

Exploring Stylistic Choices in Jamel Brinkley's Short Story "Witness"

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Abstract. *Significance of the stylistic studies in fictional works - prose or poetry, is profound, as it offers linguists opportunities to study and explore the expressiveness of language and linguistic elements that reveal author's intentions, uncovering how language is used to convey meaning and evoke emotions. By exploring stylistic choices, linguists can gain a deeper understanding of author's intents. Therefore, stylistic analysis of fictional language is always engaging and interesting, as demonstrated in Jamel Brinkley's short story "Witness". The main goal of the article is to analyze Brinkley's stylistic choices, determine the expressiveness and emotiveness within the story and ascertain how the author makes his writing style distinctive.*

Key words: *Jamel Brinkley, stylistic studies, stylistic choices, short-story, stylistic devices*

Introduction

The O' Henry Prize Winner short story "Witness" written by National Book Award finalist Jamel Brinkley, "offers a graceful and powerful exploration of the choices we make—and those we fail to make" (**James Wood for *The New Yorker***). **American writer** Jamel Brinkley is the author of *Witness: Stories* (2023), which has been a finalist for several prestigious awards, including the PEN/Faulkner Award and the Kirkus Prize. His earlier collection, *A Lucky Man: Stories* (2018), was also a finalist for the National Book Award and the Story Prize, and it won the PEN Oakland Award and the Ernest J. Gaines Award for Literary Excellence. Brinkley's work has been featured in leading literary journals such as *The Paris Review* and *Ploughshares* and has been included in *The Best American Short Stories* three times. He has received numerous honors, including fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Rome Prize in Literature, and the Wallace Stegner Fellowship at Stanford.

The study revealed Brinkley's special and individual writing style. In his short story, the author often focuses on emotions and internal struggles, reveals and reflects characters' unspoken feelings. **Emphasizing the emotional lives of his characters is one of the most striking aspects of his storytelling. He does not just describe the events or actions, he allows readers to see how the characters process these moments internally, which gives the narrative an intimacy and psychological depth that pulls the reader into the protagonist's mind.** Brinkley uses vivid descriptions to bring the setting and characters to life, while also highlighting quiet, understated emotional moments that reveal more about the characters than their words or actions. **Brinkley doesn't just tell us what happens; he shows us the characters' internal struggle, allowing readers to experience the confusion, fear, and guilt along with them. Ultimately, Brinkley's attention to the protagonist's internal world creates an emotional intimacy that connects the reader to the character.** We aren't merely watching the events unfold from a distance; we are invited into the protagonist's mind, experiencing his inner turmoil as though it is

our own. This sense of closeness enhances the emotional impact of the story, making the themes of witnessing, moral responsibility, and personal growth even more expressive.

“Exhilarating . . . Brinkley is a writer whose versatility knows no boundaries . . . A gift of the highest quality.” —Mateo Askaripour, The New York Times Book Review”.

Stylistic analysis offers readers a deeper understanding of literary works by exploring the characteristics of language and structure. By breaking down a text into smaller components, stylistic analysis makes it easier for readers to identify its meaning. Conducting a stylistic analysis helps readers gain a more comprehensive understanding of a literary work, revealing the messages the author intends to convey.

Given research aims at exploring the stylistic choices in the O’ Henry Prize Winner short story "Witness" written by Jamel Brinkley. More specifically, the paper focuses on how Brinkley employs stylistic devices to make his writing distinctive and deepen the emotional coloring of the story. Brinkley’s language is impressive and highly emotive as he provides readers vivid descriptions and understated emotional moments expressed by various stylistic devices, such as imagery, metaphor and other devices. His short story is full of powerful phonetic and lexical expressive means that make his style so distinctive, expressive, and emotive.

Methodology

This research aims to explore and analyze the stylistic choices, specifically the stylistic devices and expressive techniques, employed in Jamel Brinkley’s short story *Witness*. To achieve this, two methodological approaches were employed: observation and stylistic analysis. Stylistic analysis provides insight into how the meaning of a text is constructed through a detailed examination of its linguistic structure, as well as how readers interact with this structure to derive meaning. Such an analysis often uncovers new interpretations or clarifies how a text achieves its intended effects. The primary objective of stylistics is to elucidate how interpretation is formed, thereby supporting particular readings of the text (Khadjieva & Jumambetova, 2020). By studying and analyzing the intentional use of stylistic devices and expressive means, we can highlight the key features of the text, as well as its emotional undertones and logical emphasis.

