GLORIA NAYLOR'S STYLE IN *THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE*

Corina PUŞCAŞ
Universitatea "Petru Maior", Târgu-Mureş, Romania

Abstract

The Women of Brewster Place *is Gloria Naylor's first short story cycle, a book which immediately appeals to readers (especially female ones), who experience a fluent pleasure of reading – hence our desire to understand and write about the writer's style. Naylor uses several very effective stylistic devices related to diction, imagery and syntax, i.e. a combination between Standard English and Black vernacular, recurrent metaphors, an abundance of bodily sensations, and free indirect discourse.*

Style has been defined in numerous ways according to the choice to emphasize one factor involved in the literary work or another (i.e. the writer – the work – the reader). We choose to define and understand it traditionally by focusing on the author: Style is the specific way in which an author organizes his or her message as far as coherence and personal expression are concerned, in order to induce the maximum effect in the reader's consciousness. It also reveals the writer's way of perceiving experience and organizing perceptions. The word *specific* in the definition above refers to something repeated, recurrent, something that in contrast to random aspects becomes a dominant stylistic feature[i]. Style includes the author's choice of words as well as the arrangement of words into phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. Thus, the elements of style are diction, imagery and syntax. A stylistic analysis of a literary work has as aim a better understanding of both the message and the writer's personality.

Stimulated by the sheer pleasure of reading *The Women of Brewster Place*[ii] we have proceeded to identifying the main stylistic phenomena, which contribute to this effect. A very inspiring guidance in our approach was the thorough stylistic analysis performed by Mihaela Mudure in *Katherine Mansfield. Plucking the Nettle of Impressionism* (212-241).

What immediately caught our attention was Naylor's choice to render the actual speech of her characters. She combines Standard English (specific mainly to indirect discourse: the narrator's voice, used when describing places, characters, events) with Black vernacular (specific to direct speech - most characters' voices). For the sake of authenticity, Naylor changes the spelling of a

BDD-A23835 © 2005 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:56:13 UTC)

great number of words, uses different grammatical structures and numerous colloquialisms in direct discourse:

"*Going to cut cane, Mr. Mike" […]*

Mr. Mike grinned. "Ain't figure you to be goin' catfishing with that knife, gal." (*Mattie Michael*, 12)

The gap between Standard English and Black vernacular varies according to the level of education of each character. Thus Lorraine, Theresa and Kiswana, who attended college speak literary English, whereas Ben, C.C. Baker and his gang, Mattie, Etta, Butch etc. speak the opposite. Here are two relevant examples in *The Two*:

Lorraine followed Theresa into the kitchen. "No, I'm not really tired, and fair's fair, you cooked last night. I didn't mean to tick off like that; it's just that…well, Tee, have you noticed that people aren't as nice as they used to be?"

Theresa stiffened. Oh, God, here she goes again. "What people Lorraine? Nice in what way?"

"Well, the people in this building and on the street. No one hardly speaks anymore. I mean, I'll come in and say good evening – and just silence […]" (134)

"I lives in this here block just like y'all," Ben said slowly. "And when you ain't got no heat, I ain't either. It's not my fault 'cause the man won't deliver no oil." (139)

Naylor's text is also characterized by rich imagery, which is not surprising taking into account her affiliation to poetic realism. Metaphors are quite common in her writing. The story of every character benefits from the vivid or dramatic effect created by a certain metaphor (implied comparison by which the image-word replaces the object-word.). In *Mattie Michael* there is the recurrence of the smell of freshly cut sugar cane, a very powerful symbol for the 'sweetness and terror of sex'. In *Etta Mae Johnson* the omnipresent jazz music symbolizes the main character's romantic mood and 'loose' life. The flight of a pigeon described at the beginning of *Kiswana Browne* is a vivid metaphor for the title character's ending up in Brewster Place. The pigeon helped by the wind glides in circles in front of her window and Kiswana fantasizes that it bears her dreams on its back and that it will "*ascend to the center of the universe*"; but the wind dies out and the bird with "*awkward, frantic movements*" lands on the "*corroded top of a fire escape on the opposite building*" in Brewster Place (75). The metaphor and the leitmotif in *Lucielia Louise Turner* is water, a soul cleansing element. The episode when she washes the rice is symbolic for her giving up on her unborn baby, while the episode in which Mattie gives her a bath after her child's death is the episode of a symbolic baptism. *Cora Lee* is also constructed on a dramatic metaphor: every child the young woman has is "*her new baby doll*", a 'doll' she abandons when she gets bored or she gives birth again. Metaphorical in *The Two* is the "*yellow mist*", which stands for the atmosphere

