

A Stylistic Analysis of “After Twenty Years” by O. Henry

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Abstract

The present study aimed at stylistically analyzing the short story of “after twenty years” written by O. Henry, a pen name for William Sydney Porter. This American short story writer has a rich canon of more than 250 short stories and his stories are well known throughout the globe. He wrote in a dry and humorous style and famous for his use of surprise or twist endings of his stories, mostly, for the aim of underlying ironies. Since the study is both theoretical and descriptive in nature, the researcher paid a close reading to the text. The short story is stylistically analyzed applying only two categories, namely lexical categories and cohesion and context in the linguistic and stylistic checklist suggested by Leech and Short (2007).

Keywords: Stylistics, Style, Lexical categories, Cohesion and Context, Short stories

Introduction

O. Henry, pseudonym of William Sidney Porter (1862-1910) was born in Greensboro, North Carolina. He attended school for a short time. Before becoming a short story writer, like many other writers, O. Henry’s early profession aspirations were unfocused, and he tried different career activities. First, he started working in a pharmacy, latter he moved to Austin, Texas, while he was young and there he worked as a bank teller. In 1895 he started working as a newspaper columnist. There, while working at the bank, he was indicted with embezzlement and sentenced to three years in prison. After his release in 1901, he moved to New York, which is the setting for many of his short stories.

This American short story writer has a rich canon of more than 250 short stories and his stories are well known throughout the globe. He wrote in a dry and humorous style and famous for his use of surprise or twist endings of his stories for the aim of underlying ironies.

This study does not aim to explore and depict a comprehensive picture of the writing style of O. Henry. It only aims to stylistically analyze one of his short stories named “after twenty years”. In this regard, it should be mentioned that the style of an author cannot be wholly explored and depicted by only analyzing one of the writer’s works, as Leech and Short (2011) stated that “it is difficult to generalize about the style of an author” (as cited in Song, Sh., 2009, p. 117).

The Concept of Style

The word “style” which is used commonly, originally is derived from Latin. Leech (1969) defined style as “the way in which something is spoken, written, or performed”. He further stated that style refers to the word use, sentence structure, and figure of speech used by a writer. Zeru (1996) states that style is “the characteristic manner of expression in verse or prose: how a particular writer says things” (p. 7). Additionally, According to Leech and Short (2007) style refers to “the way in which language is used in a given context, by a given person, for a given purpose, and so on” (p. 9).

Generally speaking, for Leech and Short (2007) the concept of style is uncontroversial in its general interpretation. Yet, on the other hand, they state that in practice, writers are not in the same line regarding “to what or whom do we attribute style”. In this regard, Leech and Short (2007) state that “in the common and broadest sense, style can be applied to both spoken and written, and both literary and everyday varieties of language; whereas by tradition, it is applied to written literary texts” (p. 10).

All in all, taking into account the above descriptions of the word “style” it can be sated that style refers to the specific model and way of an author’s spoken or written literary or unliterary, his word choice, sentence structure, use of figurative language, and generally the arrangement of his ideas for the aim of artistically expressing what he wants to convey. Therefore, it can be sated that every author has his/her own different style and having familiarity or knowledge about the style of an author would help to figure out and make sense of the s/his works.

Stylistics

Stylistics is a branch of applied linguistics, originally created for the purpose of applying linguistic models and tools to texts, most specifically to literary texts. Stylistics is defined by different scholars in varying ways, but with using somehow alike concepts. To Widowson (1975) stylistics is “the study of literary discourse from a linguistic orientation (p. 3). Short and Candlin (1989) defines stylistics as “a linguistic approach to the study of the literary texts. It thus embodies one essential part of the general course – philosophy; that of combining language and literary study” (as cited in Batool et al., 2015, p. 194). According to Crystal (1992), stylistics is “a branch of linguistics which studies certain aspects of language varieties. The features of language a poet or writer uses including diction, phrases, sentences, etc.” (as cited in Batool & Ahmad, 2014, p. 50). Leech and Short (2007) defines stylistics as “the (linguistic) study of style, is rarely undertaken for its own sake, simply as an exercise in describing what use is made of language” they further sate that style is studied for the purpose of explaining something” (p. 11).

