

S. 3 LITERATURE NOTES ON POETRY. (ONLY FOR LIT STUDENTS)

ELEMENTS OF POETRY

Aspects or elements of poetry can be defined as a set of instruments used to create a poem. There are several features used to make up a good poem. They are described as below;

PERSONA/SPEAKER

To put his message, the poet creates a character who speaks in the poem. For example to highlight the plight of the beggar, a poet may write his poem from a beggar's point of view. He may alternatively use a small child who is looking at the beggar to achieve the same end.

This person that the author creates airs the poet's views and so he becomes the poet's mask or mouth piece. Thus in a poem, it is never the poet speaking but the persona and the person is also referred to as the speaker.

A poem may also have two or more personas depending on how many voices the poet uses in his poem. The person could be;

A child, a mother, an observer, a priest, a concerned person, a citizen, a politician.

The poet's choice of a persona depends on the message in the poem.

OLD GRANNY

A little freezing spider
Legs and arms gathered in her chest
Rocking with flu
I saw old granny
At Harare Market;
It was past nine of the night
When I saw the dusty crumple spider,
A torn little blanket
Was her web.

Bonus Zimunya

Try this out.

- a) Who is the speaker in this poem?
- b) Why have you come to such a conclusion?

MESSAGE/THEME

Any effort must be geared towards a certain end. A poet is always driven on by a message that he wants to share with others. This could take a form of an experience, an observation, an idea or even a feeling.

A theme is therefore an idea that the writer puts across. There are major and minor themes. A theme is not stated but the reader is supposed to infer from the characters, their actions and words, plot and the setting of the piece of writing.

To answer the question of the theme, study all the ideas that emerge from the poem and then consider those that seem dominant or run throughout the poem. However do not force themes out of the poem instead let them flow naturally. You can only arrive at a poem's meaning after understanding the feelings portrayed through the poet's language.

SUBJECT MATTER/ WHAT THE POEM IS ABOUT.

The word subject refers to the topic, concern or issue in the poem and matter refers to the details of this topic or issue. Therefore subject matter is a term used to refer to what a poem is about. The subject matter is more of the occurrences brought out in a poem.

When writing the subject matter start by stating the subject statement that summarises the poem beginning with statements like,

- The poem is an account of.....
- The poem is a description of.....
- The poem recounts the pains of.....
- The poem is a narration of.....
- The poem is a lamentation of.....
- The poem describes.....
- The poem talks about.....

PERSONIFICATION

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This the giving of human traits or characteristics to animals or non-human objects or things. In poems where personification is used, you may have animals able to cook, talk, and even own property. These actions peculiar to human beings for example in David Rubadiri's poem '*An African Thunderstorm*', the clouds are said to be pregnant. They are also said to gather and ride stately which qualities are known to humanly. This is a clear example of personification.

(Copy the poem. An African Thunderstorm below)

IRONY

Irony occurs when ideas, words or situations are contrary to what we would expect. It is the contrast or the difference between what is said and what is meant or between what happens and what is expected to happen in life and in literature. It should not be confused with **sarcasm** which is simply language designed to cause pain.

Irony is used to suggest the difference between appearance and reality between expectation and fulfillment. In poetry there are two types of irony that is situational irony and verbal irony.

Situational irony is the difference between what the characters or the reader expects and what actually happens. For example, if mother behaves like a child while children act like parents to the mother, constantly correcting her mistakes and cautioning.

Verbal irony is the difference between what a person and character says and what he means. Expression of something which is contrary on the intended meaning; the words say one thing and mean another. As such characters say the opposite of what they mean or what we expect of them.

SATIRE

Satire in itself means ridiculing human weakness. To ridicule is to make fun of. Therefore satire is criticizing human weakness in a humorous way. Those who usually employ satire target people in authority, institutions, religious leaders or even the ordinary people. People who are unable to carry out their own duties efficiently are often mocked and

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ridiculed so that we can laugh at them. For example 'Building the Nation' is a satirical poem. The permanent secretary in this poem is presented as a laughable character.

(Copy the two poems here: BUILDING THE NATION AND PSALMS 23: PART II)

Qn: With reference to Psalms 23 part II answer these question

- a. What and who is being satirized in the poem?
- b. Identify the irony in the poem.

REPETITION.

Words, sound phrases, lines, may be repeated within a poem. Sometimes repetition can enhance an element's meaning, but at other times it can dilute the meaning.

Refrain.

A phrase or group of lines that is repeated at significant moments within a poem. For example the poem 'FOOTPATH' by Stella Ngatho. In this poem the line 'Return my mother to me' is found at each several intervals in the poem. This is a refrain used to make emphasis.

RHYME AND RHYTHM

Rhythm is important for a piece of poetry to flow freely. This element of poetry refers to the music that statements in the poem make. To better understand this resonance of words along with the sound and music produced is important when reading a poem aloud.

Rhyme is a poem that rhymes has in its structure that last words of line marching each other in some form. It is important to note that a poem may either have this poetry structure or it may not for example, the last words of the first and second lines would rhyme or the first and third or the second and fourth.

