'The Place Near The Thing Where We Went That Time': An Inferential Approach to Pragmatic Stylistics

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Abstract

This paper considers the exploration of inferential processes involved in interpreting texts as one way of applying ideas from pragmatics within the field of stylistics. There are a number of questions to ask in accounting for specific inferences. Exploring them leads to insights about individual texts, individual inferences and the nature of literary and non-literary interpretation. A number of these questions are briefly considered here. Is the inference derived before, during or after the initial interpretation of the text? What part or parts of the text provide evidence to support the inference (how 'local' or 'global' is the evidence)? How much support for the inference is provided by the text? How determinate/vague is the inference? Is the inferential process open-ended or is there a fairly clear conclusion to the process? How salient are the inferential processes? How likely is it that interpreters will revisit or continue to think about the inference after the initial interpretation process? Understanding particular inferences, and exploring these questions about them, can help us to understand how a text gives rise to specific effects. In some cases, inferential processes themselves constitute effects of a text. Studying inferential processes is one way in which (pragmatic) stylistics can engage with other areas of literary study, shedding light on questions about literary interpretation, literary criticism and literary value.

1   Introduction

A number of authors have seen a role for pragmatics in stylistic analysis.[1] This paper aims to build on earlier work (Clark 2009) which argues that accounts of inferential processes can make a significant contribution to stylistic analysis and that in some cases salient inferential processes give rise to effects which can only be accounted for by looking at the inferential processes of readers. This paper considers a range of ways in which accounts of inferential processes can contribute to stylistic analysis. The next

section briefly discusses pragmatic stylistics and the motivation for developing an inferential approach. Section three runs through a number of questions we might explore in developing accounts of specific inferences. Section four considers how this work might help to develop connections between stylistics and other areas of literary study by shedding light on the nature of literary interpretation, literary criticism and notions of literary value. The overall conclusion is that this approach is a fruitful way of developing our understanding of specific texts, specific inferences, and the nature of literary and non-literary interpretation.

2   Inference and Pragmatic Stylistics

This section begins by discussing an example which illustrates some of the ways in which inference is involved in responding to texts. It then considers the notion of pragmatic stylistics understood as the application of ideas from pragmatics to the stylistic analysis of texts.

2.1   Understanding and inference

In the 2007 film *Broadcast News* (written, produced and directed by James, L. Brooks) there is a conversation which demonstrates how the nature of inferential processes can be more or less salient to audiences, how inferences can contribute to the effects of texts and how inferential processes can themselves constitute effects. The main characters in the film work for a news station where economic problems have led to job losses and reshuffles. The character Jane Craig, played by Holly Hunter, is still in the office late in the evening when she makes a phone call to her fellow employee Aaron Altman, played by Albert Brooks. Here is their conversation:

(1)   *(Phone rings. Aaron answers right away)*

Aaron: Hello!

Jane: Bastard! Sneak! Quitter!

Aaron: Speaking!

Jane: I just found out. You didn't say anything to me. You just resign? Will you meet me now?

Aaron: Oh, no, I can't. Maybe next week, I got —

Jane: No. I'm I'm going away tomorrow. Please!

Aaron: All right, I'll meet you at the place near the thing where we went that time.

Jane: OK, I'll meet you there.

(*Broadcast News*, 2007, dir. James L. Brooks)

This conversation illustrates a number of ways in which inferential processes are involved in understanding the film and contribute to its effects. First, the exchange reveals important developments in the story, perhaps most importantly that Aaron has resigned. Second, it reveals information about the relationship between Jane and Aaron. Jane begins the conversation by uttering a series of insulting terms. This suggests that she and Aaron have a very close relationship, close enough for it to be safe for her to initiate a conversation in this way. This is reinforced when Aaron replies with the one word *speaking*, which he utters in an affected, markedly positive way. This suggests an ironic interpretation based on the contrast between Aaron's positive manner and Jane's negativity. It also shows that Aaron understands instantly what Jane is talking about and that he recognises why his actions would lead to her thinking of him as a 'bastard/sneak/quitter'. This builds on the picture of their close relationship which has developed throughout the film. Jane's instant refusal to wait for a week to see him and

Aaron's instant acceptance that he will meet her that night also add to the sense of a very quick and easy understanding between them.