In the twentieth century stylistics was not so popular and researchers were not interested in. According to Lecerle (1993), “no one has ever really known what the term ‘Stylistics’ means, and in any case, it seems difficult that no one will care” (as cited in Ghaniabadi & Taher, n.d., p. 3). Then, what Lecerle, imagined has changed dramatically. Today, in the twenty first century, stylistics is becoming popular and is taught in universities. In addition to that, now, a large number of students are interested in stylistics and they are eager to do research on it.

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Moreover, regarding the purpose of stylistic analysis, Thornborrow & Wareing (1998) states traditionally it was believed as only a way of interpreting meaning of a literary text, but now to a great extent, this view is moved to a more pragmatic orientation as to “link choices in text to social and cultural context” (as cited in Ahmad, M., Khan, Ahmad, S., & Ijaz, 2015, pp. 10-11). However, it should be stated that this does not mean that the way of interpreting the meaning in stylistic analysis has altered in total. Yet, in addition of exploration of meaning, stylisticians have started taking interest in the ways in which features of text: particular choice of words is viewed in relation to the context in which it is produced and received.

Leech and Short (2007), state that stylistics attempts to answer the questions “why” and “how”. They further state that “from the linguist’s angle, it is ‘why’ the author here chooses this form of expression? And from the literary critic’s viewpoint, it is ‘how’ is such-and-such an aesthetic effect achieved through language” (P. 11).

As a concluding point, it can be simply stated that stylistics or stylistics analysis is a way of studying, analyzing and interpreting both spoken and written literary texts in order to achieve the intended meaning of the text or its specific purpose. In this regard, Zeru (1996) states “Stylistic helps to analyze a certain literary work and get its quality and appreciate its aesthetic value” (p. 15).

Methodology

This study carries out the stylistic analysis of a short story “after twenty years” by O. Henry. This short story is chosen after a close reading in order to make sure that it is linguistically rich enough for a stylistic analysis. The study aimed at investigating the writer’s choice of language in the selected short story. For the purpose of this study, the checklist of linguistic and stylistic categories suggested by Leech and Short (2007, pp. 61-64) is followed. The checklist provides a systematic basis, and it includes four general categories: “a) Lexical categories consists of: general, nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs. b) Grammatical categories that includes: sentence types, sentence complicity, clause types, clause structure, noun phrases, verb phrases, other phrase types, word classes, and general. c) Figures of speech that contains: grammatical and lexical, phonological schemes, and tropes. d) Context and cohesion that includes: cohesion and context”. However, it should be stated that this study only focuses on two categories: a) lexical categories and d) Context and cohesion.

About the Story

Summary of the Story

The “after twenty years” tells the story of two close friends who made a promise to meet at a specific place and time after twenty years. Bob and Jimmy were to close friends. Before parting from each other they made a pact to meet after twenty years in the same place and time, no matter what will happen and how far they will be. Then Bob left for West to make his own way. There, Bob will turn to a criminal, and Jimmy will become a policeman. Twenty years passed, yet both remember their promise. Bob took the way and arrives at the specific place and on time in New York. Suddenly a policeman comes to him and asks him what he is doing there at this late time of night. Bob explains

the matter and the policeman who is Jimmy recognizes Bob, as his old friend and a noted criminal, yet leaves him without identifying himself because he does not want to arrest his own friend himself. Therefore, he leaves him and tells another policeman to arrest Bob. After the policeman arrests Bob, he hands him a note that Jimmy has written it for him and tells Bob I am your friend, but I knew you are wanted as a criminal in Chicago, therefore I could not identify myself and left you because I do not have the heart of arresting my own friend with my hands.

Setting

The author specifies the time of the story from the very beginning. As it is clear in the third line:

“The time was barely 10 o'clock at night, but chilly gusts of wind with a taste of rain in them had well-nigh depeopled the streets”.

Yet, the author does not simply show and specify the setting himself. But, in an artistic style the setting is given through one of the characters (Bob). The setting can be determined in line (22) while Bob is talking with the policeman:

“He and I were raised here in New York, just like two brothers, together. I was eighteen and Jimmy was twenty. The next morning, I was to start for the West to make my fortune. You couldn't have dragged Jimmy out of New York; he thought it was the only place on earth”.

Therefore, the setting is ‘a street in New York at night’.

