



A Lexico-Syntactic Analysis of Tim O'Brien's *Where Have You Gone, Charming Billy?*

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Abstract

The Vietnam War was one of the major wars of the 20th century. It had a profound and multifaceted impact on society, politics, and culture. Moreover, many writers who served in the war used literature as a means of processing their traumas and conveying the raw emotions of combat. Therefore, this paper is mainly concerned with exploring the effect of the Vietnam War in Tim O'Brien's (1975) short story *Where Have You Gone, charming Billy?* by conducting a lexical syntactic analysis. Moreover, the sample is composed of one hundred ninety-seven words. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there has not been lexical syntactic analysis on *Where Have You Gone, Charming Billy?* Accordingly, this article applies the approach of Short & Leech's (2007) "Style in Fiction", specifically, their checklist, which consists of four categories of analysis, lexical categories, cohesion, grammatical categories, and figures of speech. Furthermore, O'Brien's chosen text is examined in terms of lexical and grammatical categories. The findings reveal that the author has used simple words more frequently in

approximately 74% of the text, whereas complex words make up around 25%. As for sentence type and complexity, O'Brien uses simple declarative sentences much more frequently than the other types. Significantly, O'Brien depends on simplicity to deliver his message and shape the discourse around the Vietnam War.

Keywords: Stylistics, Leech, Short, Lexical Analysis, Syntactic Analysis, Short Story, Tim O'Brien.

الملخص

تعد حرب فيتنام واحدة من الحروب الكبرى في القرن العشرين. حيث كان لها تأثير عميق ومتعدد الأوجه على المجتمع السياسي والثقافي. علاوة على ذلك، استخدم العديد من الكتاب الذين خدموا في الحرب الأدب كوسيلة لمعالجة صدماتهم والتعبير عن مشاعرهم. لذلك، فإن الهدف الرئيسي للبحث هو دراسة وتحليل تأثير حرب فيتنام في قصة تيم أوبراين القصيرة المختارة: "أين ذهبت يا ببلي الساحر؟" (1975) من خلال إجراء تحليل نحوي معجمي؛ حيث تتكون العينة من مائة وسبعة وتسعين كلمة. حتى الآن، لم يكن هناك تحليل نحوي معجمي حول "أين ذهبت يا ببلي الساحر؟". وفقا لذلك، من أجل دراسة أسلوب الكاتب، استعان الباحث بقائمة الخصائص المعجمية والنحوية التي وضعها ليتش و شورت في كتابهما "الأسلوب في الرواية". بالإضافة لذلك، يتم فحص النصوص المختارة من قبل أوبراين من حيث بعدين: الفئات المعجمية والنحوية. وتوصلت الدراسة إلي أن المؤلف استخدم كلمات بسيطة بشكل متكرر في حوالي 74% من النص، في حين أن الكلمات المعقدة تشكل حوالي 25%. بالنسبة لنوع الجملة يستخدم أوبراين الجمل التصريحية البسيطة بشكل متكرر أكثر من الأنواع الأخرى. الجدير بالذكر أن تيم أوبراين يعتمد على البساطة لإيصال رسالته وتشكيل الخطاب حول حرب فيتنام.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأسلوبية، التحليل المعجمي، التحليل النحوي، القصة القصيرة، تيم أوبراين.



1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the Study

Many writers who served in the war used literature as a means of processing their traumas and conveying the intense emotions of combat. Personal experiences narrated by individuals who were directly involved or witnessed the war became powerful tools to humanize the war experience, creating a deep emotional connection between readers and the realities of the conflict, specifically, the Vietnam War, which was one of the major wars of the 20th century. It had a profound and multifaceted impact on society, politics, and culture. Its consequences were deeply felt in both Vietnam and the United States. Additionally, the war resulted in a staggering human cost, with millions of lives lost, leaving lasting emotional and psychological scars on those who experienced it. Hence, the Vietnam War was a transformative experience for the writers, influencing their works in specific ways.

One individual who vividly captured the essence of this war through his writings is the acclaimed American writer, Tim O'Brien. His experiences as a soldier in Vietnam profoundly shaped his work and provided unique insights into the psychological and emotional impact of war on soldiers and civilians alike. O'Brien's writing resonates not only because of its artistic merit but also because it reflects the lived experiences of countless individuals who were directly affected by the war. Subsequently, the present research's main concern is to analyze the style of Tim O'Brien's selected short story: *Where Have You Gone, Charming Billy?* (1975). Thus, a model of lexical-syntactic techniques adopted by Leech and Short (2007, p. 75-82) in their book, *Style in Fiction*, serves as the base for this study.