Results

Based on the stylistic analysis of Jamel Brinkley’s short story “Witness”, has been revealed that, the author uses colloquial writing style where various forms of stylistic devices and expressive techniques are employed to make his story more emotional and more expressive. The first of the devices that is so frequently used in the research material is metaphor, which generates a distinctive form of expression, influencing the reader's inner world and psychological responses (Garibashvili, 2022). According to Nørgaard (2010) a metaphor is a figure of speech, that is often seen as a kind of linguistic embellishment. In metaphor, a comparison of two distinctively different, yet similar, things is established (Nørgaard: 2010:107).

The author uses metaphors to enhance the major themes of the story, reveal its characters inner nature, and highlights their emotions and impacts on the readers. For example, in the following example, author uses metaphorical language to convey a complex emotional experience and the feeling of overwhelming tension: *I felt trapped, as though the words out of her mouth were expanding and filling up the space in her tiny apartment. The chill from outside clung to her body.* The latter, besides it is an example of metaphor, it is also an interesting example of personification, as the chill is personified, as if it physically clings to her like an unwanted presence, strengthens the emotiveness of the sentence.

Bernice’s presence is narrator’s (brother’s) life is described by metaphor in the following way: *The way she could crowd you out of your life with the enormity of her own.* By the phrase *the enormity of her own* the author describes how large, and demanding is Bernice’s emotional or personal world. The metaphor illustrates the narrator’s feeling of being suffocated by his sister’s presence. The term *crowd you out* is metaphorical, as it describes a person's emotional or psychological influence on someone else. But, at the end of the story, he regrets that he had not

known her sister better.

Following example *She collected as much information as she could, as furiously as she could, about the lives and trials, real and imagined, of black people everywhere. Willy-nilly, she regurgitated facts and ideas at me* is really interesting as it represents a combination metaphor and hyperbole in it which is a deliberate overstatement or exaggeration of a feature essential to the object or phenomenon (Galperin,1977). The word *regurgitated* is an exaggeration here. Regurgitating or vomiting facts and ideas is impossible, but the use of this word emphasizes that the information was repeated, forced, or perhaps overly abundant. *Regurgitated* is also a metaphor, as it compares the act of conveying facts and ideas to the physical process of regurgitation. By using informal tone (*willy-nilly*) adds a colloquial flavor to the writing, making the action feel more spontaneous or uncontrollable. The phrase *willy-nilly* is particularly interesting because it is highly expressive, making the narrative feel more natural, as if the speaker is speaking in a relaxed, almost whimsical manner. Additionally, its rhythmic and playful sound adds a sense of humor or exaggeration to the sentence.

To express Bernice's struggle against the overwhelming pressures of her changing life, Brinkley also uses a metaphor *being crushed by circumstances* to compare the emotional or psychological pressure of the altered circumstances to the physical act of being crushed: *But it was clear that whatever else it was, this new habit was a way to resist being crushed by the altered circumstances of her life.*

The author, alongside with metaphor uses parallel constructions and tries to emphasize the speaker's internal struggle and discomfort and makes strong negative emotions. *I didn't want to be with Dove, but I didn't want to be in the apartment either. Bernice was just another kind of burden.* In the same sentence, by metaphor *Bernice was just another kind of burden*, Brinkley makes a comparison of Bernice to a burden and considers her as something that is emotionally or mentally heavy and difficult to bear.

...every emotion and reserve of energy seemed to have been boiled out of her. The metaphor suggests that Bernice's emotional and physical exhaustion is like something that has been boiled out. Boiling implies heat, pressure, and a complete transformation, so it conveys a sense of being emotionally and physically exhausted.