Characters

There are three characters in the story. Two of them are main characters known as Jimmy Wells and Bob. The name of the third character which is minor is not given, but he was referred to as the ‘tall man’.

Theme

While reading the story carefully and closely one can come across of different themes. However, it can be stated that generally two themes are dominant. First, “friendship versus community responsibility”. This theme is best illustrated in the story, as despite being two close friends and being like two brothers, but Jimmy decides to arrest his friend Bob, because he has to be committed to his social responsibility as a policeman. Second, “the conflicting choices and decisions in life and their effect on the person’s life”. This theme is illustrated through the decisions and philosophies of Bob and Jimmy in life for their future. As it is clear in the short story Bob is a greedy and materialistic person. He made his decision to go to the West to make a lot of money and enjoys a life of luxury. He does not care through what ways he can earn all the things he want, even via illegal ways. Yet, Jimmy, is conventional he decides to stay in New York and to have a steady job through which he can serve his society and built a normal and secure life for his family as well. Then after twenty years when they meet again, we can see how the two men’s decisions and philosophies took them on two different paths. Jimmy achieved what he planned for. He has a good job, and he is secure. On the other hand, Bob despite making a lot of money, but the money did not bring him any good at the end because he is not secure, has no home and family and ended up in prison.

Analysis of the Short Story

As mentioned previously, this short story will be analyzed by applying only two categories from those four suggested in the checklist by Leech and Short (2007, pp. 61-64). First, it will be examined in terms of lexical categories and then context and cohesion will be applied on it.

Lexical Categories

Lexical category in stylistic analysis addresses general, nouns, adjective, verbs, and adverbs in a literary work.

General

The majority of the words used in the story are simple and easily understandable. The author might have used the simple vocabularies to convey his aim bluntly and to make it easy for anyone to understand it. However, the overwhelming majority of the words used are formal, but some informal words can also be seen such as chum, chap, and Bully. These colloquial words are used when Bob describes Jimmy, his friend.

*“...Jimmy Wells, my best **chum**, and the finest **chap** in the world.*

***Bully**; it has given me everything I asked for”.*

Moreover, in another distance the informal word “silky” is used when the tall man refers to Bob.

*“...You’ve been under arrest for ten minutes, **Silky Bob**”.*

Additionally, the majority of the vocabularies are descriptive. Some of them are used to describe the setting, some to describe the characters’ physical appearance, and yet some of them to define the features of Jimmy. To show this, below are some extracts from the story:

“The time was barely 10 o'clock at night, but chilly gusts of wind with a taste of rain in them had well-nigh depeopled the streets”.

“There was now a fine, cold drizzle falling, and the wind had risen from its uncertain puffs into a steady blow. The few foot passengers astir in that quarter hurried dismally and silently along with coat collars turned high and pocketed hands”.

“He and I were raised here in New York ...”

The above quotations show the setting of the story. As can be seen the words *10 o'clock, at night, chilly, wind, rain, streets, passengers, New York* etc. are used to achieve this purpose.

Moreover, the below extracts show how some words are used to describe the characters’ physical appearance:

“...Turning now and then to cast his watchful eye adown the pacific thoroughfare, the officer, with his stalwart form and slight swagger, made a fine picture of a guardian of the peace”.

“The light showed a pale, square-jawed face with keen eyes, and a little white scar near his right eyebrow”.

“...to change a man's nose from a Roman to a pug”.

As can be seen from the above given quotations, the author, by using the words such as *watchful eye*, *pale*, *square-jawed*, *keen eyes*, *scar* etc. describes the characters' physical appearance. Furthermore, as mentioned above, some of the vocabularies are used to describe the features of Jimmy, such as *best chum*, *finest chap*, *truest*, *staunchest old chap*, *plodder*, *good* etc. These words can be seen in the below extracts:

“...Jimmy Wells, my best chum, and the finest chap in the world”.

“But I know Jimmy will meet me here if he's alive, for he always was the truest, staunchest old chap in the world. He'll never forget”.

“He was a kind of plodder, though, good fellow as he was”.

Below table illustrates the frequency of major word classes namely nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs.

Table 1. Major word classes

Word classes	Nouns	Adjectives	Verbs	Adverbs
Total number	277	96	259	97
Percentage	38%	13. %	36%	13. %

Note: Total number of word classes (nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs) is 729.

