



## A Stylistic Analysis of “Miss Brill” by Katherine Mansfield

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### Abstract

Katherine Mansfield, remembered as one of the finest writers of English short stories, enjoys enduring fame and a somewhat awesome literary status with her short stories, *Miss Brill* as one of her representative pieces. The interest of our Chinese critics, in general, locates more in the modernist techniques and devices she employs to present the inner world of the characters in her stories, than in her unique artistry in using language—commonly known as style—as a women writer. This thesis, however, is concerned primarily with the style of “Miss Brill”, and aims to provide an integrative, systematic stylistic analysis of the short story, deriving its underlying theories from a method of prose text analysis, proposed by literary stylists Leech & Short. The analysis is done in three main steps corresponding to the four main “linguistic levels” of a text: lexical levels, grammatically levels, figures of speech, and cohesion and context.

**Keywords:** Style, Lexical feature, Grammatical feature, Rhetorical tool, Fine, Sensitive

### 1. Introduction

Katherine Mansfield, pseudonym of Kathleen Mansfield Beauchamp (1888-1923), was born in Wellington, New Zealand. She came and went, across the horizon of our contemporary letters, before we had quite accustomed ourselves to the thought that she belonged to us. She died at the age of 35, in the first flush of her fame, leaving behind a queerly persistent interest for virtually anything she writes, a charm that no critic has been able to fully define. Ever since the day Mansfield was introduced to Chinese readers, our critical world has been littered with numerous essays and theses on her writing achievement, yet many of them are about the second aspect, whereas about the first one, lamentably few. And the challenge remains of trying to explain the nature of that artistry, and how it integrates with the larger artistic achievement of the writer.

This thesis is not written with the ambition of depicting a comprehensive picture of the writing style of Katherine Mansfield as a writer, for even those text linguists as eminent as Geoffrey N. Leech and Michael H. Short have to concede to the fact that “it is difficult to generalize about the style of an author.” (Leech & Short, 2001: 12) The major task of the paper is, therefore, to investigate how the artistic effect of the story is achieved, and how the theme of the work is successfully expressed, through the writer’s choice of language. But still it is not impossible that through a stylistic analysis of this representative work of the writer, in juxtaposition with extracts from some of her other finely written stories, an illuminating glimpse of the exquisite “mind and pen” (Warner, 2002: 88) of Mansfield as a literary artist, is to be revealed.

#### 1.1 Stylistic Analysis as a Critical School

The common view that a literary text is likely to be comprehended better if it is studied in parallel with stylistic analysis which emphasizes the crucial role of the linguistic codes of the text contributes much to the development of literary criticism.

M. A. K. Halliday is one of the text linguists who sees “grammar” as a network of systems of relationships which account for all semantically relevant choices in language, which is as well the standpoint of stylistic analysis. In his *Linguistic Function and Literary Style*, a functional theory of language is proposed, acknowledging three major functions, which he calls “ideational”, “interpersonal” and “textual”. (Halliday, 1971: 330-368) He goes on to make an analysis of the language of William Golding’s novel *The Inheritors*, the stylistic interest of which is successfully explored, by Halliday, in the light of what he calls the ideational function of language. “His analysis is revealing in the way it relates precise linguistic observation to literary effect” (Leech & Short, 2001: 31), or in another to the theme of

the whole novel: “the linguistic pattern of choices realizes a primitive pattern of cognition, which in turn is the key to the tragic vision of the novel.”(Leech & Short, 2001: 32)

Halliday being the widely acknowledged precursor of functional stylistics, the eminent German linguist-critic Leo Spitzer (1887-1960), is likewise father of literary stylistics. In his insistence that the smallest detail of language can unlock the “soul” of a literary work, he maintains the task of stylistics is to provide a hard-and-fast technology of analysis:

I would maintain that to formulate observation by means of words is not to cause the artistic beauty to evaporate in vain intellectualities; rather, it makes for a widening and deepening of the aesthetic taste. It is only a frivolous love that cannot survive intellectual definition; great love prospers with understanding. (Leech & Short, 2001: 2)

A question which is often asked in this connection is “At which end do we start, the aesthetic or the linguistic?” The image used by Spitzer of the “philological circle”, the circle of understanding, however, seems to suggest there is no logical starting point. Spitzer argues that the task of Linguistic-literary explanation proceeded by the movement to and fro from linguistic details to the literary “center” of a work or a writer’s art. There is a cyclic motion whereby linguistic observation stimulates or modifies literary insight, and whereby literary insight in its turn stimulates further linguistic observation. (Shen Dan. 1998: 78)

### **Insert Figure 1 Here**

Halliday and Spitzer may vary in their approaches to the analysis of literary texts, the stylistic studies carried out by both, nevertheless, bear solid evidence to the plausibility of the activity in which we wish to engage in this paper: the study of style as used in “Miss Brill”, with the aim of relating it to the its theme and artistic effect.

