

An Analysis of Typographical Elements in Laurie Halse

Anderson's *Wintergirls*

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Abstract

Young Adult novels of the twenty first century have been instrumental in addressing mental health issues, offering the readers an insight into various challenges faced by young adults. Authors often incorporate the symptoms of mental illnesses into their narratives while employing stylistic techniques to enrich the storylines. These techniques serve to convey the complexities of mental health struggles, making the narratives more impactful and relatable. This paper aims to explore the innovative use of typographical tools by Laurie Halse Anderson in her novel *Wintergirls*. The study investigates the use of typography, like punctuation marks, fonts, symbols, layout, and unconventional writing styles as tools for portraying the

protagonist's symptoms of the mental illness. The method combines textual analysis with a semiotic study of the novel's typographical features to explore their interpretive significance. These stylistic choices not only enhance the reader's immersion in the character's internal world but also portrays theme of emotional turmoil as well as the psychological struggles of the protagonist by blending content and form hence offering a deeper understanding of the themes and conflicts of the novel.

Keywords: Typography, Punctuations, Strikethroughs, *Scriptio Continua*, Layout

Introduction

“Typography is the art and technique of arranging type to make language visible” (Serafini 4). All the elements in a print format that communicates something in a written format constitutes typography. Each and every element imbibes a potential meaning for communication and discourse. Initially as Bringhurst stated, “typography exists to honor content” (17). This shows how typography was always secondary to content or narrative. It was analyzed by its ability to be an additional supportive element to the written content without drawing attention to itself. However, the growing interest in linguistic and stylistics has given importance to typographical elements and has opened up the scope of typographic study.

Literature Review: Typography in literature

Early Greek poems of the second and third century BCE witnessed concrete poetry, where poems heavily relied on its typography. It was also known as visual poetry that uses words and phrases shaped like the subject of the poem (“Concrete Poetry”). It is a form of typographical experiment that draws the attention of the readers and create a visual effect on their minds. Poems like "Easter Wings" and "The Altar" by George Herbert and Robert Herrick's "This crosstree here" are early examples of concrete poems that was printed in the shape of its subject. “The typographic treatment of words within concrete poetry starts to add

additional resonances through their scale, placement, overlay and styling, suggesting new ways to see and say the poem” (Mayes).

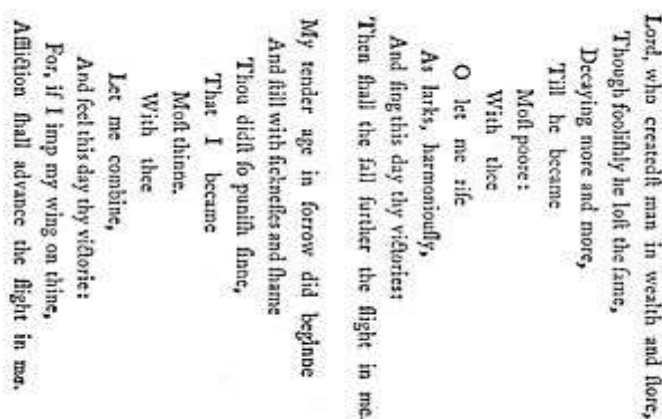


Fig. 1. "George Herbert: Easter Wings (1633)." *Wikipedia*, uploaded by Wikimedia

Commons, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Concrete_poetry. Accessed 26 Aug. 2025.

With constant urge to incorporate innovative techniques, novelists also began experimenting with typography. Salvador Plascencia's novel *The People of Paper* experiment a range of typographical elements like strike-through marks, solid blocks of ink, scattered diagrams and illustrative elements. As the story is narrated by multiple characters, the shifts in point of view are highlighted through these elements. Similarly, Mark Z. Danielewski's novel *House of Leaves* stirs the curiosity of the readers by printing each word of a sentence on different pages. This not only makes the plot suspenseful but also helps the readers to feel the fast-paced movement of the story. The inclusion of 'actual' ephemera of bill posters, letters, press reports, photographs, maps and period vignette illustrations in the historical novel *Redemption Falls*, helps the readers to experience the impact of the American Civil fulfilling the ultimate purpose of the respective genre. Hence, the inclusion of visual elements in literature has always existed.

