



Schema Disruption and Text-World Shifts in Ocean Vuong's 'Aubade with Burning City': A Cognitive Stylistic Analysis

¹Denisse Sales, ¹Rhian Laxamana, ¹Jana Marie Miralles, ¹Meryll Isidro,

¹Dwayne Dabu, ¹Abegail Guanzon, ¹*Christian Loid Valenzuela

¹College of Education, Arts and Sciences, Gordon College, Olongapo City, Philippines

*Corresponding Author e-mail: valenzuela.christianloid@gmail.com

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Abstract

Ocean Vuong's *Aubade with Burning City* has been widely recognized for its fragmented imagery and exploration of love, war, and trauma. However, existing literary studies have largely emphasized its imagery and thematic concerns while giving limited attention to how its stylistic features shape meaning through schema disruption and text-world construction. This study employs cognitive stylistic analysis, drawing on Schema Theory and Text World Theory, to examine how the poem's imagery, syntax, lexical choices, and shifts in point of view contribute to meaning construction. Using qualitative textual analysis, the study identifies linguistic patterns that theoretically prompt readers to activate familiar schemas of intimacy, celebration, safety, rescue, and religious faith. These schemas are subsequently disrupted by contrasting images of violence, fragmentation, and war, requiring continual reinterpretation. The analysis further demonstrates how shifts between intimate domestic scenes and conflict-ridden environments construct multiple text-worlds that foreground the tension among love, war, and trauma. These findings provide a theoretically grounded explanation of how the poem's stylistic features may guide readers' cognitive processing and interpretation, rather than representing empirically observed reader responses. The study contributes to cognitive stylistic scholarship by illustrating the interaction between linguistic form and cognitive meaning construction in contemporary poetry. It also offers pedagogical value for literature instruction by demonstrating how cognitive stylistic analysis can support students' interpretive skills and provides a foundation for future empirical research examining readers' cognitive responses to literary texts.

Keywords: Cognitive stylistics; Schema theory; Text-world theory; *Aubade with burning city*; Ocean vuong

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INTRODUCTION

Ocean Vuong's *Aubade with Burning City* is a contemporary poem that juxtaposes intimacy and violence through fragmented syntax, shifting perspectives, and contrasting imagery. Set against the backdrop of the Fall of Saigon during the Vietnam War, the poem interweaves a love scene with scenes of destruction while incorporating intertextual references to Irving Berlin's *White Christmas*. These historical and cultural references create a layered poetic structure in which private affection unfolds alongside public catastrophe. Rather than presenting war as a chronological narrative, the poem relies on fragmented language, abrupt perspective shifts, and symbolic contrasts that require readers to actively construct meaning. Consequently, the poem presents an analytical challenge because its stylistic features not only represent the themes of love, war, and trauma but also shape the cognitive processes through which these themes are interpreted.

Recent developments in cognitive stylistics have emphasized that literary interpretation emerges from the interaction between textual features and readers' cognitive processes. Mureşanu and Grunwald (2024) explain that cognitive stylistics investigates how linguistic cues activate mental frameworks through concepts such as Schema Theory, foregrounding, and conceptual mapping. Likewise, Burke (2023) argues that narrative deviation and stylistic patterning guide readers' interpretive processes, while Stockwell (2019) and Giovanelli et al. (2021) highlight the role of imagery, embodied cognition, and background knowledge in constructing literary meaning. Gavins and Steen (2003) and Gibbons (2023) further explain that readers continually modify their mental representations as textual perspectives, temporal relations, and spatial settings shift throughout a literary work. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that meaning is dynamically constructed through readers' interaction with stylistic features rather than being passively extracted from the text.

Despite these theoretical developments, research applying cognitive stylistic analysis to trauma literature remains limited, particularly in poetry (Wallis, 2022). Previous studies on *Aubade with Burning City* have primarily examined imagery, symbolism, metaphors, and thematic representations of war, memory, and identity. Hasan (2025), for example, focused on the poem's objective correlatives and symbolic imagery, whereas other literary analyses have largely remained descriptive, emphasizing thematic interpretation without examining how linguistic structures guide cognitive meaning construction. Moreover, relatively little attention has been given to fragmented syntax, shifts in narrative perspective, and the interaction between readers' background knowledge and textual structures. Consequently, the cognitive mechanisms through which the poem constructs experiences of love, war, and trauma remain insufficiently explored.

