

FOR RHYTHMIC PATTERN OF *THE EBONY TOWER* BY JOHN FOWLES

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Abstract: In terms of prose rhythm, *The Ebony Tower* by John Fowles possesses a multi-layered rhythmic pattern. The study revealed that the novella's intense rhythmic expressiveness is largely due to the fact that rhythm is achieved not only on plane of expression but also on plane of content. Both, stylistic devices and repeated focus alterations and shifts, flashbacks in time and space appear to be at work to create prose rhythm in this currently obscured literary classic. In this article, we tried to prove that not only the language material of the text is full of rhythm but also the content, on the semantic level, possesses the rhythmic quality due to its marked expressiveness.

Keywords: prose rhythm, distribution, rhythmical pattern, unit, expressiveness

Introduction

Though elusive and largely subjective in most cases, the rhythm of prose can be created and maintained even in a lengthy piece of literature provided the rhythm creating devices are employed appropriately and rhythmical units are distributed at certain intervals, mostly irregularly. *The Ebony Tower* by John Fowles is a successful example of this. This hugely atmospheric novella fascinates readers not only by the twists of the plot but the language as well and it puts forward a duly multi-layered pattern. The mundane and the poetic, the reality and what might have happened, are juxtaposed not only on the plane of content but also on that of expression. And it is the rhythm, through which, in our opinion, all these features are woven together harmoniously.

Review of the Literature

The prose rhythm is not an easy task to create and maintain, especially through a considerably long piece of writing. It has been long argued, whether rhythm is the property of poetry only. Aristotle (384–322 BC) was one of the earliest proponents of prose rhythm. In his *Rhetoric*, while advising orators on speech making and stressing the need of certain and appropriate rhythm for every utterance and speech, Aristotle wrote: “Neither like a poem nor totally devoid of rhythm should a speech be. For, above all, it will not be convincing and it will sound artificial...no speech is complete without rhythm and a speech needs to have a complete form but not in a metric sense. Speech needs a certain rhythm but not an exact meter for in this case it would be a poem. And, the rhythm of a speech must not be absolutely regular” (Aristotle, 1981:180). Many scholars and linguists have agreed that the units creating rhythm should be distributed on every level and repeated at certain intervals; “The frequency and the quality of their distribution must be perceptible for a reader” [6]. The prose rhythm works not in one way; it is not only perceived through repeated units but also in the expressiveness of the author's language. Thus, it makes sense that “emotional content rather than rhythmic pattern is the important element in “rhythmic prose” (Andrews, 1918:188).

John Fowles (1926-2005), belongs to the mighty league of the English language authors who are masters of both: language and plot. *The Ebony Tower* (1974) is like just another quietly glowing gem of his oeuvre.

Analysis of the Data

To begin with, in terms of the rhythm created content-wise, the whole text is lined by deep and extended dialogues about fine art and being faithful to one's principles. There are four lengthy dialogues of this kind. Furthermore, there is David's considerable inner monologue about art and his life at the end of the novella. Between them, also appearing at certain intervals, the author creates *tableaux vivants* – living pictures, as rhythmically as everything else, here and there. Sometimes Fowles writes overtly as if it were needed: “Gauguin disappeared; and Manet took his place” (Fowles, 1980:82). As if not him, but the great masters are creating the canvases before us. Or: “Another echo, this time of Gauguin; brown breasts and the garden of Eden” (Fowles, 1980:82). Sometimes, as if to fill in the rhythmic gap, when no name is mentioned, readers

are expected to make reference to this or that artist. For instance, while reading the following late dinner scene, “The housekeeper went to a corner of the room and lighted an oil lamp, then brought it back and set it down in the empty space opposite David. On her way out to the kitchen she reached for a switch and the electric light around them died. At the far end of the room a hidden lamp in the corridor upstairs remained on, silhouetting the handsome diagonal of the medieval staircase” (Fowles, 1980:62), we are reminded of a Georges de la Tour painting. At the end of the work, after David’s merciless self-analysis an untitled abstract painting takes over: “Coët had remorselessly demonstrated what he was born, still was, and always would be: a decent man and an eternal also-ran. That last was the label that seemed to have been lurking for hours when it finally came to him. He was left staring at the petered rise, which he saw almost literally above the dreary sea of roofs, wet now in a drizzle, outside the hotel; the collapsed parallel of what he was beside the soaring line of all that he might have been” (Fowles, 1980:129).