As Bernice suffered from the disease and terrible headaches, she tried to escape her depressive thoughts and emotions through reading and activities at home and at work. The author uses metaphors to depict the coping mechanisms: *When she wasn't absorbed in a book, ... Bernice was forced to deal with local matters... She was running out of sick days at work*, and her performance there seemed to be declining fast. *At least until her husband or brother came home, breaking her loneliness and her peace.*

During the funeral Silas experiences a mix of guilt, sadness. His inner turmoil reflects his struggle to reconcile his feelings of responsibility with his recognition of Bernice's struggles and their shared history. His emotional state is metaphorically expressed by the author "*As I sat there in the front pew, words flowed easily into my mind, just as I had expected. But the words that came were the bloated kind one used to satisfy the unknowable and therefore impossible expectations of others, words that shined a light so dazzling it washed out every distinctive feature. Our mother, sitting to my left, turned to me. Her expression pleaded with me at first, and then demanded I rise, but I was unable to get up from my seat.*

Study revealed that the author makes an expressive combination of different lexical and phonetic expressive means and stylistic devices, such as personification, onomatopoeia, alliteration, and consonance as in the following example: *The heat hissed steadily into the room.* *The heat* is personified in the sentence, as it cannot make a hissing sound. By using personification, Brinkley aims to evoke a deeper emotional response from readers and make descriptions more vivid and memorable. Additionally, the phrase can also be considered an example of **onomatopoeia** (the process of creating a word that phonetically imitates, resembles, or suggests the sound that it describes (Garibashvili, Geldiashvili, 2024), as the word *hissed* imitates the sound that heat or steam might make as it enters the room, enhancing the sensory experience of the reader. The author tries to help readers *hear* the action or environment and

make his narrative feel more immersive. The author also employs **alliteration**, and **consonance** in the sentence, that make the melodic effect in the utterance, provide rhythm, emphasize words, and help shape the tone and mood of the narrative., e.g., *heat hissed* (alliteration) and *heat hissed[t]* steadily into (consonance).

Another interesting example of personification is found in the story – *Even the coach and his television were idle*, where the author underlines the existing calmness in the room. The coach and television are attributed with human-like qualities, emphasizing their inactivity in a playful way. The author

Readers find sentences more expressive and emotionally colored when various stylistic devices are combined. For example, in the following sentence, the author offers an interesting example of imagery, where different devices – personification, hyperbole, consonance and alliteration are combined. By the combination, the author tries to make the description more vivid: *Sticks of incense had been lit, well over a dozen, and scented candles burned. In the middle of this cloying cloud, the bed was strewn with books and other objects.* The phrase *cloying cloud* uses **personification** to give the *cloud* a tangible, oppressive quality. The word *cloying* suggests that the air, thick with incense and candles, is suffocating, as though it's an active force in the room rather than just a neutral atmosphere. The passage is rich in **imagery**. The "sticks of incense" and *scented candles* evoke strong smells, which, combined with *cloying cloud*, create an image of an overwhelming, perhaps oppressive atmosphere filled with sweet or heavy fragrances. The *bed strewn with books and other objects* offers a visual image of disorder or chaos in the room and adds the sensory experience for readers. Besides, the phrase *well over a dozen* is an example of **hyperbole**. It emphasizes that there are many incense sticks burning, adding to the intensity of the scene. By using **consonance** and **alliteration**, the author tries to make an emphasis and create a melodic effect, e.g. the use of *sticks of incense* and *scented candles* (consonance), with the repetition of the [s] sound and in *cloying clouds* the repetition of [k] sound.

Generally, Brinkley frequently uses imagery throughout the short story, making us feel the part of it. An interesting example of **imagery** is shown in the passage where the family portrait is described - *In it, Bernice is three, cranky from an ear infection, and I am a frowning infant in her lap. Sitting beside us on a stiff-looking blue sofa, wearing a pale summer dress, our mother smiles with her teeth.* The image of Bernice as a cranky child and Silas as a frowning infant creates nostalgic picture of their past. The *stiff-looking blue sofa* and the description of their mother's smile with her teeth suggest a mixture of discomfort and warmth, further layering the emotional depth of the scene.

Brinkley actively engages examples of **similes** in his short story to create vivid imagery, evoke emotions, or emphasize specific aspects of character or setting. Simile characterizes one object by bringing it into contact with another object that belongs to an entirely different class of things. Simile gives rise to a new understanding of the object characterizing as well as of the object characterized (Galperin,1977:167). The author uses powerful similes to engage the reader, creating expressive and emotionally charged connections in the short story.

