

Diction in Creative Writing: A Lexicalist Appraisal of *Pellets*

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ABSTRACT

This study attempts an appraisal of Pellets – manuscript of an unpublished anthology of poems¹. Selected poems from the anthology are appraised to establish the aesthetic relevance and potency of diction in poetry in particular, and in other literary genres in general. Two theories anchor this study: The Critical Theory and the Lexicalist Theory. In terms of approach and style, poetry differs from other literary genres. It is peculiar for using inflated language, deployed in verse and stanza. Diction is vocabulary stock used by a writer to convey theme(s). Despite the normative properties of language, it has social signification which the literary writer explores, using individualistic linguistic choices that capture the operational forces being addressed. This study concludes that in Pellets – and other creative writings by extension – diction is instrumental in effective, imaginative and creative presentation of themes.

KEYWORDS: *Pellets, the Critical Theory, the Lexicalist Theory, appraisal, diction*

INTRODUCTION

Language reflects writer-reader interaction in a very active and dynamic way. The poet, like other literary writers, uses language to shape and deconstruct the world to produce a socially constructed order. Communication transcends having the skills to pattern linguistic items in stretches; the writer should be able to use linguistic stretches to impinge on the readers' emotions and mindset. Writing is fascinating across genres. Different scholars have attempted defining the term "writing". For example, Freeman cited in Acheoah [1] defines writing as "the ability to select the strongest words, the most useful facts since it is the appropriate selection of these facts that engrave the image of a work in the reader's mind." To write a literary or non-literary text, the writer is essentially engaged in mental, psychological, rhetorical and critical process. In this study, we are concerned with literary (creative) writing; that is, poetry. Poetry shows how writers convey messages via scintillating and unique style. The poems in *Pellets* accentuate the creative writer's unique opportunity for self-expression

of varied emotions: anxiety, admiration, love, disgust, etc. As the study unfolds, we examine how diction enables the poet in particular, and creative writers in general, to communicate themes with enchanting effectiveness.

The Literature of Creative Writing

Any creative writing task involves written language. The literature acknowledges that the process is individualistic because the writer's personal experiences and feelings are articulated in the message(s) conveyed. There is no societal vice or concern that cannot be addressed through creative writing. The language deployed in literary writings cannot be compared to that used in non-literary writings; language is inflated in literary writings, particularly in poetry.

According to Chambers Dictionary (cf. Adele Ramet [2]), creative writing is "... having the power to create, that creates, showing, pertaining to, imagination, originality and 'writing' as 'The act of one who writes, that which is written, literary

production or composition’.” Although creative writing is imaginative writing, originality is crucial to it.

The effects of the University of Iowa in the promotion of creative writing pedagogy (teaching and learning) mark the beginning of the spread of creative writing as a subject in educational institutions worldwide. In contemporary world, the curriculum of educational institutions, incorporates the subject. Mary Swander et al. [3] make an elaborate submission in this regard:

In 2005, creative writing became very famous in higher education. In the UK, degree (MA, Mphils, and PhDs) are now awarded in different aspects of creative writing: poetry, prose, playwriting, science, critical theory, journalism or creative writing pedagogy. The field is fast undergoing innovations even in classroom approaches ... until around 1990, most creative faculty followed the Engle teaching model without much reflection. A workshop teacher led small groups – *The AWP Directors’ Handbook* (2003: 5) recommends no more than fifteen, with twelve as ideal, but recognized that most workshop groups now are between eleven and twenty – through peer oral critiques of completed poems, stories, chapters of novels or plays ... The growth of creative writing has culminated in the publication of relevant textbooks on techniques for the skills ... creative writing has continued to gain relevance in academia. Jerry Newman (2007: 24) submits that *when the first creative writing MA in the UK were founded in the late 1960s and early 70s, many traditional scholars and academics argued that no one could teach the mysteries and fascinating process of literary creativity, and that such courses had no place in a university. Their objectives have been overturned, partly, it must be said, because of student demand for accredited creative writing courses ...*

