

Stylistic Analysis of The Auto-Biography of Bill Clinton “*My Life*”

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Abstract:

This research paper deals with the stylistic analysis of the preface of the well known autobiography of Bill Clinton “My Life”. Preface means ‘an introduction to a book, especially one that explains author’s aims.’ (Oxford 8th edition: 2010). The term preface is also known as foreword, introduction, prologue, preamble and translator’s preface. Each of them means a short introduction at the beginning of a book. For the purpose of this research paper, it is collectively termed as the Prefatory Matters.

Keywords: Preface, prologue, preamble, stylistic analysis, prefatory

Reading such a preface is to get a bird’s eye view of the book to which it belongs. It has given a great pleasure to the researcher to read preface of the world famous book. It is said that even the market value of a book mainly depends upon a preface apart from its content and the blurb. It is interesting to study the way the preface is constructed. It certainly is not written in a casual way though the tone may be reader-friendly. A preface often indicates the stance of the writer of a book and the way he/she looks at the book. If it is looked upon from the point of view of stylistics, a reader can derive a huge amount of pleasure that makes him/her get ready to set out to go through the book. Despite the variety of the prefaces, the main purpose of it is to tell the reader something about the book and make him/her understand the significance of the given book. In view of this significance, it is indeed worth doing research about it from the viewpoint of stylistics—especially because a preface is often neglected by the readers in general, despite the fact that the preface does matter.

The prefatory matters intend to lay bear the threads of tapestry that follows in the book. Here, an attempt is made to define the chief categories of prefatory matters, though it is very difficult to clarify the thin boundaries that separate them. Being prefatory in nature it also

discusses the plan and purpose of the research. The discussion is aimed at justifying the hypothesis of the research and will briefly elucidate the methodology that will be followed throughout the entire work.

It is believed that the preface is a mirror to the respective book. This is more or less true. However, there are many types of prefatory matters like prologue, preamble, preface, foreword, introduction to an edition etc. Obviously they are likely to have different function specified to each of them. General reading often overlooks these prefaces as if they do not matter. If that were the case there would be no need of them but they are there, in various forms as mentioned above - not only that, they have a function. The researcher has analyzed their function(s) as well as their significance to the book.

The instrument developed for the analysis is as follows:

- a) Information about the book,
- b) Content of the preface,
- c) Stylistic analysis of the structural design of the preface.

The structural design has been investigated into with the help of parallels and contrasts, deviations, foregrounding, cohesion and coherence. The analysis has been restricted to a preface as a form of literary art.

MY LIFE BY BILL CLINTON PROLOGUE

When I was a young man just out of law school and eager to get on with my life, on a whim I briefly put aside my reading preference for fiction and history and bought one of those how-to books: *How to Get Control of Your Time and Your Life*, by Alan Lakein. The book's main point was the necessity of listing short-, medium-, and long-term life goals, then categorizing them in order of their importance, with the A group being the most important, the B group next, and the C the last, then listing under each goal specific activities designed to achieve them. I still have that paperback book, now almost thirty years old. And I'm sure I have that old list somewhere buried in my papers, though I can't find it. However, I do remember the A list. I wanted to be a good man, have a good marriage and children, have good friends, make a successful political life, and write a great book.

Whether I'm a good man is, of course, for God to judge. I know that I am not as good as my strongest supporters believe or as I hope to become, nor as bad as my

harshest critics assert. I have been graced beyond measure by my family life with Hillary and Chelsea. Like all families' lives, ours is not perfect, but it has been wonderful. Its flaws, as the entire world knows, are mostly mine, and its continuing promise is grounded in their love. No person I know ever had more or better friends. Indeed, a strong case can be made that I rose to the presidency on the shoulders of my personal friends, the now legendary FOBs.

My life in politics was a joy. I loved campaigns and I loved governing. I always tried to keep things moving in the right directions, to give more people a chance to live their dreams, to lift people's spirits, and to bring them together. That's the way I kept score.

As for the great book, who knows? It sure is a good story.

MY LIFE BY BILL CLINTON ANALYSIS OF PROLOGUE

Title of the Book	: <i>'My Life'</i>
Name of the Writer	: Bill Clinton
Publisher	: Random House
Year of Publication	: 2004
How long is the book?	: 1060 pages
Title of the Preface	: Prologue
Who's written the Preface	: The writer himself
Length of the Preface	: One page, four paragraphs, twenty-seven lines

Information about the book:

My Life by Bill Clinton is the strikingly candid portrait of a global leader who decided early in life to devote his intellectual and political gifts, and his extraordinary capacity for hard work, to serve the people of the nation.