Aaron's utterance *'I'll meet you at the place near the thing where we went that time'* is quite striking. It contributes again to our understanding of their relationship. We notice that Aaron and Jane understand each other so well that this string of referential expressions causes Jane no problems of understanding. This is, of course, in contrast to members of the audience who have no way of knowing what place he is referring to, what thing it is near, or when they went there. Jane, on the other hand, can just say *'OK, I'll meet you there'* and hang up. An interesting aspect of this is that it draws attention to the inferential process itself. We as viewers do not know what *'the place'* is, what *'the thing'* is or when *'that time'* was so we can not work out where they will meet. We notice that Jane has no problems and we make inferences about how close they are because of this. Arguably, viewers are more likely to think about the inferences involved in understanding this than some other inferences they make in understanding the film. To some extent, understanding this scene and its effects involves noticing the nature of the inferences we make, the nature of the inferences Jane makes and the contrast between the two. Such variations in the salience of inferences can contribute to the effects of a text.

The rest of this paper looks more systematically at a range of questions we might ask in exploring inferences. Before that, here are some comments on what the term 'pragmatic stylistics' might refer to.

2.2   Pragmatics and stylistics

'Pragmatic stylistics' is not a well-defined term. The sense in which I am using it here is as the application of ideas from pragmatics to the stylistic analysis of literary and non-literary texts. Pragmatics, in turn, can be understood in a number of different ways, or in

a very loose, general way which encompasses other definitions. This means that pragmatic stylistics, understood as 'linguistic pragmatics applied to stylistic analysis', could refer to any of a number of different approaches depending on which ideas about pragmatics are being applied. This section makes a few comments on pragmatics, stylistics and pragmatic stylistics before we move on to consider the approach to pragmatic stylistics which applies ideas from accounts of pragmatic inference to the analysis of texts.

As Horn and Ward (2004) point out, more than one tradition has developed in the study of pragmatics. Horn and Ward focus on the linguistic and philosophical tradition associated with the work of Grice (1975, 1989), but recognise the existence of other, 'broader and more sociological' (Horn and Ward: xi) approaches. They point to Mey (1998) and Verschueren, Östman and Blommaert (1995) as useful sources on the broader conceptions. Verschueren, Östman and Blommaert (1995: ix) suggest a broad definition of pragmatics as 'the cognitive, social and cultural study of language and communication'. Given that 'pragmatics' covers such a wide range of phenomena, and given the assumption that pragmatic stylistics applies ideas from pragmatics, then the term 'pragmatic stylistics' must cover a similarly wide range. The approach outlined here follows Horn and Ward in focusing on pragmatics in the Gricean tradition and is arguably even narrower since it is specifically concerned with the inferences made by readers or viewers when responding to literary and non-literary texts.

Stylistics is also a term that has been understood in a number of different ways. As part of a wider discussion of stylistics, Wales (2006) suggests one activity which perhaps represents a relatively broad consensus shared by a large number of stylisticians:

Stylistics' …'[stylistics] characteristically deals with the

interpretation of texts by focusing in detail on relevant distinctive

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> linguistic features, patterns, structures or levels and on their
>
> significance and effects on readers.
>
> (Wales 2006: 216)

Leech and Short (2007) suggest a slightly different characterisation of the 'significance and effects' which stylistics seeks to explain:

> Let us assume that the general aim of stylistics is an attempt to
>
> explain how readers get from the words of a text to (a) an
>
> understanding of it and (b) a felt response to it.
>
> (Leech and Short 2007: 289)

Leech and Short also suggest that, in the 25 or so years between the first (1981) and second (2007) edition of their book, stylistics has undergone a 'pragmatic turn' (Leech and Short 2007: 284) and a 'cognitive turn' (Leech and Short 2007: 286). While they do not consider that all work in stylistics reflects the pragmatic and cognitive turns, they suggest that frameworks which have followed the 'cognitive turn' focus on:

> the nature of literary interpretation, conceiving it as a cognitive
>
> process of 'making sense', in the broadest sense, of a story and
>
> a way of telling it
>
> (Leech and Short 2007: 306)

They see inference as a 'key tool' in developing this kind of approach.

