

Constructing moral rejection: A stylistic analysis of
Tayeb Salih's *A Handful of Dates*

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Abstract

This article examines how Tayeb Salih's *A Handful of Dates* constructs a young narrator's changing view of his grandfather. Existing studies have discussed the story through children's psychological response, initiation, piety, and formalist interpretation, but less attention has been given to how several stylistic features work together across the narrative to produce the movement from admiration to rejection. Using qualitative close reading, the study draws on four dimensions of prose stylistics: narrative viewpoint, lexical-semantic patterning, agency and transitivity, and foregrounding. The analysis traces the narrator's initial idealization of his grandfather, the shift produced by the revelation concerning Masood's land, the material representation of the harvest and debt, the foregrounded image of "the heart of the palm" (Salih, 1999, p. 26), and the final rejection of the dates. The findings show that moral rejection develops cumulatively: changes in viewpoint are reinforced by patterns of possession, material action, and bodily response. The final vomiting of the dates therefore functions as a foregrounded embodied response to a moral re-evaluation already prepared by the narrative. The study contributes an integrated stylistic account of how moral perception is constructed through textual form.

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INTRODUCTION

Tayeb Salih's *A Handful of Dates* presents a child narrator whose understanding of his grandfather changes as he encounters the social and economic relations surrounding him. At the beginning, the grandfather is the centre of the boy's affection, imitation, and trust. The narrator accompanies him, assists with his religious routines, and imagines growing into a man like him. The grandfather's appearance is recalled in admiring language: his beard is "as white as cotton-wool" (Salih, 1999, p. 24), and the narrator states, "I loved him" (Salih, 1999, p. 24). This opening establishes an idealized image of adulthood and authority from which the rest of the story departs.

That image is unsettled when the boy asks about Masood, a neighbor whom the grandfather describes as "an indolent man" (Salih, 1999, p. 24). The conversation turns to land, and the grandfather reveals that "two-thirds of it is now mine" (Salih, 1999, p. 25). The boy is surprised because he had assumed that the fields had always belonged to his grandfather. His response is not an abstract moral argument but a change in feeling: he experiences "fear" and "pity" and wishes that his grandfather would not acquire the remaining land (Salih, 1999, p. 25). The narrative therefore makes moral re-evaluation a process of perception. The boy does not receive a complete explanation of the social order; he gradually discovers that a familiar landscape has another history and another value.

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This shift has already attracted scholarly attention. Dewi (2017) places *A Handful of Dates* within initiation fiction and emphasizes the child's focalized experience of the adult world, particularly in relation to piety and injustice. Recent stylistic research also demonstrates that formal choices in consciousness and discourse presentation can shape the interpretation of narrative viewpoint (Grisot et al., 2020). Ardani (2021) approaches the story through psychoanalysis and children's unconsciousness, highlighting the significance of the child's response to adult conduct. Most importantly for the present study's novelty positioning, Mehiri and Hoadjli (2017) explicitly demonstrate the value of a formalist approach to *A Handful of Dates*. Their work establishes that the story can be examined through textual form rather than content alone. Recent scholarship on Tayeb Salih also continues to examine the linguistic and stylistic dimensions of his fiction (Mahmutović, 2022). This article does not therefore claim to provide the first formal or stylistic reading. Instead, it asks a narrower question: how do several stylistic dimensions interact across the narrative to construct the boy's movement from admiration to rejection?

The question is significant because the story's moral force is not delivered through a direct authorial statement. The same grandfather whom the boy initially admires is later associated, in the boy's developing perception, with changing land ownership, debt, and control over the harvest. The fields first appear as "the arena for my dreams and my playground" (Salih, 1999, p. 25) but the grandfather describes them through possession and acquisition. During the harvest, the dates are gathered, weighed, divided, and taken; Masood remains in a position of economic dependence; and the narrator's attention increasingly turns towards him. The boy then reflects on "the heart of the palm" (Salih, 1999, p. 26) and on the possibility that living things experience "joy and suffering" (Salih, 1999, p. 27). Finally, after hearing Masood's distress and the grandfather's reminder that he is "still fifty pounds in debt," the boy runs away, says, "I hated him," and "spewed up the dates" he has eaten (Salih, 1999).