#### *1.2 Leech and Short’s Approach*

Literary stylistics has, implicitly or explicitly, the goal of explaining the relation between language and artistic function. However, when confronted with the challenge of presenting a satisfactory and reliable methodology for prose style analysis, even Spitzer seemed helpless:

How often, with all the theoretical experience of the method accumulated in me over the years, have I stared blankly, quite similar to one of my beginning students, at a page that would not yield its magic. The only way out of this state of unproductively is to read and reread.

(Leech & Short, 2001: 3)

Who bravely stepped into the breach were two text linguists: Geoffrey N. Leech and Michael H. Short. In the year 1981, with combined strenuous effort, they published *Style in Fiction: A linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose*, a book later becoming well established as a course text book for both students of English language and English literature. The book gives the breadth of coverage which previous studies have lacked, and, more significantly, it is in this work that an overall “theory” or “model” of prose style is put forward. Also proposed is a general informal classification of features of style as a tool of analysis which can be applied to any text. Leech and Short devise a checklist of stylistic categories which is, though not exhaustive, likely to yield stylistically relevant information, enabling us to collect data on a fairly systematic basis.

The categories are placed under four general headings: lexical categories, grammatical categories, figures of speech, and cohesion and context, under each smaller-scaled categories are enumerated, placed under further scrutiny, to give a range of data which may be examined in relation to the literary effect of the text.

A: Lexical categories

General

Nouns

Adjectives

Verbs

B: Grammatical categories

Sentence Types

Sentence Complexity

Clause Types

Clause Structure

Noun Phrases

Verb Phrases

Other Phrase Types

8. Word Classes

General

C: Figures of speech, etc

Grammatical and Lexical Schemes

Phonological Schemes

Tropes

D: Context and cohesion

Cohesion

Context

But even Leech & Short themselves have to concede the incompleteness of this overall model, for “these are attempts to give shape and system to a field of study in which much remains unclear, and hidden beneath the threshold of observation.” (Leech & Short, 2001: 33) They further confide to their readers that the study of the relation between linguistic form and literary function cannot be reduced to mechanical objectivity. In both the literary and linguistic spheres much rests on the intuition and personal judgment of the reader, for which a system, however good, is an aid rather than a substitute.

Therefore, in order to bring into the spotlight what appear to be the most significant linguistic features of “Miss Brill”, necessary adaptation is to be made of the model above, and an approach supposed to be the most suitable to analyze the target text is to be proposed, which is going to be applied in the actual analysis that follows.

## 2. A Stylistic Analysis of “Miss Brill”

### 2.1 A General Overview of the Story

Widely anthologized, “Miss Brill” is considered as one of Katherine Mansfield’s finest pieces of short fiction. It is a remarkably rich and innovative work that incorporates most of Mansfield’s defining themes: isolation, disillusionment and the gap between expectations and reality. It is about how the heroine, a woman by the name of Miss Brill, old, desolate, probably widowed, stubbornly defies a virtually inescapable fate, yet is finally compelled to concede defeat. The plot of the story is simple, and the themes are by no means uncanny. What merits our attention is, indeed, the way Mansfield narrates the story and the language she employs in the whole process of narration. Generally speaking, the style of this particular text, is delicate, poetic, and ironic; it is characterized by a subtle sensitivity to mood and emotion, revealing the inner conflicts her characters face and resolve.