Even when construed in these ways, however, the focus of stylistics is not limited to forms and cognitive processes. The interest in interpretations and effects inevitably

raises questions about contexts, including the social contexts in which texts are interpreted. Stockwell (2006) points out that a 'growing body' of work in stylistics:

> . . . marries up detailed analysis at the micro-linguistic level with
> a broader view of the communicative context

<div align="right">(Stockwell 2006: 755)</div>

He goes on to suggest that:

> Stylistics *necessarily* involves the simultaneous practice of
> linguistic analysis and awareness of the interpretative and
> social dimension.

<div align="right">(Stockwell 2006: 755)</div>

The focus in this paper is on the inferences made by individual readers/viewers. This approach is cognitive in that it focuses on individual inferences. It is social in that these inferences depend on individuals being affected, consciously or not, by the social contexts in which interpretation takes place.

Putting together a pragmatics that focuses on the inferences made by text interpreters and a stylistics that focuses on linguistic 'features, patterns, structures or levels' and their effects on readers, we would assume then that 'pragmatic stylistics' is about the inferences made by interpreters based on the linguistic and non-linguistic features of texts. How do these inferences relate to the effects of the texts? Two possibilities suggest themselves:

     a.   inferential processes could be involved in arriving at the effects of texts

     b.   inferential processes could themselves constitute the effects of texts

This paper suggests that both possibilities exist and that an inferential approach can contribute to explanations of both of these phenomena.

So what kinds of things might be involved in stylistic analysis focusing on inference? Since every act of interpretation involves inference, we will expect to develop an account of the inferences made by interpreters. Since we are aiming to explain the effects of texts, we will expect to develop an account of how these inferences contribute to or constitute the effects of texts. The rest of this paper sketches some of the ways in which applying ideas from linguistic pragmatics might contribute to these goals. The next section runs through a number of questions we might ask in exploring individual inferences.

3   Exploring Inferences

What kinds of things might be involved in exploring the inferential processes involved in responding to a text? This section runs through a number of questions we might ask about specific inferences and indicates some of the kinds of things we might discover by exploring each of them.

3.1   When is the inference made?

Inferences can be made before, during or after we first read or view the text itself. Inferences we make before we start reading a novel, for example, might be based on evidence from a wide range of sources, including assumptions we already entertain about the author, information from other readers, or ideas expressed in reviews. We might make inferences based on the book's location in a bookshop or on a website. Our

interpretation might also be influenced by the design of the cover. Hoover (1999: 1-4) makes some comments about the effects of different covers on his reading of William Golding's *The Inheritors*. Clark (2009: 196-199) develops some of these ideas, suggesting that analyses of such effects might build on ideas about the analysis of multimodal texts originally suggested by Barthes (1977) and developed by a number of authors since (e.g. Kress and van Leeuwen 2001, van Leeuwen 2005). A similar approach might be developed to account for the interaction of the title of a work with the main body of the text.

Inferences made during the reading or viewing of a text are likely to be the first considered when thinking about how to apply ideas from pragmatics in stylistic analysis, and indeed most work in this area does focus on inferences made at the time of first reading or viewing. Two types of inference are perhaps the most obvious variety: those between characters (about how one character will interpret the utterance of another character) and those between 'author' and audience (about what the author is communicating by what she writes or by what she has characters do or say). The notion of the 'author' of a film such as *Broadcast News* is tricky since films are made by production teams and there is disagreement about the extent to which any particular members of the team are responsible for the finished film. I will not discuss this issue further here but simply talk about the communicative intentions of 'the film-makers' while understanding that this leaves an important issue unresolved. A number of further complications in the relationship between the author's act of communication and the audience's inferences are not explored here, such as the variety of narrative voices which are possible. I will say nothing, for example, about possible 'implied narrators' or other 'voices' which we might represent in interpreting texts or in our stylistic analyses of them.[2]

Leech and Short (1981: 302-305) provide one of the earliest discussions within modern stylistics of the difference between character-character and author-audience inferences. This can be illustrated by the exchange from *Broadcast News* above. We make inferences about the inferences of the two characters, such as that Aaron will recognise the urgency behind Jane's request to see him, and inferences about what the author intends us to infer, such as that Jane and Aaron are very close and understand each other particularly well. Following suggestions by Clark (1996), this kind of difference could be understood in terms of the distinction within relevance theory between *'implications'*, propositions which follow logically from other propositions whether intentionally communicated or not, and *'implicatures'*, intentionally communicated propositions. Within this framework, implicatures are a subset of implications. To take a fairly simple example, suppose that I ask you the time while I am rushing to try to catch a train at 10.15am. You reply:

(2) Just after quarter past ten.