He often moved this way, as if the floor were booby-trapped. The phrase *as if the floor were booby-trapped* is a simile, as it compares the way he moves to the cautious or careful movement one would take if they thought the floor might be booby-trapped. The word *as if* signals a comparison between his movements and an imagined scenario.

In the following simile, where headphones are compared to an anchor, another device—irony—is also introduced: *...his headphones hung like an anchor from his neck.* Headphones are described in a way that evokes a sense of burden or heaviness and it.

In the simile, *An unflattering beard grew like patches of moss along his pallid cheeks and jaw*, Brinkley compares Dove's unkempt beard to patches of moss, emphasizing his disheveled appearance and creating a vivid image of the character's physical state.

Her voice was soft when she said this, but afterward it became hard and enormous, like a slab of iron, and she hurled it at every doctor and nurse she saw. By using a simile, the author compares the mother's voice to a slab of iron, emphasizing the cold, heavy, and unyielding nature

of her grief after the death of her daughter, Bernice. In this sentence, the author provides a vivid description of the mother's intense mourning, illustrating her emotional transformation.

Humor is given by an expressive simile: *I knew that she found our mother's warnings to avoid men on the street excessive. She'd told me once that doing so would be like forbidding the use of a shower because water could get hot and scald.* By comparing her mother's advice to avoiding men on the street to forbidding the use of a shower because water could get hot and scald, Bernice is highlighting the absurdity of her mother's caution. The comparison suggests that just as it is unreasonable to avoid something as essential as water, it is equally unreasonable to avoid men entirely. the author is illustrating Bernice's frustration with her mother's extreme caution and using humor to emphasize the unreasonable nature of the warning.

Each day with you shines like gold. – Dove wrote these words for Bernice on a card, expressing the depth of his passionate love for her. The simile compares each day spent with her to gold, suggesting that their time together is precious and valuable.

As it was mentioned above, Brinkley also engages phonetic expressive means and devices in the short story, that help him create a melodic effect alongside with the most expressive stylistic devices. The make the main message even more artistic and captivating, as they infuse the text with emotional weight and more strongly capture the reader's attention (Garibashvili, 2023). Examples of **onomatopoeia**, **assonance** and **consonance** are quite abundantly used in the story:

She tapped my legs so I would move them and then plopped down next to me on the love seat., My sister threw upon the door so that it banged against the little console table she kept by the entrance., Except for Bernice's whistling breaths, everything was quiet., He just hummed in response., upstairs neighbor stomped and his TV roared – in the last sentence, there are combined two devices- onomatopoeia and personification, where the TV is given a human-like quality. By employing these literary techniques, the author highlights sensory (sound) elements and actions to create a feeling of urgency, tension, and emotional depth. The sounds and physical movements are not just background details, but they enhance the emotional impact of the scenes. Onomatopoeia makes the noises feel more lifelike and vivid, while personification assigns human traits to non-living things, such as the TV, which intensifies the description of existing atmosphere.

In the short story we frequently find assonance and consonance in one and the same sentences., e.g. Repetition of the sound [i] makes an assonance in *...the way he scrnched his lips together and shifted them from side to side had what she described to me as a clarifying effect* and in the same sentence reiteration of sound [s] makes a consonance in *side to side* that strengthens the melodic effect. Brinkley uses those devices to make the sentence more engaging and pleasurable to read, evoking the sensation of movement or change in the narrative.

Repetition of sounds [ai] and [p] - *Her eyes are tired, but happily so, the way people appear sated and spent in the wake of a long, demanding meal* make assonance and consonance. These repeated sounds enhance the bittersweet emotional tone, emphasizing that the character's exhaustion is paired with satisfaction.

In the following sentences, repetition of sounds [o] [i] [o] [ai] make an assonance - he said he was sorry for bothering her., But all he did after that was keep belting it out in that terrible voice., I took the photo down and laid it on the console table,.. I picked it for what it says, inside" ... Knowing you're mine makes me feel so alive. In the last two phrases, the repeated vowel sounds create a deeper emotional resonance. The assonance here shows a sense of intimacy and connection, while emphasizing the importance of the words being spoken and giving the passage a rhythmic, poetic quality that encourages the reader to pause and contemplate the emotional weight of the message.