This gap suggests the need for an analytical framework capable of explaining not only *what* the poem represents but also *how* readers are theoretically guided to construct meaning. The present study addresses this need by integrating Schema Theory and Text World Theory within a cognitive stylistic analysis. Schema Theory explains how readers activate prior knowledge structures—such as intimacy, celebration, safety, rescue, and religious faith—while interpreting textual cues and subsequently revise these schemas when confronted with contradictory linguistic patterns (Al-Sahlanı & Mubarak, 2023). Text World Theory complements this perspective by explaining how readers mentally construct and continuously reorganize multiple discourse worlds as the poem shifts between domestic intimacy, public violence, memory, and traumatic experience. Together, these complementary frameworks provide insights that extend beyond conventional thematic or stylistic analysis by explaining the cognitive processes underlying literary interpretation.

Building on this theoretical foundation, this study contributes to cognitive stylistic scholarship by demonstrating how fragmented syntax, imagery, lexical choices, and shifts in perspective interact to construct the themes of love, war, and trauma in *Aubade with Burning City*. Rather than treating stylistic features as isolated literary devices, the study examines how they function collectively to activate, disrupt, and reconstruct readers' cognitive frameworks during the interpretation of the poem. The findings also contribute to literature pedagogy by illustrating how cognitive stylistic analysis may support deeper literary interpretation and provide a theoretical basis for future empirical investigations of readers' cognitive responses to literary texts.

Accordingly, this study seeks to examine how Ocean Vuong's *Aubade with Burning City* constructs meaning through cognitive stylistic analysis by investigating the interaction between its linguistic features and readers' cognitive processes. Specifically, the study explores the stylistic patterns of imagery, syntax, lexical choices, and shifts in

perspective that characterize the poem; examines how these stylistic patterns theoretically activate and disrupt readers' schemas during meaning construction; analyzes how shifts in text-worlds contribute to the cognitive representation of love, war, and trauma; and explains how the integration of Schema Theory and Text World Theory provides a deeper understanding of the poem's cognitive meaning construction beyond conventional thematic and stylistic analyses. Through this approach, the study addresses an existing gap in scholarship by demonstrating how linguistic form functions as a cognitive mechanism that shapes literary interpretation.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a theory-guided qualitative textual analysis using cognitive stylistic analysis as its primary analytical approach. Unlike empirical reader-response research, cognitive stylistic analysis does not investigate actual readers but examines how linguistic features may theoretically guide cognitive meaning construction through established cognitive theories. The study therefore interprets the poem using Schema Theory and Text World Theory, recognizing that any discussion of readers' cognitive processes represents theoretically inferred interpretive effects rather than empirically observed reader behavior.

Qualitative textual analysis involves the systematic examination of written texts to identify linguistic, stylistic, and thematic patterns that contribute to meaning construction. Within cognitive stylistics, textual form and cognitive interpretation are viewed as mutually related, as stylistic features activate mental representations that support literary interpretation (Stockwell, 2019). Accordingly, this study analyzes lexical choices, imagery, syntax, deixis, narrative perspective, irony, symbolism, and textual fragmentation to explain how these linguistic features may theoretically prompt schema activation, schema disruption, and text-world construction in Ocean Vuong's *Aubade with Burning City*.

Data Source

The primary data source was the complete text of Ocean Vuong's poem *Aubade with Burning City*, examined in its officially published version. The poem consists of two major stanzas characterized by fragmented syntax, rapid perspective shifts, contrasting imagery, and intertextual references that collectively construct the themes of love, war, and trauma. Throughout the analysis, textual evidence is cited using stanza and line numbers to ensure accurate reference and transparency. Because the study is purely textual, no human participants, research instruments, or experimental procedures were involved. The poem itself served as the sole unit of analysis.

Data Collection

Data collection followed a systematic close-reading procedure consisting of several stages. First, the poem was read repeatedly to develop familiarity with its historical context, linguistic structure, thematic progression, and stylistic organization. During subsequent readings, the researchers annotated lexical choices, imagery, syntax, deixis, narrative perspective, irony, symbolism, and instances of textual fragmentation.

Second, excerpts that demonstrated prominent stylistic features were identified and recorded together with their corresponding stanza and line numbers. These excerpts were then organized according to recurring thematic categories associated with love, war, and trauma. Finally, annotated excerpts were compiled into an analytical record that documented the linguistic feature identified, its textual location, its cognitive stylistic function, and its corresponding interpretation using Schema Theory and Text World

Theory. This procedure established an audit trail that enhanced the transparency and consistency of the analytical process.