It follows from this that I have missed the 10.15 train. Did you intend me to understand this based on your utterance? It depends on whether or not you knew that I was trying to catch that train. If you knew that I was trying to catch the 10.15, then you have implicated that I have missed it. If you did not know this, then the fact that I have missed this train is an implication, something I have inferred from your utterance, but not an implicature, since you could not have intended me to infer this. Typically, if we ask a stranger in the street what time it is, their response is relevant largely because of implications which the stranger can not have been aware of.

We can illustrate some of the possibilities by looking at example inferences we might make based on the *Broadcast News* exchange. (3) is an implicature which follows from (at least) Jane's first two utterances:

(3)   Jane is upset about Aaron resigning.

This implicature is implicated by Jane but we could argue that it is also implicated by the film-makers since they are providing evidence to support it by having the character act in this way. (4) is arguably not implicated by either character:

(4)   Jane and Aaron are so close that Aaron's way of referring to where they will meet causes Jane no problems of comprehension.

The conclusion that this is not a character implicature is only arguable since Aaron's utterance and Jane's response do provide evidence for this conclusion. But it is not the main point of either Aaron's or Jane's utterance and it is not clear how likely it is that either character would think about this. (4) does logically follow from Aaron's utterance and Jane's response, making it at least an implication. It is also clear that the film-makers intend audiences to arrive at this conclusion. Therefore, it is also an implicature which the film's audience derive based on evidence provided by the film-makers.

We have seen that implicatures communicated by both characters and film-makers can be distinguished from implicatures of film-makers which are only implications of the behaviour of characters. As with all communicative acts, there are also some inferences which follow logically from evidence in the film but which would not count as implicatures by anyone, e.g. the exchange provides evidence that neither character has decided to

speak in a language other than English at this point in the film, something which no-one would argue is being intentionally communicated.

As well as inferences about what the characters communicate and about what their actions and utterances suggest, we also make inferences about the development of the story. (5) and (6) are inferences we will make when viewing the exchange between Jane and Aaron.

(5)   Aaron has resigned.

(6)   Aaron did not tell Jane that he had resigned.

The information about Aaron having resigned and not having told Jane are things that each character knew before the exchange but which are wholly new to us. What is significant for the characters is that Jane has come to know them recently and is making this manifest to Aaron. After the exchange, they both know that they are both aware of these. Before the exchange, Aaron might have thought about whether Jane knew. Now that they are mutually manifest, the characters are in a different situation, particularly with regard to their social relationship.[3]

Before we first read or view a text, we make inferences based on contextual assumptions from a range of sources. During our first reading or viewing, we make inferences about the story, the characters, the character's inferences and what the author intends to communicate. What about inferences which happen after reading? Some of these are continued explorations of inferences made before or during first reading. We can, for example, go back to the cover or title and think further about how it relates to the text as a whole. Other inferences might be about the text as a whole, what we understood from it, its themes, its value and so on. The process of deriving these inferences might go on for a very long time if we choose to develop more detailed

interpretations or criticism. As discussed in section 4.1 below, Furlong (1996) develops

an inferential account of literary interpretation based on a distinction between

'spontaneous' and 'non-spontaneous' interpretation. The former is more typical in

informal, everyday contexts and the latter more typical when we think of ourselves as

developing literary interpretations. We also sometimes find ourselves thinking again

about texts without planning to do so formally. In section 4.3 below, I suggest that

exploring inferences associated with this phenomenon can make a significant

contribution to understanding the phenomenon of literary 'resonance' (as discussed from

a different perspective by Stockwell 2009) and literary value. All of these phenomena are

discussed more fully in section 4 below, with the suggestion that an account of inferential

processes can help us to understand them. One thing to note before moving on is that

post-textual inferences are also affected by discussion with others, including reviewers

and literary critics as well as formal and informal discussion with friends or other people

who have seen or read the text.[4]

3.2   How local is the textual evidence?

We can distinguish inferences which are based on very local, specific parts of the text

from those which are evidenced by longer stretches, more than one passage, or even by

the text taken as a whole ('global' inferences). Going back to the exchange from

Broadcast News, the conclusion in (7) is a local inference based purely on the

interaction of contextual assumptions, considerations of relevance and the encoded

meaning of the first four words of Jane's second utterance:

    (7)   Jane Craig has just found out something.

