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## The Manipulation of Words in Richard Newman's *Briefcase of Sorrow*: A Stylistic Approach

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### Abstract:

Poetry employs an impressive range of so-called “devices” that one does not find in ordinary language such as rhyme, a regular meter, or the subdivision in stanzas that we find in many poems. But it also uses “devices” that one may come across in non-poetic language (although not with the same intensity) like metaphors and symbols. What these devices have in common is that they always draw attention to themselves. Stylistics is one that adds more to our poetic sensibility. Literary appreciation has been part of creativity for generations. The introduction of linguistics and stylistics into the field of literary criticism paved way to new methods and approaches to understand and appreciate poetry on linguistic basis. This article takes up a poem “Briefcase of Sorrow” by Richard Newman from an anthology *The Best American Poetry 2006* edited by David Lehman, for stylistic analysis. The ways the poet has used the English words and tropes are explored to show that words can be manipulated to convey the theme of a poem imaginatively and innovatively.

**Keywords:** Stylistics, Semantics, metaphors, connotative, denotative.

### Poetic Appreciation using the Semantic tool

Stylistics is the description and analysis of the variability of linguistic forms in actual language use. It is the study of style used in literary and verbal language, and the effect the writer/speaker wishes to communicate to the reader/hearer. David Crystal says “Linguistics is the academic discipline that studies language scientifically, and stylistics, as a part of this discipline, studies certain aspects of language variation” (64). Stylistic approach can be carried on various linguistic levels like graphological, phonological, lexical, grammatical, semantic, and syntactic. This research paper is mainly concerned with the Semantic analysis of the American Poet, Richard Newman’s poem “Briefcase of Sorrow”.

Semantics is the technical term used to refer to the study of meaning, and since meaning is a part of language, Semantics is a part of linguistics. A word is a language element constituting a unity of several layers that are under constant linguistic investigation. One of the layers is its meaning which is inquired into in the field of semantics. Semantics refers to meaning, that is, the way in which words relate to each other within the language. Therefore, meaning is looked in a detailed way so as to find out how words and sentences are used in specific contexts.

The topics related to a semantic study may be those of synonymy, hyponymy, antonymy, ambiguity, change of meaning, the emotive use of words and others. Generally speaking, the use of synonyms prevents monotony and stereotype of expression and especially the existence of rows of synonyms adds vividness to the style (e.g., *peep, peek, glance, glimpse, stare, watch* are all possible alternatives to 'look'). Synonymy on the phrase level is called "periphrasis" (a roundabout form of expression, circumlocution, e.g., *father of my children*). Different sentences having the same meaning are "paraphrasis" (including the active/passive transformation) which are often used as restatements to render the meaning more clearly, as when talking to foreigners, children, lay people, etc.

Viewed from the onomasiological (meaning-to-form) perspective, other semantic relations are "antonymy" (gradable: *very big/small*, nongradable: *male/female*, converse: *parent/child*), "hyponymy" (*car, bus, train* are co-hyponyms of *vehicle*), "hyperonymy" (*flower/tulip*). All these types of lexical relations are used in texts as a means of their lexical cohesion and on the deep semantic level they realize their semantic coherence.

The sense relations among lexemes seen from the semasiological (form-to-meaning) perspective are "polysemy" (*foot of a leg/the stairs*), "homonymy" (*bow – to bend outward at the sides, the weapon which shoots arrows*), "homophony" (*no/know*), "homography" (*lead/lead*). Polysemy and homonymy are major sources of lexical ambiguity. "Pun" based on homophony (*What's black and white and red/read all over?*), "zeugma" (the use of a word to modify two or more words when (a) it is appropriate to only one of them, as in '*to wage war and peace*', or (b) is appropriate to each but in a different way, as in '*on his fishing trip, he caught three trout and a cold*', "palindrome" (*Madam in Eden, I'm Adam*), etc.