We find examples of consonance through the repetition of the [f] and [s] sounds, which helps reader to feel the inner strength or intensity of the moment: *When she emerged a bit later, feeling affirmed, the man approached her., proof of the force of her will., He seemed possessed of no seriousness, completely unlike the sort of person you should commit your life to.*

Repetitions of initial sounds at the beginning of sentences, make interesting examples of alliteration, where a sense of lightness and playfulness, almost like the rhythm of casual speech is created: *break because... Maybe I'll go see him do his thing., A sentimental song., I was out with a woman when my phone lit up., that weekend sparked a whirlwind romance. ... all she did was raise her head from the arm of the love seat. , But it was clear that whatever else it was, this new habit was a way to resist being crushed by the altered circumstances of her life.*

As mentioned above, Brinkley uses colloquial style in his short story and engages the most powerful devices to make his writing distinctive, expressive, and emotive. Language in "*Witness*" is often direct, reflecting the harshness of the situations the characters face. Brinkley, alongside with colloquial language, doesn't avoid using **vulgar/coarse** language.

Generally, vulgar language is often used to convey intensified emotion, especially in moments of anger, confusion, or frustration. The language used by the characters can help bridge the gap between the reader and the characters. The goal of using vulgar words is to push the boundaries of comfort, forcing the reader to confront the harshness and violence within the story.

The use of vulgar language in "*Witness*" makes the story more realistic. Brinkley's characters often speak the way, people in real life might speak under emotions. In the following sentence, the **vulgar language** is employed in metaphor to convey Bernice's **anger, frustration, and emotional release**. The language is deliberately harsh reflecting the intensity of her feelings: *Tell that motherfucker I can't stand him anymore, she said. Tell him next time I see him, he should just gumboot-dance directly on my chest.*

In the sentence: *He unlocked the door and shuffled in ass first, bent over two milk crates of LPs* the author uses vulgar language to convey feelings of **humiliation, awkwardness, and self-mockery** and highlights his **vulnerability** and **imperfections**, adding a layer of **emotional complexity** to the scene.

It should be noted that the use of vulgar and insulting words while reading does not create a sense of discomfort for the reader; their incorporation does not diminish the aesthetic quality of the story: *What you need to do, he teased, is hurry up and find your ass a job. Then he bumped my fist hard with his and we went our separate ways.* The use of vulgar language is not meant to be offensive but rather adds a humorous, easy-going tone to the conversation. Dove is teasing the Silas in a way that shows familiarity and comfort, rather than hatred. The use of vulgarity in this context serves to **lighten the mood** and make the interaction feel more relaxed and informal.

The vulgar language conveys **disdain**, emphasizing the speaker's **harsh** and **resentful** feelings toward the picture and Bernice in the sentence: *I always hated that damn picture," he said. "Bernice is so ugly in it, just a sad-ass, ugly-ass kid.* It reflects a strong sense of **disgust** and **bitterness**, that strengthens an emotional intensity to the utterance. The same is meant in the following example: *Man, he said, staring up at the wall again, I really fucking hate that photo,* where the use of vulgar language expresses **anger** and **frustration**. The word *fucking* intensifies the speaker's strong negative feelings toward the photo, highlighting a deep sense of **dislike** and **irritation**.

Conclusion

Based on the research, revealed that Jamel Brinkley's short story *Witness* is a powerful exploration of emotional complexity through the use of rich stylistic devices and colloquial language. The figurative language he uses in his short story is extremely expressive and varied. Employment of metaphors, personification, and vivid imagery allows readers to identify the real faces and emotions of the characters. The incorporation of phonetic devices such as alliteration, consonance, and onomatopoeia not only creates a rhythmic flow but also heightens the emotional weight of each scene, making the reader feel more immersed in the story. Brinkley's strategic use of vulgar language serves multiple purposes, to conveying raw, unfiltered emotions and highlight the characters' vulnerabilities and frustrations, while also creating moments of humor and intimacy. Through these stylistic choices, Brinkley captures both the heart and mind of the reader, making them feel the full depth of life's sweetness and bitterness.

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