The conclusions in (8) and (9) are based on evidence from all of Jane's second utterance:

(8)   Aaron has resigned.

(9)   Jane has just found out that Aaron has resigned.

We conclude this based on all three parts of Jane's utterance interacting with appropriate contextual assumptions. When Jane first says *'I just found out',* we might make a guess what she has found out. But it is only when we hear her say that Aaron didn't tell her what she has just found out, and then expressed her surprise that *'you just resign'* (with some effects derived here from the use of present tense), that we can derive the full 'explicature' and realise that Jane has said to Aaron that she has just found out he has resigned. Aaron, by contrast, knows straight away what she has found out. He knows this as soon as she calls him a 'bastard', 'sneak' and 'quitter' and it is even possible that he assumed that she would have found out by the time she called him.

Further inferences might be based on larger stretches of the film or even on the film as a whole. These might include inferences about themes of the film, such as the relationship between 'serious' things such as 'hard news' and more 'trivial' or superficial things such as how someone looks. We might spend a considerable amount of time, explicitly or implicitly, formally or informally, developing such global inferences.[5] These are an important part of the process of developing literary interpretations, as discussed in section 4 below.

3.3   How much support does the text provide?

We can also distinguish inferences for which the text provides strong support from those based on much weaker evidence. We can be sure, for example, that Jane is upset that Aaron has resigned. We are less sure about exactly how upset she is. We know that Aaron is in love with Jane. We are less sure about exactly how Jane feels about him, even though we do know that she does not really see him as a possible romantic partner. There is no clear cut-off point between weakly evidenced implicatures and mere implications which are not intentionally communicated. Exploring the boundary between these is part of the pleasure in interpreting complex texts and in developing literary interpretations.

3.4   How determinate is the inference?

Inferences also vary with regard to how clearly determined they are. This is related to, but not exactly the same as, the question about how much evidence the text provides. It is possible for an inference or set of inferences to be both strongly evidenced and indeterminate. Consider the precise nature of Jane's feelings about Aaron having resigned. We can be sure that she is upset but we cannot determine exactly how she feels, including exactly how negatively she feels about it, and so on. This is typical of cases where we attempt to communicate complex emotional thoughts. Jane herself might not know exactly how she feels, or exactly how to put it into words, and we can not be sure of exactly how to represent this ourselves.[6]

3.5   How open-ended is the inferential process?

Closely related to the previous point is the question of how open-ended the inferential process is. When Jane says *'OK, I'll meet you there'*, we can be confident that we have understood her as soon as we understand that she is agreeing to meet at *'the place near*

the thing'. When we think about her feelings, we might go on for a long time thinking through possible ways of thinking about this. For some texts, we might never think we are near the end of the process of thinking about the inferences it supports.

3.6   How salient is the inferential process?

A different point concerns the salience to interpreters of the inferential process itself. As mentioned above, this is illustrated here by the offer to meet at *'the place near the thing where we went that time'*. As viewers, we recognise that we cannot determine the intended referents of this series of referring expressions. This contrasts with Jane's instant response revealing that she knows exactly what place Aaron has in mind. As a result, we are aware that she is making inferences that are beyond us. We then use this fact to make inferences about the closeness of their relationship.

Clark (2009) discusses a more complex example involved in reading William Golding's (1955) novel *The Inheritors*. Readers face extreme difficulties in understanding the majority of the book, presented from the point of view, or 'mind style', of the Neanderthal Lok. This contrasts sharply with the relative ease in understanding the final passage where the point of view is that of the 'new people'. This difference itself constitutes one of the effects of the text, as does the speed with which readers then move on to make a large number of inferences about the book they have been reading, the story it tells, the characters it contains, and its more general relevance to the reader, partly based on what it suggests about the nature of human beings today.

3.7   How often is it revisited?

As mentioned above, some inferences we make are revisited and sometimes repeatedly. In everyday life, this might happen because someone has said or done something so staggering that we keep thinking about it in an attempt to fully understand

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it. This might be a particularly irritating utterance, such as when someone in a position of power refuses to show compassion to someone in need of help, or a particularly charming one, say an amusing utterance by a child.

