

## **Investigating Stylistic Devices in Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones***

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### **ABSTRACT**

The paper presents analysis of the stylistic devices used in Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones*. *The Lovely Bones* sets its progress around the protagonist Salmon Susie, a fourteen-year girl raped and murdered by her neighbor, Mr. Harvey a rapist and serial killer. Susie's murder is placed in the beginning of the novel which makes its darker at first sight. She is an omniscient narrator and opens *The Lovely Bones* with arresting lines, "My name was Salmon, like the fish; first name Susie. I was fourteen when I was murdered on December 6, 1973" (Sebold, *The Lovely Bones*, 2002). The murdered is in *her heaven*, and her rapist and murderer is roaming freely in his next prey makes *The Lovely Bones* even darker. The imagery, settings, and clarity of emotions through diction in *The Lovely Bones* push it to stay on top in the list of the best-seller. The paper investigates the various threads of language tools used to fabricate this piece of art. Alice Sebold is a writer of dark subjects i.e. rape, murder, pedophilia, dissolution of families, social inequalities, gender differences, etc. Investigating the dark images in *The Lovely Bones* through stylistic analysis is the main objective of the paper.

**Keywords:** stylistic analysis, dark images, diction, rape, murder, crime, dissolution, families

## 1. Introduction

*The Lovely Bones* is Alice Sebold’s masterpiece which brings her into limelight. It was hailed as the most successful debut since *Gone with the Wind* (McCrum, 2007). The dark subjects i.e. rape, murder, pedophilia, dissolution of families, social inequalities, gender differences, etc. are the areas where Sebold’s pen rests. In her memoir *Lucky* published in 1999, Sebold shares her brutal experience of getting raped in a tunnel when she was a freshman in a college, and reaction of her family, friends and society towards her after the incident. The shadows of Sebold’s real-life experiences are visible effects on her writings; therefore the dark elements can be seen especially in the opening of her works. Sebold opens *Lucky* with, “*In the tunnel where I was raped, a tunnel that was once an underground entry to an amphitheater, a place where actors burst forth from underneath the seats of a crowd, a girl had been murdered and dismembered*” (Sebold, 1999). *The Almost Moon*, Sebold’s second novel published in 2007 is full of horror. It is all about Helen Knightly, the murderer of her old-aged mother. Again, Sebold’s pen sets the arresting lines in the beginning, “*When all is said and done, killing my mother came easily*” (Sebold, *The Almost Moon*, 2007).

*The Lovely Bones* has a variety of language tools which make it a special text of its genre. Language is the only way that helps a writer to express and a reader to reach the intended objectives. The reason why language is so important to stylisticians is because the various forms, patterns and levels that constitute linguistic structure are an important index of the function of the text (Simpson, 2004). The criminals have special expressions and they use them selecting different language tools. They manipulate the idiomatic expressions, linguistic connotations, and conventional metaphors to bring out cruel, inhuman and violent undertones, as well as how irony conveys their vicious intentions (Gregoriou, 2002). “*Don’t let me startle you,*” says Mr. Harvey, the serial rapist and killer of *The Lovely Bones*. It is his first utterance, and the notable word *startle* used consciously or unconsciously connects his personality with *surprise and fear*. Using these kinds of specific words for special characters and their utterances depends on the writer’s particular style. And to study this style,

stylistics came into existence. It is a method of textual interpretation in which primacy of place is assigned to language. Through stylistic analysis, a reader is able to see the text in various meanings which are helpful understand the literary texts. It doesn't mean to challenge the writer's choices but explore the beauty of language and a writer's skills in using language in different ways according to the person, and context. The analysis of style is an attempt to find the artistic principles underlying a writer's choice of language (Leech, 2007). For this purpose of analysis, Leech and Short further categorize the characteristics of a writer's style in four major headings: lexical, grammatical, figures of speech, and cohesion and context.