Moreover, Table 2 below presents the major word class in comparison to general English.

Table 2. Major word classe comparison to general English

Major word class	Number/ (% per100 words)		General English (% per 100 words)
Nouns	277	21.9 %	25.1
Adjectives	96	7.6 %	7.5
Verbs	259	20.2 %	13.4
Adverbs	97	7.6 %	6.1
Total	729	57.3 %	52.1

Note: The total number of words used in the short story is (1265) words.

Nouns

In the short story “after twenty years”, as can be seen in Table 1 above, noun class word is the most dominant one (38%) and they are of different types, such as: proper nouns, abstract nouns, and concert nouns. The majority of the nouns used are concert nouns. This is followed by abstract nouns, and proper nouns are used the least. Below table shows a number of concert nouns, abstract nouns and all proper nouns.

Table 3. Examples of types of nouns

Concret nouns	Abstract nouns	Proper nouns
Man	Wind	Jimmy Wells
Street	Time	Bob
Eyebrow	Tase	New York
Scar	Fate	West
Cigar	Impressiveness	Chicago
Restaurant	History	Big Joe Brady
Store	Peace	
Doors	Destiny	
Policeman		
Coat		
Face		
Diamond		

It

should be stated that, in the short story, the concret nouns are used to identify the setting, the characters, and what is happening around the setting. The purpose of the abstract nouns is to describe the events and perceptions. Finally, the proper nouns are used to refer the characters and places (cities).

Adjectives

Like nouns, different types of adjectives are used. Yet, it should be noted that adjectives are not as common as nouns. As can be seen in Table 1 above, likewise adverbs, adjectives are the third most frequent type of word class used in the story (13%). Additionally, however, they refer to different attributes, such as: physical, psychological, colure, evaluative, and referential, but the majority of them are used for the descriptive purpose. Below table presents examples of each attribute.

Table 4. Examples of adjective attributes

Physical	Psychological	Colure	evaluative	Referential
Big	Good	White	Handsome	Other
Tall	Bad	Pale	Truest	Opposite
Short	Watchful	Darkened	staunchest	
Old	Brilliant		Finest	
Little	Fine		Pretty	
High	Uncertain			
Square-jawed	Sharpest			

It can be stated that by using these different types of adjective, the author aims to create a visual imagery in the mind of readers and help them to have a good knowledge about the nature of characters. Additionally, having these different types of adjectives will add more interest to the story

and it makes the reader to follow the events with enthusiasm. Therefore, it can be figured out that O. Henry used the adjectives wisely and purposefully.

Verbs

In the short story verbs are used commonly. As can be seen in Table 1 above, they are the second most frequent class of vocabularies (36%). Yet, they are not used only for the grammatical function of the language, but they do serve and hold an important part of the meaning. The verbs have been used are both dynamic and stative, but dynamic verbs are used more. The below table shows the examples of dynamic and stative verbs.

Table 5. Examples of dynamic and stative verbs

Dynamic verbs	Static verbs
Moved	Like
Went	Sounds
Made	Thought
Leaned	Know
Cast	Forget
Trying	Bet
Slowed	Hope
Dined	Exclaimed
Came	Wish
Put	Heard
Going	See
Stopped	were

Additionally, the verbs that have been used refer to movements, physical acts, speech acts, and psychological states. The following are some extracts to show this fact:

Verbs refer to movements:

*“The policeman on the beat **moved up** the avenue impressively.”*

*“Trying doors as he went, **twirling** his club with many intricate and artful movements, **turning** now and then....”*

*“... the policeman suddenly **slowed** his walk...”*

Verbs refer to physical acts:

*“The waiting man **pulled out** a handsome watch...”*

*“...**grasping** both the other's hands with his own.”*

*“The man from the West stopped suddenly and **released** his arm.”*

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Verbs refer to speech acts:

*“The policeman walked up to him the man **spoke** up quickly.”*

*“It’s all right, officer,” he **said**”*

*“Well, yes, for a time we corresponded,” **said** the other.”*

Verbs refer to psychological states:

*“I never **thought** you were so tall by two or three inches”.*

*“The other, submerged in his overcoat, **listened** with interest”.*

*“Chicago **thinks** you may have dropped over our way... ”*

Furthermore, the verbs have been used are transitive and intransitive verbs. But, transitive verbs are used more often than intransitive one. The following are some extracts to show the both types.

