CONSTRUCTING CONTRAST: HOW AUTHORS EMPLOY OPPOSITIONAL PHRASING TO BUILD TENSION AND FOREGROUND THEME

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ABSTRACT

Opposition has long been recognised as fundamental both to how meaning is organised and to how narratives are built, yet the specific linguistic means by which authors exploit it in literary texts remain under-examined. This qualitative stylistic study investigates how writers employ oppositional phrasing — from canonical antonyms to opposites constructed contextually within a text — to build tension and to foreground theme. Drawing on the framework of constructed opposition and on lexical-semantic accounts of antonymy, it analyses a purposive sample of canonical, public-domain English literary texts by Shakespeare, Milton, Blake, Austen, and Dickens. The analysis identifies a repertoire of oppositional structures, including negated and either–or opposition, paradoxical or oxymoronic opposition, replacive and comparative opposition, and sustained structural or parallel opposition, and shows how each is put to work. The findings suggest a functional division: opposition held unresolved, or presented as a forced choice, tends to generate tension, whereas opposition that is sustained and structurally patterned tends to foreground theme, with parallelism serving throughout to make the contrast salient. The study argues that oppositional phrasing is a compact and powerful literary resource, and that the construction of text-specific opposites is central to its effect.

Keywords: *opposition, antithesis, antonymy, stylistics, constructed opposition, literary tension*

INTRODUCTION

Opposition is among the most basic organising principles of language and thought. Structuralist linguistics held that meaning itself arises from difference, so that a term acquires value only in contrast with what it is not (Saussure, 1959), and later structuralists extended the point from the word to the whole cultural and narrative system, treating binary oppositions — nature and culture, life and death, self and other — as the deep scaffolding on which myths and stories are built (Jakobson, 1960; Lévi-Strauss, 1963). Long before modern linguistics, rhetoric had catalogued antithesis, the balanced expression of contrary ideas, as one of the most powerful of figures. It is

unsurprising, then, that oppositional phrasing pervades literary writing, where it is used to sharpen conflict, dramatise choice, and crystallise meaning.

Recent work in linguistics has refined our understanding of how opposition operates in text. Lexical semantics has long described the types of conventional, or canonical, opposites — gradable antonyms such as *hot/cold*, complementaries such as *dead/alive*, and converses such as *buy/sell* — that are recognised out of context (Cruse, 1986; Lyons, 1977; Murphy, 2003). More recently still, discourse-analytic work has shown that opposition is not confined to such fixed pairs: authors and speakers routinely *construct* opposites in context, setting up as contraries words that are not antonyms in the dictionary at all, by placing them in particular syntactic frames (Davies, 2013; Jeffries, 2010; Jones, Murphy, Paradis, & Willners, 2012). This insight is especially consequential for literature, where the creation of text-specific opposites is a routine imaginative act.

What has been less systematically examined is how these resources are deployed for specific literary ends. This study addresses that gap by asking how authors use oppositional phrasing to two related but distinguishable effects: the building of tension and the foregrounding of theme. It pursues three research questions. RQ1. What types of oppositional phrasing do authors employ in literary texts? RQ2. How does oppositional phrasing function to build narrative and dramatic tension? RQ3. How does oppositional phrasing function to foreground theme?

2. Conceptual Framework

Opposition in Structuralist Thought

The structuralist tradition supplies the broad rationale for treating opposition as meaningful. For Saussure (1959), linguistic value is differential: signs mean by virtue of what distinguishes them from other signs, so that opposition is built into the fabric of the linguistic system. Jakobson (1960) carried this principle into poetics, arguing that literary language characteristically projects patterns of equivalence and contrast onto the sequence of the text. Lévi-Strauss (1963) generalised it to narrative and myth, which he read as symbolic machines for mediating fundamental binary oppositions. On this view, an author who sets two terms against each other is not merely decorating a sentence but tapping the most elementary mechanism by which humans make and organise meaning.