This sequence suggests that the final action should not be treated as an isolated emotional outburst. Its force depends on the accumulation of

changes that precede it. Narrative viewpoint is important because the story restricts the reader's access to events through the boy's changing knowledge. Lexical-semantic patterning is important because the meaning of the land and the dates changes as the boy moves from childhood play towards an awareness of property and obligation. Agency and transitivity are important because actions of owning, buying, gathering, taking, and remaining in debt make relations of control and affectedness visible. Foregrounding is important because certain expressions and actions, especially "the heart of the palm" (Salih, 1999, p. 26) and the final bodily response, receive unusual prominence within the narrative sequence. Moral evaluation is treated here as an interpretive outcome of these patterns rather than as a fifth stylistic category. Recent cognitive-stylistic research also shows that formal textual choices can contribute to the construction of moral meaning in narratives involving child perspectives (Muhammad, 2022). The article therefore keeps interpretation accountable to form: each larger claim about moral change is anchored in a describable textual movement, the discussion does not treat interpretation as a substitute for textual evidence.

The theoretical basis is primarily Leech and Short's (2007) account of prose style, supplemented by work on narrative viewpoint (Dancygier, 2005; Ikeo, 2014, 2016), transitivity and agency (Nuttall, 2019), foregrounding (van Peer, 2007), and moral interpretation in stylistics (Cook, 2021). Literary stylistics connects linguistic description with the interpretation of how textual choices shape meaning and evaluation (Leech & Short, 2007; Woldemariam, 2022). These approaches are used in integrated close reading rather than as separate quantitative procedures, consistent with recent discussions of stylistics as a method that links systematic textual observation with interpretive claims (Alaghbari, 2023). Contemporary stylistics increasingly combines close linguistic analysis with broader interpretive questions while maintaining attention to textual evidence (O'Halloran, 2023). The analysis is also attentive to the limits of inference. It does not claim to recover Salih's intentions or to establish what all readers must feel. It describes how the narrative

makes the boy's changed evaluation increasingly intelligible from within his developing experience.

The article therefore contributes a focused account of moral re-evaluation as a stylistically constructed process. Its originality lies not in discovering that the boy changes his view of his grandfather—a point established in previous scholarship—but in showing how viewpoint, lexical-semantic patterning, agency and transitivity, and foregrounded embodied action form a connected progression from identification to distance. The study asks four questions: (1) How does narrative viewpoint construct the boy's initial admiration and enable its re-evaluation? (2) How do lexical, semantic, and grammatical patterns represent changing relations of authority, possession, and vulnerability? (3) How does the representation of agency contribute to the boy's developing understanding of the relationship between his grandfather and Masood? (4) How does the final rejection of the dates function as a foregrounded expression of the boy's changed moral position?

This article argues that the narrator's movement from admiration to moral rejection is constructed cumulatively through the interaction of narrative viewpoint, lexical-semantic patterning, agency and transitivity, and foregrounding. Rather than presenting rejection as a sudden emotional response, the narrative progressively reconfigures the grandfather, the land, and the dates through the boy's changing perception, culminating in the embodied rejection of the dates at the story's close.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative stylistic close-reading design. The primary data are the English version of Tayeb Salih's *A Handful of Dates* used in the present study. The text is treated as the object of analysis, and examples are selected because they participate in the narrator's changing perception of his grandfather, his developing awareness of Masood's position, or the final rejection of the dates. The analysis is interpretive but text-centred: claims are linked to identifiable lexical, grammatical, semantic, narrative, and foregrounding patterns rather than to external biographical assumptions about Salih.