Methodology

The study applies semiotic approach that focusses on how typographic elements gain meaning through their interaction with context and other modes. The study incorporates the

methodology of textual analysis and Nina Nørgaard's *Multimodal Stylistics* which gives an analytical framework to analyze the interaction between linguistic and visual modes of meaning-making in literary texts. The framework extends traditional stylistic methodologies, typically concerned with linguistic and narrative features, to encompass multimodal dimensions such as typography, spatial arrangement, and layout.

Discussion: Overview of *Wintergirls*

Anderson's *Wintergirls* (2009) is the story of the two young adults, Lia and Cassandra, told from the point of view of the former who suffers from anorexia- an eating disorder that involves "weight loss or lack of appropriate weight gain, difficulties maintaining an appropriate body weight for height, age, and stature" ("Anorexia Nervosa: Symptoms, Treatment & Support: NEDA"). Cassandra, popularly known as Cassie, also suffers from an eating disorder called bulimia, which is characterized by "a cycle of bingeing and compensatory behaviors such as self-induced vomiting designed to undo or compensate for the effects of binge eating" ("Bulimia Nervosa: Symptoms, Treatment & Support: NEDA"). However, as the novel begins, Cassie dies from ruptured oesophagus. The novel portrays the struggles of Lia whose eating disorder worsens after the death of Cassie. The subsequent events in the story depicts her attempts to overcome it as well as recover from the sudden death of her friend, Cassie. Laurie Halse Anderson utilizes various typographical elements to enhance the readability, visual impact, and emotional intensity of the text. Through these stylistic choices, she effectively conveys the protagonist's emotional turmoil, offering readers a deeper insight into the experience of mental illness.

Typographical tools: Punctuation Marks

Anderson (2009) depicts the traumatic event of Cassie's death and Lia's initial response to it through ellipses in the exposition of the novel. Lia is nervous whereas Jennifer, the step-mother of Lia, is unbothered about it as she reads the news report to Lia:

When she gets to the worst part

...body found dead in a motel room, alone...

...my walls go up and my doors lock. (1)

Ellipses are generally used to signify something that remains unsaid in a text or that is intentionally left incomplete (“Ellipsis Points: Definition, Usage and Examples”). The first two ellipses in these lines signify an account of the death as quoted from the news report which creates a sense of shock both to the readers and Lia. The ellipses metaphorically indicate the unrevealed cause of Cassie’s death, the conflict of the novel which Lia unfolds as the story proceeds further. The third ellipsis is Lia’s first emotional response to the sudden death. Lia’s symptoms of Anorexia worsen after this traumatic event. According to a study conducted by National Eating Disorder Association (NEDA), “25% of people with eating disorders experience co-occurring post-traumatic stress disorder” (“Eating Disorders and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)”). Similarly, Lia feels trapped, which is a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder. This is clearly evident as the third ellipsis is followed by imagery of a wall.

The unresolved issues in Lia’s family, often unnoticed by the elders, are also represented through ellipses in the novel. For instance, Jennifer’s talks about the death of Cassie when Lia is in the kitchen. As Lia listens to Jennifer talk about the death of her friend, she looks at the untidy parts of the kitchen and connects it to the unresolved problems in the family and says as follows:

Here stands a girl clutching a knife. There is grease on the stove, blood in the air, and angry words piled in the corners. We are trained not to see it, not to see any of it.

... body found in a motel room, alone... (Anderson 3–4).

