

AN ANALYSES OF THE STYLISTIC TECHNIQUES IN JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER'S *EXTREMELY LOUD AND INCREDIBLY CLOSE*

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Abstract:

*The paper deals with the stylistic features that are typical of each of the three character- narrator's discourse in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Analyses is based on a general impression of each narrator's style. The novel consists of three narrative voices. The contrast of the three narrative perspectives is accomplished by applying diverse styles, language and speech rhythms. The first narrator is a nine-year-old boy, Oskar, who struggles to cope with his father's death during the attack on the World Trade Centre. The second narrator is Grandma, a kind and devoted woman who cares her grandson a lot and wants us to know all about her 'feelings,' and the third narrator is Thomas sr., a young sculptor who in his teens loses his beloved and eventually marries Grandma, his beloved's sister. The chapters that are narrated by Oskar differs from those narrated by Grandma and Thomas Sr. in that they are not letters or diary entries, and they are not addressed to any specific person.*

Key Words: *Stylistic, analysis, narrative voices, rhythms.*

The exposition of the story starts on the way to the funeral of Oskar's Father, Thomas Schell, who deceased during the attack on the World Trade Centre, a tragic event known as 9/11. Oskar, who lives with his occupied Mother and over-caring Grandmother, cannot reconcile with the loss. The rising action comes when he accidentally finds an envelope with a key in it in a mysterious vase in his Father's closet. Oskar believes the key to be a clue to the last "Reconnaissance Expedition" which his Dad used to design for him. These "Reconnaissance Expeditions" were tracking games with complicated, well-hidden clues which helped Oskar to learn to improve his communication skills and to develop his knowledge and exceptional intellect. After the discovery of the key, Oskar decides to solve the riddle and begins to search secretly for the lock. It is Oskar's way of prolonging his Father's presence in his life as well as reconciliation with his death. It is also his dealing with sense of guilt, which comes from the day of the 9/11 attack when Oskar was not able to answer his Father's call after having heard his previous desperate messages. Oskar then in panic let instead the answering machine record his Father's last message.

In contrast to Grandma's or Thomas Sr.'s texts, Oskar's prose does not exhibit anything particularly remarkable when it comes to sentence length or punctuation. His style is more colloquial than that of Grandma and Thomas Sr. He uses informal language, slang expressions, and sometimes we see that he uses discourse marker which we typically associate with spoken language, such as "anyway" and "obviously." Oskar's style also differs from that of Grandma and Thomas Sr. in that he consistently uses the same or similar wording or phrases. His choice of words reflects his age for example jargon expressions such as cool, neat, crack up (instead of "laugh"), wimpy and so on. Oskar also has some odd expressions of his own, such as saying "Jose" (2) instead of the whole phrase 'No way, Jose.' The distinctive elements in Oskar's speech are part of what creates him as a character. It is common for people to have "favourite" words or expressions which they tend to (over) use in their everyday speech. Oskar's frequent use of "Jose" and "What the?" (2) is part of what makes him vivid as a character and creates the illusion that he is telling the whole story to us orally. There are certain phraseological patterns which reappear in Oskar's speech. He

has an active and associative mind, and he is constantly coming up with ideas for more or less likely inventions. When he is thinking of these, he often uses questions such as “what if...?” or “what about/how about...?” (1). There is no narrate present in Oskar's part of the narrative, so the use of a question here is likely to be self-addressing; it is a way of mimicking the thought process behind the inventions. Oskar also uses questions when he is narrating episodes where he is curious about something, or when he is confused. The way Oskar uses questions adds to the overall impression of him as an open, inquisitive and naive child.

French words and phrases frequently occur in Oskar's speech. Oskar takes French lessons, and often shows off his knowledge of French in his narrative. The French expression he favours the most is *raison d'être* (1), which occurs several times in Oskar's portions of the novel. We also see Oskar using French in dialogue with other characters, such as when he runs his finger along the top of a microwave, holds up his finger and mockingly tells Abby Black that “*c'est sale*” (93), or when he tells his mother that he is “*très fatigué*” (168).

This tendency of “showing off” in Oskar can be seen as an expression of Oskar's wish to appear knowledgeable and worldly despite the fact that he is no more than nine years old. We also learn from his narrative that Oskar does not seem to fit in well at school and appears to prefer the company of adults. His showing off can be interpreted as a sign that he is self-conscious of his age and would like to appear wiser and more mature than he is. But in reality this behaviour of Oskar reveals that he is a child and that he craves for praise and acknowledgement from adults.

Since most of Oskar's narrative deals with his search for the lock and this search involves walking around New York and talking to people, Oskar's chapters contain more dialogue than the others, and a greater number of characters. When reporting dialogue, Oskar mostly uses a combination of indirect and direct speech. When there is direct speech, he uses quotation marks and he usually does not shift the line to mark the turns in the dialogue: “The next morning I told mom I couldn't go to school again. She asked what was wrong. I told her. “The same thing that's always wrong.” “You're sick?” “I'm sad.” “About Dad?” “About everything” (42).