The analytical framework combines four dimensions. First, narrative viewpoint refers to the way the first-person narrator's knowledge, perception, and evaluation organize the presentation of events. Attention is given to evaluative description, perception, reported awareness, and moments when previously accepted assumptions are revised. This draws on Leech and Short (2007) and on stylistic approaches that treat viewpoint as a linguistic and cognitive organization of perspective (Dancygier, 2005; Ikeo, 2014, 2016).

Second, lexical-semantic patterning refers to recurring or contrasting areas of meaning. The analysis concentrates on religion and authority; land and possession; debt and economic obligation; harvesting and material distribution; and affection, fear, pity, pain, and rejection. The aim is not to count words mechanically but to examine how related lexical choices accumulate significance within the narrative. Third, agency and transitivity concern the representation of who acts, controls, possesses, transfers, or is affected. Nuttall (2019) is used cautiously as a basis for considering how recurring transitivity patterns may contribute to construals of agency and control; the present study does not infer moral responsibility from individual clauses in isolation.

Fourth, foregrounding refers to textual or narrative prominence produced by contrast, repetition, deviation, position, or sustained attention. Recent work has also revisited foregrounding as a concept that has developed alongside cognitive and linguistic approaches to stylistics (Tevdoradze, 2023). Following van Peer (2007) and Meniailo (2020), the analysis considers how particular images become salient. In *A Handful of Dates*, "the heart of the palm" (Salih, 1999, p. 26) interrupts the practical sequence of harvesting and becomes an object of reflection, while the final vomiting of the dates gains prominence from its position at the narrative conclusion and its contrast with the boy's earlier acceptance of the fruit.

The procedure follows the story's progression. The opening is examined for the grandfather's initial construction as an admired authority figure. The conversation about Masood and the land is then analyzed for the shift in viewpoint and the emergence of possession and acquisition as semantic and grammatical patterns.

The harvest is examined for material action, distribution, and debt. The palm passage is analyzed for foregrounding and the development of sensitivity to suffering. Finally, the ending is analyzed for the convergence of viewpoint, agency, semantic recontextualization, and embodied response. Within each stage, the analysis moves from description to interpretation: a textual feature is first identified, its local function is explained, and its contribution to the developing narrative evaluated. Recent literary stylistic studies continue to apply foregrounding to explain how patterned textual features acquire interpretive prominence (Ahmad et al., 2024). This procedure helps keep the discussion evidence-led rather than impressionistic. Moral evaluation remains an interpretive concern throughout: it describes the changing attitude made available by the text, not a moral verdict imposed by the researcher.

The study has two limitations. First, it analyses one short story in an English version, so some effects may depend on translation; this is particularly relevant to lexical patterning, metaphor, and clause structure. Second, it does not include empirical reader-response data; therefore, statements are made about textual affordances and narrative construction rather than universal reader reactions (Grisot et al., 2020). These limits are consistent with the study's purpose as close stylistic reading. A further practical implication is that the article's strongest claims should remain proportional to its evidence: the study demonstrates a pattern in one narrative, not a general law of Salih's fiction or of literary responses to moral conflict.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Viewpoint and the initial construction of admiration

The opening establishes the grandfather through the boy's admiration rather than through independent authorial description. The narrator remembers being taken wherever his grandfather went and recalls his religious routines in detail. His grandfather's "white" beard, exceptional height, and the direct statement "I loved him" present him as physically impressive, morally authoritative, and emotionally secure. The boy also imagines growing up to be like him. Identification is

therefore built into viewpoint from the beginning: the grandfather is not merely admired; he provides the model through which the boy initially understands adult identity. The narrative does not ask the reader to compare this portrait with an external account at first; instead, the reader is positioned close to the child's current understanding. That closeness makes the later revision more consequential because it changes the status of someone who had functioned as a stable point of reference.

