

Original Paper

Impenetrable Eyes, Stealth and Surveillance: A Corpus Stylistic Study of Salient Adjectives in William Faulkner's *The Hamlet*

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Abstract

Stylistics combines both a granular and global approach to works of literature. Through analysis of linguistic and semantic patterns in a text, stylistics explores how authors construct a fictional text world and populate it with vividly realized characters. In this article, I adopt a corpus-stylistic approach to William Faulkner's The Hamlet. Through identification of high-frequency words and close reading of their concordances, I explore what the data reveals about Faulkner's thematic concerns in the novel and how his linguistic strategies convey them to the reader.

Keywords

corpus stylistics, concordances, Wmatrix, POS tagging, William Faulkner

1. Introduction

Corpus stylistics allows researchers to conduct quantitative analysis of literary texts, compile frequency lists of keywords, parts of speech and semantic fields, and then compare the target text against a large database of imaginative literature to determine the relative overuse of key language. Statistical analysis of the resulting sets of linguistic elements identifies statistically-significant elements to generate a semantic profile of the literary work. Combining such quantitative data with close reading of concordance lines of given keywords yields data-driven qualitative insights concerning authors' writing style and character-development strategies.

In the current study, the author will apply this blend of quantitative analysis and qualitative commentary to William Faulkner's *The Hamlet*. Published in 1940, but composed of fragments and short-stories published earlier, *The Hamlet* covers several decades in the life of Frenchman's Bend, a small southern town. The novel centers on the changes in fortune of a long-established and a newly-arrived family, exploring how shrewd business moves and intermarriage enable the secretive

Flem Snopes to supplant son Jody Varner as the successor to his father's position as de-facto leader of the town. The novel features a panoply of lesser characters whose comic intrigues, outbursts of violence, and sexual depravity are observed and reported by itinerant salesman, intelligence gatherer and moral conscience of the novel, Ratliff.

The study will employ the online corpus-analysis program Wmatrix, using its automatic keyword and part-of-speech tagging functionality to compile keyword and part-of-speech frequency lists for the target corpus, Faulkner's *The Hamlet*. Then the log-likelihood test will be performed to identify statistically-significant overuse of keywords relative to the target corpus, the BNC Written Imaginative sampler. The aim of the study will be to answer the following research questions.

Research Questions

- (1) What can quantitative corpus analysis of William Faulkner's *The Hamlet* tell us about keywords and parts-of-speech in the novel?
- (2) What can close reading of concordance lines for statistically-overused adjectives tell us about the thematic concerns of the novel and Faulkner's linguistic strategies for developing them?

2. Wmatrix and the Log Likelihood Test

Using Wmatrix (Rayson, 2003, 2008), researchers can conduct automatic keyword, part of speech and semantic analysis of contemporary written and transcribed spoken English texts. CLAWS, part of Wmatrix, performs this analysis in two stages. First, it attaches a part-of-speech tag to all lexical items in the text, a process which has a 97% accuracy. Then it compares the text to two computer dictionaries. This stage has 92% accuracy. The researcher then examines the results and performs manual checks and revisions. To ascertain the statistical significance of frequency counts generated by the POS- and semantic-tagging, statistical tests like the *log-likelihood test* can be used (Dunning, 1993). Using this test, the researcher can compare the observed frequency of a word/tag between two corpora, taking into consideration the sizes of the corpora being compared. Higher log-likelihood values indicate a higher statistical significance for the difference between the target and reference corpora.