Continuing with the rhythm on content level, the time concept must be mentioned; the present day-ness of the narration is not rhythmically single-paced either. This time this rhythm happens on the level of events happening; not one after another, but simultaneously.

The story of the young successful English painter/art critic David Williams visiting famous expatriate Henry Breasley at his house deep in the forest of Brittany, France, may be seen also as a story of a medieval knight in search of the eternal truth; David too, is either consciously or subconsciously in search of the Holy Grail of his trade. Yes, there are two young ladies at Henry’s place as well, one particularly in need of help, *the damsel in distress*. If we follow this thread, Henry may be seen the cruel king guarding his domain and property. Henry is angry at the contemporary art, which rejected the real, genuine principles of painting. David, the bright, smart and talented representative of abstractionism, finds himself unable to face the challenge at Henry’s retreat.

Being surrounded by the lush green forests of Brittany, the present day characters are almost constantly made aware of the Celtic legends and images which as if come alive in the emotional turmoil of protagonists. Thus, the clock rhythmically ticks to and fro, from past to present, from present to past; the *tableaux vivants* are juxtaposed by the actual paintings at the artist’s retreat; the personages – by their medieval counterparts. And, readers are conscious of the **rhythmic interaction of these two layers** all the time. Here are the instances:

“Strange, how Coët and its way of life seemed to compose itself so naturally into such moments, into the faintly mythic and timeless. The uncontemporary” (Fowles, 1980:82);

“Once more he had that uncanny sense of melted time and normal process; of an impulsion that was indeed spell-like and legendary. One kept finding oneself ahead of where one was; where one should have been” (Fowles, 1980:115);

“Coët was in another universe; one and an eternal day’s drive away” (Fowles, 1980:129);

“The old man explained in his offhand way the sudden twelfth and thirteenth-century mania for romantic legends, the mystery of island Britain...the sudden preoccupation with love and adventure and the magical, the importance of the once endless forest—of which the actual one they were walking in, Paimpont now, but the Brocéliande of the lais of Chrétien de Troyes, was an example—as the matrix for all these goings-on; the breaking-out of the closed formal garden of other medieval art, the extraordinary yearning symbolized in these wandering horsemen and lost damsels and dragons and wizards, Tristan and Merlin and Lancelot” (Fowles, 1980:78);

“Perhaps it constituted the old man’s real stroke of genius, to take an old need to escape from the city, for a mysterious remoteness, and to see its ancient solution, the Celtic green source, was still viable; fortunate old man, to stay both percipient and profoundly amoral, to buy this last warm solitude and dry affection with his fame” (Fowles, 1980:95);

The following two excerpts inevitably remind us of Tristan and Iseult, during their secret meetings:

“In the background, the black wall of the forest. The dew was heavy and pearly. But it was warm, very still, a last summer night. The ghostly apple trees, drained of colour; a cheeping of crickets. David glanced secretly at the girl beside him; the way she watched the ground as she walked, was so silent now, strict to her promise. But he had not imagined. It was here, now, the unsaid. He knew it in every nerve and premonitory fibre” (Fowles, 1980:114);

“Once or twice he patted her back gently; and stared into the night and the trees; saw himself standing there, someone else, in another life. In the end she pulled gently away and turned against the gate, her back to him” (Fowles, 1980:116);

“There was a deep nocturnal silence, both inside the house and out; as if they were alone in it, and in the world. He felt he had travelled much further than he expected, into the haunted and unpredicted; and yet in some strange way it seemed always immanent. It had had to come, it had had causes, too small, too manifold to have been detected in the past or to be analysed now” (Fowles, 1980:109);

“And more silence, as if they were quite literally in the forest; the way hidden birds sing, spasmodically, secretly shifting position between utterances” (Fowles, 1980:110);

“He had failed both in the contemporary and the medieval sense” (Fowles, 1980:124).

As for the rhythm on the language level, it seems relevant to go on with a stylistic device *gradation*, which rhythmically punctuates and pulsates through the whole novella.