BDD-A23835 © 2005 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:56:13 UTC)

(made up of gossip, rejection, isolation) that surrounds the lesbian couple. Yellow (and purple) symbolizes the homo-sexual preference. All these metaphors are the result of the author's highly sensitive perception of reality.

Naylor's sensitivity is also shown by the fact that she practices a style abundant in bodily sensations (of course, these are all related to female characters). Thus, Mattie *"was conscious of the hardness of his chest under her probing fingers as she sought the handkerchief, and when she stood on her toes to wipe his wet brow, her nipples brushed the coarse denim of his overalls and began to strain against the thin dress*" (*Mattie Michael*, 14-15). Later, while she was cruelly beaten by her father, her "*body contracted in a painful spasm, each time the stick smashed down on her legs and back, and she curled into a tight knot, trying to protect her stomach*" (23). Etta, after another one night stand, while lying in bed with her eyes closed "*felt the bleached coarseness of the sheet under her sweaty back*" (72). Kiswana's "*toes curled involuntarily at the passing thought of his full lips moving slowly over her instep*" (77). In *Lucielia Louise Turner* we witness strong bodily sensations, both before Serena's death ("*A tight, icy knot formed in the center of Ciel's stomach and began to melt rapidly, watering the blood in her legs so that they almost refused to support her weight*") (97), and after: "*The bile that had formed a tight knot in Ciel's stomach began to rise and gagged her just as it passed her throat. Mattie put her hand over the girl's mouth and rushed her out the new-empty room to the toilet. Ciel retched yellowish-green phlegm, and she brought up white lumps of slime that hit the seat of the toilet and rolled off, splattering onto the tiles. After a while she heaved only air, but the body did not seem to want to stop. It was exorcising the evilness of pain*" (104).Cora Lee is another character that is very much aware of her senses and keen on the thing that "*felt good in the dark*". However, the most intense episode with respect to bodily sensations is the episode of the rape:

"He slammed his kneecap into her spine and her body arched up, causing his nails to cut into the side of her mouth to stifle her cry. He pushed her arched body down onto the cement. Two of the boys pinned her arms, two wrenched open her legs, while C.C. knelt between them and pushed up her dress and tore at the top of her pantyhose. Lorraine's body was twisting in convulsions of fear that they mistook for resistance, and C.C. brought his fist down into her stomach. […]

The impact of his fist forced air into her constricted throat, and she worked her sore mouth, trying to form the one word that had been clawing inside of her – 'Please.' It squeezed through her paralyzed vocal cords and fell lifelessly at their feet. Lorraine clamped her eyes shut and, using all of the strength left within her, willed it to rise again.

'Please.'

The sixth boy took a dirty paper bag lying on the ground and stuffed it into her mouth. She felt a weight drop on her spread body. Then she opened her eyes and they screamed and screamed

BDD-A23835 © 2005 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:56:13 UTC)

into the face above hers - the face that was pushing this tearing pain inside of her body. The screams tried to break through her corneas out into the air, but the tough rubbery flesh sent them vibrating back into her brain, first shaking lifeless the cells that nurtured her memory. Then the cells went that contained her powers of taste and smell. The last that were screamed to death were those that supplied her with the ability to love - or hate. .

Lorraine was no longer conscious of the pain in her spine or stomach. She couldn't feel the skin that was rubbing off of her arms from being pressed against the rough cement. What was left of her mind was centered around the pounding motion that was ripping her insides apart. She couldn't tell when they changed places and the second weight, then the third and fourth, dropped on her - it was all one continuous hack sawing of torment that kept her eyes screaming the only word she was fated to utter again and again for the rest of her life. 'Please'.

Her thighs and stomach had become so slimy from her blood and their semen that the last two boys didn't want to touch her; so they turned her over, propped her head and shoulders against the wall, and took her from behind. When they had finished and stopped holding her up, her body fell over like an unstringed puppet. She didn't feel her split rectum or the patches in her skull where her hair had been torn off by grating against the bricks. Lorraine lay in that alley only screaming at the moving pain inside of her that refused to come to rest." (170-171)

The details that Naylor offers with respect to Lorraine's physical and psychological agony are so vivid and thorough that it is impossible not to have a tremendous impact on any reader. It is our belief that only a female writer is capable of such true-to-life rendering of feelings and sensations. Another aspect to be emphasized here is that this harrowing episode reflects not only the writer's heightened sensitivity and descriptive talent in expressing the female experience, but also her courage to adopt such a blunt and emotional language (style).

Being very interested in rendering the character's inner life, Naylor uses several very effective stylistic devices. The most important is free indirect discourse (FID), which may be defined as "the technique for rendering the character's thought in his/her own idiom while maintaining the third person and the basic tense of the narration" (Mudure, 214), it is also "a dialogic technique through which the author's and the character's voices become interwoven in various degrees of sophistication" (Mudure, 215).

We have noticed that this device is used with every main character, but to different degrees. - quite frequently with Mattie: *"She was touched by the gentleness in his caress and immediately repentant of her attitude in the car. During the day she resolved to make amends with him. After all he was under a great deal of pressure, and it wasn't fair that he bear it alone. Was it so wrong that he seemed to need her constant support? Had he not been trained to expect it? And he had been trying so hard those last two weeks; she couldn't let him down now.*" (52-52)

BDD-A23835 © 2005 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:56:13 UTC)

- only occasionally with Etta: "[*When Etta got to the stoop she, noticed there was a light under the shade at Mattie's window, and she strained to hear what actually sounded like music coming from behind the screen.*] *Mattie was playing her records!*" (74)
- regularly with Kiswana: "*Damn. Kiswana could have strangled herself*!" (80)
- several times with Lucielia: "*But how do you tell yourself, let alone this practical woman who loves you, that he was back because of that. So you don't.*
You get up and fix you both another cup of coffee, calm the fretting baby on your lap with her pacifier, and you pray silently – very silently – behind veiled eyes that the man will stay." (92)
- occasionally with Cora: "*What did these people on Brewster Place want from her anyway? Always complaining. If she let the kids go outside, they made too much noise in the halls. If they play in the streets, she didn't watch them closely enough. How could she do all that – be a hundred places at one time? It was enough just trying to keep this apartment together*." (110)
- the most frequently with Theresa: "*That was just like Lorraine to stand there and let someone else take up for her. Well, maybe, she'd finally learned her lesson about these ignorant nothings on Brewster Place. They weren't ever to be accepted by these people, and there was no point in trying*." (163)
- very rarely with Lorraine: "*If only she had some friends in the city*." (168)

Naylor uses the same technique even with a few secondary characters:
- with Sophie in *The Two*: "*Sophie had plenty to report that day. Ben had said it was terrible in here. No, she didn't know exactly what he had seen, but you can imagine*[…]" (132)
- with Reverend Woods in *Etta Mae Johnson*: "*Well, he shrugged his shoulders and placated his dented ego, that's the nice part about these worldly women. They understand the temporary weakness of the flesh and don't make it out to be something bigger than it is. They can have a good time without pawing and hanging all onto a man. Maybe I should drop around sometime."* (73)

In general, Naylor uses this type of discourse to render the characters' thoughts about a present situation, only rarely to render an actual or inner conversation. The effect of this continuous shift among the three types of discourse (direct, indirect, and free indirect) is a more complex and sophisticated character construction.

There are other stylistic devices as well: specific punctuation, visual accentuation, repetition of key words, the use of very short and sharp end of paragraph or of text sentences etc. These, however, are not as frequent or relevant as the ones that have been broadly discussed and illustrated above.

In conclusion, Naylor's style is essentially characterized by an effort to render the speech as authentically as possible, by rich imagery (mainly due to the use of metaphors), by preference

BDD-A23835 © 2005 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:56:13 UTC)

towards bodily sensations expression, as well as by frequent occurrences of free indirect discourse - in other words by a rich complexity of language.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Naylor, Gloria (1985) *The Women of Brewster Place. A Novel in Seven Stories*. New York: Penguin Books,

Secondary Sources

Bell, Bernard W. (1993) *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press

Mudure, Mihaela (2000) *Katherine Mansfield. Plucking the Nettle of Impressions*. Cluj Napoca: Napoca Star

Sarbulescu, Emil (199) *Cartea care vorbeste. Introducere in romanul Afro-American*. Craiova: Fundatia Scrisul Romanesc

Smith, Valerie; Baechler, Lea; Litz, A. Walton (eds). (1993) *African American Writers*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company

*

Davis Finney, Kathe. *Afro-American Literature*. Chapter XII in *A Handbook of American Literature*. Zbgniew Lewicki (ed.) pp.182-194

*

Gloria Naylor "Unofficial" Homepage http://www.lythastudios.com/gnaylor (April 2005)

Walker King, Debra. Review: *The Critical Response to Gloria Naylor, edited by Sharon Felton, Michelle C. Loris*. African American Review, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Autumn, 1999), 543-545. http://www.jstor.org (May 2005)

Cox, Karen Castellucci: *Magic and memory in the contemporary story cycle: Gloria Naylor and Louise Erdrich*. College English (60:2) [Feb 1998], p.150-172. LITERATURE ONLINE http://proquest.umi.com (May 2005)

Donlon, Jocelyn Hazelwood: *Hearing is believing: Southern racial communities and strategies of story-listening in Gloria Naylor and Lee Smith.* Twentieth Century Literature: a scholarly and critical journal (Hofstra Univ., Hempstead, NY) (41:1) (Spring 1995), p.16-35. LITERATURE ONLINE http://proquest.umi.com (May 2005)

Branzburg, Judith V.: *Seven Women and a Wall.* Callalloo. No. 21 (Spring-Summer, 1984), 116-119 http://www.jstor.org (May 2005)

Holloway, Karla F.C.: *Revision and (Re)membrance: A Theory of Literary Structures in Literature*

BDD-A23835 © 2005 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:56:13 UTC)

by African-American Women Writers. Black American Literary Forum, Vol. 24, No. 4. Women Writers Issue (Winter, 1990), 617-631 http://www.jstor.org (May 2005)

Matus, Jill L.: *Dream, Deferral, and Closure in The Women of Brewster Place*. Black American Literary Forum, Vol. 24, No. 1, (Spring, 1990), 49-64. http://www.jstor.org (May 2005)

Arana, Marie: *Gloria Naylor: Telling Her Tale*. http://www.watchtowerinformationservice.org Sunday, October 29, 2000; Page X08

(April 2005)

[i] Leon Levitchi identified five types of dominant features according to denotation (vocabulary and grammar), connotation, accentuation, modality (the attitude of the writer), and coherence.

[ii] Published in 1982, while Naylor was still a graduate student at Yale, *The Women of Brewster Place* marked her sudden emergence onto the American literary scene. Described on the cover as 'a novel in seven stories', and spanning a thirty-year period from the early 1940s (when many immigrants and Southern blacks - Naylor's parents included - arrived in New York after the War, searching for jobs and hoping that New York would provide their children with better opportunities than they had had as children growing up) to the mid-1970s, the work chronicles the lives of seven black women struggling to survive in a difficult neighborhood (they all live on the dead-end street called Brewster Place).

BDD-A23835 © 2005 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:56:13 UTC)