

A FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS  
OF  
THE NOMINAL GROUP  
STRUCTURES

DYLAN THOMAS' POEM

*"THERE WAS A SAVIOUR"*

AS A CASE STUDY

Khalid Shakir Hussein

## ABSTRACT

The researcher argues that in the case of Dylan Thomas' poem "There was a Saviour" a close analysis of some linguistic features can show how some basic literary meanings are made. The poem shows some careful shifts in the religious representation of "the Saviour", and these shifts can be associated with certain parallel changes or developments in the structure of the nominal groups used throughout the five stanzas of the poem.

The nominal group structure is analyzed carefully into five elements: Head, Deictic, Numerative, Epithet, and Qualifier. Dylan Thomas employed them in different degrees in relation to the structural complexity of the nominal groups; he relies heavily on the Qualifier, and the Epithet to increase the structural complexity of the nominal groups in the poem. This recognition of the way the nominal group is structured can provide a "point of entry" for a specific literary interpretation.

# 1. Introduction

This paper describes a particular linguistic feature as it occurs in a particular literary text. This description might help a reader to understand and appreciate the literary significance of the text depending on its linguistic features. Modern methods of linguistic analysis can tackle the problem of giving a precise description of the literary language . However, any practical method of linguistic analysis must select some features for analysis and ignore others (Leech and Short, 1981:13). It is clear, then, that linguistic analysis must be very selective: some studies concentrate on just one feature, as it is the case in this paper, and others on a handful of features (see Carter, 1984:12). The question usually posed in this concern is : How are the features for analysis to be selected? It is assumed that stylistics investigates the relation between the writer's artistic achievement, and how it is achieved through language (Short, 1996: 3). This implies two criteria for the selection of stylistic features: a literary criterion and a linguistic criterion (Fowler, 1985: 21). But at which end does one start, the literary or the linguistic? Leech and Short (1981: 14) stresses that there is "a cyclic motion whereby linguistic observation stimulates or modifies literary insight, and whereby literary insight in its turn stimulates further linguistic observation."

Nevertheless, the literary considerations of the poem in question guided the researcher in selecting what features to be examined. Thus, the starting point is the literary considerations which are based upon the ability to respond to the poem as a literary work (Birch, 1993: 88) and then

the researcher moved on to observe any linguistic feature that might explain how the aesthetic effect is achieved through language-use.

The theory on which the method of description is based in this paper is *Systemic Theory*. It is largely based on Firth's system-structure theory, in addition to certain principles from Halliday's Functional Grammar. The organizing concept in such a theory is that of a "system network" (Halliday, 1994: 138). Accordingly, every feature of a text can be related to the overall system of English (Arnold, 1985:15). That is, the linguistic analysis of any feature is such as to relate the text to general features of the language. Consequently, the linguistic analysis in *Systemic Theory* covers *the clause* (in its textual; interpersonal; and ideational aspects), primary classes of *group and phrase* (nominal; verbal; adverbial; and prepositional), and *the clause complex* (Thompson, 2000: 179).

In this paper the focus will be on one linguistic feature related to *nominal group structure* as it occurs in Dylan Thomas' poem "There was a Saviour". The researcher's hypothesis is that the nominal group structure is handled by Dylan Thomas throughout his poem in a way that contributes to the general meaning which the poet tries to convey. Nominal group structure is a particular feature of Dylan's style which calls for a careful investigation. It is exploited in a such stylistically interesting way that it might be called a *style marker*.

The concept of "*style marker*" is the key to one important step in linguistic description (Spencer, 1988: 34). This step is related to the process of grouping linguistic features into those that function as *style markers* in a given context, and

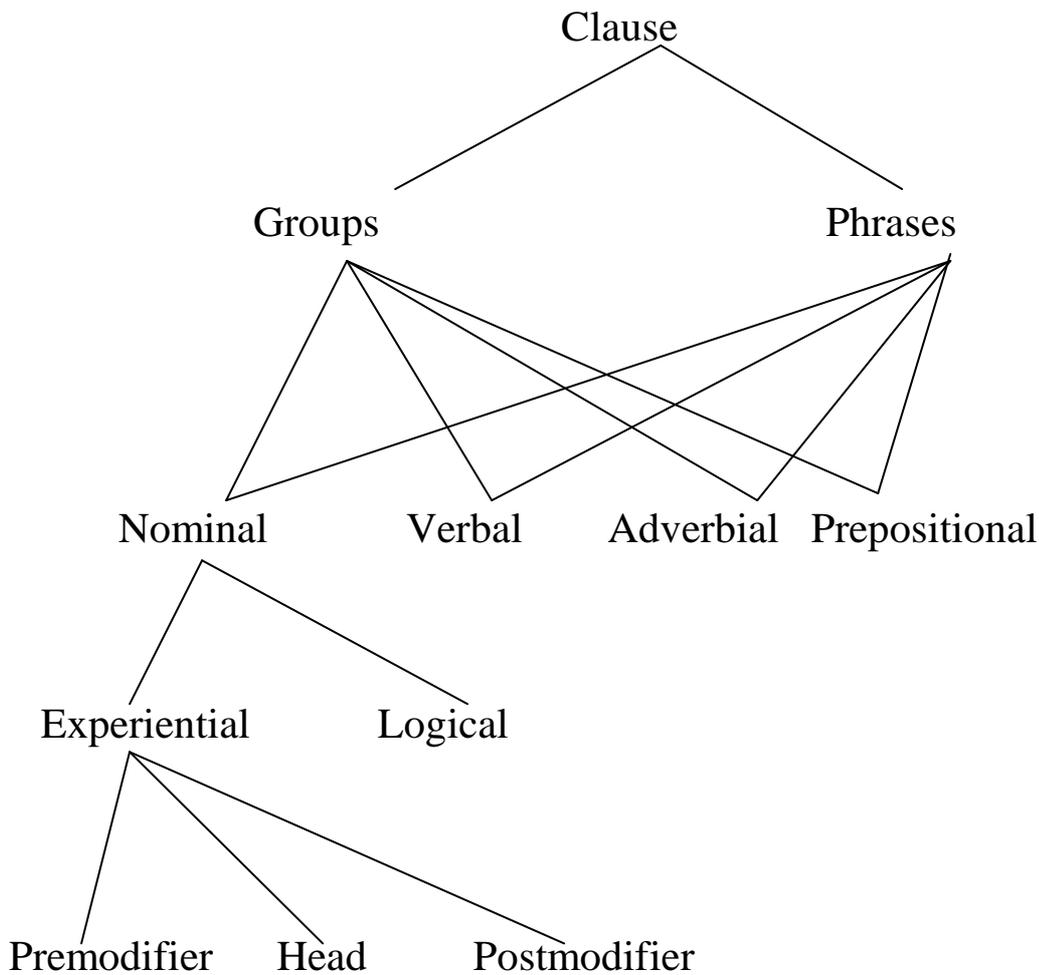
into those "whose stylistic function is limited or nil" (Leech and Short, 1981:69). The linguistic survey of "There was a Saviour" that will be carried out recognizes nominal group structure as a stylistic marker; nevertheless, there is little to say about the other groups (verbal; adverbial; prepositional) in such a short text. Hence, they cannot serve as a style marker in the sense that they are stylistically neutral or they are not so prominent in the poem as it is the case of the nominal group structure.

## 2. Nominal Group Structure

Groups, in general, constitute the immediate structure after clause in the rank ladder offered by Thompson (2000: 166). Just as the clause has functional slots (e.g. Subject; Actor; Theme) which are filled by groups and phrases, so these slots or elements themselves "can be analyzed in terms of the functional slots that they offer" (ibid.: 179). Before one goes on in analyzing the structure of the nominal group, two points should be clarified: First, a group is not a phrase, a phrase is different from a group in that, the former is a contraction of a clause, whereas the latter is an expansion of a word (Arnold, 1985: 159).

In spite of this structural difference, the two hold the same status on the *rank scale*, "as units that lie somewhere intermediate between the rank of a clause and that of a word" (ibid:161). Second, linguists in Systemic Theory used to deal with two types of group structure in general: *experiential*, and *logical* (Martin, 1997:72). The first type is the focus of this paper, however, this does not mean that the logical structure is irrelevant, but this paper falls short of

exposing such a complex and highly abstract interpretation of groups in terms of *formal logic*. The diagram below shows *the rank scale* the researcher draws on in this paper:



## 2.1 Experiential Structure of the Nominal Group

The nominal group is the grammatical unit which has the most variety at this rank of groups and this would allow the widest range of meanings to be expressed (Thompson, 2000: 181). If one considers, for example, the following nominal group:

the unexpected *news* for which you have been waiting,

according to Thompson (ibid. : 183), one can set up a basic three-part functional structure for the nominal group: *Premodifier, Head, Postmodifier*. That is, there are slots before the Head (*news*), the noun which forms the central axis, and others following the Head.

Figure (2.1)

Premodifier	Head	Postmodifier
the unexpected	news	for which you have been waiting

Of course, not all nominal groups have all three slots filled (see Halliday, 1994:135). The only obligatory slot is the Head. This is normally filled by a pronoun, a proper name or a common noun, though there are some exceptions, for example, in an elliptical nominal group the Head may be a determiner (or 'Deictic') (Thompson,2000: 180), pronouns and proper names rarely need any further specification, and therefore usually appear with no pre-or postmodification (ibid.).

Common nouns, on the other hand, refer to a class of things, either concrete or abstract (e.g. 'eyes'; 'situation') and they frequently require some kind of specification to be added (Morley, 1985: 35). It is the function of the pre- and postmodifiers to provide the specification in different ways (ibid: 37).

Although it is possible to identify *four*\* functional slots or elements within the Premodifier (Arnold, 1985: 160), the researcher will only focus on three elements insofar as Dylan Thomas' poem is concerned:

1. *Deictic*: the Deictic element indicates whether or not some specific Head is intended; and if so, which one (ibid. : 161). It is either (i) *specific* or (ii) *non-specific* (ibid.). Specific deictics may specify the intended Head by one of two possible ways: either *demonstratively*, i.e. by reference to some kind of proximity to the speaker (this, these = 'near me'; that, those = 'not near me') (Morley, 1985:47), or by *possession*, "by reference to person as defined from the standpoint of the speaker (my, your, our, his, her, its, their; also Mary's, my father's, etc.)" (ibid.). All these have the function of identifying a particular Head that is being referred to.

Non-specific deictics work in a different way: they signal that the hearer or reader is not assumed, or does not need, to be familiar with the specific identity of the Head at that point (Thompson, 2000: 182). Since the Deictic slot is not needed for identification, "it is used instead to indicate what quantity of the Head is involved- *all*, *some* or *non*" (ibid.), as it is shown in the examples below:

There are *some* trains on the track.

*Both* trains have left.

I have noticed *no* trains go by.

---

\* Though the functional elements within the premodifier are four, *classifier* is not going to be tackled as a functional element since it has been completely ignored by Dylan Thomas in "There was a Saviour".

It should be noted that one often finds a second Deictic element or (the Post-Deictic) (Morley, 1985: 52) as in : '*the other* unexpected influences'; '*some other* people'; '*a certain* project'; '*your own* life'; . . .etc.

2. *Numerative*: the category of Numeratives overlaps with Deictics to a large extent. It indicates "the number or quantity of the Head, either in exact terms, 'three', 'twenty', or in inexact terms, 'many', 'much'; or it specifies order, 'first', 'fifth" (Halliday, 1994:183). There is no need to go further in tackling the different classifications of Numeratives, since this would be irrelevant to the main concern of this paper.

3. *Epithet* : the Epithet indicates some quality of the Head, e.g. old, long, blue, fast (Arnold, 1985:163). It can answer two main questions: "What do you think of the Head?" and "What is the Head like?" (Thompson, 2000: 183), i.e., the Epithet may be an expression of the speaker's *subjective attitude* towards the Head, e.g. splendid, silly, fantastic, or it is an *objective property* of it, e.g. red, tall, huge (Morley, 1985:89). Generally speaking, there can be any number of Epithets, though in practice it is rare to find more than two (ibid. : 90). The difference between the two types of the Epithet is not clear-cut, however, the *attitudinal* Epithet express "evaluation and modality, they represent an interpersonal element in the meaning of the nominal group" (Halliday, 1994:142), whereas the *objective* Epithets are experiential in function in the sense that they express the properties of the Head itself (ibid.).

As for the Postmodifier, it is typically an embedded phrase or clause, it is also part of the nominal group, having a function referred to by linguists as *Qualifier* (Thompson, 2000: 185). Unlike the elements that precede the Head, which are words (or sometimes word complexes), what comes after the Head is either a phrase or a clause (Arnold, 1985:166). Almost all Qualifiers are embedded phrases or clauses (ibid.); thus, Morley (1985: 97) points out that they are structurally of a rank "higher than or at least equivalent to that of the nominal group"; such qualifying structures are said to be 'embedded', or using systemic terms, "rankshifted" (Halliday,1994: 144). The examples below may give a clear idea about the structures that may realize the Qualifier element:

*the news for which you have been waiting.*

*the decisions made in your name.*

*the foundations of your ambitions.*

*situations beyond your control.*

*tensions at work.*

*events happening in the future or situations to do with overseas.*

*a feeling that you really do not know which end is up.*

Structurally, a postmodifying embedded clause might be *finite* or *non-finite* (Thompson, 2000: 186). If finite, it may be a defining relative clause (ibid.), (see the examples above). If non-finite, it may be an '-ing' clause, or an '-en' clause (ibid: 187), ( 'The decisions *made* . . .'; 'Events *happening* . .'). The embedded non-finite clause may also be a 'to-infinitive' clause, (Arnold, 1985: 167) ( ' . . .

situations *to do with . . .*'). A *prepositional phrase* may occur as a Qualifier in a nominal group (ibid:190), ( 'The foundations *of your . . .*'), ( 'Tensions *at work*').

### 3. Nominal Group Structures in "There Was a Saviour"

#### 1

There was a saviour  
Rarer than radium  
Commoner than water, crueller than truth;  
Children kept from the sun  
Assembled at his tongue  
To hear the golden note turn in a groove,  
Prisoners of wishes locked their eyes  
In the jails and studies of his keyless smiles.

#### 2

The voice of children says  
From a lost wilderness  
There was calm to be done in his safe unrest,  
When hindering man hurt  
Man, animal, or bird  
We hid our fears in that murdering breath,  
Silence, silence to do, when earth grew loud,  
In lairs and asylums of the tremendous shout.

## 3

There was glory to hear  
 In the churches of his tears  
 Under his downy arm you sighed as he struck,  
 O you who could not cry  
 On to the ground when a man died  
 Put a tear for joy in the unearthly flood  
 And laid your cheek against a cloud-formed shell:  
 Now in the dark there is only yourself and myself.

## 4

Two proud, blacked brothers cry,  
 Winter-locked side by side,  
 To this inhospitable hollow year.  
 O we who could not stir  
 One lean sigh when we heard  
 Greed on man beating near and fire neighbour  
 But wailed and nested in the sky-blue wall  
 Now break a giant tear for the little known fall,

## 5

For the drooping of homes  
 That did not nurse our bones,  
 Brave deaths of only ones but never found,  
 Now see, alone in us,  
 Our own true strangers' dust

Ride through the doors of our unentered house.  
 Exiled in us we arouse the soft,  
 Unclenched, armless, silk and rough love that breaks all  
 rocks.

The poem consists of five stanzas, the nominal groups in each stanza will be analyzed into their own functional elements as it is shown in the Tables below. Certain symbols are used to mark the functional elements of the nominal groups:

( D = deictic; N = numerative; E = epithet; H = head; Q = qualifier ).

TABLE (1)

NOMINAL GROUP STRUCTURE IN STANZA (1)

Nominal Group	Functional Structure
a saviour	D H
Rarer than radium	E H
Commoner than water	E H
crueller than truth	E H
Children	H
the sun	D H

his tongue	D H
the golden note	D E H
a groove	D H
Prisoners of wishes	H Q
their eyes	D H
the jails	D H
studies of his keyless smiles	H Q

TABLE (2)

NOMINAL GROUP STRUCTURE IN STANZA (2)

Nominal Group	Functional Structure
The voice of children	D H Q
a lost wilderness	D E H
calm to be done	H Q
his safe unrest	D E H
hindering man	E H
Man, animal, or bird	H + H + H
We	H
our fears	D H
that murdering breath	D E H
Silence	H
silence to do	H Q

earth	H
lairs and asylums of the tremendous shout	H + HQ

TABLE (3)

NOMINAL GROUP STRUCTURE IN STANZA (3)

Nominal Group	Functional Structure
glory to hear	H Q
the churches of his tears	D H Q
his downy arm you	D E H H
he	H
you who could not cry	H Q
the ground	D H
a man	D H
a tear	D H
joy	H
the unearthly flood	D E H
your cheek	D H
a cloud-formed shell	D E H
the dark	D H
yourself and myself	H + H

TABLE (4)

## NOMINAL GROUP STRUCTURE IN STANZA (4)

Nominal Group	Functional Structure
Two proud, blacked brothers . . . Winter-locked side by side	N E1 E2 H Q
this inhospitable hollow year	D E1 E2 H
we who could not stir one lean sigh	
we	H Q
Greed on man	H
fire	H Q
the sky-blue wall	H
a giant tear	D E H
the little known fall	D E H
	D E1 E2 H

TABLE (5)

## NOMINAL GROUP STRUCTURE IN STANZA (5)

Nominal Group	Functional Structure
the drooping of homes . . . That did not nurse our bones	D E H Q
Brave deaths of only ones but never found	E H Q + Q
(?) alone in us	(H ?) Q

<p>Our own true strangers' dust</p> <p>the doors of our unentered house</p> <p>(we) Exiled in us</p> <p>the soft, Unclenched, armless, silk and rough love that breaks all rocks</p>	<p>D1 D2 E D3 H</p> <p>D H Q</p> <p>(H) Q</p> <p>D E1 E2 E3 E4 + E5 H Q</p>
--	---

One careful look at the Tables above would reveal one particular feature about the structural complexity of the nominal groups in the poem: if one takes into consideration the most complex nominal group structure in each stanza, this would bring out a pattern of an increased ( or ascending) complexity, as it is shown in Table (6) below:

TABLE (6)

Complexity of the Nominal Group Structures in Stanza (1-5)

Stanza Number	Nominal Group Structure Complexity
(1)	3-elements
(2)	3-elements
(3)	3-elements
(4)	5-elements
(5)	8-elements

It should be noted that the sense of complexity used in this paper is a formal one: the complexity of a nominal group structure is measured by counting the functional elements offered by such a structure. In this respect, the most complex functional structure of the nominal groups consists of three-elements, (D E H), in the first stanza; three-elements, in the second stanza, ranging from (D H Q) and (D E H) to (H + H Q); three-elements, in the third; five-elements, (N E1 E2 H Q) in the fourth; and eight-elements (D E1 E2 E3 E4 + E5 H Q) in the fifth.

One may think that the structural complexity in the first three stanzas is stable and stigmatized with the three-element structures, however, it is worthnoting that the exponents of the (Q), being of a rank higher than that of the nominal group, have a rather different structural complexity:

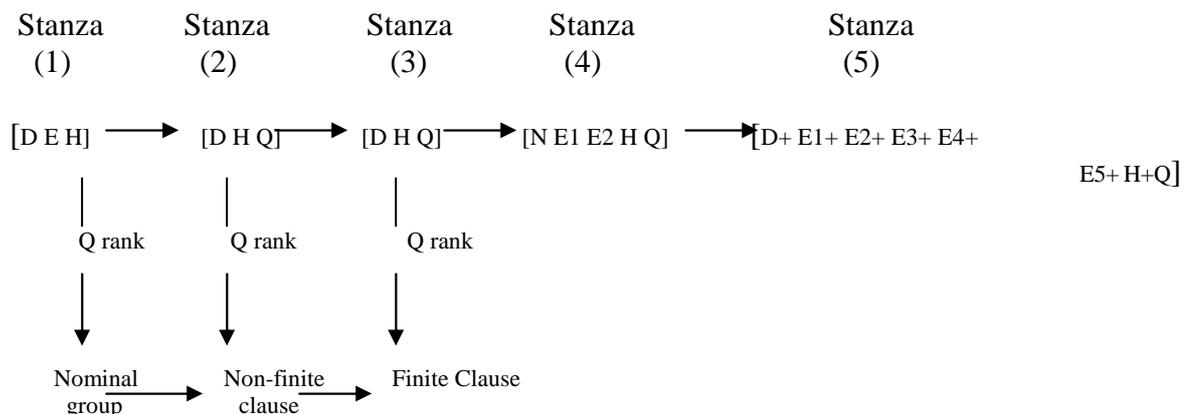
1. in the first stanza, there are two Qualifiers, one is the (H) structure, ( . . .of *wishes*); and the other is the three (D E H) structure, ( . . .of *his keyless smiles*),
2. in the second, the structures of the Qualifier are getting more complex, they are expanded into a non-finite 'to-infinitive' clause, ( . . .*to be done*); ( . . .*to do*),
3. in the third, the Qualifier is still realized by a more complex structure, which is a defining relative clause, ( . . .*who could not cry*),
4. in the fourth, it is even realized by a more complex relative clause than that in the third, ( . . .*who could not stir one lean sigh*),

5. finally, there are three complex clausal Qualifiers in the fifth stanza: ( . . .*that did not nurse our bones*); ( . . .*of only ones but never found*); ( . . .*that breaks all rocks*).

Thus, the structural complexity of the nominal groups, especially in the first three stanzas, is handled through the increasing complexity of the constituents attributed to the Qualifiers. The diagram below may give a rather close illustration of the ascending structural complexity of the nominal groups in the poem:

DIAGRAM (1)

(The Ascending Structural Complexity of The Nominal Group Structure)



## 1. The Aesthetic Function

To find out the aesthetic function of a particular use of language is to inquire how a specific configuration of language is used for a specific artistic purpose, or by what linguistic means a particular aesthetic purpose is achieved. What holds the researcher's concern is the

sense in which the nominal group structure is used by Dylan Thomas in his poem as a specific linguistic configuration, and how far he was successful in employing such structures to convey certain literary themes and effects.

A linguist engaged in stylistics must be prepared to *utilize* his analysis of the literary text (Fowler, 1985:21). However, he should first wonder about the general meaning the literary text is trying to convey, and then he could proceed to figure out the utility of the analysis he carried out in relation to the overall meaning that might be intended by the writer (*ibid.*).

According to Nowotny (1980: 78), the poem presents itself in a progressive structure "beginning with children taught about a saviour and moving on through their lives to death and to the redefinition of salvation". Each stanza represents a new development or redefinition of the salvation as being a notion. The general meaning of the poem develops itself throughout 'three' stages: the first, which extends from the first stanza up to the third, is related to the vanishing of the Saviour; the second, represented by the fourth stanza, is related to the expression of human compassion; and the third, represented by the fifth stanza, is related to the entry of sexual love (see, Birch, 1993:103).

It seems that the sense of the poem declares itself through a gradual development of the religious image related to the Saviour. This might represent itself as the stages of a child moving through adolescence, or the stages of religion, or "the social and cultural relations

involved in school, peer group activities, and adult awareness of social ritual and beauty" (ibid:104).

There might be a sort of parallelism between the *religious development* of the Saviour as a notion and the *structural development* of the nominal groups used throughout the poem: it has been noted so far that the structure of the nominal groups in the first three stanzas tends to be relatively simple, *three-element structure*, and this may match the simplicity of the child's representation of the Saviour. However, the fourth stanza represents a turning point in the structure of the nominal groups, it loses its simplicity and becomes more complex, *five-element structure*, and this coincides again with a new redefinition of the Saviour that remakes it in the adolescent's image by distorting the naïve simplicity of childhood to cope with the complexity and vagueness of human compassion. The fifth stanza reflects two kinds of climax: the thematic climax, and the nominal group structure climax. The structure of the nominal group reaches its utmost point of complexity, *eight-element structure*, and the notion of the Saviour as well is radically redefined by allowing sexual love to extend over everything, it is identified with a sort of complex release of sexual feelings which is powerful enough to set the individual free .

## 2. Conclusions

Though there is still a great deal unsaid about the linguistic potentialities of this poem, what has been said in this paper hopefully shows how some aspects of the

literary meaning in the poem can be described in terms of a particular linguistic feature. Nominal group structure, as a linguistic feature, proved useful in showing the way some key literary meanings in the poem are made. There are subtle shifts in the religious attitudes concerning the image of the Saviour, and these shifts are associated with changes in the functional structure of the nominal groups used throughout the poem. This stylistic use of the nominal group structure gives evidence for making an argument about the themes involved in the poem. The changeable functional structure of the nominal groups leads the researcher to give a sort of linguistic justification to the basic interpretation of the poem.

Nevertheless, it is evident that some functional elements in the nominal groups are heavily relied upon, such as the *Qualifier* which indicates by itself an interesting and rather independent range of complexity, and the *Epithet* which constitutes the hardcore of the most complex nominal group structures, while it diminishes in the simple ones. However, the analysis carried out in this paper is still far from being final since the meanings which literature conveys have a very elusive nature and would not give themselves completely to the methods of linguistic analysis.

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

Arnold, E., *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*.  
London: Routledge, 1985

Birch, D., *Language, Literature and Critical practice*. London and New York:  
Routledge, 1993

Carter, R., , *Language and Literature*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1984  
Fowler, R., *Essays on Style and Language*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul,  
1985

Halliday, M., 'Systemic Theory', in R. E. Asher (ed.), *Functional Descriptions:  
Theory in Practice*. London and New York: Pinter., p. 132-45, 1994.

Leech, G., and Short, M., *Style in Fiction*. London and New York: Longman,  
1981.

Martin, J., *Working with Functional Grammar*. London: Arnold, 1997.

Morley, G., *An Introduction to Systemic Grammar*. London: Macmillan, 1985.

Nowottny, W., *The Language Poets Use*. London: Athlone press, 1980.

Short, M., *Exploring the Language of Poems, Plays and Prose*. London and New  
York: Longman, 1996.

Spencer, J., *Linguistics and Style*. London: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Thomas, D., *The collected poems of Dylan Thomas*. London: New Directions,  
1991,P. 180.

Thompson, G., *Introducing Functional Grammar*. London: Hodder Headline  
Group, 2000.