Another avenue to approach semantics of lexemes which is relevant for the study of style is differentiating between "denotative" (referential, cognitive, notional, conceptual) and "connotative" (associative, emotive, expressive, social, stylistic) meanings. The former are considered as basic and stylistically neutral; a traditional concern of stylistics has been the latter type of meaning. Some words have connotations built into their meanings (e.g. *darling, honey, mistress, spinster*). These are exploited more in poetry, since connotations are evoked also by rhythm, repetition, sound instrumentalization, etc. A special type of connotative meanings is "figurative" (non-literal) meanings, especially "metaphorical" meanings. Based on this are some literary or rhetorical devices known as "tropes" (simile, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, hyperbole, litotes, apostrophe, allusion, personification, paradox, catachresis, euphemism, oxymoron, climax, anticlimax, and antithesis).

The concept of semantic deviation deals with the notion of meaning. Meanings are formulated with words and sentences in specific contexts. Semantic deviation refers to "as meanings" relations which are linguistically inconsistent or paradoxical in some way" (Short 43). In general, metaphors exhibit this characteristic of deviation, for those metaphorical elements that are joined together do not belong to each other and in the real sense of meaning, they can be regarded as 'nonsense'. However, with this kind of deviation, poetry makes

foregrounding and the analyst makes the seemingly nonsense features sensible. Those deviant features produce new meanings that cannot be found in the dictionary. For instance, if we find an expression, which says, “*the sky rejoices in the mornings’ birth*” (Leech 153) in normal usage, sky could not rejoice. The term “rejoice” refers to the human habit of becoming happy but sky cannot be happy since it is inanimate. However, it is attributed human quality to refer to its brightness or pleasant atmosphere.

Semantic parallelism constitutes the patterning of meaning in the text. When certain linguistic features or structures recurrently appear with the same potential of meaning, we can say they are semantically parallel. Paradoxical relationships also fit into this category. To cite an example from Dylan Thomas’ poem, “Light Breaks Where no Sun Shines”: “*light breaks where no sunshine*” (Short 43). Here inconsistent semantic relationships occur in the phrase “*light breaks where no sunshine*”. “Light” and “sunshine” are semantically parallel but with “no sunshine”, light could not emerge. If the sun does not shine, it means it is dark and in darkness it is not possible to have light. Here, the reader has to make meaning of these elements. By taking such foregrounded items that are semantically odd, we can construct interpretation. Light and darkness are semantically contradicting. Therefore, the combination possibly shows the opposition of life.

On the basis of this theoretical framework, Richard Newman’s poem, “Briefcase of Sorrow” is taken up for semantic analysis.

### *Briefcase of Sorrow*

My briefcase of sorrow slumps by the door.  
 The semester’s done. I leave it behind,  
 all my manila folders of grief (stacked  
 and alphabetized, bound with rubber bands  
 of stretched hope), pens of overachievement,  
 and pencils of petty angst. At some point,  
 I suppose I should dump its insides out  
 on the table, the staple remover  
 of apocalypse, a few sticky notes  
 of indecision. Poor briefcase—it can’t  
 ingest them, try as it may, and I should  
 especially purge the gradebook of mixed  
 endeavors, the crumbs of last month’s sandwich.  
 Not now. My neighbourhood pub calls louder  
 than some cloying briefcase, strap of pity  
 wagging as I leave, its two bright buckles  
 of expectation gleaming for my return  
 once again, when I will spill its contents,  
 the paperclips of despair, the Wetnaps  
 of desire, bringing it, light and swinging,  
 along my side to fill one more time its  
 compartment of everything and nothing.

This poem “Briefcase of Sorrow” written by Richard Newman is taken from *The Best American Poetry 2006* edited by David Lehman published in 2006. Born in Illinois on March 25, 1966, raised in southern Indiana, and now living in St. Louis, Richard Newman teaches at Washington University and St. Louis community college. Newman is the author of two books of poetry, *Borrowed Towns* (2005) and *Domestic Fugues* (2009), and the editor of the literary journal *River Styx*. He was named “best local poet” by *The Riverfront Times* in 2008. “His greatness, for all his technical skill,” writes Maura Stanton, another poet, “is to give us a sense that we are all in this together, that he’s out there for all of us, figuring out how to make sense of muddled, disappointed lives” (Web).