Transitive verbs:

*“I’m just **waiting** for a friend.”*

*“The man in the doorway **struck** a match and lit a cigar.”*

*“I **have** a position in one of the city departments.”*

Intransitive verbs:

*“It’s all right, officer,” he **said**, reassuringly”.*

*“... Haven’t you **heard** from your friend since you **left**?”*

*“You’ve **changed** lots, Jimmy.”*

Adverbs

In the “after twenty years”, as can be seen in Table 1 above, the number of adverbs used, comparing to other major word class is the third one like adjectives (13%). But, this does not mean that adverbs do not carry important functions. The adverbs used by the writer carry on different semantic functions, as manners, place, direction, time, frequency and degree. Yet, adverbs of manner and time are used the most. These two classes of adverbs are used to describe the movements of the characters and the night that the story was happened in. This might indicate that the writer aimed to put more emphasis on manner and time. Finally, it should not be unsaid, that like other word class words, O. Henry used the adverbs wisely and purposefully. As can be seen how the use of these adverb made the story colorful and helps the reader to call up an image of that night. Below table presents examples of adverbs according to their semantic functions.

Table 6. Examples of semantic functions of adverbs

Maner	Place	Frequency	Time	Degree
Well	There	Always	Now	At least
Silently	Here	Sometimes	Oclock	Exactly
Oddly	Where	Again	Then	Chilly
Dismally	Around	Never	Tonight	Moderately
Qietly			When	Weel-nigh
Impresively			Until	Barely
Doubtfully			Still	
Simultaneosly			Ago	
Quickly				
Suddenly				
Sharp				

Cohesion and Context

Cohesion

Elegant variation: In the short story now and then, the technique of elegant variation can be seen. In (24) instances the elegant variations are used and all of them are used to refer to the characters. For instance, Jimmy is referred to as ‘the policeman’, ‘the officer’, ‘the old chap’, ‘the good fellow’, and so on. And likewise, Bob is referred to as ‘the waiting man’, ‘the man from the west’, ‘the man in the door’, ‘the man who had come thousand miles to fill an appointment’ and so on. Additionally, the third unnamed character is referred to as ‘the new arrival’, ‘a plain clothes man, ‘and the man’. Clearly, these references are not used randomly and without any specific purposes, but the writer used them wisely and most probably in order to draw attention of the readers to the characters and to show many sided-pictures of each of them. Moreover, the elegant variation references are used to delay introduction of the name of characters. Because even the short story starts with an elegant variation and later after a strange delay names of characters are introduced. This might be done to raise the enthusiasm of the readers to go through the short story and to have a picture of each and then suddenly to be introduced to their names. Or, it can also be said that the names are not so important to be introduced at first, while the characteristics and career of each character is more important.

Co-references in General: O Henry used variable cross-referring devises throughout the short story. In addition to the elegant variation, the other most notable cross-referring devises are lexical repetition, personal pronouns, definite article, conjunctions, and demonstratives. The lexical repetition as a one of the types of cohesion is occurred in (111) instances. And the most repeated word is the policeman with its synonyms that is used (12). This may indicate that writer wants to put emphasis on the public carrier responsibility of Jimmy. The man is occurred (9) times, and the phrase ‘after twenty years’ is repeated (7) times, and so on. Despite repetition of words, personal pronouns as a cross-referencing device are also used widely in (153) times. Prominent, too, (80) times is the use of definite article that is accompanied by a noun identifying a previous reference.

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For instance, ‘the officer’ in (4) refers back to the ‘policeman’ mentioned in (1), ‘the wind’ in (52) refers back to the chilly gusts of wind in (3), and ‘the new arrival’ in (59) goes back to ‘a tall man in a long overcoat’ in (55). Additionally, the use of definite article as a co-reference remark in (80) instances is also used by the writer to create a pretense of shared knowledge with the readers, to make the readers as if they are in the real situation and already know the characters. To prove this, the short story begins by the definite article followed by a noun ‘the policeman’. Moreover, the demonstratives ‘this’ and ‘that’ together are also utilized (13) times such as ‘that kept early hours’ in line (5), ‘this store stands’ in line (14). Furthermore, the writer used variable conjunctions (69) times, as cohesive marks to make cohesive connections between sentences. For instance, ‘the impressiveness was habitual and not for show, for spectators were few line (2), ‘The time was barely 10 o'clock at night, but chilly gusts of wind...’ line (3), ‘...see the lights of a cigar store **or** of an all-night lunch counter’ line (6), ‘The man in the doorway struck a match and lit his cigar’ line (17), and so on. Table 7 below illustrates cohesion data in term of elegant variation, lexical repetitions, personal pronouns, definite article, demonstratives, and conjunctions.