## 2. Literature Review

The literature on Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* shows a variety of approaches i.e. the interpretation of its hyper-reality, narratology etc. Many scholars have drawn their particular and personal conclusions on *The Lovely Bones*. Some of them are here as follow:

- *Hyper-reality in Sebold's The Lovely Bones* concludes that the heaven fabricated in *The Lovely Bones* actually is a representation of contemporary American culture and social set-up. Susie, the central character of the novel, imagines the hyper-real heaven. Although in real religious heaven people can reach to all their wishes in a moment, it is everlasting and this fact is a hyper-real aspect of real religious heaven which is different from the heaven of this novel (Kiaei & Safdari, 2014).
- *Maturation Beyond the Grave: A Narratology Reading to Susie Salmon in Alice Sebold's The Lovely Bones* draws our attention to the technique of narration. Narration from the point of view of the dead character allows Susie to know everything about what is happening on Earth. The difference between Susie's narration and the narration of the usual third person omniscient narrator is that Susie plays a key role in the plot; her murder is the main conflict of the novel, and the way the living characters come to terms with her loss is the primary action of the novel. Rizki focuses the three key elements in Susie's narration:

mistakes she did in the past, the reversal of fortune that she experienced, and her realization (Rizki, 2013).

- *The post-mortal rape survivor and the paradox of female agency across different media: Alice Sebold's novel The Lovely Bones and its 2009 film adaptation* speaks about what sets *The Lovely Bones* apart from other fiction and non-fiction about sexual crimes against women is the unusual narrative setting employed by Sebold (Czarnowsky & Laura-Marie, 2013).
- In his *Saving the girl: a creative reading of Alice Sebold's Lucky and The Lovely Bones* the researcher compares both of Sebold's works i.e. *Lucky* and *The Lovely Bones* and searches out how one text haunts the other and the interrelationship of truth and fantasy. While writing *The Lovely Bones* in 1990s, Sebold forced herself to complete her critically acclaimed rape memoir *Lucky* (1999) first; because she did not want Susie Salmon (the dead narrator of *The Lovely Bones*) would represent her. She decided to make Susie free to tell her own story. *Lucky* is a real deal about rape while *The Lovely Bones* would be a fantasy (Kilby, 2018).
- *Quest for Identity in the Contemporary American Bildungsroman: Sue Monk Kidd's The Secret Life of Bees, Alice Sebold's The Lovely Bones, and Jonathan Safran Foer's Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* examines both the representation of the conventions within the contemporary context and the way they are manipulated or reconstructed by three influential authors namely Sue Monk Kidd, Alice Sebold, and Jonathan Safran Foer. Further it says that in terms of their objectives, the journeys taken by all of the protagonists result in failure; however, they are all reborn with a new philosophy that allows them to acknowledge loss and a life without the physical presence of the parents. Focusing Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones*, it concludes that notwithstanding the parallels, the three pieces also significantly diverge from some of the conventions of bildungsroman. The most notable challenge against the

traditional structure is obviously posed by Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* through its posthumous bildung heroine. The individuation process goes into reverse in *Bones* as the central character's development is initiated by her murder. The end is a new beginning for Susie. It proves that development is not confined to worldly presence. The death of the heroine is rendered into an opportunity to observe the operation of the mortal world, human beings, and daily life through an alienated viewpoint. Without being involved in the situations, she acquires a unique viewpoint (Ilya, 2014).

- “*Share Moments, Share Life*”: *The Domestic Photograph as a Symbol of Disruption and Trauma in The Lovely Bones of Bliss* discusses the character of mother in the book, analyzing her maternal instincts, response to the death of her daughter, and sense of self. Concepts discussed in the article include visual representations, domestic photographs, mother-daughter dynamics, and trauma (Bliss, 2008).

From the literature reviewed-above, it becomes clear that *The Lovely Bones* has attracted attention of many scholars and they have written extensively viewing it from different point of views. However, to date, there has been little research devoted to the stylistic analysis of the novel. Therefore, the paper is intended to analyze Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* stylistically.

### 3. Research Methodology

The paper focuses on the dark images used by Alice Sebold in *The Lovely Bones*. To have better explanation and understanding of *the dark images*, the researchers studied the works of Edgar Allen Poe, Sigmund Freud, and Feminism. For overall idea of Sebold's diction and style, the researchers read all of her works especially paying attention to *The Lovely Bones*. The qualitative aspect of research and analytical approach is applied for the stylistic analysis of Sebold's *The Lovely Bones*. The researchers preferred a widely used framework of stylistic analysis presented by Geoffrey Leech and Mick Short in 2007. To present the accurate details in the series of stylistic analysis, the

researchers studied the original text *Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Prose* (2007) by Leech and Short. Leech and Short provide maximum options of stylistics devices used in a language to analyze a text stylistically. They categorize them in four major categories: lexical, grammatical, figures of speech, and cohesion and context.

## 4. Analysis

In this section, the paper deals with the analysis of *The Lovely Bones* stylistically. About stylistic analysis, Leech (2007) says that it is important to note that the stylistic analysis of a text is not simply a description of a scene, but an account of the relation between the visual world and its observer, who strives to comprehend and interpret it.