Here are some samples of gradation from the work:

“One could imagine him countless **rebuffed**, and **indifferent** to it; enormously selfish, both **in** bed and **out**; **impossible**, so **one believed in** him. And now even those many who must have refused to believe had been confounded: he had come through to this, *reputation, wealth, the girls, freedom* to be exactly as he always had been, *a halo round his selfishness, a world at his every whim, every other world shut out, remote behind the arboreal sea*” (Fowles 1980:77).

The gradation above is a mixture of different devices at work and all of them driving to the euphonic last semantic-syntactic pair *the arboreal sea*. Thus, there are antithetic pairs: *rebuffed-indifferent*, *in-out*, a kind of an oxymoron: *impossible, so one believed in him* and two rows of enumeration: *reputation, wealth, the girls, freedom* and, *a halo round his selfishness, a world at his every whim, every other world shut out, remote behind the arboreal sea*.

Another example of gradation:

“Even as he stood there he knew it was a far more than sexual experience, but a fragment of one that reversed all logic, process, that struck *new suns, new evolutions, new universes out of nothingness*. It was *metaphysical; something far beyond the girl; an anguish, a being bereft of a freedom* whose true nature he had only just seen. **F**or the **f**irst **t**ime in his **l**ife he knew more than the **f**act of being: but the passion to exist” (Fowles 1980:119-120).

Beside the highly charged content crowned with the conclusive statement ‘but the passion to exist’, the gradation is achieved through alliteration, assonance [ai] and two rows of enumeration.

One more example:

“Turning away from nature and reality had atrociously distorted the relationship between **painter** and audience; now one **painted** for intellects and theories. Not people; and worst of all, not for oneself. Of course, it paid dividends, in economic and vogue terms, but what had really been set up by this jettisoning of the human body and its natural physical perceptions, was *a vicious spiral, a vortex, a drain to nothingness*, to a **painter** and a critic agreed on only one thing: that only they exist and have value. A good gravestone; for all the scum who didn't care a damn” (Fowles, 1980:127).

Here is the gradation complete with consonance and alliteration, pairs of semantic synonyms, enumeration, repetition and the statement again at the end.

Next, to a considerable extent, *nominal sentences* also contribute to the general rhythmic pattern of Fowles's prose. Free of predicates, these sentences, flow as if more smoothly and rapidly especially when there are several of them one after another. To name a few:

“Last summer. August... Another art student, a sculptor” (Fowles, 1980:85);

“Best brain, best heart. Unique” (Fowles, 1980:97);

“Hanged man. Not the Verona thing. Foxe” (Fowles, 1980:98);

“Book of Martyrs. Woodcuts. Old copy at home... Aged six, seven. Far worse than the real thing. Spain” (Fowles, 1980:98);

“Too much root. Origin. Past. Not the flower. The now. Thing on the wall” (Fowles, 1980:98);

“Psyches. The cruelty of glass: as transparent as air, as divisive as steel” (Fowles, 1980:111).

The next devices that need being considered, are *parallel structures* and *repetition*. We are putting them forward together since in many cases they are closely connected. “Parallel structures are often backed up by

repetition of words (lexical repetition) and conjunctions and prepositions (polysyndeton)" (Galperin, 1981:191).

The examples:

"**The more he learnt her, the more he watched her, the more he liked her;** as temperament, as system of tastes and feelings, **as** female object" (Fowles, 1980:94);

"He...knew that words **were** swiftly **becoming** unnecessary; **were becoming**, however frank or sympathetic, not what the situation asked" (Fowles, 1980:111);

"**Her** body, **her** face, **her** psyche, **her** calling: she was out there somewhere in the trees, waiting for him" (Fowles, 1980:111);

"**How** impatient it was of barriers and obstacles, **how** it melted truth and desire of all their conventional coats; **one** desired truth, **one** truthed desire, **one** read minds, jumped bridges, wanted so sharply, both physically and psychologically" (Fowles, 1980:113);

"And also as if hands knew what fools these **mortals**, or at least **mortal** intentions and **mortal** words, were"(Fowles, 1980:117);

"The trap of marriage, when the physical has turned to affection, **familiar** postures, **familiar** games, a safe mutual art and science" (Fowles, 1980:117);

"The horror was that he was **still** being plunged forward, **still** melting, **still** realizing; as there are rare psychic phenomena *read of, imagined, yet missed* when they finally happen" (Fowles, 1980:119);

"Even as he stood there he knew it was a far more than sexual experience, but a fragment of one that reversed all logic, process, that struck **new** suns, **new** evolutions, **new** universes out of nothingness" (Fowles, 1980:119-120);

"He was returning to sat mercilessly reflected and dissected in its surface... and **how** shabby it now looked, **how** insipid and anodyne, **how** safe" (Fowles, 1980:125);

"**One** killed all risk, **one** refused all challenge, and so **one** became an artificial man" (Fowles, 1980:125);

"**What she** said; **what she** felt; **what she** thought" (Fowles, 1980:129).