Lexical Opposition and Its Types

Lexical semantics provides a finer typology of oppositeness. Cruse (1986) distinguishes several kinds of opposite, including complementaries, which exhaustively divide a domain so that the negation of one entails the other (*dead/alive*); gradable antonyms, which admit degrees and intermediate values (*hot/cold*); directional opposites

(*up/down*); and relational opposites or converses (*parent/child*). A further important notion is canonicity: some antonym pairs are strongly conventionalised and spring readily to mind, while others are weak or occasional (Murphy, 2003). This distinction between the canonical and the non-canonical opposite is precisely where the study of literary opposition becomes interesting, since literature so often trades in oppositions that are anything but conventional.

Constructed Opposition and Its Triggers

The pivotal advance for the present study is the recognition that opposition can be constructed in discourse. Jeffries (2010) demonstrates that texts routinely set up as opposites words that have no conventional antonymic relation, and that they do so through identifiable syntactic frames — among them negated opposition (*X not Y*), replacive opposition (*X rather than Y*), comparative opposition (*more X than Y*), concessive opposition (*X but Y*), explicit opposition (*X versus Y*), and parallelism, in which matched structures cast their contents as counterparts. Corpus work on antonym co-occurrence independently identifies a similar set of frames in which opposites are drawn together (Jones, 2002; Jones et al., 2012). These frames are the mechanism by which an author can make two words function as opposites for the space of a text, and they furnish the analytical categories used below.

Foregrounding

Finally, stylistics explains why oppositional phrasing tends to command attention. Foregrounding theory holds that linguistic features made to stand out, whether through deviation from a norm or through unexpected regularity such as parallelism, acquire interpretive prominence (Leech & Short, 2007; Mukařovský, 1964; van Peer, 1986). Antithesis is a paradigm case: the balanced, parallel structure that typically carries an opposition is itself a form of foregrounding, so that the contrast is not only stated but made salient. Oppositional phrasing thus tends to arrive already highlighted, which is part of why it is so effective a vehicle for tension and theme.

It is worth adding that these frameworks are complementary rather than competing. The structuralist tradition supplies the rationale for why opposition matters; lexical semantics classifies the conventional opposites a language provides; constructed-opposition theory describes how texts exceed that inventory by fashioning new opposites; and foregrounding explains how any of these is made perceptually prominent. A full account of literary opposition needs all four, since a single passage may draw on a conventional antonym, embed it in a constructed frame, foreground it through parallelism, and thereby tap the deep binary logic that structuralism describes. The analysis below

accordingly moves freely among these levels, using each where it is most illuminating.

3. Method

Design

The study employs a qualitative stylistic design, appropriate to its aim of characterising how a linguistic resource is used for literary effect rather than of measuring its frequency. The approach is interpretive and theory-informed: instances of oppositional phrasing are analysed closely, classified using the categories set out in Section 2, and examined for their contribution to tension and theme.

Data

The data comprise a purposive sample of passages from canonical, public-domain works of English literature: Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*, Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794), Austen's novels, and Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859). These works were selected purposively because each is widely recognised for its striking use of opposition and because all are in the public domain, allowing free quotation and independent verification. The sample is deliberately illustrative rather than representative; it is intended to support analytical, not statistical, generalisation, and its limitations are addressed in Section 5.

Analytical Procedure

Each selected passage was subjected to close reading in three steps. First, instances of oppositional phrasing were identified, whether they involved canonical antonyms or opposites constructed in context. Second, each instance was classified by the lexical relation involved (Cruse, 1986) and by the syntactic trigger through which the opposition was realised (Jeffries, 2010). Third, each was examined for its primary literary function, coded broadly as the building of tension or the foregrounding of theme, with the recognition that many instances serve both. Analytic notes recorded how form and function related in each case, and the results were summarised in a matrix (Table 1). As the analysis was conducted by a single analyst, the account should be read as a replicable interpretive model rather than as a claim to inter-coder agreement.

4. Analysis and Findings

The analysis first notes the range of oppositional structures observed, then examines those that principally build tension and those that principally foreground theme, before considering their interaction. Table 1 summarises the pattern.