Table 7. Cohesion data

	elegant variation	personal pronouns	lexical repetitions	definite article	conjunctions	demonstratives
Total number	24	153	111	80	69	13
% per (100) words	2%	12%	9%	6.32%	5.0%	1%

Note: the total number of words used in short story is (1265) words.

Context

The story of “after twenty years” is almost entirely in third-person objective narration. It does not reveal the inner thoughts of any characters as what characters think and feel, but it is narrated from the viewpoint of what is seen and done in the story. To make a surprise or twist climax at the end of story this type of narration is very effective. If the story was told in first-person or even third-person omniscient narration it would not have such an effect of surprise climax ending. Additionally, this type of story narration is effective to drag the attention and interest of the reader. O. Henry’s short stories are famous of surprise or twist endings. Therefore, this type of narration best helped him to achieve his style. The below two lines from the short story best illustrate the third-person narration:

“When about midway of a certain block, the policeman suddenly slowed his walk. In the doorway of a darkened hardware store a man leaned with an unlighted cigar in his mouth”.

In the short story in some instances dialogues in direct speech can also be seen between the characters.

"Oh, I grew a bit after I was twenty.", "Doing well in New York, Jimmy?"

"Moderately, I have a position in one of the city departments. Come on, Bob; we'll go around to a place I know of and have a good long talk about old times."

Moreover, the use of dialogue in a story is also very important because it will help readers to view what is said rather than to what is felt by the characters. It gives readers a clear understanding of the events within the story. For instance, the dialogue between Bob and policeman gives readers the information about the past of the two close friends, their promise, the choices they made for their life, and the reason why he is waiting there etc. Therefore, it should be mentioned that O. Henry used the dialogues very wisely again to achieve his surprise ending style and to attach more clarity to the story.

Conclusions

With the above discussion and analysis, now it can be concluded that the short story is written in a very simple way using comprehensible vocabularies. This might reveal that O. Henry intended to convey the message bluntly and, in a way, understandable to anyone who reads it. The overwhelming majority of the words used are formal, yet a few numbers of informal words can be found throughout the whole story. In terms of major word classes, it was revealed that the short story is very rich, and it includes a prominent number of nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs. Regarding the noun class, it was uncovered that they are the most used class and belong to different types namely proper nouns, abstract nouns, and concert nouns. Additionally, it was noticed that the main function of them is to identify the setting, the characters, and what is happening around the setting.

Moreover, regarding the adjectives, it was revealed that likewise adverbs, they are the third most dominant word class, and they are referred to different attributes such as: physical, psychological, colure, evaluative, and referential. Yet, the majority of them were used to describe the physical and psychological features of the characters and the setting. It was also revealed that the use of these adjectives is helpful in creating a visual imagery in the mind of reader and helps them to have a good knowledge about the nature of characters.

Concerning the verb class, it was found out that they are the second most use word class and they do play an important role of meaning. This role in making meaning accessible to the reader is achieved through describing actions and to a certain extent by playing stative role in the story.

In regard to adverb class, it is also found out that the adverbs used by the writer carry on different semantic functions as: manners, place, direction, time, frequency and degree. Yet, adverbs of manner and time are used the most. These two types of adverbs are used to describe the movements of the characters and the night that the story was happened in.

Moreover, regarding the cohesion it is figured out that O Henry used variable cross-referring devises throughout the short story. In addition to the elegant variation, the other most notable ones are lexical repetition, personal pronouns, definite article, conjunctions, and demonstratives. Finally, pertaining to context, it is uncovered that the story of “after twenty years” is almost entirely in third-person objective narration, and in some instances dialogues in direct speech can also be seen the between the characters.

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