A feature of Oskar's discourse which also differs from the other narrator's discourse is how genre conventions are exploited. Oskar describes his rage towards his classmates, his mother and grandfather, and everyone else in a violent fantasy which is written like a stage script in the sample.

“ME. Alas, poor Hamlet [I take JIMMY SYNDER'S face into my hand]; I knew him, Horatio.
 JIMMY SYNDER. But Yorick...you're only...a skull.
 ME. So what? I don't care. Screw you.
 JIMMY SYNDER. [Whispers] This is not in the play....
 ME. I knew him, Horatio; a jerk of infinite stupidity, a most excellent masturbator in the second floor boy's bathroom-I have proof. Also, he is dyslexic” (145).

At first he shows the actual dialogue from the adapted Hamlet play that Oskar and his class are rehearsing in the sample. He shows the names of the characters in smaller, uppercase letters, with the stage directions written in italics within square brackets. Further down the page he writes (in ordinary prose) “May be it was because of everything that had happened in those twelve weeks. Or maybe it was because I felt so close and alone that night. I just couldn't be dead any longer” (145). After this he introduces a new passage of “script” that shows him insulting Jimmy Synder, the boy who bullies him at school. At first it is unclear whether this is something that is actually happening or not; whether Oskar actually does rebel against the script and starts insulting Jimmy Synder on stage during play. Eventually, however, the stage directions describe Oskar as smashing Synder's skull. “I keep smashing the skull against his skull, which is also RON'S skull (for letting MOM get on with life) and MOM'S skull (for getting on with life) and DAD'S skull (for dying) and GRANDMA'S skull (for embarrassing me so much) and DR.FEIN'S skull (for asking

if any good could come out of DAD'S death) and the skulls of everyone else I know” (146). At this point, the reader realizes that this is Oskar's inner dramatization of his confined frustration. Hence it is clear that Oskar's portions are more “multi-textured” than Grandma's and Thomas Sr.'s portions, because of the greater variety of textual and visual modes.

Grandma's language is, like Grandfather's predominantly carried out in simple sentences. It reminds the reader that they are both immigrants and English is not their mother tongue. In Grandma's narration however, the sentences occupy much larger space. The abnormal large gaps between sentences can signify a text written on a type writer or a slow speech of an old and tired person. Very often, there is only one sentence per line. Unlike Grandfather's, this kind of writing offers the reader enough time to reflect on her thoughts. Through this formal layout with the combination of the poetic language by which Grandma expresses herself, the reader gets the impression of reading a modern poetry. The brief descriptions and dialogues are interwoven by images, thoughts or rhetorical questions.

“When I was a girl, my life was music that was always getting louder. Everything moved me. A dog following a stranger. That made me feel so much. A calendar that showed the wrong month. I could have cried over it. I did. Where the smoke from a chimney ended. How an overturned bottle rested at the edge of a table” (180).

This poetic style captures Grandma's gentle melancholic nature. Moreover, to express intimate feelings or sensitive painful memories is not simple. Poetry, however, permits the narrator to capture such elusive elements. Since Grandma writes about her trauma and other sensitive inner feelings, the poetic language allows her to express them in their full depth. Grandma's narration is mostly free of descriptions or explications. It flows in an associational manner, in some places evoking stream of consciousness, just like in Grandfather's and Oskar's narration, although her pace and pausing make this kind of narration less oppressive. Another important feature of Grandma's style is the way in which she uses questions. Sometimes she uses questions to convey feelings such as wonder, confusion or exasperation when she asks herself “What would it take for you to give up?” “Why was it necessary to torture him?” (224) when watching someone being interviewed by an insensitive news reporter on television.

The most striking feature of Grandma's discourse is perhaps her use of double spaces and line shifting. This creates a lot of space in Grandma's texts, which may be meant to carry a symbolic meaning. Grandma's style is characterized by short, simple declarative sentences which often contain only a single participant and a single process. “When I was a girl, my life was music that was always getting louder... Anyone who believes that a second is faster than a decade did not live my life” (180-181). “I hit the space bar again and again and again. My life story was spaces” (176).

Another prominent feature of her style is that she lets minor sentence types such as noun phrases and short clauses stand on their own. This creates a sense of slowness; it seems as if Grandma pauses to dwell on each meaning before moving on to the next. The stylistic features we have described above combine to create Grandma as a character who is sensitive, brooding, and meditative. Grandma seems to invite the reader to make sense of what she says rather than indicating an obvious path for interpretation. She does not explicitly express her feelings towards the events she narrates such as her childhood memories, but the wordings she chooses conveys a sense of tenderness, for example, “The memory of his arm wraps around me as his arm used to” (181). Grandma mostly uses direct speech when she quotes others or while reporting dialogue, but she does not use quotation marks. Instead, she often shifts the line, and sometimes she uses speech verbs like “said,” “told,” “asked,” or when reporting exchanges between herself and Thomas Sr., “wrote,” “pointed at” or “showed” (i.e. Thomas Sr. showing either his left or right hand) to mark the turns in the dialogue.

