

UNIT C.4 – WORKED ANALYSIS

Commentary on the questions posted in unit C.4 – Michael Longley’s ‘The Comber’.

Here is some commentary on the individual questions posted in C.4.1. They are not intended to be “right” answers, but are instead suggestions about how the various questions might be addressed. In that respect, the commentary is only partial and is more about getting started than offering a definitive or conclusive worked analysis. Moreover, and as noted above, it is important not to lose sight of the inter-relatedness of units, layers and levels in stylistic description. As argued throughout the book, stylistic elements at different levels of analysis may function either in harmonic combination or in a more discontinuous or subversive way with one another. Finally, although some localised interpretations of stylistic features are offered, the commentary below is intended as a precursor to interpretation rather than a fully developed critique of Longley’s poem.

Question 1 follow up

In terms of its overall grammatical structure, the poem comprises a single sentence, arranged as an octet, consisting of three main clauses and one subordinate clause. The main clauses begin, respectively, with the following Subject-Predicator configurations:

Water and sunlight contain . . .
[water and sunlight - ellipted] suspend . . .
we meet . . .

and the subordinate clause with:

this is . . .

Importantly, there are also two embedded clauses (see B.3.1) nesting within the structure of other units in the text. Here they are, with their **Subject** and Predicator elements highlighted:

A moment before **the comber** turns . . .
. . . the only sound **I** make.

Both clauses are post-modifying elements within noun phrases and both are restrictive (that is, the sense and scope of reference of the noun to which they are attached is dependent on their inclusion). The first, which signals a time relationship and is fronted by the connective “before”, qualifies a noun phrase of which “moment” is the head and which itself forms a temporal Adjunct to the first main clause. The second embedded clause closes the poem and forms the qualifying element in a noun phrase of which “sound” is the head. The poem therefore is arranged by equivalent constituents in that subordinate grammatical structures are placed either side of the main clauses in the poem.

Question 2 follow up

Interestingly, the grammatical unit which opens the poem is broken up by a sequence of two noun phrases: “ – sea-spray, raggedy rainbows –”. These noun phrases are not linked together by any formal connectives and appear to sit outside the formal clause structures around them. As they are not obviously grammatically bound up with any Subject-Predicator pattern, they are moodless. We can use the tag test developed in A.3.2 to test this analysis by comparing the relevant sequence with a finite structure:

The comber turns . . . so it does / doesn't it?
Sea-spray, raggedy rainbows . . . * no it doesn't / *so they did / *don't
they?

The pair of noun phrases is wedged between two finite (that is, “tense-full”) structures, and it perhaps carries some significance as a kind of liminal or transitional marker. It also activates a perceptual reorientation at the start of the next line: “water and sunlight” looks, at first glance, like another dislocated noun phrase which appears to have no grammatical ‘home’ until the main verb “contain” is reached.

Question 3 follow up

As there is no dominant or sustained metrical pattern in the poem, it is largely written in free verse. However, the poem does contain some metrical “phases” which function in support of other aspects of linguistic structure. For instance, the third line is metrically foregrounded: it resembles a dactylic tetrameter (see A.4.1) with one heavy beat followed by two light beats in each foot: “**w**ater and **s**unlight **c**ontain all the **c**olours”. This is striking, though only of course in the context of what precedes it and in the context of other parallel linguistic features in the line. For example, at the sound-to-metric level, the line is phonologically shaped through repeated semivowels (/w/, /r/ and /l/) and nasal and stop consonants (eg. /n/, /k/ and /t/). At the grammatical level, coordination is created through “and” – an additive conjunction that suggests no affective contrast between its conjuncts (see B.3.1). Moreover, the co-ordination operates between both clauses and groups, in a technique which sets up parallels and unit-forming connections between this and the next line:

Water and sunlight contain all the colours
And suspend between Inishbofin and me,

Notice how the pattern of coordination is repeated in the line-initial Subject (“Water and sunlight”) and as a line-final Adjunct (“Inishbofin and me). My impression is that after the “agrammaticism” of the previous line, from the third line on the poem starts to settle stylistically: it “takes its time” for want of a better formulation. In one sense, Longley rhythmically holds, or slows down the moment which in literal terms cannot be held — he undertakes the seemingly impossible task of freeze-framing a wave.