With literary interpretations, we might return frequently to think about conclusions the text supports because we have decided to build an explicit literary interpretation. This may be supported formally, say because we are working on a research article, taking part in a seminar or attending a course. It may be supported less formally, say in a book group. It might just be that we enjoy discussing texts with friends.

It is also possible that we will return to think about the inferences a text gives rise to without having decided to do so in advance. This might be similar to the irritating or charming everyday utterances mentioned above. I have often decided that I felt very positively about a book or film or other text as soon as I finished viewing or reading it and then realised some days later that I had never thought about it again. Equally, I have sometimes thought I did not think much of a particular text and then found myself thinking about it repeatedly until I changed my mind and decided that it was more significant to me than I had realised. The relative 'stickiness' of inferences may well be an important factor in determining how literary 'value' is acquired by a text. This is discussed again in section 4.3 below.

This section has aimed to demonstrate that there are a number of interesting questions to ask about the kinds of inferential processes involved in responding to a text. The next section considers how this approach might interact with other areas of literary study.

4 Literary Interpretations, Literary Criticism and Value

Studying the inferences we make when interpreting written and other texts sheds light on the process of interpretation, on the nature of texts and on the way texts give rise to

effects. This section considers the possibility that this approach may help us to make connections between stylistics and other kinds of literary work. In particular, understanding inference can help us to understand more about the processes of literary interpretation, literary criticism and the way in which a text comes to be valued by individuals and groups.

4.1   Literary interpretation

What is an interpretation? On this approach, it is an inference or set of inferences about a text, or derived from evidence provided by a text. What is a literary interpretation? No answer to this follows directly from an inferential approach. There are, of course, at least two senses of the term 'interpretation' which are relevant here. One sense refers to a particular kind of processing involved in understanding a text. The other sense refers to something explicitly presented as a way of understanding a text. Furlong (1996) has proposed an account of the process of literary interpretation based on a distinction between 'spontaneous' and 'non-spontaneous' interpretations. Spontaneous interpretations are typical of everyday, informal interaction where we put enough effort into the interpretation process to understand what the communicator intends. Following relevance theory, this means that we are looking for an interpretation which provides enough effects to justify the effort involved in interpretation. When we have found such an interpretation, we stop. Yesterday evening, a friend said to me:

(10)   It's going to rain tomorrow

What did I understand from this? I assumed that she was communicating that the weather forecast for today was for rain and not much more than this, perhaps a few implicatures about what kinds of things it might be good to do tomorrow and how people

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in general would be feeling about the weather. Having arrived at this interpretation, I derived enough effects to justify the effort involved and then stopped.

A non-spontaneous interpretation, by contrast, is one where the interpreter decides to go beyond this first stage and think about all of the evidence they can bring to bear on the interpretation process, going on to think about further possibilities. If a character in a film or story says (10), we might well go beyond the first interpretation, wonder about possible extended or metaphorical interpretations, think about the relationships between characters, the overall themes of the text, and so on.

In an earlier paper (Clark 1996), I referred to this idea in considering the interpretation of the expression in (11) in Raymond Carver's disturbing short story *Little Things*:

(11)   But it was getting dark on the inside too.

This phrase comes at the end of the opening paragraph of the story which has described the street scene at a time when the weather had changed, snow began to melt and cars 'slushed by'. Outside, we are told, it is getting dark. The paragraph then ends with (11). The next paragraph begins inside where a man is packing a suitcase as a relationship ends in an emotionally disturbing way. A spontaneous interpretation of (11) in an everyday context might only lead to an interpretation where it describes the physical situation inside the house. In the context of the story, though, we are bound to go further and of course we take (11) as also referring to the psychological atmosphere inside both the characters and the house where things are going very badly, and we take 'dark' to refer not only to the physical quality of the light. The story does indeed end very 'darkly'.

Furlong's approach proposes a way of understanding the nature of literary interpretations as complex sets of inferences. This can help in the development and

evaluation of literary interpretations as well as helping teachers to develop the abilities of students to construct interpretations of their own.