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded through five interconnected stages. The first stage involved linguistic description, in which lexical choices, imagery, syntax, deixis, narrative perspective, irony, symbolism, and fragmentation were systematically identified through close reading. The second stage involved cognitive coding using Schema Theory and Text World Theory. Linguistic features were examined for their potential to activate existing schemas related to intimacy, celebration, safety, rescue, conflict, religion, and survival. Schema disruption was identified whenever subsequent textual cues contradicted or restructured these previously activated cognitive expectations. Text-world analysis identified world-building elements such as participants, locations, temporal references, and events, together with world switches created through changes in setting, perspective, or discourse. Modal worlds were likewise identified when the poem represented imagined, desired, remembered, or unrealized situations.

The third stage involved comparative analysis, in which coded excerpts were compared across the poem to identify recurring stylistic and cognitive patterns that contributed to the representation of love, war, and trauma. The fourth stage consisted of thematic synthesis, where linguistic findings were integrated with cognitive interpretations to explain how stylistic features theoretically support meaning construction throughout the poem. Finally, the interpretations were reviewed for internal consistency by comparing coding decisions across excerpts and ensuring that all analytical claims were directly supported by textual evidence and established principles of cognitive stylistics. Throughout the analysis, interpretations were treated as theoretically inferred cognitive effects rather than empirical observations of actual readers.

Analytical Framework

The study adopted cognitive stylistic analysis as its analytical framework by integrating Schema Theory and Text World Theory. Cognitive stylistics explains literary interpretation as the interaction between textual structures and cognitive processes rather than as meaning residing solely within the text. Previous scholarship (Stockwell, 2019; Burke, 2023; Giovanelli, 2022; Hidalgo-Downing, 2022) demonstrates that readers theoretically construct meaning by activating prior knowledge, generating inferences, and mentally simulating textual worlds while processing stylistic features.

Within this study, Schema Theory explains how linguistic cues activate readers' existing knowledge structures, including schemas of intimacy, celebration, safety, rescue, conflict, and religious belief. Schema disruption occurs when subsequent stylistic features contradict these expectations, prompting cognitive reinterpretation. Complementing this perspective, Text World Theory explains how readers construct multiple mental representations from textual information. World-building elements such as participants, objects, temporal references, locations, and events establish the primary discourse world, whereas shifts in narrative perspective, imagery, and discourse create world switches and modal worlds that contribute to the poem's representation of love, war, and trauma.

The integration of these complementary theories enables the study to explain not only the stylistic characteristics of *Aubade with Burning City* but also the cognitive mechanisms through which those stylistic patterns theoretically guide literary interpretation. Consequently, the analysis extends beyond conventional thematic

description by demonstrating how fragmented language, contrasting imagery, and shifting perspectives jointly contribute to cognitive meaning construction.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings in relation to the research questions by examining how *Aubade with Burning City* constructs the interconnected themes of love, war, and trauma through linguistic and stylistic patterns. Across the selected excerpts, a dominant pattern emerges: the poem initially constructs domestic and romantic text-worlds associated with intimacy, safety, and interpersonal connection, but these configurations are repeatedly disrupted by images of military violence and destruction. Through the combined application of Schema Theory and Text World Theory, the analysis demonstrates how Vuong creates competing text-worlds in which familiar expectations of affection and security are destabilized by the realities of war.

Representative excerpts were purposively selected based on their ability to demonstrate recurring linguistic patterns and cognitive-stylistic processes throughout the poem. The selected passages represent significant instances of schema activation, schema disruption, and text-world shifting; however, they are not treated as evidence of actual reader cognition. Rather, they are analyzed as textual structures that provide interpretive affordances through which meanings of intimacy, violence, and trauma are constructed.

Textual Construction of Love in Aubade with Burning City

The textual patterns identified in the excerpts demonstrate that love in *Aubade with Burning City* is constructed through a continuous interaction between intimacy and disruption. The opening domestic images activate schemas associated with affection, care, and interpersonal closeness through gestures of offering, touching, and responding. In the line “He fills a teacup with champagne, brings it to her lips,” (Stanza 2, Lines 7-9) the concrete actions of filling and bringing establish a domestic text-world organized around intimacy and shared experience (Gibbons & Whiteley, 2021). The symbolic association of champagne with celebration reinforces this construction of an affectionate environment, consistent with studies that identify champagne as a cultural marker of celebration and positive social experience (Aron, 2024).

However, the passage does not present intimacy as entirely stable. The imperative “Open,” followed by the declarative “She opens,” (Stanza 2, Lines 7-9) creates a patterned interaction between command and response. This syntactic arrangement reflects how interpersonal relationships may contain both affection and subtle forms of relational positioning, as patterns of declarative and imperative structures can influence representations of agency and control within discourse (Baldwin, 1992). Thus, the linguistic construction of love involves not only emotional closeness but also the negotiation of roles between participants.