### 4.1. Lexical Categories

#### 4.1.1. Verbs

As the narrator narrates the actions taking place in the past, so the action verbs and phrasal verbs have been used frequently: murdered, contempt, dissect, killed, cried, died, snowing, blocking, take off, leave, fought, lying, panting, sweating, trapped, press, cheat, dying, struggled, wept, ripped open, beating, stung out, turned out, stared at, etc.

#### 4.1.2. Adjectives

*The Lovely Bones* is full of dark images and it is confirmed by its opening where it clearly states, “*My name was Salmon, like the fish; first name Susie. I was fourteen when I was murdered on December 6, 1973.*” What makes the act more painful, being the perpetrator is the neighbor, and he freely walks on earth after raping and killing the innocent Susie Salmon. The story is told through the eyes of the murdered. Using the bold words, Sebold never hesitates in telling what exactly happened to the victim. The adjectives which have been used during the rape scene and in the scenes when Susie, from her heaven, recalls her family on earth: missing, white,

old-fashioned, broken, difficult, weird, horrible, observant, startle, warm, concerned, frozen, swallowed, hard, etc.

To accompany the auditory of verbs, the adjectives bring visual imagery, particularly of color (Leech, 2007). The dark color tells the story of darkness and white stands for peace and hope in the darkness whereas red symbolizes the blood, hence, misfortunes or mishaps. In *Lucky*, black color is used 61 times which refers to the darkness all around, white is 45, and red is used 18 times. In *The Lovely Bones*, the black is used 38 times, white is 41, and red is used 27 times. And finally in *The Almost Moon*, the black is used 21 times, white is 40, and red is used 32 times.

#### 4.1.3. General

Alice Sebold also employs other lexical categories in the text, nouns and collocations are two of them: white girls, dark trips, murderer, December, daughter, mother, father, eggshells, coffee grounds, heaven, cologne, dark, tragedy, shame, bullshit, huge skeletons, virgin, struggle, lips, lamb, perpetual yesterday, worms and animals, etc. The aim of the descriptions of lexical categories is not to describe them but to make a visual connection between what the writers intends to express and how can a reader reach the targeted meaning by having the full understanding of lexical categories in the text.

## 4.2. Grammatical Categories

### 4.2.1. Sentence Structure

Sentence structure choice depends on a writer's skills. There isn't any parameter to give specific importance to any one specific structure. The context of story, role and intentions of the character play a significant part in applying certain sentence structures. But the majority of writers prefer to use complex sentences to present complex ideas. The complex form gives and withholds information, subordinates some ideas to others more important, coordinates those of equal weight, and ties into

a neat package as many suggestions, modifiers, and asides as the mind can attend to in one stretch (Barzun, 1975). Just before Mr. Harvey’s entry in *The Lovely Bones*, this sentence occurs, where the use of six feet (the standard size of a grave) creates darkness:

*Six feet from where Mr. Harvey stood, I stuck my tongue out to taste a snowflake.*

In the second sentence of the novel, Susie says, “*I was fourteen when I was murdered on December 6, 1973.*”

Mr. Harvey’s commands (imperatives) show his authority and manly attitude of the society where women are just to follow: “*Come and see.*” “*Look around.*” “*Be polite and have a Coke.*” “*Take your clothes off.*” “*Tell me you love me.*”

Susie’s short replies show that she doesn’t know anything how to deal with these circumstances. Alice Sebold filled Susie’s mouth with ‘please’ and ‘don’t’ repeatedly: “*Don’t Mr. Harvey.*” “*Please.*” “*Please don’t.*”

### 4.3. Figures of Speech

#### 4.3.1. Simile

Simile is used to compare two different things and it is indented to draw the connection between them. “I think that the impulse to find the likeness between unlike things is very basic to us, and it is out of that, of course, which the simile or metaphor springs (Muldoon, 2004)”. In *The Lovely Bones*, the existence of simile increased the darkness in thoughts.

After kissing, Mr. Harvey started working himself over Susie. Susie says, “*I felt like a sea in which he stood and pissed and shat.*” It shows the vulnerability of innocent girls where a criminal man takes the liberty of his manhood and shatters innocent lives into uncountable pieces.



When Mr. Harvey was on top of Susie, the use of simile refers to the state of females in the society. A rabbit (female) against hammer (male) shows how a woman is powerless against mighty man.