2. Aim of the Study

The main concern of this study is to analyze the style of Tim O'Brien's selected short story: *Where Have You Gone, Charming Billy?* (1975). Thus, a model of lexical-syntactic techniques adopted by Leech and Short (2007, p. 75-82) in their book, *Style in Fiction*, serves as the base for this study, granting us the chance to deeply explore and analyze the use of lexis which can be used to highlight the mental and emotional impact of combat on soldiers. Additionally, the syntax and sentence structures can also reveal the characters' internal struggles. Furthermore, the syntactic study of sentence structure indicates the writer's style used to convey his message and intended meaning.

3. Research Questions

to illustrate the power of language as a medium for exploring the human condition and the lasting effects of war on the human psyche. Therefore, the following research questions guide this investigation:

- 1) To what extent does the use of Lexis show the true meaning of O'Brien's representation of the Vietnam War? This research aims
- 2) What role do the sentence types and structures play in shaping the discourse around the Vietnam War?
- 3) What methods will be applied to conduct the analytical analysis?

4. Objective of the study

This study is mainly devoted to

- 1) Understanding the role of stylistic analysis in shaping the meaning/ morals of the selected short story.
- 2) Assessing the effectiveness of O'Brien's lexical strategies in conveying the realities and complexities of the Vietnam War to readers who have no direct experience of it.



- 3) Examining how the author's use of sentence structures and grammatical patterns conveys the psychological impact of the war on soldiers.

5. Literature Review

5.1 Overview of Style and Stylistics

The concept of *Style* refers to how language is used to convey meaning. It is concerned with the choices that speakers and writers make when they choose how to express themselves in language. Furthermore, *Stylistics* is a branch of linguistics that deals with the study of style in language. It is concerned with analyzing language use, focusing on how language is used for different purposes, in different contexts, and by different people. The development of stylistics can be traced back to the early 20th century when scholars began to explore the relationship between language and literature.

Different linguists have defined stylistics in their own way. So, we can find several definitions of stylistics. Widdowson (1975) defines it as “The study of literary discourse from a linguistic orientation” (p: 3). The goal of stylistic analysis is to examine how language is used to create meaning and effects that go beyond the simple conveyance of information, it goes beyond the surface layer to find out the hidden messages and intentions of the literary works.

Abrams (1993) states that “Stylistics insists on the need to be objective by focusing sharply on the text itself and by setting out to discover the “rules” governing the process by which linguistic elements and patterns in a text accomplish their meanings and literary effects.” (p.284). Accordingly, Stylistic analysis sheds light on the intricate relationship between the reader and the text. The way an author employs language can shape the reader's interpretation and emotional response, making stylistic analysis essential in understanding the overall impact of the work on its audience.



5.2 Related Studies

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, this is the first time that Leech and Short's approach has been applied to the works of Tim O'Brien. Nonetheless, a number of his works have been tackled from other points of view. For example, Sadie Williams (2016) explores Tim O'Brien's storytelling techniques in three of his works, namely *Going After Cacciato*, *The Things They Carried*, and *In the Lake of the Woods*. Furthermore, Williams analyzes O'Brien's use of Sigmund Freud's dream theory to understand how O'Brien's works explore the complexities of human experience and the nature of storytelling.

Leech and Short's approach has been adapted to various genres. In 2019, Kambash's study aims to illustrate the simplicity of Hemingway's *very short story*. Moreover, the study focuses on the role and function of sentences in the text. As a result, the author examines sentence simplicity using two models: Leech and Short's (2007) for sentence length and Crys and Dav's (1997) for sentence type. This paper shares an analytical focus on sentence types, aligning with the methodology utilized in Kambash's paper. During the examination, Kambash discovered that the story comprises forty sentences. There are 11 simple sentences (27.5%) and 14 compound sentences (35%), whereas the number of Complex sentences accounts for 15 with a percentage of 37% of the total. Based on the previous data, the researcher concluded that simple sentences are used to describe the characters, whereas complex sentences are used to first describe the setting, which plays a crucial role in the play, and then to provide historical context for the setting, particularly the place where the action occurs.