The Range of Oppositional Phrasing

Across the sample, oppositional phrasing ranged from the use of strongly canonical antonyms to the construction of wholly

text-specific opposites. At one pole, Dickens opposes the canonical pair *best/worst*; at the other, Blake sets *lamb* against *tyger* and Austen sets *pride* against *prejudice* — pairs that are opposites only because the texts make them so. Between these poles lay paradoxical combinations, forced choices, and sustained structural contrasts. This spread confirms the central relevance of constructed opposition (Jeffries, 2010): much of literature's oppositional work is done not with dictionary antonyms but with opposites the author manufactures for the occasion.

Oppositional Phrasing that Builds Tension

Three configurations recurrently generated tension. The first is negated or either–or opposition. Hamlet's *"To be, or not to be"* frames existence and non-existence as an exclusive, unresolved choice; the bare opposition of a term with its own negation, foregrounded at the head of the soliloquy, sets up a tension that the speech then explores rather than dissolves. The second is paradoxical or oxymoronic opposition, in which contraries are fused rather than merely juxtaposed. Romeo's strings of oxymora — *"brawling love"*, *"loving hate"*, *"cold fire"* — hold incompatible terms together in single phrases, and the resulting semantic friction enacts the turmoil of his feeling: the tension is not described but performed by the language. The third is replacive or comparative opposition, which stages a stark preference. Milton's Satan, declaring it *"Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heaven"* (1667), uses a comparative frame to set reigning against serving and Hell against Heaven, and the audacity of the ranking generates much of the moment's moral and dramatic charge. In each case tension arises because the opposition is left in force — unresolved, fused, or defiantly chosen — rather than reconciled.

Oppositional Phrasing that Foregrounds Theme

A different set of configurations served principally to foreground theme. The clearest is sustained parallelism. The opening of Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) — *"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times"*, and the run of matched antitheses that follows — uses parallel structure to foreground contradiction itself as the novel's theme, announcing an age defined by its coexisting extremes. A second is structural or sustained opposition across a whole work. Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794) is organised around the governing opposition named in its title, and the paired poems — the gentle *lamb* against the fearful *tyger* — make that opposition the collection's central thematic axis, posing through it questions about creation and cruelty. A third is titular and conceptual opposition: Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* announce paired abstractions in their very titles, framing the thematic oppositions the novels then anatomise. Here opposition works not by remaining unresolved in a single moment

but by being sustained and patterned across a text, so that it organises and highlights what the work is about.

The Interaction of Tension and Theme

The two functions are separable in emphasis but frequently co-produced. A local paradox that generates momentary tension may also encapsulate a work's theme, and a sustained thematic opposition is often the source of a narrative's larger tensions. Romeo's oxymora both create immediate friction and announce the love–hate opposition that structures the play; Dickens's antithetical opening both arrests the reader and states the theme. What unifies the cases is the mechanism: an author foregrounds a contrast, canonical or constructed, and the way that contrast is handled — held open or patterned across the text — determines whether its principal yield is tension, theme, or both.

It is also notable how economical these devices are. In each of the tension-building cases, a very short span of text — six words in Hamlet's question, two in each of Romeo's oxymora, a single clause in Milton's boast — carries a disproportionate weight of effect, precisely because opposition compresses a whole conflict into the confrontation of two terms. The same economy operates thematically: Austen's two-word titles and Blake's single governing pair announce entire thematic programmes in a handful of syllables. This compression is a large part of the appeal of oppositional phrasing to writers, who can thereby set a conflict or a theme before the reader in the smallest possible compass, and it helps explain why such phrases are so often the most memorable lines a work contains.

Table 1. *Oppositional structures, triggers, and their principal functions in the sample*

Oppositional structure	Trigger / relation	Example (author)	Principal function
Negated / either–or	X or not-X	"To be, or not to be" *(Shakespeare)*	Tension
Paradox / oxymoron	Fused contraries	"loving hate" *(Shakespeare)*	Tension
Replacive / comparative	better X than Y	"reign in Hell…serve in Heaven" *(Milton)*	Tension
Parallel antithesis	Parallelism	"best of times…worst of times" *(Dickens)*	Theme

Oppositional structure	Trigger / relation	Example (author)	Principal function
Sustained / structural	Constructed opposition	lamb / tyger *(Blake)*	Theme
Titular / conceptual	Constructed opposition	pride / prejudice *(Austen)*	Theme