4.2 Literary criticism

It could be argued that much literary criticism can be understood as a complex set of inferences. The origins of stylistics are, of course, closely connected with an interest in literary criticism. In fact, the motivation for the development of stylistics is often seen as being to offer a more reliable way to develop criticism than previous models. There has been regular disagreement about the connections between stylistics and literary criticism, perhaps the most famous dispute being the rather heated and ultimately not very productive debate between Roger Fowler and F.W. Bateson (discussed and partly reprinted in Fowler 1971). In recent years, there has not been much explicit discussion of literary criticism within stylistics. Perhaps one source of the difficulty has been that an opposition has been assumed between what critics are attempting to do and what stylisticians are attempting to do. Stylistics is often presented as more rigorous since it is based on specific analytical techniques. Critics suggest, however, that there are aspects of literary understanding which can not be explained simply by reference to linguistic forms. There are two reasons why a focus on inference might be helpful here. First, inference might be involved in filling in some of the gaps in the explanation from form to interpretation (something I will not explore further here). Second, we might analyse the inferences made by critics or examine the evidence that may or not support particular conclusions.

Applying our understanding of inference in literary criticism is not quite the same as applying our understanding of other linguistic areas such as lexis or syntax. A significant difference is that inference itself has a crucial role to play in all criticism, regardless of whether or not the criticism is focused on aspects of language. To arrive at

a critical viewpoint just is to make inferences about the text, in some cases based on its linguistic features. Understanding criticism in this way suggests a number of activities, including:

a.   looking at how linguistic and other features of the text criticised give rise to audience inferences

b.   looking at inferences which give rise to effects

c.   looking at inferences which constitute effects

d.   looking at inferences made by critics and exploring the nature of the evidence which supports them

The connection between literary criticism and inference has not been much explored so far, but it seems likely that exploring inferences associated with literary criticism will help in the development and testing of particular critical arguments.

4.3   Literary value

Questions of criticism are, of course, connected with notions of literary value. One way to distinguish them might be to see literary criticism as always formal and explicit and the development of value as sometimes taking place without formal or explicit discussion. Literary criticism involves an explicit focus on texts, developing arguments about how they work, their interpretation and their value. Literary value may well emerge and develop without being directly determined or even necessarily much connected with explicit literary criticism.

Within stylistics, there is a developing recent interest in questions about literary value (see, for example, papers on literary evaluation in van Peer 2008, and Stockwell 2009 on the related, but not identical, notion of literary 'resonance'). There has not,

however, been much discussion of pragmatics or inference in considering these questions. Short and Semino (2008) make suggestive remarks about how stylistic analysis can help us to understand processes of evaluation as well as of interpretation. Accounts of inference may have a particularly important part to play here. When we think about what happened in a text or our response to it we are making inferences. When we return to think about a text or part of a text repeatedly, we are returning to make inferences about it. The more often we return to it, the more inferences we make. If we return repeatedly to a text, this must be because it continues to lead us down interesting inferential pathways. Perhaps one way of understanding this is to suggest that a text we come to value is one which repeatedly provides a source for rewarding inferential processes.

As a brief indication of how this might go, here are some comments on Anton Chekhov's story *The Lady With The Little Dog* based on an approach which I aim to develop in future work (Clark, in preparation). Chekhov's story is much anthologised and more than once it has been described as one of the greatest short stories ever written. Richard Ford has described it as "the all-time short story gold standard" suggesting that the story is "as good as any of us will ever read" (Ford 2007: xi). In an earlier discussion, Ford (1998) discusses the history of his own relationship to the story, explaining that he was at first 'baffled' by it and could not understand 'what made this drab set of non-events a great short story — reputedly one of the greatest ever written' (Ford 1998: vii). He goes on to explain how his attitude began to shift:

> I'm certain that I eventually advertised actually *liking* the story,
> though only because I thought I should. And not long afterward
> I began maintaining the position that Chekhov was a story writer
> of near mystical — and certainly mysterious — importance, one

who seemed to tell rather ordinary stories but who was really

unearthing the most subtle, and for that reason, unobvious and

important truth.

(Ford 1998: ix)

So Ford changed his attitude as he continued to think about the story. Janet Malcolm

(2001: 20) reports a different, though clearly connected, response when she quotes the

playwright Ivan Scheglov writing to Chekhov to discuss an earlier story, *Lights*. Scheglov

writes:

I was not entirely satisfied with your latest story. Of course, I

swallowed it in one gulp, there is no question about that,

because everything you write is so appetising and real that it

can be easily swallowed.