The poem “Briefcase of Sorrow” abounds in metaphors. Comparisons engender similes and metaphors. Similes are explicit comparisons whereas metaphors are implicit comparisons. Poets create similes and metaphors to bring images in words before the reader’s minds as vividly as possible. Metaphors sometimes don’t bring the images suggested into focus clearly. Such metaphors are often inconceivable and mostly incomprehensible to figure out the image pictured by the poet. The title of the poem “Briefcase of Sorrow” is one such metaphor calling for the reader’s utmost creativity and reasoning.

A briefcase is an object to stuff clothes, stationary and cash. The poet conceives a briefcase that is filled with sorrow. Sorrow is shapeless, spaceless and timeless. The word “briefcase” contains two lexical elements “brief” and “case”. Semantically, “brief” denotes smallness and it has other semantic potentialities like “case” in legal parlance. The poet appears to bring up a brief in case of his sorrow.

The title metaphor “Briefcase of Sorrow” opens a slew of metaphors running through the entire poem. The whole poem appears to be a briefcase tightly packed with lines without any space in between as a single-stanzaic one composed of twenty two lines. This jamming of materials inside the briefcase is further strengthened by the clause “When I will spill its contents” in line 18. So the form of the poem is a graphological foregrounding to suggest a briefcase crammed with several things. Since sorrow is something abstract, it cannot be seen or felt by the person other than the one who is experiencing it. So, the opening line “My briefcase” authenticates the poet’s personal experience of feeling sorrowful. Again, he is not able to describe the immensity and the intensity of the sorrow and normal clusters of words fail him and his desperate attempt to do so, pushes him to the extreme of inventing a string of innovative metaphors. Such metaphors create semantic oddities and the things compared are often forcibly brought together to create a singular effect as in the case of metaphysical conceits.

The word “slump” denotes the condition of exhaustion. This notion of slumping experienced by the poet is passed on to the briefcase through the principle of association. So the reader conjures up the exasperated poet rather than the lifeless briefcase through the act of slumping. The very first line semantically conveys the poet’s unburdening of sorrow for the time being as the semester is done. He is now free from his academic pressure and simultaneously the pressure of the briefcase is also released when it is emptied. The poet

pushes behind him his immediate past, but not without disturbing the idea of being filled with sorrow, when the following semester commences. His mind and his briefcase are going to be filled up again and both of them will become tense. Thus the briefcase is a substitute for the person to whom it belongs.

He leaves his sorrow near the door to enjoy some personal space, being free from his academic pressure. The idea of one semester being done is conveyed by the phrase “by the door”. The phrase connotes that the door against the semester is closed and it also inevitably suggests that the other door is likely to open to the following semester. The poet leaves all his grief behind by the door and walks into a temporary reprieve. Maybe, he needs to be recharged to face the challenges yet to come during the following semester. He uses “sorrow slumps” (l.1) to express his weary journey through the semester. A sigh of relief after the exam is semantically expressed when the poet says, “the semester’s done” (l. 2) with a heaviness in his heart conveyed through the voiced sounds in “done”. The burden of examination is heavy which he struggled to complete and soon after his exams, he gathered all his grief into folders. The leaves of grief are stacked into folders, alphabetized, and “bound with rubber bands of stretched hope” (l. 5). The parenthetical interpolation impedes the flow of the poem and it accounts for the time-consuming process of filing the “grief” papers into various folders.

The poet’s experiences are compared to “folders of grief”, alphabetized and bound with “rubber bands of stretched hope”. The “manila folders” are preferred in order to withstand the pressure of “grief” as the poet’s physical and intellectual folders do in order to withstand the academic pressure. As rubber bands are stretchable, the poet stretches his hope. The words “rubber” and “stretch” have a semantic affinity, as the poem is composed of a series of metaphors right from its title. Comparisons of the material with the abstract parade themselves throughout the poem.