The romantic text-world established through tactile imagery is further reinforced in the phrase “His hand running the hem of her white dress” (Stanza 2, Lines 15-16). The tactile description and symbolic association of white with innocence and purity contribute to a schema of tenderness and emotional security. Previous psychological research on symbolic associations has similarly identified links between white imagery, purity, and moral evaluation (Sherman & Clore, 2009). Within the poem, however, this intimate configuration remains vulnerable because it is embedded within a broader wartime text-world.

This disruption becomes evident in the line “Don’t worry, he says, as the first bomb brightens their faces” (Stanza 2, Lines 48–50). The juxtaposition of reassurance with violent imagery produces a semantic contradiction: the phrase “brightens their faces” typically evokes positive transformation, yet the noun “bomb” introduces destruction and threat. This collision between conflicting meanings reflects the

disruption of established schemas, where familiar expectations of safety and affection are challenged by representations of violence (Van Moort et al., 2020). From the perspective of Text World Theory, the poem constructs an initial domestic world through participants, objects, and interpersonal actions before introducing competing world-builders associated with military conflict. Similar applications of Text World Theory demonstrate that literary texts construct layered mental representations through linguistic cues that establish participants, settings, and events (Shah et. al, 2024 ; Harvey, 2023). In *Aubade with Burning City*, the movement between domestic and wartime configurations produces an unstable text-world in which intimacy and violence exist simultaneously. Therefore, love is not represented as an isolated emotional refuge but as a fragile construct continually reshaped by the intrusion of historical trauma.

Table 1. Textual Construction of Love

Excerpt	Linguistic Feature	Activated Schema	Source of Disruption	Text-World Configuration	Interpretive Significance
“He fills a teacup with champagne, brings it to her lips / ‘Open,’ he says. / She opens.” (Stanza 2, Lines 7–9)	Concrete action verbs; tactile imagery; imperative-declarative clause pattern	Domestic intimacy schema involving care, affection, and interpersonal closeness	The commanding structure of “Open” introduces subtle asymmetry within an apparently affectionate interaction	Constructs an intimate domestic world through participants, physical gestures, and shared sensory experience	The passage establishes love as embodied through acts of giving and receiving while simultaneously foregrounding the relational dynamics embedded within communication
“His hand running the hem of her white dress” (Stanza 2, Lines 15–16)	Tactile imagery; symbolic imagery; participial construction	Romantic intimacy schema associated with tenderness, purity, and emotional attachment	The later appearance of violent imagery destabilizes the security associated with domestic affection	Builds a temporary world of romantic closeness before it becomes embedded within the larger wartime world	The image positions intimacy as vulnerable because personal connection exists within an environment shaped by political instability
“Don’t worry, he says, as the first bomb brightens their faces, / my brothers have won the war and tomorrow...” (Stanza 2, Lines 48–50)	Irony; juxtaposition; semantic contrast between reassurance and destruction	Safety and reassurance schema	The phrase “first bomb brightens their faces” transforms an image of light into one associated with violence	Creates a blended text-world where domestic interaction and military destruction occur simultaneously	The collision between affectionate reassurance and violent imagery presents love as unstable rather than separate from historical trauma

Textual Construction of War in Aubade with Burning City

The findings reveal that war in *Aubade with Burning City* is constructed through a series of linguistic disruptions that transform ordinary spaces, objects, and experiences into representations of violence and instability. Rather than presenting war as a distant historical occurrence, the poem constructs it as an immediate and immersive presence

through sensory imagery, auditory patterns, and conflicting semantic associations. The selected excerpts demonstrate a recurring movement from familiar schemas of safety, order, and domesticity toward disrupted configurations shaped by fear, destruction, and displacement.

The line “The radio saying run run run” (Stanza 2, Line 42) establishes a wartime text-world through auditory imagery and lexical repetition. The repeated imperative verb “run” functions as a foregrounded linguistic feature that emphasizes urgency and movement. Within Schema Theory, the phrase activates an emergency schema associated with warning and escape, but the repetition intensifies the instability of this schema by presenting communication itself as a marker of danger rather than reassurance. As Anderson (1977) explains, schema-based interpretation involves the interaction between existing knowledge structures and incoming information; however, in literary texts, these expectations may be challenged through unexpected combinations of concepts. In this poem, the radio, which conventionally serves as a source of information and connection, becomes a mechanism that introduces panic and disruption into the surrounding environment.

The representation of war is further intensified through the metaphorical construction “Snow shredded with gunfire” (Stanza 2, Lines 21 and 36). The combination of snow, which is conventionally associated with stillness, purity, and calmness, with the violent expression “shredded with gunfire” produces a semantic conflict between natural beauty and destruction. This juxtaposition creates schema disruption by transforming an ordinary environmental image into a landscape marked by violence. Rather than simply describing physical destruction, the linguistic construction foregrounds the extent to which war alters familiar meanings and transforms spaces previously associated with stability into sites of threat.