It shows us the progress of a remarkable American, who, through his own enormous energies and efforts, made the unlikely journey from Hope, Arkansas, to the White House a journey fueled by an impassioned interest in the political process which manifested itself at every stage of his life: in college, working as an intern for Senator William Fulbright; at Oxford, becoming part of the Vietnam War protest movement; at

Yale Law School, campaigning on the grassroots level for Democratic candidates; back in Arkansas, running for Congress, attorney general, and governor.

It is the life of a great national and international figure, revealed with all his talents and contradictions, told openly, directly, in his own completely recognizable voice. A unique book by a unique American.

Contents of the preface:

1. The writer first tells us how he happened to buy a book 'How to get Control of Your Time and Your life.' By Alan Lakein.
2. Then he tells us about the subject matter of the book which was
 - i) The necessity of listing life goals,
 - ii) Putting them in order of importance and
 - iii) Listing specific activities to achieve each of them
3. The writer then gives the list of his life goals he decides to achieve as follows:
'I wanted'
 - i. to be a good man,
 - ii. have a good marriage and children,
 - iii. have good friends,
 - iv. make a successful political life, and
 - v. write a great book.
4. The prologue ends with the assurance that the book would read like a story.

Stylistic analysis of the structural design:

The first paragraph presents the circumstances in which the writer brought a book 'How to Get Control of Your Time and Your Life.'

The first sentence begins with when-clause about the young Bill in just three phrases, 'a young man,' 'just out of school' and 'eager to get on with my life'. The three expressions complement each other to form a live picture of Bill.

The second half of the clause ... on a whim I briefly put aside my reading preference for fiction and history and bought one of those how to books... a parallel and contrast.

It is natural for a young Bill to do something 'on a whim' (=a sudden wish to do or to have something especially when it is something unusual or unnecessary.) 'The youth' and 'a sudden desire to do something' go hand-in-hand.

‘Fiction’ (= a type of literature that describes imaginary people and events, not real ones) and ‘history’ (= a set of facts about the past life of a person or place) are in contrast with each other. It indicates that Bill would be in the dreamy world of imagination and at the same time down to earth, facing the realities of life. The clause continues with the connector ‘and’: (I) bought one of those how-to books...’ the verb ‘bought’ conveys his activity of going for a book ‘on purpose’ which is again the continuation of his previous deliberate action of ‘putting aside’ his reading preferences. ‘To buy something’ and ‘to put aside something’ are action verbs and form a parallel. At this point of time in his life, he goes for a how-to book which is in contrast with his usual choice of imaginary or factual books. As Bill is ready to enter into life so it is natural that he would need to go for something that would teach him how to go about life. As a result, he buys, ‘How to Get Control of Your Time and Your Life.’ The book is not about ‘how to control’ but ‘how to get control,’ suggesting that he has to acquire a skill of controlling. ‘Your time’ and ‘your life’ are interlinked because ‘the time of your life is important, life time’ – time is life and life is time and to have control over both is sometimes a young man need to know and that is what the young Bill is trying to do. All this – the young man, out of law school, eager to get on with life, keeping aside (though briefly) his whim and buying a how-to book is in just one sentence of four lines with which the preface opens, which also shows the stride in which Bill is going to take his life (‘to take something in your stride = to accept and deal with something difficult without letting it worry you too much.) the when-clause ends with the name of the book Bill buys. Against the whole background of young life, the title of the book ‘How to get...’ is foregrounded and it is this book that is going to be a turning point in Bill’s life. In fact the book ‘My Life’ issues from his act of buying the book. It is the source of his inspiration. The very first sentence offers us the glimpses of what the book is going to be like.

The second sentence is also of four lines which tells us about the how- to book. The contents of the book are given in brief: ‘It is about the necessity of listing short-medium and long term life goals, categorizing them in order of their importance and listing under each goal specific activities designed to achieve them.’ The presentation in the book and in the preface is logical– listing goals, categorizing them and giving activities to realize them. The purpose of all this is not to introduce the book ‘How to Get Control’... to readers but how that book mattered in Bill’s life. Therefore, he does not talk more about the book and probably, pretends ‘I still have that paperback book, now

almost thirty years old' and indirectly suggests his age or stage of life at which he is presently. He then pretends that the list he made of goals at that time must be somewhere buried but he cannot find it. The air of reality he creates by pretending is boosted its highest point – 'However, I do remember the A list'. Then gives the list of his goals:

I wanted to be a good man,
Have a good marriage and children,
Have good friends,
Make a successful political life,
And write a great book.

Even during the young age, which is dreamy and sensitive Bill's priority list of life goals is admirable. The list has three good's, one successful and one great.

To be a good human being is the basic requirement; to be 'successful' and 'great' have no meaning without one being good. Bill, as a young man, knew the essence of human life. It shows his positive attitude to life. Life is enjoyable if one's marriage is successful and children are good and there are good friends around. Then one can make one's political life, or whatever kind of life, successful. In fact with a successful marriage, good children and good friends one can always command the course of life and make it successful. After the basic needs are fulfilled one feels satisfied with life and then can always look for higher kind of joys, like writing a great book. The last sentence offers practical philosophy of life in a logical way. Thus, the first paragraph begins with a great book 'How to Get Control...' and ends with Bill's determination 'to write a great book.'

