

PAPER

## NATIONAL-CULTURAL SPECIFICITY OF EPITHETS IN ENGLISH LITERARY TEXTS

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### Abstract

This article explores the national-cultural specificity of epithets in English literary texts from a stylistic and pragmatic perspective. While epithets are traditionally regarded as expressive modifiers, this study argues that they function as culturally embedded linguistic units reflecting national worldview, value systems, and socio-historical context. Drawing on functional stylistics, discourse analysis, and pragmatic theory, the research analyzes selected English literary works to identify culturally marked epithets and examine their evaluative, emotional, and ideological functions. The findings demonstrate that English literary epithets encode cultural attitudes toward nature, individualism, morality, and social hierarchy. The study contributes to stylistics and discourse studies by highlighting the role of epithets as carriers of national-cultural meaning.

**Key words:** epithet, national-cultural specificity, literary discourse, stylistics, pragmatics, evaluation, English literature.

### Introduction

Language in literary discourse is never culturally neutral. Lexical choices, particularly expressive modifiers such as epithets, reflect deeply rooted cultural values and collective worldviews. Traditionally, epithets have been defined as descriptive attributes that add emotional or evaluative coloring to a noun (Wales, 2011).

However, modern stylistics and discourse analysis emphasize that linguistic forms in fiction are closely tied to cultural and ideological contexts (Simpson, 2004).

English literature, shaped by historical developments such as the Renaissance, Romanticism, Victorian morality, and modernist experimentation, presents a rich field for examining culturally marked epithets. These

Compiled on: March 17, 2026.

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expressive units often reveal national attitudes toward nature, individuality, morality, and social relations.

Functional stylistics argues that lexical selection is rarely accidental; it encodes attitude and evaluative stance (Leech & Short, 2007). Furthermore, pragmatics highlights the role of context and shared cultural knowledge in meaning construction (Yule, 1996). From this perspective, epithets should be analyzed not only as stylistic devices but also as culturally embedded pragmatic tools.

The purpose of this study is to identify and analyze the national-cultural specificity of epithets in English literary texts and to determine how they reflect cultural values and ideological patterns.

### Research questions:

How do epithets in English literary texts reflect national-cultural values? What evaluative and pragmatic functions do culturally marked epithets perform?

How do epithets contribute to the construction of cultural identity in literary discourse

### Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach based on functional stylistics and discourse analysis. The analysis focuses on selected prose texts from 19th- and early 20th-century English literature, a period characterized by strong cultural identity formation.

The theoretical framework integrates:

Functional stylistics (Leech & Short, 2007)

Discourse stylistics (Simpson, 2004)

Pragmatic theory (Yule, 1996)

Narrative discourse analysis (Toolan, 2009)

Epithets were identified according to structural and semantic criteria. Particular attention was given to those reflecting:

Cultural values

Moral evaluation

Social hierarchy

Nature perception

National identity markers

Contextual analysis was used to determine pragmatic meaning and cultural implication. As relevance theory suggests, interpretation depends

on inferential processes grounded in shared knowledge (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). Therefore, cultural background was considered a key factor in analysis.

### Results

The analysis revealed four major patterns of national-cultural specificity in English literary epithets.

#### 1. Nature-Oriented Epithets and Romantic Heritage

English literature, especially Romantic and Victorian prose, frequently employs epithets that idealize or moralize nature. Expressions such as “gentle breeze,” “lonely moor,” or “restless sea” reflect a cultural tendency to personify and emotionally align with the natural world. This pattern corresponds to the Romantic tradition, where nature functions as a moral and spiritual force. Stylistically, such epithets do more than describe; they encode a worldview in which nature mirrors human emotion (Simpson, 2004).

#### 2. Individualism and Character Evaluation

English literary epithets often foreground individual traits, reinforcing cultural emphasis on personal identity and moral character. Phrases such as “proud gentleman,” “independent spirit,” or “ambitious young man” illustrate a cultural orientation toward individual agency and social mobility. According to Leech and Short (2007), characterization in fiction relies heavily on evaluative lexical choices. These epithets implicitly communicate social values such as dignity, restraint, ambition, and self-control.

#### 3. Social Hierarchy and Moral Coding

Victorian and Edwardian texts frequently use epithets that signal social status or moral judgment: “respectable family,” “humble servant,” “decadent aristocrat.” Such expressions reveal cultural preoccupation with class distinctions and moral reputation. Narrative discourse analysis shows that lexical markers contribute to ideological positioning (Toolan, 2009). In this context, epithets function as compact indicators of social identity.

#### 4. Emotional Restraint and Understatement

English literary discourse is often characterized by emotional moderation. Epithets such as “quiet sorrow,” “silent dignity,” or “reserved affection”

reflect cultural norms of restraint.

Pragmatically, understatement operates as a culturally shaped communicative strategy (Yule, 1996). These epithets encode emotion indirectly, relying on shared cultural understanding rather than overt intensity.

## Discussion

The findings confirm that epithets in English literary texts function as culturally embedded evaluative units. They reflect national attitudes toward nature, individuality, morality, and social order.

From a pragmatic perspective, epithets activate culturally shared assumptions that guide interpretation (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). Readers infer deeper meanings based on socio-cultural knowledge. Thus, epithets serve as inferential triggers rather than mere descriptive adjectives. Functional stylistics supports this interpretation by demonstrating that lexical selection shapes ideological perspective (Leech & Short, 2007). English literary epithets frequently encode subtle moral evaluation and social positioning.

Moreover, discourse stylistics suggests that narrative meaning emerges through patterns of lexical repetition and evaluative framing (Simpson, 2004). Culturally marked epithets contribute to thematic cohesion and identity construction.

Therefore, the national-cultural specificity of epithets lies in their ability to condense collective values into compact expressive forms.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that epithets in English literary texts possess clear national-cultural specificity. They function not merely as decorative stylistic devices but as:

Carriers of cultural worldview

Markers of moral and social evaluation

Indicators of ideological positioning

Pragmatic cues guiding interpretation

English literary epithets reflect Romantic reverence for nature, cultural emphasis on individualism, social hierarchy awareness, and emotional restraint.

By situating epithets within stylistic and

pragmatic frameworks, this research contributes to discourse studies and cultural linguistics. Future research may compare English epithets with those of other linguistic traditions to reveal cross-cultural differences in evaluative strategies.

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