This matters because the story's later conflict is a revaluation of a familiar figure, not the discovery of a completely new character. When the boy learns about Masood's land, the grandfather does not announce that he has changed. The boy's access to information has changed. The narrative consequently shifts from a mode of imitation towards a mode of observation and evaluation. Dewi's (2017) emphasis on the child's focalized position is relevant here, but the present analysis specifies the textual progression through which that focalization changes: admiration is followed by surprise, fear, pity, attention to Masood, physical distress, and finally rejection.

One useful sign of this transition is the contrast between the boy's earlier passivity and later independent attention. At first, his actions are oriented towards the grandfather: he anticipates his wishes, helps with prayer, and imagines becoming like him. Later, he notices what grandfather's authority means for another person. The central stylistic movement is therefore a movement in alignment. The grandfather initially dominates the narrator's emotional field; Masood gradually enters that field as a figure requiring attention and sympathy.

Lexical-semantic patterning: from playground to property

The conversation about the land condenses the change in perception into a contrast between semantic frames. The narrator describes the familiar landscape as "the arena for my dreams and my playground." (Salih, 1999, p. 25). The vocabulary is experiential and imaginative. The grandfather's language is different: the land "belonged to Masood," "two-thirds of it is now mine," and he expects to have "bought the remaining

third" (Salih, 1999, p. 25). The physical place has not changed, but its social meaning has.

The contrast between "playground" and "mine" is especially important because it marks a change from use to ownership. For the child, the land is valuable because it enables play and dreams; for the grandfather, it is valuable as property. The possessive "mine" places the grandfather in the position of present control, while the future-oriented "shall have bought" (Salih, 1999, p. 25) represents acquisition as an ongoing project. The past tense "belonged" further places Masood's former ownership beside the grandfather's current possession. The boy consequently discovers that what he took to be permanent is historically contingent.

The semantic shift produces an effective response. The boy feels fear and pity and wishes that his grandfather would not acquire the remaining land. His evaluation therefore follows his reinterpretation of the landscape. This is consistent with a stylistic account of viewpoint in which new information changes the mental construal of an already familiar situation (Dancygier, 2005). The story does not need a narrator's explicit statement that the grandfather is unjust; the boy's reaction indicates that the lexical language of possession has changed the meaning of the grandfather for him.

Agency and transitivity in the harvest and debt sequence

The economic relationship becomes more visible when the narrative moves from conversation to action. The grandfather's account already contains a sequence of possessions and acquisitions: land belonged to Masood; part of it is now the grandfather's; the remaining part may be bought. The harvest then turns those relations into material processes. Dates are gathered, collected into mounds, weighed, and poured into sacks. The economic structure is represented as a sequence of things being done with land and produce.

The distribution of the harvest is especially revealing. The narrator reports that one man "took ten" (Salih, 1999, p. 28), while others "took five" (Salih, 1999, p. 28), and the grandfather also "took five" (Salih, 1999, p. 28). The repetition is stylistically plain, yet it creates a pattern of acquisition. The narrator then says that he is

"Understanding nothing" (Salih, 1999, p. 28) and turns his attention to Masood. The sentence marks a gap between seeing and knowing: the child observes the material distribution before he fully understands its meaning.

The grandfather's statement, "You're still fifty pounds in debt to me" (Salih, 1999, p. 28), intensifies this pattern. The word "still" indicates that the obligation predates the immediate scene. The text places the debt reminder immediately after the distribution of sacks, but the analysis should not overstate the evidence by declaring that each sack taken is mechanically equivalent to a debt payment. The stronger stylistic point is juxtaposition: ownership, taking, and debt are brought together in the boy's field of perception.

Nuttall's (2019) discussion of transitivity and agency supports attention to these recurring participant roles. The grandfather is repeatedly represented as a participant who owns, intends to buy, takes, and demands recognition of an outstanding obligation. Masood appears increasingly as the person whose property and economic circumstances are acted upon. The pattern does not independently prove a moral judgment, but it makes asymmetry of control more perceptible. At the same time, the narrator's own agency develops. He moves from following grandfather to watching, questioning, approaching Masood, running away, and finally rejecting the dates. Agency therefore operates at two connected levels: it represents the adult economic relation and charts the child's increasing independence from the grandfather.