Another characteristic feature of Grandma's style is, she brings the past and the present together by making association between her memories and newer experiences or observations. Sometimes she creates these associations simply by juxtaposing “snapshots” from her mind. “I spent my life learning to feel less.

Every day I felt less. Is that growing old? Or is it something worse? ... I pulled the book from him. It was wet with tears running down the pages, as if the book itself were crying” (180). In the chapter entitled “MY FEELINGS” we can also find that Grandma exploits the polysemy and homonymy of the word ring(s). “One million pieces of paper filled the sky. They stayed there, like a ring around the building. Like the rings of Saturn. The rings of coffee staining my father's desk. The ring Thomas told me he didn't need. I told him he wasn't the only one who needed” (225). There is also an instance where Grandma is sitting and watching the images of burning and falling towers over and over again on television, there is the following quote: “Bodies falling. Buildings falling. The rings of the tree that fell away from our house” (232).

What we see here is how Grandma's memories of her childhood blend into what she is experiencing on 9/11, and the pain of losing her family in Dresden is coming back to her as she realizes that she has lost her son. This is never written explicitly, however. It is typical for Grandma's discourse, connections between events, reasons for decisions and associations between past and present are only implied, never spelled out. Moreover, there is a symbolic connection between the rings of the tree and all the time that has passed between the moments she recalls. What her memories and impressions are blended like this, it makes it seem like we are invited into Grandma's mind, as it were, and experiencing the world as she does, or in other words, it creates a stream-of-consciousness effect.

Grandfather's narration is delivered in letters written in order to explain to his son, Oskar's father, the reasons of his departure. The most important factor that influences Grandfather's style of narration is his trauma from World War II and the subsequent loss of speech. The reader feels the tension coming from his narration due to the narrator's choleric overwhelming phrasing. Grandfather uses very short sentences but nearly omits full stops, substituting them for commas. The first sentence of his narration covers fourteen lines. “To my unborn child: I haven't always been silent, I used to talk and talk and talk and talk...so that the person could hear what I couldn't, myself, say” (16). From the narration thus emerges an intensely fast pace, eliminating any space for thinking. This feeling is potentiated by the visual form of the text due to lack of paragraphs or any other text division. The narration blends into one constant stream-of-consciousness until it is interrupted by a page with a single utterance. “I want two rolls” (19). “And I wouldn't say no to something sweet” (20). This is a moment when language style penetrates the visual aspect. Not only that the narration is tensed itself but by the look at it the reader experiences the pressure the narrator undergoes within himself. Grandfather's urging need to explain his deeds contrasts with his ability of real self-expressing. He seems to be as isolated by his grief and guilt as the utterances levitating in the middle of the blank pages.

Thomas Sr. also uses short clauses and minor sentence types. The difference between his and Grandma's style is that Thomas Sr. breaks normal conventions when it comes to punctuation. We also see that his texts are mostly written in one long paragraph, except for the pages that show the pages of his daybook which he uses to communicate to the outside world. Thus we see that while Grandma uses full stops, double spaces and shifted lines to create a sense of space and slowness in her prose, Thomas Sr.'s prose seems to move faster. Since Thomas Sr. has lost the ability to speak, writing in his daybooks is the closest he comes to speaking apart from gesturing and displaying his palms. It therefore seems like he writes as if he is talking. Even though the sentences are often unusually long, Thomas Sr.'s texts are not ungrammatical or difficult to read. It seems like reading a transcript of his speech. While grandma seems to invite the reader to pause and reflect on what she writes in each line, Thomas Sr. discourse moves rapidly on. We also see that there is some variation in sentence length; so that the rhythm of his discourse varies somewhat.

Thomas Sr. usually renders dialogue in direct speech, and he uses quotation marks and speech verbs. He does not shift the line when quoting the turns in a dialogue, but sometimes he shows only his own turns, by displaying pages of his book where he has dedicated the whole page to a single utterance.

A feature which stands out in Thomas Sr.'s prose is that it is highly repetitive, both in terms of

lexical and structural repetition. We see that Thomas Sr. repeats words such as Something, Nothing, mark off, disappear, privacy in his narration. We also see that he repeats the phrase “x is Something/Nothing” toward the end of the sample. “This is Something,” we decided. “This is Nothing.” “Something.” “Nothing.” “Something” “Nothing.” “Nothing.” “Nothing.” (111). Such lexical repetition contributes to making Thomas Sr.'s discourse intense and fast-moving. In contrast to Grandma's text there is a sense of energy and pace rather than contemplation.