### 2.2 Analysis

#### 2.2.1 Lexical features—Vague words and expressions

Among the diverse salient stylistic features of the text, what particularly deserves attention, on the lexical level, is the writer’s marked preference for words and expressions, with vague meanings, provoking vague feelings. Recurring throughout the story, these expressions help create an aura of drifting and uncertainty, foreshadowing the story’s heartbreaking ending. Elizabeth Bowen, when commenting Mansfield’s artistic accomplishment in short story writing, attached even greater significance to writer’s unique talent of being vague: “It is her trademark ambiguities that enriches her narratives and almost deceptively fuel her stories forward.” (Bowen, 1956: 9)

It seems that throughout the story of *Miss Brill*, no deliberate effort is made towards a direct portrait of the heroine’s predicament. Little is said about the sordidness of her “little”, “dark” room, a room “like a cupboard” (Mansfield, 1981: 335). It is not until the very end of the story that the final epiphany arrives. It is only at that moment that the “secret” is given away, only at that juncture that we readers, together with the heroine herself, come to the bitter realization that she is nobody but an old woman, loneliness-stricken, poor and miserable. However, after a second reading, even the most callous reader cannot help noticing the sense of unease haunting the narrative throughout. As a matter of fact, ever since the point the story unfolds, an air of discomfort has already been there, to anticipate ominous consequences:

Although it was so brilliantly fine...The air was motionless, but when you opened your mouth there was just a faint chill, like a chill from a glass of iced water, before you sip, and now and again a leaf came drifting—from nowhere, from the sky. (Mansfield, p. 330)

It is apparent that Miss Brill is disturbed by an inexplicable restlessness, which stems partly from the “faint chill” she somehow senses in the motionless air. In this reiterated phrase—“a faint chill”, the pre-modifying adjective “faint” is itself a rather vague term. In this context, it could mean “lacking clearness, brightness or strength”, connoting that the “chill” is a feeling rather elusive, a sensation defying further articulation. As “faint” is semantically associated with

vagueness, the key word “chill” likewise embraces multi-implications. Literally, it refers to a slightly unpleasant degree of coldness. Also compiled in most dictionaries are meanings exploiting the psychological and sociolinguistic dimensions of the word. “Chill” could as well be interpreted as “an unpleasant sensation of coldness, especially from fear or discouragement”, or “coldness of manner, (a state) of unfriendliness. ( Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 1998: 241). Yet what that “chill” indeed is the writer does not specify. Even when the story reaches its very end, there remain questions as to how the “chill” comes into being and why it is repeatedly mentioned. Mansfield seems content, as it were, to leave these questions open and unanswered deliberately. She would rather let the enigma linger, because she apparently see no need in clarifying it. By virtue of that vagueness, a reader’s imagination is given free rein. He may look at that “chill” in a dry, literal light, and surmises from it that the story is set in fall, a season characterized by slight coldness and drifting leaves (This explains why Miss Brill decides to wear her beloved fur). Or, he may understand it metaphorically. The “chill” could well be an indicator of Miss Brill’s forlornness and loneliness, of a miserable feeling she is always unconsciously aware but consciously denied. And above all, it is repeatedly mentioned throughout as an indelible shadow. Even when the heroine’s moods, with the tunes of the band, starts to flit, float, and fly, this faint chill somehow manages to make its way into her heart, coloring an otherwise perfectly blissful moment with an inauspicious nuance.

Apart from the “faint chill”, “Words with blurred edges” such as “nowhere”, “somehow”, “something” also contribute to foster a pervasive sense of uncertainty:

1. And now and again a leaf came drifting, from nowhere, from the sky.
2. It must have had a knock, somehow.
3. And when she Breathed, something light and sad—no, not sad, exactly—something gentle seemed to move in her bosom .
4. And what they played was warm, sunny, yet there was just a faint chill—a something, what was it?—a something that made you want to sing. (Mansfield, 1981: 330-334)

As a matter of fact, two contradictory points of view about vague language have long been present, both in everyday life and in literary criticism: one, that vagueness in language is a bad thing, the other, that it is a good thing. Among the various inherited beliefs about language , an important one is that “good” usage involves(among other things) clarity and precision, hence it is believed that vagueness, ambiguity, imprecision, and general wooliness are to be avoided, making vagueness, like many other linguistic phenomena, pass unnoticed. Ullmann (1962), in a section entitled “Words with blurred edges”, traced from Plato to Byron a recurrent feeling of the inadequacy of language to express thought, particularly because of its lack of precision. But he also noted the converse feeling among poets and creative writers, that such vagueness is in fact an advantage. (Channell 2000: 7) This idea has also been reflected by Wittgenstein (1953) who suggests that words are like blurred photographs and adds, “Is it ever always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn’t it the indistinct one often exactly what we need?” (Channell 2000: 11)

Appreciating “Miss Brill” is exactly like appreciating “an indistinct picture”. It is saturated with vague words and phrases to trigger imagination. In it, much is left undefined, open to diverse interpretations. Moreover, this art of being vague enables the writer to stealthily infuse into the narrative an aesthetic beauty, a beauty most elusive and misty, a beauty peculiar to Mansfield’s writing.