Similarly, the phrase “children shrieking inside” (Stanza 2, Lines 21–22) expands the representation of war beyond military conflict by emphasizing civilian vulnerability. The auditory imagery generated by the verb “shrieking” constructs a soundscape of fear and distress, while the reference to children introduces a schema of innocence and protection. However, this schema is disrupted because the domestic space implied by “inside” is no longer represented as secure. Instead, the poem positions private spaces as locations where political violence is experienced directly. This thematic convergence of vulnerable bodies, conflict, and disrupted domestic spaces reflects what Hardwick (2025) conceptualizes as the “poetry of unease”—a literary tradition wherein the conventional values of safety, protection, and bodily integrity are destabilized by war. Furthermore, his representation aligns with trauma studies that emphasize how violent experiences are frequently communicated through fragmented sensory details and the disruption of ordinary structures of meaning (Emmott et al., 2023).

From the perspective of Text World Theory, these linguistic patterns contribute to the construction of overlapping and unstable text-worlds. Werth (1999) argues that texts create worlds through linguistic cues that establish participants, objects, locations, and events, while Gavins (2007) further explains that these worlds may contain shifts, modifications, and alternative configurations. In *Aubade with Burning City*, domestic world-builders such as the bed, intimate gestures, and personal relationships initially establish a private world of connection. However, this world is repeatedly interrupted by military world-builders, including bombs, gunfire, helicopters, and evacuation scenes. The coexistence of these competing elements produces a text-world where intimacy and violence are not separate experiences but overlapping realities.

This instability becomes particularly evident in the line “A helicopter lifting the living just out of reach” (Stanza 2, Line 39). The participial construction “lifting the living” initially introduces a possibility of rescue and survival; however, the phrase “just

out of reach” immediately limits this possibility. The linguistic contrast between movement toward safety and the impossibility of attaining it constructs a disrupted rescue scenario. Similarly, the phrase “The lights go out” (Stanza 2, Line 51) functions as a boundary marker within the text-world, suggesting closure, disappearance, or the collapse of the previously established environment.

The analysis of these excerpts supports previous discussions on trauma representation, foregrounding, and poetic world construction, which emphasize how fragmented images, contradictions, and shifts in perspective represent experiences of violence and loss. However, the findings extend these discussions by demonstrating how Vuong’s representation of war operates through the repeated collision of domestic and political worlds. Rather than portraying war as an external event separate from personal experience, *Aubade with Burning City* constructs violence as an intrusive force that continually reshapes intimate spaces and human relationships. Through recurring schema disruptions and shifts between incompatible text-worlds, the poem foregrounds the instability of life under conditions of conflict and historical trauma.

Table 2. Textual Construction of War

Excerpt	Linguistic Feature	Activated Schema	Source of Disruption	Text-World Configuration	Interpretive Significance
“The radio saying run run run” (Stanza 2, Line 42)	Lexical repetition; imperative structure; auditory imagery	Emergency and survival schema associated with warning, escape, and immediate danger	The repeated command disrupts ordinary expectations of communication by transforming the radio into a marker of panic and instability	Constructs a wartime text-world through sound, movement, and urgent action	The radio operates as a world-building element that introduces external violence into personal and domestic spaces
“Snow shredded with gunfire” (Stanza 2, Lines 21 and 36)	Metaphorical construction; semantic contrast; violent imagery	Natural and seasonal schema associated with stillness, beauty, and peace	The violent verb “shredded” and noun “gunfire” disrupt the peaceful associations attached to snow imagery	Creates a conflicting text-world where familiar environmental elements become sites of destruction	The metaphor foregrounds the transformation of ordinary spaces under conditions of war
“children shrieking inside” (Stanza 2, Lines 21–22)	Auditory imagery; emotive lexical choice	Childhood vulnerability and safety schema	The presence of civilian suffering disrupts assumptions of protection and innocence	Expands the wartime text-world beyond battlefield spaces into domestic and civilian environments	The image emphasizes how political violence penetrates intimate human experiences

Textual Construction of Trauma in Aubade with Burning City

The findings demonstrate that trauma in *Aubade with Burning City* is constructed through the fragmentation of familiar schemas and the continuous disruption of text-world configurations. Unlike representations of trauma that rely solely on explicit descriptions of suffering, Vuong’s poem develops trauma through contradictions between safety and danger, rescue and failure, and spiritual hope and destruction (Hasan, 2025). The selected excerpts reveal how linguistic choices create unstable environments in which ordinary expectations are repeatedly challenged by images of violence, displacement, and loss.