Different theories abound in the literature. The theories evolve and discuss principles and guidelines to facilitate creative writings across the basic genres: drama, poetry and prose. The following creative writing theories are instructive:

a. The Romantic Myth: In this theoretical stance, it is believed that although a writer’s talent is inborn, it can be developed individually and through classroom inputs.

b. Bloom and Bate Theory: Theorists in this school of thought hold the view that the stride of predated great creative writers hinders attempts by present and future creative writers to be accomplished in the art.

c. Compositional Theory: Compositional Theory of creative writing contends that: non-creative writings (compositions) have content and importance, and are therefore not less difficult than creative writings. The theory also proposes that the flouting of norms of writing should be allowed in compositions as it obtains in creative writings.

d. Non-traditional Academic Approach: It is an approach

which proposes the use of workshops in the teaching of creative writing. In the pedagogical process, students’ writings are critically assessed.

e. Critical Theory: This theory teaches learners how to critically study existing literary texts, focusing on the process, objectives, content and approach therein. The aim is to spur the learners to write good creative works that connect the past and present.

The literature of creative writing is replete with the principles of writing texts within the purview of drama, poetry and prose. “Genre” (which means “kind”) is by origin, related to “genus”. As early as the beginning of the nineteenth century, the word has been used in English to mean “a kind of literature”. In content, style and language, the three major genres of literature differ somehow. For instructive perspectives on their peculiarities, see Mike Harris [4], Brighde Mullins [5] and O’ Brien [6].

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical frameworks direct textual analysis in different research disciplines. Although the analysis in this study explores perspectives from different scholars in the creative writing domain of research, our main theoretical frameworks are the Critical Theory and the Lexicalist Theory.

The Critical Theory

The Critical Theory proposes critical review of available literary texts, as a means of developing the learners; the theorists contend that by focusing on the process, objectives, content and approach of available literary writings, the learners can write creative texts which connect the past and present.

The Lexicalist Theory

Sergio Scalise and Emiliano Guevara [7] submit that “the term Lexicalism refers to the theoretical standpoint in modern generative linguistics according to which the processes that form complex words (derivation and compounding) are accounted for by a set of Lexical Rules, *independent of and different from* the syntactic rules of the grammar (i.e. word formation is not performed by syntactic transformations). Such Lexical Rules are assumed to operate in a pre-syntactic component, the lexicon.” Scholars hold the view that the Lexicalist Approach to word formation is a product of Chomsky’s article, *Remarks on Nominalizations* (1970) and Halle’s *Prolegomena to a Theory of Word Formation* (1973). These classical works still spur research on lexicalism. Within the context of this study, the lexicalist perspectives of language use explain a writer’s innovations in the use of lexical items or diction without strict compliance to the lexicon or grammar conventions.

Diction in Pellets: a Lexicalist Appraisal

Diction is essentially vocabulary, and it determines the

quality of a literary text. According to Aristotle, cited in Lauri [8], “perfect use of diction presupposes the use of ordinary clear words (which make writing unique).” Any literary writer who desires to use appropriate diction should have a good grasp of the language that conveys the writing. Several celebrated literary texts have survived over time, because of the choice of words of the authors of such texts³. Consider the following lines of a poem taken from Pellets:

Can you see the tempestuous sea?

It frightens the birds with its ridge-like roaring waves.

The dreaded current and sound make me spell-bound.