The metaphor “rubber bands” of hope means that the poet stretches his hope. The elongated quality of rubber band is attributed to hope. The poet not just simply stacks his sorrow and leaves it in a corner but instead he keeps his hope of unburdening his similar grief for the next semester. Though it is not the final semester, for the time being, the poet is relieving himself after his exams and it is semantically expressed in the lines “the semester’s done” (l. 1), “I leave it behind” (l. 2), and “all my manila folders of grief” (l. 3), meaning his manifold grief is folded up temporarily. The poet has chosen metaphors from his academic life to demonstrate his mental state. His academic life on the campus leads to the use of hyponymy. Co-hyponyms of stationary like pens, pencils, table, notes, gradebook, paperclips, staple remover, rubber bands and folders run a train of thought about a student’s experiences.

The poet’s sweat turns into a string of achievements through his pen. Pens are the tools to reveal our talents in the form of intelligent tests and record our achievements. The use of word “overachievements” suggests his strenuous efforts to make his performance much better. Pencils are beautifully related to “petty angst”. In the shining presence of his “overachievements”, his “angst” dims.

The briefcase has been filled with all these angst, grief and achievements but it has to be emptied for refilling through yet another spell of academic semester. The words “angst” is synonymous with “sorrow”, “grief”, “despair” and “pity”. “The folders of grief”, “pencils of angst”, and “pens of overachievements” are to be replaced with new folders, pencils and pens during the following semester. The unburdened mind will once again become burdened. Difficult situations like “sticky notes” confuse the mind and are figuratively connected with a set of indecisive states of mind. They connote the sticky and obsessive preoccupations of the student-poet.

The poet forcibly puts everything in the briefcase much against its capacity, feeling pity for the briefcase and pleading “try as it may” (l.11). The swollen briefcase has already turned into an over-burdened “griefcase” like the poet himself at the end of the past semester. This is a semantic foregrounding demonstrated by the title. Feelings of pity and compassion cannot be associated with inanimate objects but the poet’s briefcase which could not ingest everything connotes the poet’s poor mind. As the poor mind of the poet couldn’t bear the abundant grief, he wants to chill out and unwind as he tries to unbuckle and spill the contents of the briefcase which is also unable to bear the load. The poet’s gradebook is a record of the results of his various efforts taken during the examination. The “gradebook of mixed endeavours” closes the page of the erstwhile mixed endeavours and opens another page for a new series of entries due in the course of the subsequent semester. The act of “purging” happens in between. The erstwhile endeavours become “crumbs of the last month’s sandwich” and future fresh efforts will have to be crisp and crunchy.

The phrase “not now” brings down the curtain and it rings a break aloud. The alliterative phrase strikes a note of boldness and relief and the pub comes to the poet’s mind. To a man who is used to hearing the clinkclank of the briefcase buckles to a cloying degree, the noise from the pub brings cheer and freshness. The sickening familiar buckle noise and the wagging of the briefcase straps temporarily fade away, overwhelmed by the pub’s hustlebustle. However, the “two bright buckles” shine in a distance to signal the poet to come back to his routine academic life. The buckles throw a mischievous “shine” at him, beckoning him back into the domain of his duties and responsibilities. The poet exploits all the semantic potential of the words “cloying”, “wagging” and “shining” to foreground the progressive aspect of the poet’s grammar of life. The idea of having left behind one semester brightens his face for a time and he hopes to repeat the same in the following semester with another sort of achievements, of course, despite the usual academic odds. The “paperclips of despair” and “wetnaps of desire” enter his mind. The paperclips hold the papers together. Likewise, he is in a grip of paperclip-cum-sorrow.

The poet uses the metaphors and comparisons from academic life to express his feelings. The comparisons chosen by the poet communicate more beyond the normal semantic range of words involved. There are two lexical sets with well-defined semantic boundaries. One is physical and tangible, characteristic of a student’s academic life and the other, metaphysical and intangible, characteristic of abstract ideas. When these two semantic ranges are coalesced into a perfect harmony, the metaphors open up new vistas of creativity

and enriched aesthetics. The reader's active role in conjuring the linkages is boldly summoned and the reader recreates the images as conceived and created by the poet.