The phrase “A helicopter lifting the living just out of reach” (Stanza 2, Line 39) illustrates how the poem constructs trauma through the tension between possibility and

impossibility. The participial construction “lifting the living” initially establishes a rescue-oriented text-world associated with survival and escape. However, the phrase “just out of reach” immediately disrupts this configuration by introducing limitation and unattainability. Within Schema Theory, the passage activates a rescue schema but simultaneously alters its expected outcome, creating a tension between anticipated safety and experienced failure. This process reflects schema disruption, where established patterns of interpretation are challenged by conflicting textual information (Anderson, 1977).

The representation of failed rescue is further intensified through the poem’s use of contradictory world-builders. The helicopter functions as an object associated with evacuation and survival, while the phrase “just out of reach” transforms it into an image of separation and abandonment. From the perspective of Text World Theory, the passage constructs a temporary rescue world that is immediately modified by a competing world of danger and exclusion. Werth (1999) and Gavins (2007) explain that text-worlds are constructed through linguistic cues that establish entities, events, and relationships; in this excerpt, the interaction between movement and distance creates a fragmented world in which survival remains uncertain.

Traumatic disruption is also evident in the image, “In the square below: a nun, on fire, runs silently toward her god—” (Stanza 2, Lines 54–55). The juxtaposition of religious imagery and violent destruction creates a significant semantic conflict. The figure of the nun activates a schema associated with spirituality, devotion, and moral refuge, while the image of being “on fire” introduces suffering and devastation. The inversion of the sentence structure and the use of the non-finite clause “on fire” foreground the contrast between sacred identity and physical destruction. Through this linguistic arrangement, the poem constructs a world in which traditional sources of protection and meaning are disrupted by violence.

This representation corresponds with discussions of trauma narratives that emphasize fragmentation, contradiction, and disrupted meaning-making (Busch & McNamara, 2020). Sirinarang and Wijitsopon (2021) and Mmeka (2025) highlight how traumatic experiences in literary texts may be represented through linguistic patterns that disturb ordinary associations and create conflicting interpretive possibilities. Similarly, Emmott et al. (2023) emphasize that trauma representation often involves shifts in perspective, incomplete experiences, and unstable narrative structures. In *Aubade with Burning City*, trauma emerges not only from descriptions of violence but from the collapse of expected relationships between safety, identity, and survival.

The fragmented quality of the poem is further reinforced through the images “something neither of them can hear” and “The bed a field of ice cracking” (Stanza 2, Lines 31–32 and Line 46). These expressions transform familiar domestic elements into symbols of instability. The bed, conventionally associated with intimacy and security, becomes connected with the imagery of cracking ice, suggesting fragility and rupture. Within the framework of Text World Theory, this transformation demonstrates how domestic spaces are reconstructed by the intrusion of traumatic world-builders. A private world initially associated with closeness becomes reorganized by the presence of fear and uncertainty.

Table 3. Textual Construction of Trauma

Excerpt	Linguistic Feature	Activated Schema	Source of Disruption	Text-World Configuration	Interpretive Significance
“A helicopter lifting the living just	Participial construction; semantic contrast;	Rescue and survival schema associated with evacuation,	The phrase “just out of reach” disrupts the expectation	Constructs a rescue-oriented text-world that shifts into a	The image foregrounds trauma through the

Excerpt	Linguistic Feature	Activated Schema	Source of Disruption	Text-World Configuration	Interpretive Significance
out of reach” (Stanza 2, Line 39)	spatial imagery	safety, and escape	of successful rescue by introducing distance and unattainability	world of uncertainty and failed escape	tension between the possibility of survival and the experience of abandonment
“In the square below: a nun, on fire, runs silently toward her god—” (Stanza 2, Lines 54–55)	Inversion; non- finite clause; visual imagery; juxtaposition	Religious and spiritual refuge schema associated with faith, protection, and transcendence	The image of a sacred figure experiencing violence disrupts expectations of spiritual safety and moral order	Creates a traumatic text- world where religious identity, physical suffering, and destruction coexist	The juxtaposition presents trauma as a rupture between systems of meaning and the realities of violence
“Something neither of them can hear” (Stanza 2, Lines 31–32)	Negation; sensory imagery; absence of perception	Communication and human connection schema	The inability to hear disrupts assumptions of mutual awareness and shared experience	Constructs a fragmented text-world characterized by separation and perceptual limitation	The linguistic absence emphasizes disconnection and the difficulty of accessing another person’s experience
“The bed a field of ice cracking” (Stanza 2, Line 46)	Metaphor; nominal construction; domestic-to- destructive image transformation	Domestic intimacy and security schema associated with comfort and privacy	The transformation of the bed into a fragile and unstable landscape disrupts its association with safety and closeness	Reconfigures a domestic text- world into a traumatic environment shaped by rupture and instability	The metaphor demonstrates how war infiltrates private spaces and transforms intimate settings into sites of vulnerability