## 2.2.2 Grammatical Features

### A: Sentence types

The sentence is the highest rank of grammatical construction. In terms of their communicative functions, sentences may be divided into four categories: statement, commend question, and exclamation. (Zhang Zhenbang 1999: 171) Most of the sentences of the short story “Miss Brill” fall into the former two types, namely, statement and commend. But it is particularly noteworthy that this textual web, generally woven out of declarative and commentary sentences, is also densely interspersed with exclamatory sentences.

When seeing a beautiful lady, so elegantly clad, should dismiss a little boy running after to hand to her a bunch of violets she had dropped, Miss Brill simply cannot help exclaiming, “Dear Me!” (Mansfield, 1981: 333) Again, as she sees a woman, with a shabby ermine toque, being brutally spurned away by a gentleman, Miss Brill’s whole heart cries out for her. In her vigorous imagination, “even the band seemed to know...and played more softly, tenderly, and the drum beat ‘The Brute! The Brute!’” (Mansfield, 1981: 333) In addition to exclamatory sentences indicative of judgment and evaluation, in the text there are also those inducing ironic effects. Notice how Miss Brill observes the old people sitting on the benches: “they were odd, silent, nearly all old” “as though they’d just come from dark little rooms or even—even cupboards!” (Mansfield, 1981: 332) Such an exclamation, with a glimmering of gloat—yet not without deep compassion—might very well have yielded the anticipation that Miss Brill were a young woman, vital and blooming. The conjecture, however, as the reader comes to the very end of the story, is smashed into pieces by the

appalling reality—she, just like those sitting on benches, is odd, silent, and old; she, just like those sitting benches, comes from a dark little room. Hasn't she herself ever noticed it? Or is it just the reluctance to accept the truth that prevents her from seeing it?

The paragraph where exclamatory sentences most abound is also where the climax is reached, that is, when Miss Brill coaxes herself into believing she has a part of the play and that's why she comes every Sunday:

Oh, how fascinating it was! How she enjoyed it! How she loved sitting here, watching it all! It was like a play. It was exactly like a play. Who could believe the sky at the back wasn't painted? ...Even she had a part and came every Sunday. No doubt somebody would have noticed if she hadn't been there; she was part of the performance after all. How strange she'd never thought of it like that before! ...No wonder! Miss Brill nearly laughed out loud. She was on the stage. She thought of the old invalid gentleman to whom she read the newspaper four afternoons a week while he slept in the garden...But suddenly he knew he was having the paper read to him by an actress! "An actress!" ... (Mansfield, 1981: 333-334)

At the very beginning of the passage there lies a succession of three short exclamations: "On, how fascinating it was! How she enjoyed it! How she loved sitting here, watching it all!" The parallel structure applied here no doubt magnifies Miss Brill's intense happiness at finding the value of her existence, which makes her believe that she is needed—at least in some way! In the same paragraph exist more vivid examples: "How strange she's never thought of that before!" "No wonder!" Almost all these sentences are invariably short, emphatic, creating a powerful and strong rhythm. Yet with the thought in mind that her sweet dream is destined to smash itself against the cold hard stone of reality, how poignant a feeling these sentences will produce in the reader's heart!

B: Subordinate clause

In terms of syntactical complexity, Mansfield's style is also drastically distinguished from those of her contemporaries. Her syntax is generally simple, by no means intricate. In this particular text, the ratio of dependent clauses to independent clauses is approximately 1:10. And a considerably large proportion of the dependent clauses are in fact –ing and –ed participle clauses, which act as adverbials of accompany circumstances:

1. Only two people shared her "special" seat: a fine old man in a velvet coat, his hands clasped over a huge carved walking-stick, and a big old woman, sitting upright, with a roll of knitting on her embroidered apron.
2. (They were) an Englishman and his wife, he wearing a dreadful Panama hat and she button boots.
3. Little children ran among them, swooping and laughing.
4. And sometimes a tiny stagger came suddenly rocking into the open from under the trees...until its high-stepping mother, like a young hen, rushed scolding to its rescue.
5. Two peasant women with funny straw hats passed, leading beautiful smoke—colored donkeys.
6. ...and her hand, in its cleaned glove, lifted to dab her lips, was a tiny yellowish paw.