*How mine skipped like a rabbit, and how his thudded, a hammer against cloth.*

#### 4.3.2. **Metaphor**

“Metaphor is not fanciful embroidery of the facts. It is a way of experiencing the facts (Hawkes, 1972)”. The facts Susie faces in *The Lovely Bones* cause silence, fear and darkness. Sebold's personification, a form of metaphor, also grabs the attention. The filthy intentions of Mr. Harvey can be observed when Susie says, “*His glasses were small and round with gold frames, and his eyes looked out over them at me.*”

Again a miserable female in a manly society is shown in the sentence when Susie says, “*I was the mortar, he was the pestle.*” The pestle is dominant on the mortar, and it is free to move on anywhere, wherever it wants, with freedom and force.

Susie's believe that Mr. Harvey is going to kill her is visible here. He insulted her in a way she thinks herself an animal. It signifies the male-female behaviour in the society: “*I knew he was going to kill me. I did not realize then that I was an animal already dying.*”

The dark past always haunts. To refer the frequent incidents with girls while thinking about the hole where Mr. Harvey took her in and raped and murdered, Susie says, “*Life is a perpetual yesterday for us.*”

#### 4.3.3. **Irony**

Irony is a kind of secret communication (Leech, 2007) between author and reader. It is a double significance which arises from the contrast in values associated with two different

points of view. It can be manifested in a single sentence, or can be extended over a whole novel (Leech, 2007). “*My Murderer was a man from my neighborhood,*” declares Susie in *The Lovely Bones*. A neighbor is supposed to help, stand with in unfavorable conditions, but Mr. Harvey was a rapist and murderer being Susie’s neighbor.

The fertilizer is to enhance life, but the irony spreads its wings when once Susie’s father asks Mr. Harvey, the murderer, about the fertilizer.

In the beginning of the novel, Susie mentions ‘fish’ with her last name, Salmon. Salmon fish is a special kind of fish having many characteristics like Susie. One of them is “to smell quickly” (Crochetiere, 2015). The other thing Susie says about herself that she never feels comfortable with adults. And unfortunately when she takes a shortcut from junior high to his house, she smells cologne in the cornfield and finds an adult, Mr. Harvey there, but ironically she found herself rooted on the spot where Mr. Harvey stood.

#### 4.4. Cohesion and Context

Through the last four decades, studies have been conducted by linguists to explain and examine cohesive features. The major work that influenced these studies is the one conducted by Halliday and Hasan (1976). They call the concept of cohesion *a semantic one* it deals with the relations of meaning within any text. It occurs where the interpretation of some element in the discourse is dependent on that of another and, thus, a relation of cohesion is set up. *The Lovely Bones* is a story told by a murdered girl named Susie from her heaven. She is an omniscient narrator; hence, the use of pronoun ‘I’ and ‘my’ is frequent which makes the text coherent. In the opening of the novel:

*My name was Salmon, like the fish; first name, Susie. I was fourteen when I was murdered on December 6, 1973.*

The ‘I’ in the second sentence refers to Susie Salmon in the first sentence. The text is cohesive because we cannot understand the meaning of ‘I’ unless ‘Susie Salmon’ exists in the text.

“*I wasn’t killed by Mr. Botte, by the way*” is the opening sentence of the third paragraph of the novel. We know who Mr. Botte is because his description is there in the previous paragraph.

There are certain phrases/idioms that occur throughout the text periodically and help the text connect together. For example, “*Nothing is ever certain*” is used six times, “*my father*” is used four-hundred and fifty-eight times, and “*my mother*” is used four-hundred and eleven times.

## 5. Conclusion

The paper was set to investigate the stylistic devices focusing the dark images in Alice Sebold’s *The Lovely Bones*. The analysis showed the use of stylistic devices to create the dark effects on the text. The frequent use of devices kept the text in streamline. Sebold’s preferences of selecting the vocabulary, sentence structures, figures of speech and the art of cohesion mix up the innocent voice of Susie with the poisonous of Mr. Harvey. Where the helplessness in Susie’s words wins readers’ sympathy, on the other hand, Mr. Harvey’s filthy actions and intentions awake the reader’s anger. The dialogues create moving images which travel through passage to passage. The popularity of *The Lovely Bones*, as it is called Sebold’s masterpiece and one of the best-selling books in 2002, shows that the stylistic devices plays a significant role in a text and the careful study of the stylistic devices helps understand a language and literature in a better way.

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