Integrative Discussion, Contributions, and Implications

The combined findings from the analyses of love, war, and trauma demonstrate that *Aubade with Burning City* constructs meaning through the persistent collision between domestic intimacy and political violence. While each thematic category reveals distinct linguistic patterns, they are interconnected through a central cognitive-stylistic process: the establishment of familiar schemas and text-worlds that are repeatedly disrupted by images, events, and perspectives associated with war. The poem initially constructs intimate spaces through domestic objects, interpersonal gestures, and relational interactions; however, these configurations are continuously interrupted by military imagery, producing unstable text-worlds where affection, survival, and loss exist simultaneously.

From the perspective of Schema Theory, the findings illustrate how Vuong’s poem relies on the activation and disruption of culturally familiar expectations. Images of champagne, intimate gestures, domestic spaces, religious figures, rescue attempts, and seasonal imagery initially evoke schemas associated with celebration, safety, spirituality, and connection. However, these expectations are unsettled when they are placed

alongside bombs, gunfire, destruction, and displacement. Consistent with Anderson's (1977) discussion of schema-based interpretation, the significance of these textual patterns emerges from the interaction between established conceptual structures and unexpected textual configurations. In *Aubade with Burning City*, schema disruption functions as a central mechanism through which the poem represents the instability of personal and collective experiences during wartime.

The findings also extend discussions of Text World Theory by demonstrating how poetic trauma may be represented through the continuous modification and collision of text-worlds. Werth (1999) and Gavins (2007) explain that texts construct worlds through linguistic cues involving participants, objects, settings, and events. The present analysis shows that Vuong's poem creates multiple overlapping configurations: a domestic world characterized by intimacy, a wartime world characterized by violence, and a traumatic world characterized by fragmentation and uncertainty. Rather than existing as separate domains, these worlds repeatedly intersect, suggesting that private experiences cannot be separated from broader historical and political realities (Gibbons & Whiteley, 2018).

This finding contributes to existing criticism on Ocean Vuong (e.g. Hasan, 2025) by emphasizing the cognitive-stylistic processes through which trauma is represented. Previous discussions of Vuong's poetry have frequently examined themes of memory, migration, violence, identity, and historical trauma. The present study extends these perspectives by demonstrating how such themes are linguistically organized through schema disruption, foregrounding, and text-world shifts. In particular, the analysis highlights that trauma in *Aubade with Burning City* is not represented only through direct descriptions of suffering but through the instability created when intimate and violent worlds occupy the same textual space.

The study also contributes to broader scholarship on trauma representation and war poetry. Existing trauma studies emphasize fragmentation, disrupted chronology, conflicting perspectives, and the difficulty of representing experiences of violence (Sirinarang & Wijitsopon, 2021; Emmott et al., 2023). The findings support these observations by showing how Vuong's use of contradictory images, sensory foregrounding, and unstable world-building structures produces a representation of trauma grounded in disruption. The poem's significance lies not only in what forms of violence it depicts but also in how its linguistic patterns construct a continuous tension between vulnerability and survival.

Furthermore, the findings have implications for cognitive poetics and reader-response research. Although the present study does not make empirical claims about actual reader responses, the identified textual patterns demonstrate how literary language provides interpretive affordances through which meanings of intimacy, violence, and trauma may be constructed. Future cognitive-poetic research may examine these interpretive processes through empirical approaches, including think-aloud protocols, eye-tracking methods, and cross-cultural reader-response studies.

The analysis also acknowledges that interpretation of *Aubade with Burning City* may depend partly on historical and cultural knowledge. As Nguyen (2016) observes regarding the ethics of memory in Vietnamese-American literature, war is rarely remembered as a distant historical event, but as an ongoing, intimate presence that continually shapes aesthetic forms. References to the Fall of Saigon, wartime evacuation, religious symbolism, and cultural representations of domestic life provide important contexts for understanding the poem's world construction. Therefore, some interpretive possibilities may vary depending on readers' familiarity with these historical and cultural frameworks. This reinforces the importance of considering both textual features and contextual knowledge in cognitive-stylistic analysis.

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations. First, the analysis focuses on a single poem, limiting the extent to which the findings may be applied to Vuong's broader poetic works or to other representations of war trauma. Second, the study employs interpretive textual analysis rather than empirical investigation; therefore, it examines textual affordances rather than measuring actual reader cognition. Third, the analysis primarily focuses on linguistic and cognitive-stylistic features and does not provide an extensive comparative examination of other war poems or trauma narratives.