In the above lines, the use of appropriate diction makes it possible for the poet to describe the splendor and horror of the sea. The grandeur of “nature” is exposed by the poet via skillful selection of words. Replacing “tempestuous”, “ridge-like”, “roaring” and “dreaded current” with some other weak descriptive words, can make the description of any agencies of nature (e.g. sea, land, wind, river, mountain, etc.) less image-conjuring. To use “flowery” language, a writer must be fortified with the vocabulary and grammar of the instrumental language – the language that conveys the text. As a demonstration of such knowledge, the writer is able to hyphenate created expressions – the morphological process of derivation. Derivational processes deployed by writers corroborate Haille’s claim that “if a grammar is a formal representation of a native speaker’s knowledge of language, then there must be a component that accounts for the speaker’s lexical knowledge: a speaker of English ‘knows’, for example, a) that read is a word of his/her language, but lazen is not, b) that certain words have internal structure (e.g. un-drink-able) and c) that the internal structure respects a specific order of concatenation of morphemes (un-drink-able is a possible word but *un-able-drink or drink-un-able are not)” – (cf. Sergio Scalise and Emiliano Guevara [7]). A poet can generate seemingly ungrammatical constructions as he/she uses language with abstraction. Commenting on Haille’s Strong Lexicalist Hypothesis, Sergio Scalise and Emiliano [7] submit that “Haille’s proposal represented a significant innovation in that it contains a special mechanism for creating complex words (i.e. WFRs), a mechanism that makes use of more linguistic information and carries out more abstract operations than simple concatenation ... Haille’s WFRs are quite unrestricted; not only do they have access to information contained in later stages in a derivation.” Let us consider the poem below for more discussion:

There are many creatures, but one special one is the butterfly.

There are many winged-creatures, but one unique one is the butterfly.

I mean a fully-grown butterfly in all its beauty and splendor.

Have you ever touched a butterfly?

I mean that tender, amazing creature.

Have you ever felt a butterfly in your skin – yes, I mean on your finger tips?

Try to see and touch the dazzling one –

The kind which glows in the king’s orchard ...

As a writer explores the five senses, language is needed to describe objects and phenomena through the instrumentality of diction. To describe things, language should be clear. The sense of “sight” is invoked when the reader focuses on the adjectives deployed by the poet to describe the butterfly.

There is the need for a writer to ensure that language use is germane to audience. For example, language should not be inflated in poems written for use in primary schools. Diction is indispensable in creative writing because the list of objects, places and phenomena to be described with creative precision is not exhaustive. For example, the poet may have to describe:

- i. coaches, buses, planes, ships;
- ii. cafés and restaurants;
- iii. personal experiences;
- iv. clubs;
- v. doctors’/dentists’ surgeries;
- vi. hair dressers;
- vii. school playgrounds, etc.

In Pellets, the following lines show the description of different referents by the poet:

On that very day – in the early millennium,

The sun and the moon signed the treaty of nature

In a holy wedlock.

It took place in the skies of the Nigerian horizon

And made the ecosystem strange as nature’s routine was reversed ...

The photographers were out to snap Beauty.

The teachers were outside to explain the fall-outs.

Special eye-glasses were manufactured

For those who must behold the eclipse of the sun

So that their anxious eyes would not be damaged.

Animals could not understand the threat

Which suddenly plagued their routine.

Plants could not interpret the rebellion ...

The eclipse of the sun disappeared,

And Nigeria got back its rhythm.

The poem succinctly describes the experiences of Nigerians when the eclipse of the sun occurred. The fact that the eclipse is a natural phenomenon, informed the kind of words the poet uses to describe it and its fallouts: “skies”, “horizon”, “ecosystem”, “plants” and “animals”. The poet uses word-patterning to generate figurative language; some words are made to co-occur even though they are not usual collocates in the conventions of the language. To personify the sun and the moon, the poet uses the expression ... “holy wedlock”, and the message is clear; marriage between a man and a woman is a natural practice, just as the eclipse is a natural phenomenon. Therefore, the sun and the moon represent “bride” and “bridegroom” respectively. Diction enables creative writers delve into domains that concern their thematic preoccupations. Diction also helps the poet to capture physical contexts, making it easier for readers to visualize settings. A poet also describes psychological context to project his/her feelings/emotions. To succeed in describing contexts/setting, the poet hinges on his sensitivity to the five senses mentioned earlier – sense of: touch, sound, sight, smell and taste. A good description makes the readers see the object described in their minds’ eyes.

Consider the poem below:

The spinning is slow.

But the spider knows

That the destination is a sure-thing.

Have you ever been kidnapped by a spider?

Has it ever happened to you when it sets out

To begin the spinning mission?