3. Analysis

POS-tagging data compiled by UCREL-CLAWS produces lists of the most frequently-used parts of speech in the narrator's text. Once the data is compiled, it is possible to access the complete list of each occurrences of that part of speech in the text, along with the number of times it was used. More granular information can then be obtained by clicking on the "concordance" button which will give the full context of each appearance of that word in the novel. The list of most frequent parts of speech produced by the POS-tagging of *The Hamlet* are shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Most Frequent Parts-of-Speech in Narrator Text

POS (Part of speech)	Example	Frequency
1. singular common noun	(book, girl)	17436
2. article (e.g. the, no)	(the, no)	9705
3. general preposition	(in, to, at)	8337
4. general adjective	(old, other)	7761
5. past tense of lexical verb	(gave, worked)	7180
6. coordinating conjunction	(and, or)	6404
7. general adverb	(even, just, still)	5297
8. 3rd person sing. subjective personal pronoun	(he, she)	4601
9. Infinitive	(to give..., It will work...)	3790
10. plural common noun	(books, girls)	3681

The frequency list in Table 1 showed that the category of “general adjective” was the fourth most frequent POS type in the novel. An author’s use of adjectives in a work of fiction plays a key role in developing individual characters’ mind-styles, and in generating that more elusive gestalt, “atmosphere”. The next step of the analysis was to look at the keyword list generated by UCLAW and isolate the adjectives in the list. Given that these are words that were found to be overused to a statistically-significant degree relative to the BNC Written Imaginative sampler, these adjectives can be considered distinctive to Faulkner’s writing strategies in *The Hamlet*. The adjectives in Table 2 represent a sampling of those that were statistically-overused in the novel. O1 is observed frequency in *The Hamlet*, O2 is observed frequency in the BNC Written Imaginative sampler, %1 and %2 values show relative frequencies in the texts, and LL shows the log-likelihood value. All of these adjectives had a statistical significance above the log-likelihood critical value of 15.13 ($p < 0.0001$, indicating 99.99% confidence of significance).

Table 2. Statistically-Overused Adjectives in *The Hamlet*

Word	O1	%1	O2	%2	LL
motionless	38	1.03	1	1.20 +	65.47
furios	34	0.44	2	0.78 +	52.51
fierce	29	2.02	1	0.35 +	48.52
impenetrable	18	0.61	0	1.36 +	34.97
pleasant	24	0.45	4	0.74 +	27.46
shrewd	16	1.01	3	2.27 +	17.36
invisible	22	3.22	7	1.53 +	17.34

3.1 Concordance Lines Close Reading: “Pleasant”

Figure 1 shows concordance lines featuring adjective “pleasant”. The statistically-significant overuse of adjective “pleasant” reflects an understated irony typical of Faulkner’s characterizations wherein characters shrewdly size up other characters’ adversarial intentions while maintaining a somewhat ironic ease of demeanor in sharp contrast to the haste and heat of the interlocutor.

1. Jody said, in his bland hard quite pleasant voice. “What can I do for you?”
2. voice did not change either, still pleasant, still hard: “I don’t know as I
3. dogs follows some folks. “He spoke in a pleasant, lazy, equable voice
4. chair on cabin galleries, pleasant, affable, courteous, anecdotal and impenetrable
5. his perfectly clean faded shirt, his voice pleasant and drawling and anecdotal,
6. I can’t be setting here, no matter how pleasant it is. Maybe I can get there in
7. “Evening, Uncle Will”, he said in his pleasant, courteous, even deferent voice.
8. relaxed in his chair, with his lean brown pleasant shrewd face, in his faded clean
- 9, and who was accommodating and unfailingly pleasant and even generous, yet in
10. he man, his expression bland courteous and pleasant. “What’s that?” the woman
11. Ratliff looked at her, still bland, still pleasant. “Have I done made a mistake?”
12. much time setting down. “He looked now, pleasant and quizzical, at the men sitting
13. back. Ratliff looked at him for a moment, pleasant and inscrutable behind his faint
14. wright said. Again Ratliff looked at him, pleasant, impenetrable. He looked at the
15. and sat looking with an expression quite pleasant and absolutely impenetrable at
16. “Sholy”, Ratiiff said, still quite pleasant, impenetrable. He got out of the buckboard
17. did not say it, he just said, absolutely pleasant, easy, inscrutable : “I wonder
18. handsome, ready-tongued, assured and pleasant man who had come into the
19. by name and cursed them in a pleasant, drawling, conversational voice and dared
20. ked up and saw the bold handsome face, the pleasant hard revelation of teeth which
21. did not know that—the father, the lean pleasant shrewd unillusioned man asleep
22. The Texan looked at him, the eyes bleak, pleasant and hard above the chewing jaw,
23. his mouth, “Sho now”, Ratliff said, pleasant, bland, inscrutable, with his spent
24. know, “Ratlin: said in that same pleasant and unchanged and impenetrable voice