"The heart of the palm": foregrounding and the development of sensitivity

The harvest scene also contains a shift from economic action to reflection. When a warning is given not to cut "the heart of the palm" (Salih, 1999, p. 26), the narrator pauses over the phrase and imagines the tree as something with feeling. He remembers that palm trees, "like humans, experience joy and suffering," and describes the palm as having "a heart that throbbed" (Salih, 1999, p. 27). The lexical field of the body and emotion is inserted into an agricultural context. This interruption is important because the narrator's attention is no longer organized only by the adults' practical purposes. The harvesting activity

continues, but his consciousness temporarily reorganizes it around the possibility of injury and suffering.

This passage is foregrounded because it interrupts the practical rhythm of harvesting and receives sustained narrative attention. Van Peer (2007) identifies foregrounding as a way of accounting for the prominence of textual features, while Meniailo (2020) similarly emphasizes the role of foregrounded features in directing interpretive attention. Here, the phrase “heart of the palm” acquires importance because the boy reinterprets it through a human semantic frame. The significance of the phrase is therefore produced through contextual salience rather than unusual vocabulary alone (Tevdoradze, 2023). The palm becomes a possible object of suffering, and the boy’s sensitivity extends beyond what the adults treat as routine work.

The passage should not be reduced to an allegory in which the palm is simply a symbol for Masood. The text does not state equivalence. A more cautious interpretation is that the image trains the narrator’s attention towards vulnerability. Immediately afterward, his gaze is drawn towards Masood, and the later representation of Masood’s distress gives that sensitivity to a human object. The formal significance lies in the sequence: practical action is interrupted by an image of feeling; the boy reflects on suffering; and his attention becomes increasingly aligned with the figure who appears most affected by the harvest. The movement is also consistent with the study’s treatment of foregrounding as contextual salience. What becomes prominent is not merely a rare phrase but a phrase that changes the narrator’s mode of noticing. The palm is made significant because the boy stops treating it as agricultural material and begins to construe it as vulnerable life.

From observation to embodied rejection

The narrator’s attention to Masood becomes progressively more intimate. He says, “I found myself for some reason watching Masood” (Salih, 1999, p. 26), and later, “I felt myself drawing close to Masood” (Salih, 1999, p. 26). The phrasing presents the movement as something that happens to the narrator rather than as a fully planned decision. His attention has shifted away from

grandfather and towards the person whose vulnerability he has begun to perceive.

The shift culminates in sensory and bodily language. Masood approaches slowly, and the narrator reaches his garment. He hears a sound from Masood’s throat “like the rasping of a lamb being slaughtered” (Salih, 1999, p. 28) and experiences “a sharp sensation of pain” (Salih, 1999, p. 28) in his chest. The story therefore moves through a chain of embodied perception: drawing close, reaching, hearing, and feeling pain. The narrator’s moral response is increasingly physical before he can formulate it conceptually. The body thus becomes another site of viewpoint: what the boy cannot explain analytically is registered as sensation and movement. This continuity between perception and action helps connect the harvest scene to the ending rather than treating the final response as an abrupt change of subject.

The ending makes the accumulated change explicit. The narrator runs away, says, “I felt at that moment that I hated him” (Salih, 1999, p. 28), and then, “without knowing why” (Salih, 1999, p. 28), puts his finger into his throat and “spewed up the dates” he has eaten (Salih, 1999, p. 28). The exact action matters: he vomits the dates; he does not throw them away. The final response is consequently best described as foregrounded embodied action. It is not a conventional speech act because rejection is communicated primarily through bodily behavior.