Question 4 follow-up

Arrest, delay and enhancement are three important stylistic features which are situated at the interface between graphology and grammar. Grammatical arrest occurs when a clause or smaller grammatical constituent is broken up at a line ending so as to make us search for the remainder of the structure in the subsequent line (a “release” element). The early appearance of “into” (the first component only of a prepositional phrase) as a line-final item (“turns into / A breaker”) engenders such an arrest, and the attendant perceptual recovery procedure tends rather to precipitate us into the following line in order to complete the sense of this unit. Extension tends to be the reverse of arrest in that it functions when a seemingly complete grammatical unit makes up a line ending only for the following line to trigger a revision to its perceived structure. In “The Comber”, the sequence “without my scent / In her nostrils” is a good example of extension. Delay occurs when an anticipated element is withheld or suspended, such that its retrieval requires progression through and beyond intervening elements. The delay of

the reference to “The otter” is a good case in point: this element is anticipated as a Complement of the verb “suspend”, yet the intrusion of an Adjunct, with its strengthened grammatical parallels with the Subject of the same sentence (see above) and its status as a line ending, tends to suspend and “squeeze out” the reference to the otter. When the phrase eventually comes, it is accompanied with massive end-focus. That it is suspended both gives it prominence and, in another sense, suspense: it is held from the reader to the last possible moment.

Question 5 follow up

This rather more general question can be tackled in different ways, and there are many features of the poem which could be accommodated under this instruction. For example, it is especially interesting to see how the moodless sequence noted in the commentary on question 2 achieves further salience through the interplay of sound and vocabulary. Both noun phrases are consolidated by word-initial consonantal alliteration (sea-spray /raggedy rainbows) yet this pattern of harmonic combination is offset by other non-harmonic phonetic features in the second noun phrase. More specifically, this is created through contrasts both in vowel quality and in consonant length: with short vowels and short, stop consonants in “raggedy” set against long vowels and diphthongs (/o:/ and /ei/) and long fricatives and nasals (/z/ and /n/) in “rainbows”. Essentially, both contrast and harmony are present in one phrase.

We can also narrow down the analysis here by breaking down the word “raggedy” into its morphological constituents. It is derived from a kind of double morphological suffixation (see B.2.3): the modifier “ragged” is combined with an additional (and,

strictly speaking, superfluous) derivational suffix “y”. The quality imparted by “ragged” is thus shored up further by the adjectival status conferred upon it by the addition of “y”. The result is a neologism (a new word) which functions as a motif at two conceptual levels. First of all, the “double” morphology it exhibits is suggestive perhaps of developmental grammar in its echo of the child’s reduplicative “worsen” and “wenten” — constructions so common in early syntax yet never found in adult grammar (see B.2.4). Second, the word is part of an intertextual motif which, if not exactly retrievable from the text of “The Comber” on its own, symbolises a patchwork quilt. This symbol pervades the entire collection in which this poem appears.

Question 6 follow up

It is of course possible to rewrite the poem in many ways, and the amount of alteration carried out will depend on how much stylistic detail has been uncovered in the original analysis. Here is a rewrite, produced with the permission of the poet, which subverts mostly the grammatical features identified in the commentaries above:

Very Much Not “The Comber”

Water and sunlight contain all the colours
And suspend the otter between me and Inishbofin,
A moment before the comber turns
Into a sea-spray, ragged rainbows breaker.
And thus we meet, without my scent in her nostrils,
Without the uproar of my presence
And without my unforgivable shadow on the sand,
Even if this is the only sound I make.

It is worth placing the two texts, the original and the altered, side by side just to see how much of the subtlety of the original has been lost in the transfer. Rewrites also draw

attention to yet further patterns of interest in the original, and this is especially useful when the real text is not especially “exuberant” stylistically. It is interesting to see how rearranged structures at one level have a knock on effect with regard to other levels: the grammatical break-up identified in commentary 2, for example, is entirely nullified once the poem has been rearranged. And it is of course possible to fine-tune the transposition even further so that other features identified in the analysis (the alliterative “sea spray” pattern for instance) can be broken up. As it stands, the rewrite is simply not Longley, and it hopefully serves as a mechanism for foregrounding the richer stylistic detail of the original text.