Another study was undertaken by Waleed (2022) entitled "A Stylistic Analysis to Agatha Christie's Novel Three Act Tragedy". The researcher employs three categories from Leech and Short's approach to their book *style in fiction* in 2007. Furthermore, the study adopts the lexical and grammatical categories, as well as figures of speech. In



addition, the researcher uses the coherent devices proposed by Halliday and Hasan. Accordingly, the study is organized into four areas. The findings of this study indicate that the author's techniques aid in increasing the level of engagement between the writer and the reader.

6. Methodology

6.1 Approach

The researcher applies the approach of Short & Leech's (2007) "Style in Fiction", specifically, their checklist, which consists of four categories of analysis, that are respectively: lexical categories; cohesion; grammatical categories; and figures of speech. Furthermore, O'Brien's chosen text is examined in terms of lexical and grammatical categories.

6.2 Methods

After reading the extract, an application of the above approach will be conducted on it. Thus, there are two types of analysis. Firstly, the lexical categories which comprise general, nouns, adjectives, and verbs. Secondly, the syntactic features which are categorized according to their relevance to the following aspects: sentence type and sentence complexity. Furthermore, it starts with analyzing lexical categories and then grammatical categories. For the syntactic analysis, the text is parsed according to Leech et al. (1982). The parsing process assumes the form of brackets. Additionally, the text is analyzed by using both quantitative and qualitative methods, each of which provides a different perspective on the text.

7. Data Analysis

In this section, the researcher selects a significant extract from the story *Where Have You Gone, Charming Billy?* (1975), reads it properly, and then analyzes the collected data based on Leech and Short's model which consists of lexical and grammatical categories.



Example :

"The platoon of twenty-six soldiers moved slowly in the dark, single file, not talking(1). One by one, like sheep in a dream, they passed through the hedgerow, crossed quietly over a meadow, and came down to the rice paddy(2). There they stopped(3). Their leader knelt down, motioning with his hand, and one by one the other soldiers squatted in the shadows, vanishing in the primitive stealth of warfare(4). For a long time they did not move(5). Except for the sounds of their breathing, the twenty-six men were very quiet: some of them excited by the adventure, some of them afraid, some of them exhausted from the long night march, some of them looking forward to reaching the sea, where they would be safe(6). At the rear of the column, Private First Class Paul Berlin lay quietly with his forehead resting on the black plastic stock of his rifle, his eyes closed(7). He was pretending he was not in the war¹, pretending he had not watched Billy Boy Watkins die of a heart attack that afternoon(8). He was pretending he was a boy again, camping with his father in the midnight summer along the Des Moines River" (9). (p.1).

Context :

The extract starts with a platoon of Twenty-six American soldiers silently moving through the dark, walking through a hedgerow, crossing a meadow, and stopping at a rice paddy. The protagonist -Private First Class Paul Berlin—lies quietly and pretends not to be in the war.

¹ War: the Vietnam war , 1961-75; it began as a civil war between North and South Vietnam. By 1961, the Americans were actively involved in the war on the side of the South Vietnamese.



Analysis:

A: Lexical Categories

1- General

Words are the author's tool, so it is significant for the writer to use them carefully to convey his message. Jackson and Amvela (2000) make a distinction between simple and complex words, stating that this distinction is based on the "morphological analysis" of the words. According to them, simple words "are all free morphemes" and they are "morphologically unanalyzable". (Jackson & Amvela, p. 4).

Tim O'Brien paid attention to the usage of **simple words**, for instance, (*hand, like, sheep, father, boy, dream, rice, one, long, time, move, morning, song and night, etc.*). **Complex words**, on the other hand, "are formed from simpler words by the addition of affixes or some other kind of morphological modification". (Jackson & Amvela, p.5). Some examples are (*moved, slowly, talking, passed, crossed, quietly, stopped, leader, motioning, soldiers, squatted, etc.*). The use of words, such as "*slowly*", and "*dark*", creates a clear and easily understandable picture of the soldiers' movements and behavior.