The readers know that Bill has already produced a book 'My Life' that has fulfilled his desire to write a great book, and as he says at the end, it is the readers who are to decide whether it is so.

The next paragraph is a check-list of his priority life goals i.e. whether they have been achieved or not. Regarding his being a good man, he leaves it to god to judge. 'Whether I'm a good man is, of course, for God to judge, which implies it is only God who can judge whether I'm a good person or not. This also implies that it is none of the business of anyone except God to pass a judgement on what he is. God is the best judge not the world in this respect.

He further supports his view about himself by saying I am not 'as good as my strongest supporters believe,' nor 'as bad as my harshest critics assert' where 'strongest' is contrasted to 'harshest' and 'supporters' to 'critics', and 'believe' to 'assert'. The

contrasting items contribute to 'good' verses 'bad'. The long and short of it is, Bill is neither good nor bad but something between the two, i.e. their ideal contribution. His family consists of Mrs Hillary and Chelsea, his daughter, which we know. The highly personal issue of his family life is put in a passive voice, 'I have been graced'... (=I'm really honoured) that too 'beyond measure'... (=beyond imagination). The family life is made to stand out by the mention of Hillary and Chelsea. He then compares his family life with that of others and says 'ours is not perfect but it has been wonderful – the juxtaposition of 'not perfect' and 'wonderful' makes us think that life that is not perfect can be wonderful or the other way round – the life that is wonderful may not be perfect. The writer here keeps a low profile to show that his life is as good as the life of any ordinary American. This, what with others, so is with me – attitude shows that he is one of the common people. This is a technique of establishing a rapport with the readers and at the same time indicating that his ordinary family life is different. He accepts the flaws of his life as his own: 'Its flaws, as all the world know, are mostly mine...' Bill's confession to his flaws (mostly probably his extramarital love affairs) shows his sincerity and honesty- the qualities that form the foundation of any autobiography which readers can discern in the preface itself. In spite of the flaws his family life may have. Bill asserts 'its continuing promise is grounded in their love'. Readers have to note that for Bill, it is love that is valuable for a family to be happy. The next life-goal on the check-list is 'to have good friends.' He says, 'No person I know ever had more or better friends.' Next to his family life, he talks about his friendship. The sentence structure is in complete negation – 'No person... ever had...' implying 'There is hardly any other person who had so many friends'. 'No person... at the beginning of sentence makes it forceful. 'More or better' suggests the (large) amount of them as well as their quality. The positive structure 'I have a large number of quality friends' would not have expressed his feelings about his friends as powerfully as 'No other...'. He also says, 'I rose to the presidency on the shoulder of my personal friends.' It's great pleasure for readers to appreciate Bill's humility when he unhesitatingly gives the credit of his rising to presidency to his friends' shoulders.

The paragraph, in fact the whole preface is an ideal combination of careful sentence construction with meticulously chosen words that keep on emitting what he wants to convey in the most accurate way that makes the readers get completely involved in the preface.

The happiness of his life continues to the next paragraph that talks about his political life when he says. 'My life in politics was a 'joy'; indicating that he enjoys his

political life through and through. Various dimensions of his life are given in a precise way just in one sentence with all the verbs showing activities (action verbs).

I loved campaigns and
I loved governing,
I always tried to keep things moving in the right direction,
To give more people a chance to live their dreams,
To lift people's spirits and
To bring them together.

The sentence reads like a poem and it is an ideal summary of what a politician should really do. He loved campaigns, i.e., 'a series of actions intended to achieve a particular results relating to politics or business or a social improvement' (Longman), and governing, i.e. 'having the power and authority to control an organization, country etc. (Longman). He 'tried' (and that too) 'always' 'to keep things moving' (= to make things happen) that too 'in the right direction'. He loved 'to give' (not to some people but 'more people a chance (= opportunity) 'to live their dreams' (= to live of their dreams and make them to bring their dreams into practice. He loved 'to lift people's spirits' (= make people happier) and 'to bring people together' (= to make them come together or become united, especially in order to try together to achieve something.)

The choice of verbs and phrases show how his political life was full of activities for helping out others and not to take advantage of his position in politics. All his political activities were directed to achieve something for others. The sentence creates a stainless picture of a generous politician who was engaged in extending a helping hand to the needy.

The paragraph begins with a topic sentence, 'My life in politics was a joy', and after listing activities for the welfare of others, the paragraph ends with, 'That's the way I kept score.'

The preface comes to an end with: 'As for the great book, who knows? It sure is a good story?'