The dates acquire their final significance through recontextualization. Earlier, the grandfather gave the boy a fistful of dates and the boy ate them. Later, the same kind of object has become connected, in the boy’s experience, with the harvest, possession, division, debt, and Masood’s distress. The text does not require a fixed symbolic equation in which the dates “mean” exploitation. Rather, their narrative meaning changes because the boy’s understanding of the circumstances behind them has changed. The bodily expulsion reverses his earlier acceptance and gives visible form to the moral distance he has developed from the grandfather. This reversal is especially effective because the object rejected at the end is ordinary and familiar. The force of the ending therefore depends less on the physical object itself than on the network of associations the narrative has built around it. The same dates that

could earlier be consumed without reflection are now experienced as unacceptable. The change belongs to the narrator's consciousness, but the text registers it through the altered function of a recurring material object.

The final scene therefore brings the four stylistic dimensions together. Viewpoint has changed because the boy now sees his grandfather through knowledge of Masood's vulnerability. Lexical-semantic patterning has shifted the landscape and the dates from childhood familiarity towards property and obligation. Agency and transitivity have made control visible through owning, buying, taking, and remaining in debt. Foregrounding has given special prominence to suffering and finally to the bodily act that expresses rejection. The result is a cumulative construction: the boy first identifies, then questions, then notices, feels, and finally acts against the position he once admired. The sequence also clarifies why "moral rejection" is an appropriate analytical outcome. The narrator's rejection is morally charged because it follows a reorganization of social perception, but the article remains stylistic because it explains that reorganization through the text's language, distribution of attention, participant roles, and embodied imagery. In this sense, moral meaning is not added to the stylistic analysis from outside; it emerges as the interpretive consequence of the patterns already described.

CONCLUSION

This study has argued that *A Handful of Dates* constructs the narrator's moral rejection of his grandfather through a cumulative interaction of stylistic features rather than through a single explicit judgment. Narrative viewpoint establishes the grandfather as an admired authority figure and later allows that figure to be reinterpreted as the boy learns more about Masood. The shift is therefore a change in perception before it becomes a change in action.

Lexical-semantic patterning contributes to the revaluation by changing the meaning of familiar objects and spaces. The narrator's "playground" becomes property; "belonged" is set against "mine"; and the dates move from childhood food to material signs embedded in harvesting, distribution, and debt. Agency and

transitivity make the economic relationship concrete by repeatedly representing possession, acquisition, taking, and obligation. These patterns do not establish an objective moral verdict, but they make unequal control increasingly visible within the boy's developing field of awareness.

Foregrounding becomes particularly important in the second half of the story. "The heart of the palm" (Salih, 1999, p. 26) interrupts the harvesting sequence and develops the narrator's sensitivity to suffering. Masood's later distress intensifies that sensitivity until it becomes bodily pain in the narrator himself. The final vomiting of the dates then functions as a foregrounded embodied response: the boy cannot yet provide an adult explanation of the social relations he has witnessed, but his body expresses his refusal to continue identifying with the grandfather in the same way.

The study's contribution is deliberately modest. Ardani (2021) and Dewi (2017) already establish important psychological, initiatory, focalizing, and moral dimensions of the story, while Mehiri and Hoadjli (2017) provide a formalist precedent. This article extends this scholarship by integrating viewpoint, lexical-semantic patterning, agency and transitivity, and foregrounding into a single account of the movement from admiration to rejection. The argument is therefore about textual construction rather than the discovery of a previously unknown theme. This positioning also makes the article more transparent about the limits of originality: it offers a different analytical synthesis and a more explicit account of progression, not a claim that earlier scholars overlooked the story's moral or formal dimensions altogether. Two limitations should be acknowledged. The study analyses one short story and one English version, so translation may affect some lexical or stylistic effects. It also does not collect reader-response data and consequently makes no empirical claim about uniform reader reactions. Future work could compare the Arabic original and English translations, examine stylistic patterns across Salih's fiction, or combine close reading with corpus or reader-response methods. Such extensions would test whether the integrated pattern identified here recurs beyond this single narrative and would distinguish translation-

specific effects from features of Salih's original prose.

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