This tendency towards repetition also occurs in the remainder of Thomas Sr.'s chapter. “To my child: I'm writing this from where your mother's father's shed used to stand, the shed is no longer here, no carpets cover no floors, no windows in no walls, everything has been replaced” (208). “The end of suffering does not justify the suffering, and so there is no end to suffering, what a mess I am, I thought, what a fool, how foolish and narrow, how worthless, how pinched and pathetic, how helpless” (33).

In the first example, we see the repetition of the negative no. This repetition seems to emphasize Thomas Sr.'s feeling of alienation as he is standing in the library where the shed used to be. As he looks around, he sees where the walls and floor of the shed should have been. In the second example, we see lexical repetition in end of/ to suffering and structural repetition in the phrases what a [x] and how [x]. We notice here the alternation between the phrases with co-ordinate adjectives (how foolish and narrow and how pinched and pathetic) and the phrases with a single adjective (how worthless and how helpless). This sort of repetition adds intensity to Thomas Sr.'s discourse along with his disregard for full stops. It gives Thomas Sr.'s style a sense of verbosity which contrasts to Grandma's slower and more “quiet” prose. Thomas Sr. chooses more direct ways of expressing his emotions where he adds adjective after adjective and intensifies the message through structural repetition.

Thomas Sr.'s style construes him as an expressive character. He has a lot to say and many ways to say it; yet he never seems to feel like he ever succeeds in truly explaining what he needs to explain, which is why he had to leave. The vitality and restlessness of his style reflects the restlessness of his character. While Grandma was able to somehow come to terms with her fate and decided to settle down and start a new life in the United States, Thomas Sr. never found that sort of peace. It is not until he accompanies Oskar to the graveyard and buries his letters that he finds it.

Thomas Sr. and Grandma are in many ways each other's opposites when it comes to the way in which they write. She uses short sentences, clauses and phrases that stand on their own, and creates more space in her text than what is conventional. This gives her prose a sense of slowness. He writes sentences that are much longer than what is conventional, and creates hardly any space in his text at all, which makes his texts seem more fast-paced. It is also worth noting that while Thomas Sr. is silent in the story world, Grandma appears to be quite talkative. We see this in the episode where they meet in the bakery, an episode which is narrated by both of them. Thomas Sr. describes Grandma as chattering away, while Grandma reports on the same event in her usual “quiet” style. So while Thomas Sr. is essentially an introvert who prefers to express himself in writing, Grandma seems to be an extrovert who would prefer talking. Despite their differences, however, we see that Thomas Sr. and Grandma choose to narrate many of the same events. The two of them lived through the same disaster, escaped to the same country, and tried living together, but chose different ways of coping with their fates.

By presenting their narratives interchangeably, the implied author lets Grandma and Thomas Sr. take turns in telling “their side of the story.” Grandma and Thomas Sr. clearly have a very difficult time communicating, and the juxtaposition of their narratives show how and why this is so. The arrangement of the chapters also makes the parallels between the stories visible. The bombing of Dresden during World War II is juxtaposed with 9/11. Grandma's worry that all the letters she had collected as a child caused their house to burn more fiercely when it was bombed is echoed in Oskar's last chapter, where he speaks of how all the paper in the World Trade Centre “All of those notepads, and Xeroxes, and printed e-mails and photographs of kids, and books, and dollar bills in wallets, and documents in files...all of them were fuel”

(325). Grandma speaks of the roof of her house collapsing and her father being caught underneath it, and this forms a parallel to Thomas Jr. who is in all prospects stuck in one of the collapsed Twin Towers. We learn that Thomas Jr. became “obsessed” with finding Thomas Sr. after receiving the only letter Thomas Sr. had been able to mail to Thomas Jr. Thomas Sr. tells Grandma that Thomas Jr. came to see him in Dresden once, but that “He wouldn't tell me who he was. He must have become nervous...” (277). Grandma did not know that Thomas Jr. went to find his father. Thus this creates a parallel between Oskar and Thomas Jr. They have both lost their fathers, and they have both gone on a search because of it, and there also an obvious parallel is that both of their fathers were named Thomas Schell. We do not find out about Thomas Jr.'s reasons for becoming “obsessed” with his father, or what his reasons were for wanting to meet him. In Oskar's case, it seems that his motivation for finding what the key is for is to deal with his grief. Oskar's dedication to his self-imposed task creates sympathy with the reader, as well as the characters in the book. Searching for the lock gives Oskar a purpose and helps him get through the days, and at the end of the novel it seems that it is something that has helped him come to terms with his father's death. Going to the cemetery with Thomas Sr. and burying the letters is symbolic of both of them coming to terms with the losses they have experienced.

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