The web is almost an invisible disc

It is a network of seemingly microscopic lines.

Each line is traceable to its source.

As frail as the lines seem

You cannot doubt the function of each

In the mission to complete a task ...

The above poem ascribes fascinating attributes to the spider – the creature is: industrious, purposeful, resolute, skillful, strong, discipline and intelligent. The attributes are indirectly (implied) ascribed to it through the use of appropriate phrases: “a sure-thing”, “spinning mission”, “invisible disc”, “a network”, “microscopic lines”. Through language use, the poet is seemingly “telling” and “showing”; as the poet tells us about the existential actions of the spider, we imagine seeing it performing the actions.

Another poem which adores a creature (the earthworm) taken from Pellets, is entitled “Burrowing”:

Hands of infants

Struggling for the breath of life

Lips of sucklings

Who know the worth of mother’s sap

As tender as yolk

Are those tiny finger-like protrusions

As harmless as a dove

Are those jaws

Burrowing into the morning soil

With ravishing shifts

The poet carefully selects words to compare the earthworm with three subjects: an “infant” (baby), “egg” and “dove”. The choice of words used in the poem is suitable even for readers with little knowledge of the language. To present the earthworm as a tender creature, the poet deploys useful lexical items: “infants”, “sucklings”, “yolk”, and “harmless”. With the use of simple language, a poet’s message can still be communicated impressively. This is what happens in the description of both animate and inanimate referents. Animate referents include: persons, birds, insects, animals with forelimbs and hind limbs, reptiles, etc. Inanimate subjects include: the crystal-clearness of any lake, the coldness of a beach, how misty the sky is, the freshness of vegetation, the thickness of the forest and the heat of the chimney. In the poem below, diction is used with originality in the form of linguistic stretches:

There is no single infant

That has the courage

To despise mother’s milk

The milk that nurtures the child to adulthood

Is not to be compared
With the cancerous diet of the outside world.
The child had ties with mother's milk
Even before the free air of the real world welcomes him
And as mother's milk drained each day
The child's mental and physical health become a surety
Who are the healthy infants?
They are those who invade mother's milk
Who are the intelligent children?
They are those that were not bereaved of mother's milk
Who are the strong middle-aged ones?
They are the fans of mother's milk.

Attention-demanding expressions in the poem include: "cancerous diet", "free air of the real world", "bereaved of mother's milk" and "fans of mother's milk". These expressions are message-laden. The worth of a poem is accentuated by the poet's level of originality in the use of expressions. Individuality in the use of words by a poet does not necessarily mean that the poet invented such words. Lexical innovations may be products of compounding or word-patterning. Lauri [8] cites that "Aristotle's view of originality acknowledges the modification of conventions of writing – such modification, though may be amazing, should be consistent in style ..." Like the phrases in the above poem, the previous poems considered in this study show that description of phenomena or things is also done by using phrases. This practice dates back to the period of Aristotle, as O' Brien [6] notes:

It is in the nature of poetry that the attempt to define a poem remains

unfinished. The place to begin is reading Aristotle's *Poetics* (cf. 350 B. C.),

after which there is a vast body of description and analysis from which a number of phrases have entered common usage, including 'emotion recollected in tranquility', 'memorable speech', 'objective correlative', 'what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed' and 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them'."

A good poet should have sufficient mastery of the word-class (parts of speech) of the language being used for the writing – adjectives and adverbs in particular. While adjectives describe (qualify) nouns, adverbs describe (modify) verbs. In *Pellets*, affixes are used to create adjectives, nouns or adverbs from other word classes. Sergio Scalise and Emiliano Guevara