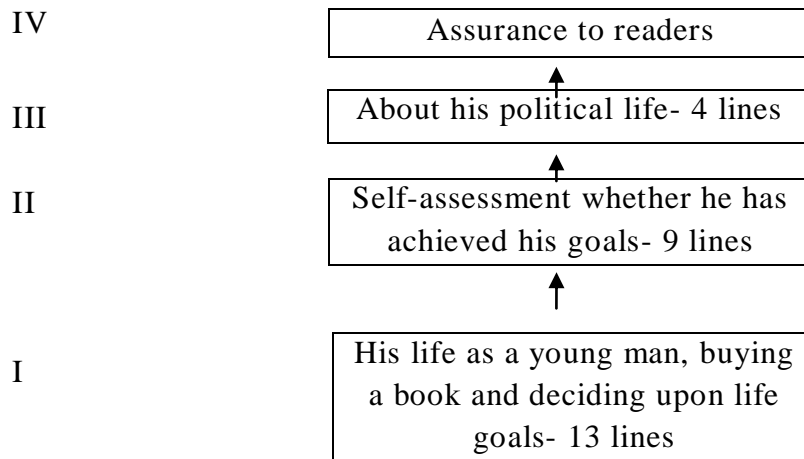
The final life-goal that is to be assessed is writing a great book. Since he talks about it at the end of the preface, he uses the phrase 'as for the great book,' that is, now let me talk about writing a great book. It is certainly more than easy to decide upon the greatness of a book. That is why he puts a question in the second half of the sentence, 'who knows?' to suggest that at least he cannot know it or decide whether the present book '*My Life*' is great or not. Ultimately, it is to be decided by the readers. Thus,

indirectly he hits the ball in the reader's court and remains neutral. But before he ends the preface, he assumes the readers, 'It sure is a good story'. This is a promise the readers would be eager to have since the reader, whatever their age or stage of life, would undoubtedly love to read a story and it would be still more enjoyable if it is 'a good story'. The writer does not say 'the book is exciting and you will definitely welcome it. He only says 'It sure is a story', which increases the reader's eagerness. The assurance is soothing because the reader is not going to read something complicated, boring or tiring but a story which is always interesting. So the book, that is to follow, is not 'My Life' but 'The story of My Life'. The human interest in a story is perennial. Right from the beginning of human civilization till date, with all the advancement of science and technology there would be hardly any person who would like to miss out on a story. The writer knows this psychology of the child in every human being and confidently tells the reader's, 'It sure is a good story'.

The preface consists of four paragraphs if last line is looked upon as a paragraph. All the paragraphs are neatly woven together. The first paragraph gives rise to the second and the third paragraph results from the second. Each paragraph is related to what has gone before and what is to come next. The principles of cohesion and coherence are well taken care of.

The first paragraph talks about the starting point in the writer's life – a how-to book that proves to be a turning point. It also marks the end of his fiction and history reading mind-set and the beginning of something serious – a change from whams and whims (therefore irregularities) to something systematic – listing the goals, prioritizing them, giving a list of activities to achieve the goals, and finally deciding upon what is to be done in life.

As a corollary to this the second paragraph is his honest assessment about his achievements and examining whether the life goals he decided on have been fulfilled or not. The third paragraph is closely related to the previous one since it deals with his political life. The structure of the preface can be represented something like as follows:



The flow of thought (ideational rhythm) is in the ascending order. The cycle of ideas begins with the last part of the first paragraph 'I wanted to write a great book' and comes to full circle with 'It sure is a good story'.

The preface can be summarised in a sentence – 'I wanted to write a great book, and will; have it is! (It may not be a great book but certainly a good story).

Every word, sentence and thought contributes to make this impact – 'It's a good story, do read it'.

The preface does not speak a word about book but tells the reader in a suggestive way what the matter of 'My Life' could be. That he does not speak about his book speaks volumes about how the book is going to be like. Art lies in concealing the art. The writer intentionally holds back the information about the book or what is there in the book. His holding back of information is artistically motivated. This leaves the probable readers to their imagination and converts them into definite readers who cannot escape but read the book.

He has already established a rapport with the readers by telling them the episode of buying a book and confessing the 'flaw' in his family life as his ('as all the world knows it') and finally taking the readers into confidence – 'It sure is a good story'.

Each paragraph begins with a topic sentence and at the end gets interlinked to the following one. If the first and the last sentence of each paragraph are put one after another the reader can understand what the writer wants to say:

I a) when I was a young man...,

- b) I wanted to write a great book
- II a) whether I'm a good man- is of course, for God to judge
b) ... I rose to presidency on the shoulder of my personal friends
- III a) My life in politics was a joy.
b) That's the way I kept score
- IV a) As for the great book, who knows?
b) It sure is a good story.

The preface does not tell us anything about the book, though the writer himself is a preface writer, the reader enjoys the preface and feels like reading the book.

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