At the same time, the use of more **complex words** and phrases, such as "*hedgerow*", "*primitive*", and "*vanishing*", adds depth and complexity to the scene. These words create a sense of mystery and tension, as the soldiers move through an unfamiliar and potentially dangerous environment. The use of "*primitive*" also hints at the cultural and historical context of the Vietnam War, highlighting the clash between traditional and modern ways of life.

In addition to the use of simple and complex words, the quotation contains mostly **descriptive vocabulary** and rare occurrences of **evaluative vocabulary**. The descriptive vocabulary includes words such as "*quiet*", "*excited*", "*afraid*", "*exhausted*", and "*long*". These words describe the physical and emotional states of the soldiers and their surroundings.



2- Nouns

The above extract includes **abstract nouns** such as "dream", "warfare", "adventure", "stealth", and "war", which convey a sense of the soldiers' mindset and the larger context of the situation. Using these abstract nouns highlights the tension and danger of the moment, as well as the importance of the soldiers' ability to move quietly and remain unseen. Furthermore, **concrete nouns** such as "hedgerow", "meadow", and "rice paddy" provide specific, tangible details that help to ground the scene in reality and create a clear mental image for the reader, in addition to the use of **topographical nouns** such as "sea" and "river".

Special mention should be made to the use of **proper nouns** in the extract. Tim paid attention to the use of some proper nouns to create a sense of reality in the text and to ensure that readers know exactly what he is talking about, for instance (*Paul, Berlin, Billy, Watkins, and Moines*). Also, he used **collective words**, like "platoon" and "sheep", which create a sense of unity and cohesion among the soldiers, emphasizing their shared purpose and the coordinated nature of their movements. In addition to the use of **common nouns**, such as "soldier, man, father, leader, boy, private, class", etc.

3- Adjectives

Adjectives can be classified, according to the type of attribute they embody, into physical, psychological, visual, auditory, referential, emotive, and evaluative. The adjectives within this extract are **Psychological adjectives** which are found in words, like (*quiet, pinched, excited, afraid, and exhausted*), in addition to **physical adjectives**, such as "long", besides, there is one **color adjective** in the passage, which is "black", and for **descriptive adjectives**, we have words like, "single" and "primitive", which adds to the sense of tension and danger, suggesting that the soldiers are trying to move unnoticed and they are using basic, instinctual tactics to do so. The word "stealth" emphasizes the importance of secrecy and suggests that the soldiers are engaged in a mission that requires them to remain hidden and undetected.

4- Verbs

Most of the verbs in this passage tend to be of **dynamic movement**, as in (*moved, passed, crossed, came down, lay, knelt down, and squatted*), in addition to **stative verbs**, which are "be", "have", and the verb "pretend" that has been repeated three times. The use of the verb "pretend" adds a level of psychological complexity and raises the possibility of deliberate escape from the real situation, which is war. The protagonist, most of the time, is imagining himself sitting with his father along the river, other times as if he wasn't at the war once. So he finds that the only way to release his fear and disconnect from reality is by pretending. Also, it's worth noting that dynamic verbs, such as "moved", "passed", and "crossed", create a sense of movement and progression toward the soldiers' goal.

Table 1. Lexical categories

Lexical data	Number
General:	
Simple words	74
Complex words	25
Descriptive words	7
Evaluative words	1
Nouns:	
Abstract nouns	5
Concrete topographical	4
Concrete	12
Proper nouns	5

"ألسنيات" مجلة الدراسات اللغوية والادبية والترجمة العلمية العدد (1) ٢٠٢٤



Collective nouns	2
Common nouns	9
Adjectives:	
Psychological adjectives	5
Physical adjectives	1
Colour adjective	1
Descriptive adjectives	3
Verbs:	
Dynamic movement	8
Stative	3

B: Grammatical Categories:

1) Sentence type

It has to be noted that Tim O'Brien uses **declarative sentences** only in the text. O'Brien's writing style frequently emphasizes realism, and the use of declarative sentences contributes to this effect. The story feels more authentic as if the narrator is recounting the events as they occurred. The author wants his protagonist to think freely and to express his fear, disconnecting him from reality by making him pretend all the time that he wasn't in the war. Moreover, the absence of imperative sentences for example is worthy of noting as the writer does not want his protagonist to receive commands, instead, he leaves his central character to express his emotions and thoughts in a way that the writer exploits to convey his message to show how reclusive the war was for soldiers.