Lia relates “grease” and “angry words” to the existing issues in both Cassie’s and her families. The words of Lia highlight the fact that family issues which could be the cause of mental illness that drastically affect young adults, are often being disregarded. This is evident from Jennifer’s

insensitive behaviour and the way Lia and Cassie are taught to avoid dealing with these problems. In their article, “The skinny on body dissatisfaction: A longitudinal study of adolescent girls and boys,” Bearman et al. concluded by stating that adolescents who share a better relationship with their parents display lower probability of suffering from body dissatisfaction. Similarly in the novel, Cassie’s disappointment with her body is a factor that has led to Bulimia. The use of ellipses at the end of the quoted statement serves as a connecting thread indicating the negligence and carelessness of Cassie’s problem by her parents which has ultimately resulted in the tragic death of Cassie. As van Leeuwen says, “typographical elements need to be conceptualized as semiotic resources for authors, illustrators, publishers, book designers and readers to draw upon to realize textual or expressive meanings in addition to interpersonal and ideational meanings” (Leeuwen 142-43). This interplay between the ellipses and phrases before and after the phrase indicate how the process of meaning making is not solely created through typographic elements alone but through their interaction with linguistic modes also.

Parentheses, generally used in mathematics for enclosing numbers and operations to be solved, is used in the novel to show Lia’s obsession with her body weight and calories. A common sign and symptom of Anorexia is preoccupation with “weight, calories, food grams, and dieting” (“Anorexia Nervosa: Symptoms, Treatment & Support: NEDA”). The following words of Lia reflects how she counts the calories of the food served:

because I don’t need a muffin (410), I don’t want an orange (75) or toast (87), and
waffles (180) make me gag. (Anderson 5)

The calorie for each dish is mentioned in the parentheses whenever she thinks about food or looks at it. Lia is always worried about gaining weight and conscious about her calorie intake due to anorexia. Hence, she perceives food not as a source that nourishes or provides energy to the body, but merely as a numerical value. The usage of parenthesis shows how she is mentally

obsessed with numbers. This is also clearly evident in her description of the car which is quoted in the text as, “My father (“one hundred and ten, kiddo—you look great!”) bought me a new car (“three years old, eighty thousand miles, but new tires and very safe”)” (Anderson 50–51).

Another punctuation frequently used in the novel are em dashes, which primarily indicates an “interrupted speech or a speaker’s confusion or hesitation” (“How to Use EM Dashes (-), En Dashes (–), and Hyphens (-)”). Throughout the novel, Anderson (2009) uses em dashes to represent Lia’s disoriented thoughts, which creates an interruption in narration. Although Lia pretends to be normal after the death of Cassie, thoughts of Cassie trigger her. The following lines from the novel shows how Lia who is lost in thoughts:

I try to detour my mind—recite the constitution, list the presidents in order, remember the names of the seven dwarfs— I can’t stop thinking that

she called me. (Anderson 31)

The quote plunges into the intrusive thought process of Lia who is caught up between the past and the present. The word ‘detour’ which means a longer route taken to avoid something, highlights the efforts of Lia to accept the tragic death of Cassie. However, the em dashes display how all her efforts result in vain, drifting away from reality and getting trapped in the past. Also, em dashes disclose Lia’s dissatisfaction with her body through the perception of herself as “a scrawny elf girl” (Anderson 41), and of Cassie as a “big-boned—like her dad.” (47) and the comparison of her self-harmed body to a canvas. Lia’s hatred of food is also shown through em dashes by describing the food served for dinner as stale. The lines, “The air is damp with dinner- leftover turkey, stinky Brussels sprouts” (62), portrays her dislike towards food and eating, highlighting her symptom of eating disorder.

Suicidal tendencies and behaviours are also experienced by people with eating disorders. In the article, “Eating disorders and suicidality: what we know, what we don’t know,

and suggestions for future research”, Smith, et al. state, “Suicide is the second leading cause of death among individuals with anorexia nervosa (AN)” (63). Most people with anorexia have constant fleeting thoughts of suicide or have attempted it. Similarly, in the novel, Lia’s emotional pain and stress levels are represented through forward slash which serves as a metaphor for her self-harming behaviour. The unbearable pain and tendency to harm herself are clear when she goes for a Japanese Anime, after visiting the motel where Cassie died. The violent images in the movie reflect her urges to hurt herself. As she cuts herself, she utters the following words, “::Stupid/ugly/stupid/bitch/stupid/ /fat/stupid/ baby/ loser/stupid/lost::” (Anderson 60). Every forward slash symbolizes the cut which signifies Lia’s guilt of not attending Cassie’s call, obsession with her body weight and hopelessness that haunts her.