Along with parallel structures and repetition, *enumeration* appears to be another useful and prominent device for creating prose rhythm. Especially when asyndeton is the case, omitting conjunctions in order to give rhythm and pace to the text. Here are a number of instances of enumeration:

"*This rather gorgeous old house, the studio set-up, the collection, the faintly gamy ambiguity* that permeated the place after predictable old Beth and the kids at home; *the remoteness of it, the foreignness, the curious flashes of honesty, a patina... fecundity, his whole day through that countryside, so many ripening apples*" (Fowles, 1980:56);

"There would be *jealousies, preferences, rifts in the lute and its being so locked away, islanded, out of David's own real and daily world, Blackheath and the rush-hour traffic, parties, friends, exhibitions, the kids, Saturday shopping, parents...*" (Fowles, 1980:100);

"A pretence, the undeclared knowledge of a shared imagination, *hung in the air; in her half-hidden figure against the light on the floor behind, in the silence, the bed in the corner, the thousand ghosts of old rooms*" (Fowles, 1980:113);

"To one part of him-already desperate to diminish, to devalue-it was merely a perverse refusal; and to another, an acute and overwhelming *sense of loss, of being cleft, struck down, endlessly deprived... and deceived*" (Fowles, 1980:119);

"One sailed past that preposterously obvious reef represented by the first evening with the old man, and one's *self-blindness, priggishness, so-called urbanity, love of being liked*, did the rest" (Fowles, 1980:125);

"And even that, the being technically innocent, that it should still mean something to him, betrayed his real crime: *to dodge, escape, avert*" (Fowles, 1980:125);

"...but the whole headlong *post-war chain, abstract expressionism, neo-primitivism, op art and pop art, conceptualism, photo-realism...*" (Fowles, 1980:127);

"*The silence, the forest, the old man's voice*" (Fowles, 1980:129);

"Something in him, a last hope of redemption, of free will, *burnt every boat; turned; ran for salvation*" (Fowles, 1980:129).

If one tries reading the book aloud, one will capture the euphonic sound of the text. Fowles employed *alliteration, consonance and assonance* to create another layer of rhythm for this piece of writing. For instance:

“He seemed surprisingly spry” (Fowles, 1980:75);

“David would like to talk a little longer “(Fowles, 1980:74);

“There on the summit stood a smirking old satyr in carpet slippers, delightedely damning all common sense and calculation” (Fowles, 1980:77) – triple alliteration of s, d;

“All bras were not burnt” (Fowles, 1980:79);

“There were others loosely constellated on the glass outside the window over her worktable, pale fawn specks of delicate, foolish organism yearning for the impossible” (Fowles, 1980:111);

“He felt frozen, fatally unable to move” (Fowles, 1980:119);

“To one part of him – already desperate to diminish, to devalue – it was merely a perverse refusal...endlessly deprived and...deceived” (Fowles, 1980:119);

“But that little touch of warmth and affection faded so fast, almost before her footsteps died away” (Fowles, 1980:122);

“He felt drowned in disillusion, intolerably depressed and shaken” (Fowles, 1980:123);

“Perhaps, abstraction, the very word gave the game away [ei] (Fowles, 1980:126).

Conclusion

In conclusion, as it was our aim, we tried to prove that the complex rhythmic pattern of The Ebony Tower is created by means of various linguistic devices. Furthermore, the prose rhythm is also clearly detectable on the level of content. Thus, the overall rhythm is achieved through alteration of both language material and content. We tried to show that the more complex the rhythmic pattern is selected by an author, the more rewarding the reading process for an eager reader. We hope, the readers experience fascinating patterns of rhythmic texture of the novella in the same way as they enjoy the story itself.

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