Examples of declarative sentences include:

- $MCL [^S_{NP} (^{Det} \text{The}^N \text{platoon}^N \text{PP} (^P \text{of}^N \text{NP} (^e \text{twenty-six}^N \text{soldiers}^N)))]^P \text{VP} (^{Mv} \text{moved})^A \text{AvP} (^A \text{slowly})^A \text{PP} (^P \text{in}^N \text{NP} (^{Det} \text{the}^N \text{dark})), \text{C}_{NP} (^{Aj} \text{single}^N \text{file}), \text{Av} (\text{not}_{vp} (\text{talking}))].$ (Se. 1)

The SNP "*The platoon of twenty-six soldiers*" sets up a collective image. The word "**platoon**" shows the soldiers as a group, emphasizing military discipline. The PP "*of twenty-six soldiers*" reminds us that each soldier is an individual with their own life and fears, even though they're treated as one unit. Furthermore, the AvP "*slowly*" suggests fear or caution. They're afraid of what might happen next. The NP "*single file*" shows the soldiers marching in a line, one behind the other. While this reflects military order, it also emphasizes isolation. Each soldier is physically close but emotionally alone.

- $Mcl [^S_{NP} (^{Pn} \text{He})^P \text{VP} (^{Aux} \text{was}^{MV} \text{pretending})] Mcl [^S_{NP} (^{Pn} \text{he})^P \text{VP} (^{Aux} \text{was})^N \text{C} (^{Det} \text{a}^N \text{boy})^A \text{AvP} (^A \text{again}), \text{VP}^P (\text{camping})^A \text{PP} (^P \text{with}^N \text{NP} (^{PN} \text{his}^N \text{father}))^A \text{PP} (^P \text{in}^N \text{NP} (^{Det} \text{the}^N \text{Adj} \text{midnight}^N \text{summer}))^A \text{PP} (^P \text{along}^N \text{NP} (^{Det} \text{the}^N \text{Des Moines}^N \text{Rivers}))].$ (Se.8)

This sentence consists of two main clauses (MCLs), connected by meaning rather than explicit conjunctions.

Main Clause 1 (MCL 1):

- **SNP (He):** The subject noun phrase contains the pronoun "He"—referring to the protagonist, Paul Berlin.
- **P VP (was pretending):** The predicate verb phrase contains:
 - **Aux (was):** The auxiliary verb, indicating the past continuous tense.



- **MV (pretending):** The main verb, showing an act of imagination or denial of reality. The protagonist pretends that he wasn't in the war to shield himself from the horrors of the war.

Main Clause 2 (MCL 2):

- **SNP (He):** The subject pronoun "He" is repeated for emphasis, creating a sense of detachment.
- **VP (was a boy again):** The predicate phrase includes:
 - **Aux (was):** Past continuous tense, consistent with MCL 1.
 - **C NP (a boy):** The complement, "a boy," indicates Paul's mental retreat into childhood.
- **AAvP (again):** Adverbial modifier, suggesting a return to the past. By imagining himself as "a boy again," Paul reveals his yearning for a time before the war stripped him of innocence and safety.
- **VP (camping with his father):** Elaborates on the imagined scene:
 - **P (camping):** The present participle describes an activity.
 - **A PP (with his father):** Prepositional phrase, specifying who he is with.
- **A PP (in the midnight summer):** Creates a vivid temporal and sensory setting:
 - **P (in):** Preposition, introducing the setting.
 - **NP (the midnight summer):** Describes the time, midnight adds mystery, while summer suggests warmth.



- **A PP (along the Des Moines River):** Adds geographical specificity:
 - **P (along):** Preposition, showing location.
 - **NP (the Des Moines River):** Proper noun phrase, grounding the memory in a real place.

2) Sentence complexity

Simple sentences

- $Mcl [AdvP^A (Av\textit{There}) NP^S (Pn\ \textit{they}) VP^P (MV\ \textit{stopped})]$. (Se.3)
- $Mcl [pp^A (For\ NP (Det\ \textit{a}\ Aj\ \textit{long}\ N\ \textit{time})) NP^S (\textit{they}) VP^P (Aux\ \textit{did}\ A\ \textit{not}\ V\ \textit{move})]$. (Se.5)

The writer appeals to using simple sentences in the text when he informs the reader of the movements of soldiers and the place where they stopped. The fronted **PP** "*For a long time*" (Se.5) is intended to stress that the soldiers didn't move for a long time, leaving the readers inquiring about the reason behind staying in one place for a long time. The writer tries to gain empathy for the soldier's condition and how serious the situation is. Furthermore, the pattern of most simple sentences used throughout the text is [A S P] using adverbial to shed light on the condition of soldiers at first hand, besides the use of intransitive verbs here such as, "*move* and *stopped*" which creates a sense of ambiguity and focus on the soldier's action.