Future research may address these limitations by examining additional poems by Ocean Vuong or conducting comparative analyses across different cultural and historical contexts. Studies may also investigate how readers from different backgrounds interpret representations of war and trauma through empirical methods such as interviews, think-aloud studies, or eye-tracking experiments. Such approaches may further illuminate the relationship between poetic language, cognitive processing, and representations of traumatic experience.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how *Aubade with Burning City* constructs the themes of love, war, and trauma through the interaction of linguistic features, schema activation and disruption, and text-world configurations. The findings demonstrate that Vuong's poem relies on a range of stylistic resources, including sensory imagery, symbolic representation, declarative and imperative structures, fragmented syntax, spatial deixis, metaphorical constructions, and ironic contrasts. These linguistic choices contribute to the poem's movement between intimate, violent, and traumatic configurations, establishing a dynamic relationship between personal experiences and historical conflict.

In the representation of love, the poem initially constructs a domestic text-world through schemas of intimacy, care, tenderness, and emotional connection. Images such as champagne, physical gestures, and domestic spaces establish expectations of affection and security. However, these configurations are disrupted when military imagery and violent events enter the same textual space. The resulting interaction between intimate and destructive world-builders presents love not as an isolated refuge from conflict but as a fragile experience continually shaped by the presence of war. In the representation of war, the poem constructs a text-world dominated by violence, displacement, and instability. Linguistic features such as auditory imagery, repetition, metaphorical expressions, and destructive imagery disrupt schemas associated with safety, order, and protection. Through the juxtaposition of domestic elements with military objects and events, *Aubade with Burning City* portrays war as an intrusive force that transforms familiar environments and alters the relationship between private experiences and historical violence.

In the representation of trauma, the poem further develops instability through fragmented imagery, contradictory representations, and disrupted text-world configurations. Images of failed rescue, spiritual suffering, and transformed domestic spaces demonstrate how trauma emerges through the breakdown of previously established meanings and relationships. The movement between competing worlds—particularly between intimacy and violence, safety and destruction, and connection and separation—foregrounds trauma as a condition characterized by rupture and uncertainty.

Overall, the study demonstrates that *Aubade with Burning City* represents human experience through continuous tension between expectation and disruption. Through the framework of cognitive stylistics, the analysis shows how linguistic choices construct schemas and text-worlds that are repeatedly established, challenged, and transformed throughout the poem. Rather than suggesting universal cognitive responses among readers, the findings highlight the interpretive possibilities created by the poem's stylistic

organization and demonstrate how poetic language functions as a means of representing complex experiences of love, war, and trauma.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings of the study, several recommendations are proposed for literature education and future research in cognitive stylistics: For English language and literature teachers, the integration of cognitive stylistics into literature instruction may provide learners with additional approaches for examining how linguistic features contribute to meaning construction. Classroom discussions may focus on identifying schemas established within literary texts, examining disruptions of expectations, and analyzing how text-world configurations shape interpretations of literary experiences.

For English majors and literature students, engagement with cognitive stylistic approaches may strengthen analytical skills by encouraging close examination of linguistic patterns, figurative language, narrative perspectives, and world-building strategies. Literary works involving fragmentation, conflict, and trauma may serve as valuable materials for exploring how texts represent complex human experiences. For literary scholars, future studies may expand cognitive stylistic research by examining a wider range of literary works from different cultural, historical, and linguistic contexts. Comparative studies may provide deeper insights into how stylistic patterns and contextual factors influence the representation of human experiences across literary traditions.

Future researchers may also consider incorporating empirical approaches, such as think-aloud protocols, reader-response interviews, and eye-tracking methods, to further investigate the relationship between textual features and reader interpretation. Additional studies may explore other linguistic dimensions, including phonological patterns, rhythm, and sound structures, to broaden understanding of how different stylistic resources contribute to literary meaning-making. Through continued integration of cognitive stylistics in education and research, scholars and educators may develop more comprehensive approaches to understanding how literary language constructs interpretations of complex experiences across different contexts.

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Declaration of Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools

During the preparation of this manuscript, the researchers used OpenAI ChatGPT (GPT-5.5-mini) solely for language editing purposes, including improving grammar, clarity, sentence structure, and academic expression. No AI tools were used for data collection, textual analysis, interpretation of findings, generation of research arguments, or construction of scholarly conclusions. All AI-assisted revisions were carefully reviewed, verified, and edited by the researchers, who remain fully responsible for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

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