[7] submit that "... words are in the lexicon while affixes are parts of rules, that is to say, affixes are not lexical items. A WFR is a sort of 'instruction' to change the category of the base into another category (e.g. A->N) and it is at the same time a phonological and a semantic operation on the base (the former typically adding an affix to the base, the latter changing its meaning ... only productive processes build the possible complex words of a language: they may not still exist, but nevertheless, conform to the morphological rules of that language. Morphological processes can be classified according to their productivity: while some WFRs are totally productive, e.g. the formation of adverbs with -ly ... which can be said to apply to most English adjectives, others exhibit a lower productivity (e.g. -dom, which only occasionally forms new words – dollardom, gangsterdom, girlhood)". The quality and quantity of these descriptive words establish uniqueness in poems. For example, through the dominant use of imagery in poetry, the creative and functional potentials of language are demonstrated. Given the works of celebrated poets from classical to contemporary times, we posit that poetry reveals the beauty of language; Sean O' Brien [6] states that "the Greek root of the word poem – poiesia – means making, an act dependent on artistry, skill, practice and let it be said – a capacity not merely for taking endless pains but for enduring perpetual dissatisfaction."

Discussion and Conclusion

A poet's messages are taken from society, and to communicate to the audience, the poet is engaged in a process of constructing meaning. The lexical items deployed in *Pellets* have semantic components that are germane to the writer's thematic pre-occupations. According to Sergio Scalise and Emiliano Guevara [7], "Aronoff gives two different views on the issue of productivity: First, he proposes (and quickly dismisses) a method to calculate the productivity of a given WFR as the ratio of possible input entries and attested output entries. Second, he points out that productivity "goes hand in hand" with semantic compositionality: any complex words whose properties are completely predictable from the interaction of the Lexicon and the set of WFRs is a possible word that does not need to be listed (whether it has been attested or not) and the related WFR is a productive one. Instead, if a word has some idiosyncratic feature (formal, semantic, syntactic), it must be stipulated and not constructed by rule." This view corroborates Halliday [9] who submits that "semogenic processes – the process of constructing meaning – cannot be understood outside of their historical contexts; but neither can they be deprived from these contexts by any sample relation ... language is at the same time a part of reality, a shaper of reality, and a metaphor for reality."

The diction deployed in *Pellets*, shows that a poet's linguistic repertoire is instrumental in the re-invention of language to convey themes. According to Berlo in Acheoah [10], "man constructed his own language under the same principles of interpretation, response and reward that govern all learning ...

in order to express meanings to himself and others, to get other people to have the same meanings, and to make responses that increased his ability to effect.” Language essentially conveys a wide range of experiences. A poet’s symbolic use of language to convey experience is fascinating. Indeed, Sapir [11] notes that “language is not merely a more or less systematic inventory of the various items of experience which seem relevant to the individual, as is so often naively assumed, but is also a self-contained creative symbolic organization, which not only refers to experience largely acquired without its help but actually defines experience for us by reason of its implicit expectations into field of experience. In this respect, language is very much like a mathematical system, which, also, records experience in the truest sense of the word ...” In literary writings, experiences or ideas are conveyed with enchanting language to arouse readers’ emotions, as noted by U. Lehtsalu, et al. [12] who posit that “besides communicating certain ideas an utterance may also produce a definite effect or arouse an emotion in the listener or reader. Linguistic resources used deliberately to fulfil a stylistic function are called stylistic devices or expressive means of the .language.”

Poetry is imaginative writing. As the poet presents his/her thematic concerns and personal emotions, he/she hinges on the principles of creative writing within the genre (poetry as verbal artistry). Creative writing is a product of the writer’s freedom of expression. As the poet conveys messages, his/her personal inclinations are articulated. Literature does not exist in a vacuum; it is a product of the writer’s existential experience, societal vices and developments. The communication of themes by the poet involves the description of persons, things, animals, places and a wide range of social phenomena. With the entrenchment of creative writing as a subject in the curriculums of educational institutions, useful teaching materials are being evolved to facilitate the teaching and learning of the subject/course, and this paper is one of such.

Notes

¹. The poems are written by Acheoah John Emike.

². Based on the principle of writing, the three major genres of literary writing (drama, prose and poetry) differ

in organization. Whether literary or non-literary, writing is done with compliance to generally acceptable conventions (standards). However, writers can flout such conventions for stylistic reason.

³. William Shakespeare is one of such writers.

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