5. Discussion

The findings suggest a coherent account of how oppositional phrasing works in literary texts. At the most general level, opposition is effective because it engages the elementary, differential mechanism by which meaning is made (Saussure, 1959; Lévi-Strauss, 1963): to set two terms against each other is to activate a binary construal that readers grasp immediately and hold in mind. What the literary analysis adds is a specification of the means and the effects. The means, strikingly, are often not canonical antonyms but constructed opposites — *lamb* and *tyger*, *pride* and *prejudice* — which authors manufacture by placing words in oppositional frames (Jeffries, 2010; Jones et al., 2012). This confirms, in a literary setting, the central claim of recent opposition research: that much oppositional meaning is textual and occasional rather than lexical and fixed.

The effects divide along an interpretable line. Opposition tends to build tension when it is held in force — when contraries are posed as an unresolved choice (negated and either–or structures), fused into paradox (oxymoron), or ranked in a defiant preference (replacive and comparative structures). In each case the mind is left holding an unreconciled contrast, and that suspension is experienced as tension. Opposition tends to foreground theme, by contrast, when it is sustained and patterned — when parallelism arrays contraries in balanced series, or when a single governing opposition organises a whole work. Here the contrast is not so much suspended as elaborated, and its repetition across the text lifts it into thematic prominence. Throughout, foregrounding is the enabling condition (Leech & Short, 2007): the parallel and marked structures that typically carry opposition ensure that the contrast is noticed, and only a noticed contrast can do either kind of work.

These results integrate strands that are usually pursued separately. They connect the lexical semantics of opposition (Cruse, 1986; Murphy, 2003) to the discourse-level construction of opposites (Jeffries, 2010) and to literary function, and they give the broad structuralist intuition about binary opposition a concrete linguistic mechanism. For the teaching of stylistics and close reading, the account offers a practical heuristic: locating a

text's oppositions, identifying whether they are canonical or constructed and how they are triggered, and asking whether they are held open or sustained, provides a reliable route into both the tension and the thematic architecture of a work.

The account also has wider resonances. Because constructed opposition is a means of dividing a field into contraries, it carries an evaluative and sometimes ideological charge: to oppose two terms is often to invite the reader to prefer one, a dynamic that the analysis of opposition in non-literary discourse has shown to be central to the construction of in-groups and out-groups (Davies, 2013). Literary texts exploit this potential when they use opposition to align sympathy or to dramatise moral choice, as Milton's Satan does in ranking rule above service. The framework is likewise relevant to translation: because a constructed opposition depends on a specific arrangement of words in a particular language, and because the canonicity of a given antonym pair varies across languages, oppositional phrasing can pose real difficulties in transfer, and recognising how an opposition functions is a first step to preserving that function in another tongue. These extensions lie beyond the present scope but indicate the reach of the approach.

Several limitations qualify these claims. The study is qualitative and its sample purposive and small, drawn from canonical, public-domain English texts; its findings are analytical rather than statistical, and their recurrence across a larger and more varied corpus — including non-canonical, contemporary, and non-English writing — remains to be tested. The analysis relied on the printed text and did not examine how performance or prosody realises opposition in dramatic works, nor did it gather reader-response evidence of the tension it posits. Future research should accordingly apply the framework to a larger corpus with independent coding and reliability checks, extend it across periods and languages, and complement textual analysis with reception data on how readers actually experience oppositional phrasing.

Conclusion

Oppositional phrasing is a compact and powerful resource of literary art. Analysing a purposive sample of canonical texts through the lenses of lexical semantics, constructed-opposition theory, and foregrounding, this study found that authors draw on a repertoire of oppositional structures — negated and either–or, paradoxical, replacive, parallel, and sustained — and put them to two principal uses. Opposition held unresolved or posed as a forced choice tends to build tension; opposition sustained and patterned across a text tends to foreground theme; and parallelism works throughout to make the contrast salient. Crucially, much of this work is done not with ready-made antonyms but with opposites the author constructs for the occasion, confirming that the imaginative creation of contrast is central to literary meaning. To

read opposition closely, then, is to gain access at once to a text's local intensities and to its governing concerns.

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