Complex sentences

- $Mcl [NP^S (P^n He) VP^P (Aux was^{MV} pretending) NP^S (P^n he) VP (Aux was) NP^C (Det a^N boy) Adv^A (A again)), V (camping) PP^A (P with NP (P^N his N father)) PP^A (P in NP (Det the^{Adj} midnight^N summer)) PP^A (P along NP (Det the^N Des Moines Rivers))]. (Se.9)$

The complexity of the sentence mirrors the complexity of the protagonist's emotional state. The clause, "He was pretending he was a boy again" introduces the idea of escaping into a memory. The participle phrase "camping with his father in the midnight along the Des Moines Rivers" provides the specific details of that memory. This combination makes the sentence richer and more meaningful, reflecting the protagonist's deep feelings. The protagonist is imagining himself sitting with his father again along the river, he finds that the only way to release his fear and disconnect from reality is by pretending. Moreover, the use of the verb "pretend" adds a level of psychological complexity and raises the possibility of deliberate escape from the real situation, which is war.

Compound sentences

- $AdvP (One by one), PP^A (P like NP (N sheep PP^P (P in NP (Det a^N dream))), S (P^N they) VP^P (passed) PP^A (P through NP (Det the^N hedgerow)), V (crossed) AdvP^A (quietly) PP^A (P over NP (Det a^N meadow)), cj and VP (P came Adv^A (down) PP^A (P to NP (Det the^N rice paddy))). (Se.2)$

The adverbial phrase "one by one" implies that the soldiers pass and cross without stopping, even if they don't accept their existence in such

a war, despite the writer's comparison of the soldiers to sheep. All of those warriors are destined for the same outcome; none of them have the option or right to leave the conflict or alter the circumstances. Their fate was the war, and they must face it as a group. Furthermore, the use of the adverb "quietly" conveys the soldiers' caution to avoid being seen or heard by the enemy reflecting once more how reclusive the war was for soldiers.

Compound complex

- $Mcl [Np^s (pn He) Vp^p (aux was V pretending)]^o [Np^s (Pn He) Vp^p (aux was Av not) pp^A (p in Np (Det the N war))], V (pretending) Np^s (he) Vp^p (Aux had Av not V watched) Np^o (N Billy Boy Watkins) Vp^p (die) pp^A (p of Np (Det a N heart attack)) Np (Det^M that N^H afternoon).$
(Se.8)

The use of the verb "pretend" in this example reveals the cruelty of war again; the writer himself has participated in the Vietnam War before, and using such a verb to reveal that cruelty means the soldiers have nothing to do except escape the real situation by imagining and pretending. The noun phrase "a heart attack" indicates the reason behind one of the soldier's death. Despite the soldier had been injured and may died of his injury, instead, he died of a heart attack and this again reflects the brutal scenes surrounding them.

Table 2. Types of Sentence Complexity

Sentence Complexity	Total	Rate
Simple sentences	4	44.4%
Complex sentences	2	22.2 %
Compound sentences	1	11.1 %
Compound complex sentences	2	22.2 %
Total	9	100%

8. Conclusion

This research aims to explore the effect of the Vietnam War on Tim O'Brien's selected short story, *Where Have You Gone, Charming Billy?* (1975), by conducting a lexical syntactic analysis of a significant selected sample from the story. It concludes that a number of lexical and syntactic features in the text contribute to highlighting the cruelty of war. Moreover, this study employed the qualitative method of analysis, utilizing the lexical and grammatical feature checklist developed by Leech and Short (2007). It also used a quantitative method that calculated the frequencies of certain syntactic and lexical features (i.e., nouns, verbs, adjectives, sentence complexity, and simplicity) to create frequency tables of these features, interpret them, and relate them to the main theme and message of the story.



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