Figure 1. Adjective “Pleasant” Concordance Lines

In 16 of these concordance lines, “pleasant” is used to describe the manner and demeanor of V.K. Ratliff. A key lexical strategy of Faulkner’s for signaling irony is the juxtaposition of a typically positive adjective with other adjectives (usually several) that carry negative connotations. Line 1 combines “pleasant” with “bland” (suggesting lack of genuine meaning/feeling) and “hard” (toughness,

firmness underlying surface geniality). Line 2 repeats the juxtaposition of “still hard” with “pleasant”. Ratliff is the traveling salesman, itinerant retailer of country news and stand-in for the narrator. He is the character closest to being the eyes and ears of the Varners. He seems to be the one man whom town-head Will Varner listens to with respect, and as he is the least directly interested in the machinations of Ab and Flem Snopes, Jack Houston, Jody Varner and the rest of the sordid Snopes clan, the frequent use of “pleasant” to describe his detachment, eagle-eyed observation and intelligence-gathering carries a distinctly pungent humor. It’s pleasant for a man to take his time spying on others while he sponges meals, chews the fat with the locals and earns his living selling merchandise to those he spies on. It is pleasant for the reader as well to see the leisurely yet masterful way he holds his cards close by confining his utterances to non-committal understatement. In Line 3 in Figure 1, Jody Varner anxiously tries to determine what hard facts concerning Ab Snopes’ alleged barn-burning activities Ratliff is in possession of, but Ratliff won’t commit to any over-broad interpretations:

“Hell fire!” Varner cried. “Do you mean he set fire to another one? Even after they caught him, he set fire to another one?”

“Well”, the man in the buckboard said, “I dont know as I would go on record as saying he set ere a one of them afire. I would put it that they both taken fire while he was more or less associated with them. You might say that fire seems to follow him around, like dogs follows some folks”. He spoke in a **pleasant, lazy, equable voice** which you did not discern at once to be even more shrewd than humorous.

Figure 2. Ratliff “pleasantly” Dodges Jody Varner’s Question

Indeed, Faulkner unreels catalogues of adjectives when sketching the contrasting shades of implication and deprecation with which Ratliff deflects other characters” attempts to pin him down. His manner is “pleasant, affable, courteous, anecdotal and impenetrable”, “pleasant and quizzical”, “pleasant and inscrutable”; his voice is “pleasant and drawling and anecdotal”, and “pleasant, lazy, equable”. Faulkner constructs situational irony around this word “pleasant” not only with Ratliff. The three generation of dissolute McCarron males have in common that their unreliable natures are unfailingly pleasant even as they are making bad speculations or getting shot gambling. The father was a “handsome, ready-tongued, assured and pleasant man”, while the son, having been beaten bloody thwarting an ambush, faces Will Varner with “the pleasant hard revelation of teeth which would have been called smiling at least, though it was not particularly deferent”.

3.2 Concordance Lines Close Reading: “Motionless”

Turning to another statistically-significant overused adjective, an examination of the adjective “motionless”, allows us to explore an interesting cross-section of events and characters in the novel. The overuse of “motionless” in the novel reflects a device used by Faulkner throughout his work, of

foregrounding the slow crawl of life in his rural Mississippi setting and then exploring the enormous tension and violence beneath this apparent stasis and stagnation as characters full of passions and resentments and rage struggle against limited options and social constraints. Figure 3 shows selected concordance lines of the 38 occurrences of “motionless” in the novel:

1. and one broad black-haired hand *motionless* and heavy as a ham of meat on the
2. the two broad faces, the one *motionless*, the other pumping up and down w
3. ire body behind him, which even *motionless* in a chair seemed to postulate an
4. same position, her hands lying *motionless* for hours on her lap like two sep
5. shop, the weathered store; the *motionless* horse alone postulating life and
6. earth's teeming minute life, the *motionless* fronds of water-heavy grasses sto
7. spent and, locked together and *motionless*, they descended once more to the
8. ich soars up the last hill and, *motionless* in the void, hovers until he him
9. against the wall and no more *motionless* than the row of backs, the row o
10. He might not have even heard, *motionless*, looking at nothing while the la
11. find it again and stood there, *motionless*, breathing quietly, and listening
12. he quelled it, holding himself *motionless*, his spent body shaking faintly
13. subdued, they huddled, gaudy *motionless* and alert, wild as deer, deadly
14. one violence. Then they became *motionless*, the stranger's high heels dug

Figure 3. Adjective “Motionless” Concordance Lines

The motionlessness in many of these occurrences paradoxically hides a tension of waiting, watching, calculation, suspicion or secret surveillance. There is implied movement or action to come, but it develops in its own time and keeps its own counsel. In line 1, Jody Varner is gnawed by fear that Ab Snopes will set fire to the property the Varners rented to him, and his “broad black-haired hand *motionless* and heavy as a ham of meat on the paper” is a metonym for his plodding inartful scheming to bind Snopes contractually and avert disaster. In line 2, Jody, having arrived at the rental property to try and maneuver against Ab Snopes', is spied upon by Snopes' twin daughters, one of whom continues with pumping water while the other stares motionlessly at Varner, her tense motionlessness heightening the atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust. In line 3 Jody seethes at having to cart to and from school his arrogantly sedentary sister, she of the “too much mammalian female meat” that arouses every strapping young man in a 10-mile radius. His boiling resentment is heightened to comic proportions by this very motionlessness, itself a metonym for her apathy and bored disassociation for everything around her: “he began to feel the entire body behind him, which even *motionless* in a chair seemed to postulate an invincible abhorrence of straight lines”. Faulkner's curious use of “postulate” here is repeated in line 3, “the *motionless* horse alone postulating life and that not because it moved but because it resembled

something known to be alive". Faulkner uses the irony of a motionless horse that merely "postulates" life being nonetheless the liveliest thing in sight to underscore how lifeless the town appears to Labove, the lecherous schoolmaster with a frustrated passion for the indifferent Eula. In lines 6-8, the comedy of frustrated passion takes a decidedly perverse turn when the rutting halfwit Ike Snopes stalks a cow with amorous intent:

He would lie amid the waking instant of earth's teeming minute life, the *motionless* fronds of water-heavy grasses stooping into the mist before his face in black, fixed curves, along each parabola of which the marching drops held in minute magnification the dawn's rosy miniatures, smelling and even tasting the rich, slow, warm barn-reek milk-reek, the flowing immemorial female

The motionlessness of this scene is a stillness taut with a heightened sensory awareness attuned to and stimulated by every aspect of the "teeming life", every vegetable and animal organism in its vicinity. The absurdity, of course, is that this is a "flowing, immemorial *bovine* female" arousing Ike's passion.

Then the sun itself: within the half-mile it overtakes him. The silent copper roar fires the drenched grass and flings long before him his shadow prone for the vain eluded treading; the earth mirrors his antic and constant frustration which soars up the last hill and, *motionless* in the void, hovers until he himself crests over,...then the trotting legs, until at last it stands upright upon the mazy whimple of the windy leaves for one intact inconstant instant before he runs into and through it. She stands as he left her, tethered, chewing. Within the mild enormous moist and pupilless globes he sees himself in twin miniature mirrored.

The motionlessness of this moment is that of carnal pursuit, suddenly arrested, poised between "antic frustration" and anticipated consummation. But again, this consummation is with a *cow*, and Faulkner uses this motionless instant to pause the narration at the instant before Ike "crests over" an incline and the target of his unnatural lust comes into view. In line 9, the unholy assignation has now moved beyond pursuit to active coitus, and the motionlessness of the backs and heads underscores the salacious voyeurism of the local yokels ogling Ike and cow *in flagrante delicto*:

against the wall and no more *motionless* than the row of backs, the row of heads which filled the gap. He knew not only what he was going to see but that, like Bookwright, he did not want to see it, yet, unlike Bookwright, he was going to look. He did look, leaning his face in between two other heads; and it was as though it were himself inside the stall with the cow, himself looking out of the blasted tongueless face at the row of faces watching him who had been given the wordless passions but not the specious words.