( Mansfield, 1981: 332-333)

In the sentences listed above, Mansfield omits "and", "but" and "or", to be replaced by a prolific use of the –ing and –ed participle clauses which she uses to depict the fragmented and inconsequential sequence of a thought pattern. This technique also allows layer by layer of images to construct rapidly in front of the reader's eyes, as in "At the Bay":

Standing in a pool of moonlight Beryl Fairfield undressed herself - letting her clothes fall, pushing back with a languid gesture her warm heavy hair. ( Mansfield, 1981: 216)

Here, by means of two successive ing- participle clauses, Mansfield miraculously compresses a handful of images into a single sentence, which consists merely of 24 words. "A pool of moonlight", a woman by the name of "Beryl Fairfield", "falling clothes", " her warm heavy hair", these images are aroused, one by one, at a speed so breathlessly fast. Perhaps it is for this reason that Mansfield's writing style, at least in short stories, is more poetic than narrative, since novels, as a rule, cannot reach this concentration of experience as it has the burden of facts and explanation. Mansfield avoids the anecdotal, and instead focuses on the direct impact of words or—to put it more exactly—the images these words suggest. By arranging the above sentence into the recognizable form of a poem, the similarities between her writing style and that of the poet become all the more apparent:

Standing in a pool of moonlight

Beryl Fairfield undressed herself-

Letting her clothes fall,

Pushing back with a languid gesture

Her warm heavy hair.

Even Mansfield herself observed of her own unique writing style: "I feel always trembling on the brink of poetry - but especially I want to write a kind of long elegy to [my brother]. Perhaps not in poetry. Not perhaps in prose. Almost certainly in a kind of special prose." (Mansfield, 1981: 66)

### 2.2.3 Figures of Speech

#### A: Phonological Schemes

Mansfield does not neglect sound effects in impressing on us the different sensory qualities of each particular scene. The story's opening sentence again stands out as a quintessential example. As is already touched upon in the above analysis, this sentence features a detailed description of the congenial weather. What calls for further clarification is the fact that such a sense of agreeableness is communicated not only through visual effect, but also through the auditory imagery evoked by words which are intrinsically alliterative: "Brilliantly" and "blue" start with same consonant / b /; "gold" and "great" alike with the sound / g /. More interesting to observe is the coupling of "light" and "like", "white" and "wine". In addition to their respective repetition of / l / and / w /, these four words, which are placed adjacent to one another, share the same vowel sound / ai /. These juxtaposed words combine to create a tempo which is both light and vivacious. The already finely-exploited beauty of the season's day, as a result, is presented as dynamic and fluid and thus more fascinating.

Other examples of alliteration and assonance, indeed, exist in fairly large numbers in the remaining parts of the story. And occasionally, consonant and vowel repetitions are employed in a way which lends force to semantic connections: As the reader treads his way through the second paragraph, a conductor, brimming over with vigor and self-confidence, recommends himself into the reader's attention. He directs the playing of the band with a flourish, and "scraped" with his foot and "flapped" his arms like a rooster about to crow. The brevity of the recurrent stop consonant / p / ( found in both "scraped" and "flapped") no doubt plays a part in foregrounding the forceful and strenuous features of conductor's gestures. By contrast, in the case of the old people, who "sat" on the bench, "still" as "statues", the motionlessness and stiffness characteristic of their postures, to a certain degree, derives from the three successive occurrence of the beginning sound / s / ( in "sat", "still", "statues") within the boundary of one single sentence.

As more and more people throng into the park, with more and more co-players joining her in this grand drama of life, the thrill of Miss Brill, step by step, begins to escalate. In correspondence with increasingly stirring passion of the heroine, the rhythm of the narrative also starts to gather momentum: In the description of the

× / × / × / ×

noisy crowd in the park, regularities of rhythm ("the couples and groups paraded,  
/ × / × / × /  
stopped to talk, to greet, to buy" (Mansfield, 1981: 332)), coupled with the clogging

/ / / /

effect of juxtaposed heavily stressed syllables ("white silk bows", "stopped",  
/ / / /

"stared", "sat down 'flop'" (Mansfield, 1981: 332) give rise to a speeding-up effect, to which consonant clusters add vehement emphasis: / st) p /, / t) k /, / gri:t/, / sæt /, / fl) p /. These are not gratuitous embellishments—what's integrated into the sound texture of the language is a scene full of hustle and bustle, as well as an aura saturated with noise and excitement.