Typographical tools: Fonts, Strikethroughs, and *Scriptio Continua*

Language is represented in written form using scripts or fonts. “A typeface or font is the vehicle through which written language is materialized for sighted readers” (Serafini 4). The use of specific character style of font conveys different meaning in different contexts. The use of varied fonts has distinctive functions in *Wintergirls*. The main text, the news report of Cassie’s death and the past events are in different fonts. The main text indicates the present as Lia narrates the story. The news report of Cassie’s death is in the standard serif font that is commonly used in newspapers and formal documents to maintain the level of formality and objectivity. The font in the news report is smaller than the main text and appears next to an advertisement for fur coats which metaphorically indicates the least importance given to the death of her friend. Phrases and sentences from the report are often quoted between the main text as Lia associates various events to the death of Cassie.

Nina Nørgaard observes that italics display “iconic resemblances to handwriting”, “mocking accent”, “whispering”, “thinking to oneself”, “(fleeting) quality of thoughts”, “signifying proper names”, “foreign words”, “words quoted in direct speech”, “contrast”,

“emphasis” and so on (Nørgaard 93-101). Anderson uses italics to address Lia’s fleeting thoughts of the past and how she reminisces about the happy past as she says, “...*when I was a real girl, with two parents and one house and no blades flashing*” (Anderson 7). The words “*no blades flashing*” show that her eating disorder as well as her self-harming nature is the cause of the separation of her parents. The word ‘real’ highlights how Lia is unreal now since she showcases herself differently by hiding her true identity. Moreover, the fairy tale love of her parents is also described in italics to show the contrast in their nature, behaviour and bonding they shared earlier.

Anderson uses strikethroughs to visually represent Lia’s mental illnesses in the novel. According to Ticak, strikethroughs serve two functions, namely, scratching the mistake off a parchment to indicate a deleted part from a text as in medieval times, and communicating the writer’s opinion to the readers through the mumbling of characters. For instance, in the novel, Lia refuses to eat by denying the feeling of hunger, which is one of the emotional and behavioural signs and symptoms of anorexia (“Anorexia Nervosa”). This denial of hunger is emphasized by the writer through strike-throughs. Consequently, strike-throughs not only mark Lia's omitted words but also serve as a means for Anderson to convey Lia's internal thoughts to the audience. As Jennifer hands over a glass of juice to Lia, she says, “~~My throat wants it my brain wants it my blood wants it~~ my hand does not want this my mouth does not want this” (Anderson 20). Her denial of juice, though she craves for it, indicates her contradictory feelings of hunger.

Lia’s hesitation to open up her feelings to the therapist which is represented through strikethroughs that is given in the text as:

~~Yes, I’d love to tell you that Cassie’s voice is on the phone in my purse and she is haunting me because I let her die. If I do, you’ll give me even more drugs. If I tell you what I ate today, you’ll pull the alarm and send me back to jail.~~ (Anderson 117)

Lia does not reveal how Cassie's death haunts her and tries to overcome it by bottling up all her emotions. Her reluctance to open up her feelings is due to the anxiety that she will be perceived as vulnerable and will be given temporary solutions like medication rather than addressing the underlying her issues.