The lack of movement in the motionless rapt watchers is linked through repetition of morpheme "-less" with the absence of language in Ike's "wordless passion" and "tongueless face", words being dismissed

by the intricately verbal narrator as “specious”. In this instant of suspension, Ratliff’s mind is furiously active, his consciousness recursively embedded, Ratliff watching Ike watching Ratliff watching him. Faulkner uses this *mise en abyme* trickery of perspective as a self-referential device, commenting on Ratliff’s role in the town as watcher/intelligence-gatherer and his function in the discourse-architecture of the novel as conduit of the implied narrator’s perspective to the implied reader.

3.3 Concordance Lines Close Reading: “Impenetrable” and “Invisible”

The final set of concordance lines we will explore through close-reading are for the semantically-related adjectives “impenetrable” and “invisible”. There were a total of 18 occurrences of “impenetrable” and 22 occurrences of “invisible” in the novel and both were overused relative to the reference BNC Written Imaginative sampler to a statistically-significant degree. Figure 4 shows a representative sampling of concordance lines for both words:

1. for the first time, quietly, invisible to his hearers though they knew ex
2. look back. She would be still invisible, but he could hear her; it is as
3. up to him already fawning, invisible and fluid about his walking legs,
4. over, whereupon it drops an invisible bridge across the ultimate ebb of
5. surrounded by the loud soundless invisible shades of the nameless and numberl
6. He descended through the dry and invisible corn, keeping his bearing on a st
7. ndergrowth and blundering against invisible tree trunks, his arm crooked to s
8. in the mud while the noise of its invisible flight crashed and ceased. He was
9. spiraling as if they followed an invisible funnel, disappearing one by one b
10. been pushing before them by some invisible means, gradually nearer and neare
11. the little hard bright eyes were invisible now; it was only the bushy overha
12. looked at one another, each face invisible to the other. “You ai nt let him
13. raised like an axe, their faces invisible to one another, strained, spent
14. ooth as ever beneath the shrewd impenetrable eyes. “Well?” Varner said vi
15. arner looked down into the cold impenetrable agate eyes beneath the writhen o
16. the full minute while the broad impenetrable face hung suspended like a ballo
17. table of face, his eyes darkly impenetrable, quizzical and bemused, rememb
18. all watching him—the smooth , impenetrable face with something about the ey
19. ned and aching-against the flat impenetrable face of the darkness, until sud
20. ce abstract and alert , with an impenetrable surface quality like flint, as
21. ttle sombre but still perfectly impenetrable. “Eck here, for instance. Wi
22. eyond Mrs Littlejohn’s house , impenetrable, brooding even. A hulking , ha
23. ue, as bland and quizzical and impenetrable as ever. “Eustace, “he said
24. amazed as always though still impenetrable, how even a Snopes was not safe

25. same pleasant and unchanged and **impenetrable** voice out of his spent and sleep

Figure 4. Adjective “Invisible” and “Impenetrable” Concordance Lines

The high frequency of these two adjectives connected with vision, one denoting “inability to see” and the other “inability to see into/through”, reflects the thematic concern of the novel with secrecy, suspicion, surveillance, intelligence-gathering, stalking, and haunting. In line 1, characters are in close physical proximity and are aware of each other’s presence, but unable to see each other. The effect of this is to emphasize Ratliff’s careful selectivity of who he shares his intelligence with and how much he shares, and underscores the necessity for interested parties to fill in the gaps. Lines 2-4 occur during the highly impressionistic narration of Ike Snopes’ pursuit of the cow. Lines 2 and 3 continue the “can hear but can’t see” of line 1, and Ike’s reliance on instinct and feeling rather than vision underscoring his carnal, animalistic stalking of the cow. In line 4, “hovers until he himself crests over, whereupon it drops an *invisible* bridge across the ultimate ebb