The following metaphors bear testimony to this: "briefcase of sorrow", "folders of grief", "rubber bands of stretched hope", "pens of overachievements", "pencils of petty angst", "a staple remover of apocalypse", "a few stick notes of indecision", "a gradebook of mixed endeavours", "strap of pity", "two bright buckles of expectation", "the paperclips of despair" and "the wetnaps of desire". Items of the physical world related to a student's academic exercise are juxtaposed with items of the abstract related to the students' mental and psychological anxiety. Comparisons are farfetched and hardly conceivable.

The lexical items "dump", "sticky", "ingest", "purge", "crumbs", "sandwich", "pub", "cloy", "contents", "spill" and "fill" – all these belong to the semantic field of refreshment. There is yet another semantic field coloured by religious overtones – "sorrow", "angst", "hope", "apocalypse", "indecision", "poor", "endeavours", "pity", "bright", "expectation", "return", "gleaming", "despair", "light", "time", "everything" and "nothing". These two semantic fields broadly cover the two opposite experiences of man in this world – the material and the spiritual. The first set of lexical items projects the temporal aspects of life with possessions and sensual pleasures. The other set of lexical items converges on the eternal with the everlasting desire and despair embodied in man. These two extremes are semantically brought together through the title metaphor "briefcase of sorrow".

The poem begins with the first person possessive pronoun "my" and ends in "nothing" and this conveys the philosophy of self-realization that "I" at last dissolves into a kind of "nothingness". It subtly conveys the emptiness of human life and man is eternally doomed to sorrow unless he prepares himself for redemption. A man's life is compared to a "briefcase of sorrow" and it is emptied at the time of death. However, his deeds in his birth decide his after-death life and if necessary the briefcase (the body) will be filled one more time. So, mundane life is a "compartment of everything and nothing" (l. 22). This idea is well exemplified in the words of Macbeth: "Life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing" (V.v.25-27).

Life appears to be "everything" as long as the body has the soul in it and it also appears to be "nothing" when one is no more in this world. "Being" ultimately ends up in "becoming", that is, "everything and nothing". This philosophy of life is beautifully put in a nutshell in the last line of the poem "compartment of everything and nothing". The words "apocalypse", "endeavours", "expectation", "return" go together to form a separate line of thought that life is cyclical in nature and it has to go on non-stop. People come and play the roles and are heard no more but life goes on with all its expectations and endeavours, sorrow, hope and despair. The semantic plurality or polysemy of the word "compartment" yields more than one interpretation. Life is a long train running perennially. Human lives are like compartments and they can be, and have to be, linked or delinked at a given point of time.



The poet uses the device of paraphrases in the lines: “I should dump its insides out” (l. 7) and “When I spill its contents” (l. 18). The phrases “dump its insides out” and “spill its contents” can be replaced with the verb “empty” or “clean”. This technique helps the poet create a picture where he wants to empty the briefcase in a hurry out of vexation but feels his inability to do so.

Newman is very detailed in stressing his emotions. There is a difficulty of extracting the meanings of lines. The sentences are so tightly woven together that the poem makes the reader miss the meaning without the entire picture. This picture painted in a sequence, even leads to a mysterious conclusion with a variety of interpretations. It is a terribly sad poem about the end of a teaching semester. It reveals to us the life we are currently living.

The poet is capable of stepping beyond the known confines of English semantics and creates new connections between lexical items. The connections are deviant but innovative and the poet ventures on new semantic explorations to widen the imaginative space. The reader takes on the foregrounded items that are semantically odd and dares to contrast interpolations to a logical conclusion. The reader can't afford to be passive and he too plunges into action to join the poet in his imaginative explorations into hitherto unexplored semantics of the English language. All this makes the poem not only enjoyable but challenging and enhances the richness of literary appreciation.

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