Scriptio continua, a Latin term, refers to a style of writing that avoids spaces, punctuations, or different letter cases between words, phrases or sentences. It was used in early manuscripts in Classical Greek and Classical Latin to save space on expensive writing materials (Gibson). Anderson uses this style in the novel to represent the unstoppable negative train of thoughts that erupt in Lia's mind. For instance, when the detective Margaret Greenfield comes to Lia's house, Lia gets extremely anxious and tells herself, "Ididn'tkillherIdidn'tkillher" (Anderson 109). Lia's continual utterances reveal that she feels responsible for Cassie's death and fears that the Police will blame her for the tragedy. This writing style is also used in the blog page of young adult girls suffering from Anorexia titled "whispersecretblog" (Anderson 111) where they share their experiences.

Typographical tools: Symbol and Spatial Layout

Theo van Leeuwen emphasises on extralinguistic resources that refer to non-verbal elements which contribute to meaning construction alongside language. Extralinguistic resources include not just typography but also images, gestures, gaze, body posture, cinematography, spatial arrangement and lighting (Leeuwen). The blog post, "whispersecretblog" (Anderson 111), mentioned in the novel incorporates different fonts to distinguish the online text medium from the main text, asterisk symbol to quote lines from different users, centered alignment and unconventional spellings like "Bperfekt," as shown in Figure 1. This unconventional style of the novel gives a contextual understanding of girls with eating disorders who are concerned over weight gain as minimum as 0.5lb and desperate as they seek help to achieve the goal of weight loss that is similar to Lia's situation. The word

“perfekt” in the last line of the post associates with the societal construct of being perfect which is the goal of Lia and most young adult girls with eating disorders.



Fig. 2. Blog page titled “whispersecretblog”, Laurie Halse Anderson, *Wintergirls*, Viking, 2009, p. 111.

Other extralinguistic elements include repetition and blank pages. As Lia’s condition worsens, she rants to herself saying, “Must. Not. Eat. Must. Not. Eat...” (Anderson 185–187). This repetitive utterance spanning for one and a half pages shows the peak of her resistance to eating despite of her weight loss, her obsessive behaviour towards starvation and her determination to fulfil her promise to Cassie of becoming the thinnest girl. Moreover, the use of blank pages adds to the devastating impact of Lia’s eating disorder. Towards the end of the novel, she self-harms. The sudden interruption of the music being played followed by the blank pages creates a dramatic pause in the narration. It further adds suspense, builds tension, and

leaves readers in shock. These blank pages evoke stillness and fear in the minds of the readers as it depicts the intensity of her self-harming nature, further creating anticipation about the possibilities of Lia's survival.

Results

The typographical analysis in *Wintergirls* shows how various elements like punctuations, fonts and layout intersect to help the readers in the meaning making process. Punctuations like parentheses, flash forward and em dashes signify Lia's symptoms of eating disorder like obsession with calories, suicidal ideation and disoriented thoughts respectively. Strike-throughs and *Scriptio Continua* also indicate her denial of hunger and intrusive thoughts. Apart from symptoms, punctuations like ellipses and em dashes also highlight the theme of unresolved family issues and body dissatisfaction in the novel. Varied fonts like italics are used for flashbacks to show Lia's happy memories and standard serif font is used for reporting Cassie's death that marks the cause of Lia's inner turmoil and conflicts. Non-linguistic elements like asterisk symbols, web page layout and blank pages highlight the growing community that leans towards skinny-obsessed culture and its horrifying effects.

Conclusion

Although language seems to be insufficient to express mental illness, Laurie Halse Anderson effectively portrays it through typographical elements like punctuation marks, fonts, symbols, layout, and unconventional writing styles. This innovative method of using typographical elements immensely contribute in understanding the causes of Lia's anorexia and gives a glimpse into her diet plans, her anxiety about weight gain, tendencies to self-harm, hatred towards her own body, and obsession with attaining the so-called perfect body, thus reflecting the symptoms of her eating disorder. Anderson's conscious use of typographical elements rather than descriptive words, amalgamates with one another to serve as a story telling technique and creates space for the expression of emotions that are not concrete but ambiguous

much like the complexities of Lia's psychological state of mind. This type of representation effectively articulates mental illness linguistically as well as non- linguistically and has initiated a literary discourse on the importance of typographical study.

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