of night”, the ambiguity of antecedent for “it”—it could be the sun, it could be Ike’s limbs carrying him or his desire driving him—reflects the undifferentiated unity and flow of Ike’s experience with the surrounding terrain and light, Ike being unable fix distinct borders between his inner and outer life, between himself and his target. While Ike’s anticipation of gratification in these lines orients him to the future, in lines 5-9 Mink Snopes is haunted by and flees the past. Line 5 is of particular interest:

he could see her, although the room itself was almost completely dark, against the small high square of the dusk-faint window. Then the match spurted and glared and steadied above the wick, and now she was framed in an opening by shadeless light and surrounded by the loud soundless *invisible* shades of the nameless and numberless men...the cuckolding shades which had become a part of his past too, as if he and not she had been their prone recipient;

In this fascinating interplay between light and dark, shade and spotlight alternate and overlap like the flicker of dramatic still-shots, darkened form appearing and disappearing, darkness framing light-accentuated form, and fevered mind conjuring and projecting myriad ghostly shades of imagined past lovers circling the visible object’s form. In lines 6-9, as Snopes flees the search party and the consequences of his shooting of Houston, he skirts invisible corn, blunders into invisible tree-trunks and, ominously, sees “the black concentric spiraling of vultures as if they followed an *invisible* funnel, disappearing one by one below the trees”. All through this sequence of occurrences, the invisibility of objects Mink moves among emphasizes the fear that controls his thoughts and clouds his judgement.

4. Conclusion

At the outset of this study a blended approach to exploring William Faulkner’s thematic and character-development in *The Hamlet* was proposed, an approach combining quantitative data

compiled by the online corpus-analysis program Wmatrix, and close reading of sets of concordance lines. The research questions were (1) What can quantitative corpus analysis of William Faulkner's "The Hamlet" tell us about keywords and parts-of-speech in the novel? and (2) What can close reading of concordance-lines for statistically-overused adjectives tell us about the thematic concerns of the novel and Faulkner's linguistic strategies for developing them?

The target corpus consisted of the complete novel while the reference corpus was the BNC Written Imaginative sampler. The initial data consisted of frequency lists of parts of speech as well as keywords frequently appearing in the novel. Then the comparison between the two corpora was conducted and statistical analysis using the log-likelihood test was performed.

The results of quantitative analysis of the target corpus yielded the following quantitative information about the novel. The most frequent parts of speech were: singular common noun, article, general preposition, general adjective, past tense of lexical verb, coordinating conjunction, general adverb, 3rd person singular subjective personal pronoun, Infinitive, and plural common noun. Given the high frequency in the text and unique character-development role of general adjectives, closer attention to this category was warranted. A set of adjectives found to have statistically-significant overuse were culled and four, "pleasant", "motionless", "invisible" and "invisible" were selected for close-reading of concordance lines. "Pleasant" used in combination with typically negative connotations such as "hard", "bland", "shrewd" and "inscrutable" was found to be a tool for irony, underscoring the humorous dissonance between Ratliff's genial surface and underlying secrecy, surveillance and shrewdness. This theme of secrecy and surveillance was also found to be linked with overuse of "impenetrable" (to describe characters' eyes). Close-reading of concordances for "motionless" revealed the device Faulkner uses throughout the novel of stillness and stasis hiding underlying tension of waiting, watching, calculation, suspicion or secret surveillance on the part of Ratliff and Flem Snopes. Motionless is also used to define the character of Eula Varner as one of profound torpor and arrogant refusal to move her body for anyone, which is used to comic effect when contrasted with Jody Varner's impotent rage.

The limitations of this study include the narrow focus on keyword and part-of-speech analysis. Given the insights provided focusing on these four adjectives, future research could expand the list of adjectives to potentially yield additional insights about the Faulkner's writing style and character and thematic development strategies. Additional insights could also be gained by looking at statistically-significant overuse of semantic fields using Wmatrix's USAS automatic tagging of semantic fields.

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