deprived of such a quality.

The following extract presents an example of a non-mixed hyperbole:

On that night when he had run through the fields crying for a son he became excited to the edge of insanity.

(Anderson 1981:62)

The edge of insanity is a hyperbole. The dictionary definition for the word *edge* is: “the outside limit of an object” (Hornby 2005). As for the word *insanity*, it is “the state of being mad” (Hornby 2005). The nominal phrase *edge of insanity* acquires adjectival meaning in the context, denoting the ultimate degree of madness. So, the noun *edge* gives exaggerative overtones to the word-combination and shows Jesse’s inner and tense mental emotional state.

One of the stories entitled “Godliness” presents many interesting examples of allusive hyperbole and here is one of them:

*I am a new kind of man come into possession of these fields,” he declared.
“Look upon me, O God, and look **Thou** also upon my neighbors and all
the man who have gone before me here! O God, **create in me another
Jesse, like that one of old, to rule over men and to be the father of sons
who shall be rulers!***

(Anderson 1981:52)

The proper noun *Jesse* is a biblical allusive name. It is the name of a biblical king – David’s father who was the king of Israel. According to the Bible, God orders Samuel to anoint David as king of Israel. The name of the biblical prototype is used in a complex way. Firstly, it coincides with the protagonist’s name. Secondly, it indicates antonomasia: *create in me another Jesse*. In this way the proper name *Jesse* becomes a common noun. Anderson’s Jesse begs God to create in him the biblical *Jesse*, through whom to rule *on earth*. The selection of the name *Jesse* creates a contrast between the two *Jesses*. And by this contrast Anderson not only shows his ironical attitude but also secures the interpretation of irony. Moreover, the fictional Jesse obviously exaggerates his role, seeing himself as a patriarch.

Jesse works tirelessly on his farm and he also makes his employees, including his delicate wife, Katherine work all day long even when they are not able to bear it any more. But at the same time he is afraid that someone *like Philistine Goliath* will take his lands from him. He strongly believes he is chosen by God and it is God’s work that he has come to the land. He wants God to notice and to talk to him. Jesse also asks God to send him a son to be called David who will help him to pluck all of his lands out of the hands of the Philistines. He compares all people around him with Goliath. The above narration of the story embraces a sarcastic tone and is interpreted as irony, simultaneously being combined with hyperbole. The hyperbolic meaning is expressed when the contrast between the two *Jesses* – the biblical *Jesse* and the fictional one becomes obvious. Moreover, Jesse’s farm is not comparable to the biblical *Valley of Elah*, however earnestly he desires it to be. It is obvious that without sufficient background knowledge the biblical allusions and respectively the story could be misunderstood and misinterpreted.

The following passage also includes biblical allusive elements with hyperbolic shades:

*A fantastic impulse half fear, half greediness, took possession of Jesse Bentley.
He remembered how in the old Bible story the Lord had appeared to that
other Jesse and told him to send his son David to where Saul and the men of*

Israel were fighting the Philistines in the Valley of Elah. Into Jesse's mind came the conviction that all of the Ohio farmers who owned land in the valley of Wine Creek were Philistines and enemies of God. "Suppose," he whispered to himself, "there should come from among them one who, like Goliath, the Philistine of Gath, could defeat me and take from me my possessions. Jehovah of Hosts," cried he, "send to me a son. Let thy grace alight upon me. Send me a son called David who shall help me to pluck at last all of these lands out of the hands of the Philistines and turn them to Thy service and to the building of Thy kingdom on earth.

(Anderson 1981:54)

Anderson's irony toward his character Jesse (Jesse is sure that he is the only person chosen by Lord) is expressed through Jesse's exaggerated self-respect, egotism and self-esteem. Hyperbole and irony are created through the introduction of the two controversial characters and hence, the grotesqueness of the situation.

The identification with the biblical episodes continues in the next two parts of the story, where Jesse wants to sacrifice a lamb – a similar episode is found in the Bible when God orders Abraham to sacrifice his only son – Isaac, in order to test Abraham loyalty to Him. Abraham obeys, and when he wants to sacrifice Isaac, the angel stops him and says that God is pleased with him and that now He ascertains that Abraham is faithful to Him. Instead of Isaac Abraham sacrifices a lamb that was sent by God.

*After the feeling of exaltation that had come to the farmer as a result of his successful year, another mood had taken possession of him. For a long time he had been going about feeling very humble and prayerful. Again he walked alone at night thinking of God and as he walked he again connected his own figure with the figures of old days. Under the stars he knelt on the wet grass and rose up his voice in prayer. Now he had decided that **like the men whose stories filled the pages of the Bible, he would make a sacrifice to God.***

(Anderson 1981:73)

In the passage taken from the story there is a hyperbole based on simile: *like the men whose stories filled the pages of the Bible*. The following biblical allusion combined with two other stylistic means – hyperbole and simile, is a means of characterization. The obvious hyperbole is; Jesse identifies himself with the biblical character but evidently he is not, and particularly he is not chosen by God.

Interestingly enough, when Jesse wants to sacrifice a lamb, he destroys his relations with the grandson while in the original (in the Bible) Abraham who is going to sacrifice his son, sacrifices a lamb, in this way keeping and re-establishing his relations with the son. So, this fact once more intensifies the contradiction and contrast between the episodes of the story and the Bible.

Thus, taking into consideration the study of the theoretical material and the results of the analysis of the above examples we may conclude that the use of hyperbole by Sherwood

Anderson in his short stories serves as a means of characterization of his complex images and personages. Moreover, it is directly connected with the author's interpretation of the grotesque and the aesthetic. Besides, in the context of Sherwood Anderson's short stories hyperbole is often fused with other stylistic devices: simile, irony, personification, pun, etc. And finally, the notions of **background knowledge** and **vertical context** are essential for the stylistic evaluation of hyperbole based on allusion, namely biblical allusion.

Notes:

1. Hyperbole is a device that is used to evoke strong feelings or to create a strong impression and emphasis.
2. The linguostylistic study of the hyperbole ensures a correct interpretation of the general semantic content and connotative meanings. Thus the study goes both along the lines of semantic and metasemiotic levels of investigation. The latter allows to evaluate all the additional overtones that the linguistic units have acquired in the context.

References:

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Համատեքստային չափազանցության ոճական առանձնահատկությունները

Հոդվածի նպատակն է ուսումնասիրել չափազանցության ոճական առանձնահատկությունները Շ. Անդերսոնի պատմվածքների համատեքստում: Տվյալ նյութի տեսական մասի ուսումնասիրության, ինչպես նաև օրինակների վերլուծության շնորհիվ հնարավոր է դառնում պատմվածքներում առանձնացնել համատեքստային չափազանցության երեք հիմնական տեսակ: Դրանք են՝ «խառը չափազանցություն», «ոչ խառը չափազանցություն» և «գրական անդրադարձ հանդիսացող չափազանցություն» տեսակները: