

# Understanding Semantics through Stylistics: A Study on Mitch Albom's Fiction

Suganthi R. and Dhanalakshmi A.

## Abstract

Stylistics studies semantics of a work of art corresponding to the source language as it serves as a bridge between linguistics and literature. The oeuvre of Mitch Albom, an internationally best-selling American writer is studied in this paper and the focus is on his fiction in order to understand the unique style of his writing. There are many elements of stylistics and here in this paper analepsis, anaphora, prolepsis, aposiopesis, epizeuxis, extradiegesis and metadiegesis are scrutinised to highlight the intensity of his writing and thereby emphasising the stylistic elements required for an inspirational writer.

**Keywords:** Analepsis; Aposiopesis; Epizeuxis; Extradiegesis; Stylistics.

Stylistics refers to the study of formation of meaning in literature and it is done after a careful study of the language. It is a bridge that connects linguistics to literary studies. The uniqueness of a writer after studying the nuances in his style of writing is brought out. It gives the writer an opportunity to convey his idea in an interesting way for the readers to enjoy and cherish his works. Stylistics also provides a platform to analyse literary works in an objective way. Evaluative stylistics and discourse stylistics are employed in this paper to understand and interpret the fiction taken for study. Evaluative stylistics focusses on the style of the author allowing the critics to study the techniques the writer has implemented in his works to make the work of art an interesting one whereas discourse stylistics concentrates on how the author has used and endeared language by creating his work in a distinct way.

This paper analyses the oeuvre of Mitch Albom, and the focus is on his fiction alone to identify the style and individuality of the author. Mitch Al-

bom's *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* (2003), *For One More Day* (2006), *The Time Keeper* (2012), *The First Phone Call From Heaven* (2013), *The Magic Strings of Frankie Pesto* (2015) and *The Next Person You Meet in Heaven* (2018) are taken for this analysis. This renowned American author has sold over forty million copies of his books across the globe in forty-nine countries and has been translated into forty-five different languages. Mitch Albom is a multifaceted person who is a journalist, screenwriter, radio and television broadcaster, playwright, musician and a philanthropist. His non-fiction collection are also best sellers which makes him a widely read author.

Nina Nørgaard, Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics in the University of Southern Denmark, mentions in her book *Key Terms in Stylistics* (2010) that stylistics is often used by the metaphor 'tool box' of linguistics allowing critics to analyse texts in their source language. Some of the prominent stylistic tools found in Mitch Albom's fiction are analepsis, anaphora, prolepsis, aposiopesis, epizeuxis, extradiegesis and metadiegesis. This paper provides simple definitions for these tools and aims to analyse Mitch Albom's usage of them in his fictional work.

Analepsis is a term coined by Gerard Genette in his *Figures III* (1972) that is used to refer to a retrospective narration or a flashback episode that fills the gap between two or more events in a work of art which allows the readers to get a better understanding of the narration and the nature of the characters in the work of art despite the changes they underwent in the course of time. In the novel *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* (2003), the protagonist Eddie, at the age of 83, is portrayed as someone who limps as an aftermath of the war he was involved in. In spite of his deformity, his legs were proper and he had danced gracefully with his wife Marguerite in the past. The reason for his limp is introduced to the readers using analepsis. The author uses flashback episodes to narrate how Eddie lost full use of his leg while serving in the military. "He had not been right on his feet since the war. But back at the Stardust Band Shell with Marguerite - there Eddie had still been graceful." (Albom 12) Here analepsis is used to highlight about his limping and his graceful dance with Marguerite.

The five people who Eddie meets in heaven explain their role in his life only through retrospection, in other words analepsis. All these episodes are set in heaven, each one takes him back to the time a specific incident happened; showing the reader how it had happened in the past and why Eddie is the way he is now. Captain, the second person he meets in heaven, tells Eddie how he saved Eddie's life by sacrificing himself in the war-front. The Captain had shot Eddie's leg, all those years ago to save his life.

This was a devastating shock to Eddie as he had been regretting his limp till that day for how it crippled him, preventing him from pursuing his dreams. "I took your leg," the Captain said, quietly, "to save your life." Eddie let go and fell back exhausted. His arms ached. His head was spinning. For so many years he had been haunted by that one moment, that one mistake, when his whole life changed. (Albom, "The Five" 91)

Similarly, in the sequel to *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* (2003), *The Next Person You Meet in Heaven* (2018), the five people Annie meets in heaven express how their lives are connected, through retrospection, which is also set in Heaven. For example, Sameer, the first person Annie meets, shows her that he was the first person for whom the surgery of successfully reattaching the limb of a boy was performed. "I made history," he told Annie. *History?* "First successful full reattachment of a limb." (Albom 52, 53) He also revealed that he was the doctor who had performed a similar surgery on Annie when she met with an accident at the age of eight. "Suddenly, it all made sense, who Sameer was, why they were in this hospital. "You were my doctor," Annie whispered." (Albom 59)

Albom uses analepsis in *For One More Day* (2006) in order to explain Charlie Benetto the truth about his parents' divorce. The protagonist meets his deceased mother, Pauline Benetto, when he is unconscious and learns that his father Leonard Benetto had secretly had another family. "He finally admitted who she was, where they had met, what he'd been trying to do." (Albom 182) "But none of it mattered. It was over. Don't you see? I could have forgiven him almost anything against me. But that was a betrayal of you and your sister, too." (183). Charlie also understood the untiring efforts his mother had taken to raise her children, from the character Thelma who is one among the three people Charlie visits along with his mother on the day he gets to spend with his deceased mother. He understood something his mother had refused to divulge as a single parent. "We cleaned houses together, Charley," she said. "How do you think I put you kids through college?" (Albom, "For" 121) His mother's narration involves flashback of events from the past which gave answers to all the questions Charlie had in the past.

Flashback technique is also found in *The First Phone Call From Heaven* (2013) when Katherine Yellin was filled with nostalgia as she received a phone call from her deceased sister Diane who told her that Heaven is better than what they had dreamt. At that moment she felt the special bond they had always shared. This bond and the reason for Diane's death is explained through memories by telling the readers how they had a mu-

tual interest in everything and remained as twin sisters though Diane is elder to Katherine by two years. The Yellin sisters had a special bond, like tethered children scaling small-town life together. Only in health had they diverged. Diane had endured migraines, an irregular heartbeat, high blood pressure, and the sudden aneurysm that killed her at the too young age of forty six. Katherine was often described as “never sick a day in her life”.

**(Albom, “The First” 11)**

Mitch Albom also makes use of Anaphora, another stylistic technique, in his novels. Anaphora refers to the repetition of the same word at the beginning of successive sentences, clauses or verses. It is employed mainly to highlight emotional circumstances in prose and poems. Its purpose is to help readers understand the intensity of the emotional outburst of characters in a novel better.

In *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* (2003), when Eddie notices the altering colours of the sky he understood that something had happened to him as a result of the accident at the amusement park, he was afraid of the place he was in because it seemed to him as if he were travelling to a different place other than Earth. So he expresses his emotions by raising questions about the new place he was in and the eagerness to know if he had saved the girl who was standing behind a collapsing ride at Ruby Pier. “Where is my worry? Where is my pain?” (Albom 23) “Did I save her? Did she live?” (23) Here anaphora is used to express the emotions of Eddie. When several questions are asked by a character it refers to the use of *quaesitio*, which is explained in *A Dictionary of Stylistics* (2014) as a figure of speech that is used to denote the several questions a character raises continuously. This allows the readers to increase their curiosity in finding solutions along with the character.

In the next novel *For One More Day* (2006), anaphora is spotted when the protagonist Charlie was told to shove gravel onto his mother Pauline’s coffin. He expresses his feelings while holding the shovel. He had not been a proper son for her by not being true to her and for a long time, neglecting her love in order to seek his father’s attention and appreciation. He deemed himself unfit to do the final rites of his mother because of his overwhelming guilt. “It belonged to a son who didn’t lie to his mother. It belonged to a son whose last words to her were not in anger. It belonged to a son who hadn’t raced off to satisfy the latest whim of his distant old man,” (Albom 177) Anaphora, the repetition of utterances while express-

ing strong emotions is also seen in the lines "That son would have stayed that weekend, sleeping with his wife in the guest room, having Sunday brunch with the family. That son would have been there when his mother collapsed. That son might have saved her." (178)

In *The Time Keeper* (2012), the protagonist Dor, also known as Father Time, is punished to stay in a cave for 6000 years because he was the first person to invent time unaware of the word and its role in the life of humans. When he was imprisoned in the cave, he heard different voices of different people who mention time in their daily lives. In the cave when he hears the first voice that said "longer", he felt terrified and questioned why such a word had been uttered. "Longer." "Longer what?" (Albom 56). Gerard Genette's prolepsis is a term in *Figures III* (1972) that refers to a narration which points at an earlier point rather than referring incidents in its chronological order. Also known as "anticipation" it indicates "foreshadowing" and often connotes "foreboding". These are considered as subtle clues that make a reader anticipate a course of the narration to take on a specific path before hand. It also signifies the "flash-forward" technique employed by the author to bring the future events in the present.

The novel *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* (2003) opens with a sentence revealing that it is a story about the character Eddie and that he would die soon near the Freddy's Free Fall ride at Ruby Pier where he works. This gives the readers an idea regarding who the story is about and how it would unfold. "This is a story about a man named Eddie and it begins at the end, with Eddie dying in the sun." (Albom 1) Similarly anticipation is kindled in the line "It also had a big new ride called Freddy's Free Fall, and this would be were Eddie would be killed in an accident that would make newspapers around the state." (1,2)

The author also reveals the fact that Eddie after so many years is hearing something strange which also makes the readers understand that there is going to be a disaster soon due to some fault in a ride, at the Ruby Pier. "After all these years he could hear trouble, he said, in the spits and stutters and thrumming of the equipment." (Albom, "The Five" 2)

In the sequel *The Next Person You Meet in Heaven* (2018), there is a mention of a hot air balloon which Annie notices during her wedding and she fancies it. This foreshadows the disaster that would happen soon stemming from the hot air balloon. "As she turned to face her future husband, Annie glanced at a hot air balloon floating above the sunset. *How lovely*, she thought." (Albom 3) Unusual behaviour of a person also foreshadows

things such as “I know. It’s not like me. But I saw a balloon as we were saying our vows. Maybe it was a sign. The card says ‘sunrise trips’.” (20) Annie unusually forces Paulo her husband to take her for a balloon ride and her unusual demand ended in tragedy.

Anticipation is brought out in *The Time Keeper* (2012) while Sarah Lemon was waiting for Ethan on a Christmas night to give him his present. There was an “End of the World” gathering that night and in the cafeteria in which Sarah was waiting, they were playing a doomsday song. The lyrics of the song were so depressing that the lines were about to come true through the person she loved the most.

Why does the sun go on shining?

Why does the sea rush to shore?

Don’t they know - it’s the end of the world

‘Cause you don’t love me anymore? (Albom, “The Time” 143)

Albom has used prolepsis to stop the suffering of Dor who did not age a day for nearly 6000 years. The excerpt given below indicates that every human being in this world will stop ageing and one person who willingly wants to age will start to become old. This gives the readers a clue that Dor will not remain the same way for long. “Every person on the planet-including Grace, Lorraine, Victor and Sarah-will instantly stop aging. And one person will start.” (Albom, “The Time”144)

Aposiopesis as mentioned in *A Dictionary of Stylistics* (2014) is a Greek term meaning “silent”, is often used to indicate a sudden disruption in utterances in situations of extreme emotions. This gives an impression that the characters are unable to complete their sentences because of the extreme emotions they experience when they are in a quagmire. When Eddie’s afterlife journey begins in *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* (2003), he is afraid of the travel he is undertaking and a lot of questions cloud his mind, he is in a confused state which makes him utter incomplete questions. ““WHERE ...?” “Where ...?” “Where ...?”” ( Albom 22, 23)

Similarly in *The Next Person You Meet in Heaven* (2018), Annie meets the second person in Heaven. She sees an old woman, Annie trembles with fear and asks if she is her second person and her questions are not complete because of the fear and hesitation and also because she was not able to recognise the woman. ““Are you ...” The woman cocked her head. “... my second person?”” (Albom 72). When Charlie was unconscious in *For*

*One More Day* (2006), he saw his deceased mother and later they were in the kitchen where his mother was cooking breakfast for him, he was not able to digest the fact that his mother was there with him. When he tried to speak, he was not able to utter coherent sentences completely. ““You can’t be here ...,” I began. Then I stopped. I couldn’t get beyond that sentence.” (Albom 62)

In *The Time Keeper* (2012), Victor Delamonte who is very sick with a tumour had planned to do cryonics in order to preserve his body. He sent his wife away to a fund raiser so that he can move out of his house without any objection and he was pretty sure that his wife will not agree to his plan as she is orthodox. So he lies to his wife which actually becomes his last sentence to her. At that moment he was not able to complete the sentence and he utters the sentence again with hesitation. ““I’ll be ...” His voice trailed off. “What, sweetheart?” “Here. I’ll be here.”” (Albom 164)

In *The First Phone Call From Heaven* (2013), when Mark Ashton visited Sullivan Harding after his release from imprisonment, Mark felt sorry for Sully’s wife Giselle because Sully was not able to attend her funeral as he was in prison at the time. So when Mark felt sorry for Sully’s death, he was not able to complete his sentence. “Look. It’s awful. What happened with Giselle...” “Yeah.” (Albom 14)

In *The Magic Strings of Frankie Presto* (2015), Frankie Presto after hurting his fingers very badly by playing a fast note in a concert in Woodstock, decided to quit music and move to Waiheke Island, New Zealand with his family. When he was spending his days there, a band named Clever Yells comprising Eddie, Lyle and Cluck decided to visit him and get ideas to make their band popular. When they reached Frankie’s place, Eddie, Lyle and Cluck stammered to talk to him and their sentences were all incomplete because of the notion that they were not able to believe whether Frankie was listening to them.

“Actually, we’re from Texas ...”

“We’ve got a band ...”

“Sorry to bother you ...”

“This guy, Kevin, told us ...”

“He dropped us at the woods ...”

“We love your music ...” (Albom, “The Magic” 341)

Epizeuxis, popularly known as the 'cuckoo spell', was coined by George Puttenham in his *Arte of English Poesie* (1589) and it points at the repetition of words continuously without any intervention. It is often used to intensify the emotions and feelings of characters. Mitch Albom has used it to put the readers in the character's shoes to realise the feelings and emotions they go through.

In *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* (2003), Eddie instructs Dom to rescue the passengers and then directs him to release the hanging cart. Later he vented out his emotions by shouting to Dominguez, his co-worker, when he realises the problem was actually with the cable and that if the cart of Freddy's Free Fall ride was released, the cart will snap and fall to the ground, collapsing on the crowd standing below, putting everyone in great danger. "NO, NO, NO, DON'T!" (Albom 19). Similarly when Eddie meets the five year old Thala, the last person Eddie meets in Heaven, he learns from her that he was responsible for the death of Thala as she was inside the hat which Eddie burnt during his service in the Philippines' war. He felt a terror engulfing him and expressed his guilt. "'I killed you, I KILLED YOU,'" then a whispered "forgive me,'" (Albom, "The Five" 201)

Mitch Albom in his *For One More Day* (2006) had used epizeuxis to enumerate the love for music in the protagonist's mother Pauline Benetto. She sings along with her favourite song "This Could Be the Start of Something Big" whenever it is played in the radio. She will be elated with energy and becomes so fervid that she played it every night. Whenever she played, she would come to Charlie Benetto, tickle him and tell "big boy, big boy, bigboybigboybigboy" (Albom 46)

In *The Time Keeper* (2012), Dor was witnessing a tradition in the December festival in a Spanish town. People one after the other were hitting a mannequin of an old man with hourglass as a representation of Father Time. People celebrated sending the old year and welcoming the new one after hitting the mannequin. "Ooyay! Ooyay!" (Albom 93) Among the crowd, a young boy lifted the bat to hit the mannequin but before doing it he turned to his mother for an approval and his mother who was not interested hesitatingly waved at the boy agreeing to him. "'OK..., OK...,'" his mother yelled, waving." (Albom 93)

In *The Magic Strings of Frankie Presto* (2015), Hampton Belgrave is a seventy-seven year old mechanic who will be of great support to Frankie Presto during his teenage when he was searching for opportunities to showcase his talent as a guitarist. Hampton will take Frankie to an audition that

is held at Grand Ole Opry, Nashville, but they will not be able to reach there on time and they will also end up reaching the wrong entrance because of which Frankie will miss his audition. Hampton unable to bear his guilt will have a sudden heart attack while he was driving Frankie home. That time unable to express his emotions Frankie will panic and utter the words "Oh no, no, no, no," (Albom 242) as he sees Hampton collapse on the steering wheel.

In *The Next Person You Meet in Heaven* (2018), Annie and Paulo will argue with love on the day of their wedding regarding a hot balloon ride the next day. Paulo wanted to spend time with Annie whereas Annie unusually insisted Paulo to go for the ride. "No-no-no-" "Yes-yes-yes-" (Albom 20)

Diegesis employed by Mitch Albom involves two varieties. One is the technique of extradiegesis which refers to the use of third person narration involving an external character apart from the characters in the book. This character refers to someone who is aware of all the stories that make the plot though the characters in the fiction are unaware of it at times. In all his fiction he has used third person narration, for example, in *The Magic Strings of Frankie Presto* (2015), he has used Music as the narrator to narrate the entire story of the protagonist Francisco de Asís Pascual Presto often called as Frankie Presto. The other one is the metadiegesis which indicates a story within a story, a second degree narration which constitutes to the framework. Mitch Albom has used this stylistic element profoundly to bring out the stories of various characters involved connecting them to the protagonist.

In *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* (2003), the story of the people Eddie meets in Heaven such as the story of the Blue Man, the Captain, Ruby and Thala are examples of metadiegesis. Similarly, in *The Next Person You Meet in Heaven* (2018), the story of the people Annie meets in Heaven such as the story of Sameer, Cleo and Eddie are again examples of metadiegesis. All these stories explain how the lives of Eddie and Annie have intersected with them and their purpose on Earth.

In *For One More Day* (2006), the story of Charlie Benetto's mother and stories of characters such as Rose, Thelma and the Italian woman who is Charlie's dad's second wife are examples of metadiegesis. The truth behind his familial bonds have been narrated through the technique of metadiegesis when Charlie becomes unconscious and gets to spend a day with his deceased mother.

In *The Time Keeper* (2012), stories of Sarah Lemon and Victor Delamonte constitute the reasons behind the importance of time in their life. Sarah wants less time because of the shame she faced and Victor wants more time because of his illness. Their stories are examples of metadiegesis as they are connected to the story of Father Time, the person who was sent to rescue them from the wrong decisions they were about to make.

Understanding the semantic aspects of Mitch Albom's works through an in-depth analysis of stylistics helps bring out multiple layers of meaning in his words, enhancing its effects and understandability. In this sense stylistics extends beyond its technicality and seeps into semantics. Mitch Albom's words have had resounding meaning and connection with many readers across borders. Mitch's style of writing is phenomenal in more ways than one, especially for his choice of themes, character's narration and meaning conveyed in his books. The same effect could not have been rendered had Albom not used these stylistic techniques. One of the major elements that sets Albom's work apart is his unique narration and character formation. The different elements of stylistics as explained in this paper, flashback episodes, emotional outburst, anticipation and much more, aid in understanding the stylistic elements required for an inspirational writer to make the readers aspire to achieve the purpose of their existence.

### Works Cited:

- Albom, Mitch. *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*. Sphere, 2004.
- . *For One More Day*. Hyperion, 2006.
- . *The Time Keeper*. Sphere, 2013.
- . *The First Phone Call from Heaven*. Sphere, 2014.
- . *The Magic Strings of Frankie Presto*. Sphere, 2016.
- . *The Next Person You Meet in Heaven*. Sphere, 2018.
- . "About "Mitch Albom"." *Mitch Albom*, 2008-21, [www.mitchalbom.com/about/](http://www.mitchalbom.com/about/). Accessed 2 Mar. 2021.
- Nordquist, Richard. "Stylistics and Elements of Style in Literature". *ThoughtCo.*, 16 July 2019, [www.thoughtco.com/stylistics-language-studies-1692000](http://www.thoughtco.com/stylistics-language-studies-1692000). Accessed 25 Apr. 2021.
- Nørgaard, Nina, Rocio Montoro and Beatrix Busse. *Key Terms in Stylistics*. Continuum, 2010.
- Wales, Katie. *A Dictionary of Stylistics*. 1990. Routledge, 2014. Print.