(Malcolm 2001: 20)

Scheglov arguably starts with a more positive attitude than Ford but what is clear is that

he also begins by thinking the story has not had a particularly significant effect on him.

Malcolm goes on to suggest that Chekhov's stories are easy to read at first and then

provide far more than we at first expect:

We swallow a Chekhov story as if it were an ice, and we cannot

account for our feeling of repletion.

(Malcolm 2001: 22)

What is happening here? It seems likely that at least part of the explanation of this shift in attitude will depend on an account of the inferential processes of readers following their first reading. Readers do not feel that the story has had much of an impact on them at first, but thinking about it later they begin to derive further effects which make a significant and long-lasting impression on them. One particularly interesting aspect of this with regard to 'The Lady With The Little Dog' is that a similar process seems to affect the character Gurov who has an affair with the lady in the title. He does not seem to be particularly interested in the lady and seems to think of their affair as just one more trivial event in his life. After he waves goodbye to her, he expects that he will forget her fairly quickly and move on with his life. He finds, however, that her memory does not fade and indeed he thinks of her more and more often:

> After another month or two the memory of Anna Sergeyevna
> would become misted over, so it seemed, and only occasionally
> would he dream of her touching smile — just as he dreamt of
> others. But more than a month went by, deep winter set in, and
> he remembered Anna Sergeyevna as vividly as if he had parted
> from her yesterday. And those memories became even more
> vivid.
>
> (Chekhov 2002: 232)

The effect on Gurov of his time with Anna is similar to the effect of Chekhov's story on many of its readers. In future work (Clark, in preparation), I develop a fuller account of the effects of the story and explore the possibility of explaining how it has come to be valued by looking at inferences made when remembering and rereading the story. The suggestion is that the 'sense of repletion' comes because what seems like a simple story

is one which supports complex and continued inferential processing. Like Gurov's thoughts about Anna, we think that the story has not had much effect on us at first, but then find ourselves thinking about it again and finding pleasure in following through some of the inferences it suggests.

5   Conclusion

'Pragmatic stylistics' is a term which can be applied to a wide range of approaches. Here I have considered some of the questions which might be explored by looking at the inferential processes of audiences. Accounting for these inferences helps to explain how individual readers and viewers first respond to texts. It is also possible that inferential pragmatic stylistics can help us to understand the nature of literary interpretation and criticism. More ambitiously, this approach might help us to understand notions of literary value and how particular texts come to be valued.

Acknowledgements

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1   Naturally, it is not possible to offer anything approaching a comprehensive list. Work which recognises a role for pragmatics in stylistic analysis, and in some cases focuses closely on pragmatic analysis, includes: Bex, Burke and Stockwell 2000; Black 2006; Culpeper 2001; Culpeper, Short and Verdonk 1998; Leech and Short 1981; van Peer and Renkema 1984; Pilkington 2000; Pratt 1977; Sell 1991; Simpson 1993, 2003, 2004; Toolan 1992, 1996, 1998. O'Halloran 2003 looks at pragmatic inferences involved in reading in order to develop understanding of the notion of interpretation within Critical Discourse Analysis. For a general overview of pragmatic approaches to stylistics, see MacMahon 2006.

2   For further discussion see Leech and Short, 1981: 257-287 (pages 206-230 in the 2007 edition).

3   See Clark 2009 for a fuller discussion, with reference to William Golding's (1995) novel *The Inheritors*, of how readers make inferences as they work through a text. For discussion of pragmatic inferences involved in reading from several cognitive and Critical Discourse Analysis points of view, see O'Halloran 2003.

4   For discussion of the activities of readers in reading groups and other social contexts, see Allington and Swann 2009, Swann and Allington 2009 and other papers published alongside these in the special issue (volume 18 number 3) of *Language and Literature* on literary reading as social practice (Allington 2009).

5   This raises a number of questions about how we see the nature of 'whole texts' or discourses. For discussion of discourse understood as a process rather than as a unit, and of the interaction between local and global communicative intentions, see Reboul and Moeschler 1998; de Saussure 2005, 2007. Unger 2006 discusses the relationship between local and global coherence, arguing that the latter can not be adequately defined and that relevance theory provides the basis for a more adequate account of the phenomena this notion aims to explain.

6   For discussion of the effects of indeterminacy in the interpretation of literary texts, and of 'poetic effects' within the framework of relevance theory, see Pilkington 2000.