#### C: Similes and Metaphors

Another distinctive feature of Mansfield's writing style, as is revealed by a scrutiny of "Miss Brill", is her generous use of figurative languages, metaphors and similes in particular. Among the myriad similes that occur in the text, there is one of special significance:

But today she passed the baker's by, climbed the stairs, went into the little dark room—her room like a cupboard—and sat down on the red eiderdown. (Mansfield, 1981: 334)

Though it would be much exaggeration to compare a room to a cupboard, the simile, nevertheless, is by no means out of place. The comparison enables us to draw a vivid mental picture of Miss Brill's living conditions: it is a cramped little room, a poorly lighted place, probably without a window. No wonder she makes such point of going to the park every Sunday afternoon: Bathed in the brilliant sunlight, "sitting in other people's lives for just a minute" (Mansfield, 1981: 331), She seems to utterly forget about the sordid place she comes from. The park has virtually become a bridge connecting her with the outside world. It is the only window through which light is occasionally allowed in to dispel the darkness haunting her heart. But finally this window of communication is shut. It is well conceivable that Miss Brill, after realizing that who she really is, would never tread her feet again on the land of the Jardins Publiques. And the remaining days of her life is going to be spent exclusively in that dark little room—a room like a cupboard.

In addition to similes with like or as to indicate a comparison, metaphors, as another major type of figure of speech, also abound in the story. Take one in paragraph 2 for instance:

Now there came a little “flutey” but-very pretty!—a little chain of bright drops. (Mansfield, 1981: 332)

In the above example two things of distinctly different categories are compared—music reproduced by the flute and a chain of bright dewdrops. At first sight, this metaphor seems a bit far-fetched, or even inappropriate: As music appeals to the sense of hearing and drops to the sense of sight, how can an analogy be drawn between them? Yet it is still justifiable because of their defining similarities: Both the “flutey” and the drops are lovely; both are pretty and light; both capable of producing a pleasing effect in our hearts. And the discrepancy between the two things compared makes their similarities all the more striking.

### 3. Conclusion

With all the evidence listed above, at least we may conclude that Mansfield’s writing style, as is revealed by an examination of the most prominent linguistic features in “Miss Brill”, is something uniquely distinctive. It is by no means quiet and level, like that of Jane Austen’s; neither is it similar to that of Dickens’s, which is universally recognized as being pompous, filled with sharp-edged irony, together with criticism so direct and forceful. She alternatively slips into and then out of the minds of her main character’s, in a most stealthy way. She is a faithful agent of their minds’ voices, sobbing out their sobs, wailing out their wails. She seems, as it were, never to allow her personal feelings and judgment to infiltrate into her story. Nevertheless, under the disguise of seemingly objectiveness lurks a passionate voice with warm humanity. That’s why she takes so much pain to describe the inner conflicts her characters face and resolve; That also explains why she has a marked preference for exquisite words, vague expressions, short emphatic exclamations, figurative languages, imagery, sound—any devices that are emotively provoking. Then, so suddenly, by revealing the sharp incongruities between imagination and reality, she shoots a final blow—an irony not intending to satirize but to arouse compassion. That’s her style, namely, sensitive, delicate, poetic, seemingly impersonal yet actually the most emotional.

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### 2. Leech and Short’s Approach

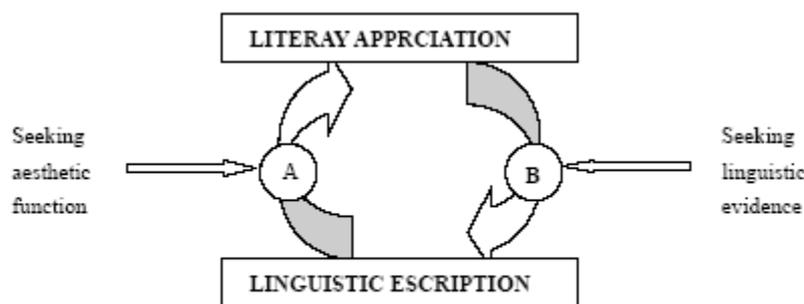


Figure. 1