Similarly sounding words are what constitutes rhyme for example cat and mat, house and mouse. This poetry style is not present in prose and novels. In order to analyze this aspect in a poem we can use what we call a rhyme scheme.

TONE, MOOD AND ATTITUDE

Tone is the quality of speaking voice in a poem or literary work. It reveals the attitude a writer has towards the subject they are writing about. It is evident in their diction, style, and opinion they express.

Mood is the state of one's feelings or mind at a particular time (especially) after reading a piece of writing. It should be noted here that every reader has a way he or she responds emotionally to a given piece of writing. Your emotions towards writing are what constitute the mood. So the mood can be:

- I. One of happiness
- II. Somber
- III. Gay relaxed
- IV. One of excitement
- V. Filled with disappointment
- VI. Romantic among others.

Attitude is the general tendency of your feelings, thinking and behavior. Your attitude towards something may be positive or negative. It can be mixed up or concerned. Then, how can you identify whether an attitude is negative or positive? You can know this from the nature of speaking voice. (Copy and refer to poem **I, TOO, SING AMERICA BY LANGSTON Hughes**. And answer these questions below)

- a) What is the speaker's attitude towards his other brother?
- b) What is his attitude towards life?
- c) What is the tone in the poem?
- d) What is the speaker's mood?
- e) How does this poem affect you?

DENOTATIVE AND CONNOTATIVE MEANINGS

The average word has three component parts: sound, denotative and connotative.

Denotative refers to the dictionary meaning of the word or the simple meaning of the words. It is also called the surface meaning.

Therefore we should know when reading poems or literature, words could have two levels of meaning that is the literal and implied meaning.

IMAGERY

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Poetry communicates experience and experience comes to us largely through the senses of seeing, tasting, hearing, smelling, feeling and touching. The word image perhaps most often suggests a mental picture that is something seen in the mind's eye. Imagery is used in literature to refer to descriptive language that evokes sensory experience. The words and phrases that are used vividly creation a sound, sight, smell, touch or taste for the reader by appealing to the senses. There are different types or forms of imagery.

Imagery can be showcased in many forms, such as metaphors and similes. An image should never be confused with a symbol.

A simile is a literally device where the writer employs the words 'like' 'resembles' or 'as' to compare two different ideas. It can be a strong word to use as a describing word in a simile or metaphor.

- He flew like a dove
- I am as bold as a lion
- He has a heart as big as the outdoors
- Her eyes sparkle like a crystal
- Her hair is like a sea
- He is acting like a clown
- I am as red as a tomato.

A metaphor is similar to a simile; however this literally device makes a comparison without the use of 'like' or 'as'

- ✓ He has a hyena's laugh
- ✓ Her face is a garden
- ✓ Her eyes were endless pools of beauty
- ✓ His voice was an explosion of sound.

Poetic license is the permission given to a writer to deviate from the conventional (usual, original) rules of grammar in order to suit their purpose. A poet may go against the rules of sentence construction or even spell a certain word wrongly for some effect in the poem.

Hyperbole/exaggeration is the deliberate amplification or over statement. Poets use it to emphasize an idea to create comic effect, reinforce, rhetorical effect or satirize. For example

- Ten thousand oceans cannot wash away my guilt
- Oscar has the appetite of a starving lion
- She was too short she could barely stand above her soles.

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Symbolism

A symbol usually represents something unnamed and means more than it is. It has layers of meanings. Whereas an image has one meaning, a symbol has many.

Writers often use a snake as a symbol of evil, an eagle for strength, a flag for patriotism, the sea for life, a cross to mean Christianity and a crescent for Islam.

Given below are helpful suggestions for identifying literary symbols;

- a) The story itself must supply a clue that a detail to be taken symbolically-symbols nearly signal their existence by emphasis, repetition or position.
- b) The meaning of a literary symbol must be established and supported by the entire context of the story. A symbol has its meaning inside not outside a story.
- c) To be called a symbol, an item must suggest a meaning different in kind from its literal meaning.
- d) A symbol has a cluster of meanings.

STEPS INVOLVED IN READING A POEM.

- Read through a poem more than once. You have to read a poem multiple times before attempting to approach it for deeper meaning yourself a chance to thoroughly and fully experience the poem.
- Is there a title, do not take this into consideration.
- Stay calm if there are any unfamiliar words or even a few terms, do not panic or obsess.
- Read it loud that is you must do this because its meanings are conveyed through sound as well as through print.
- Pay attention to punctuation to help guide the voice of its reader. You need to pay attention because the end of a line is frequently not the end of a sentence.
- Try paraphrasing. It may be best for you to write your own words from what the poet is saying in each line of the poem.
- Develop a questioning attitude while reading ask yourself questions like; who is the speaker, is the poem addressed to a certain group of people, Is there any relevance to me as the reader, is the poem making an opinion or making a simple observation about life.
- Be open to interpretation. Being open to the poets intentions can lead you to some interesting ideas and questions.

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- There are useless words also used in the poem. Poets select each and every word carefully. None should be dismissed, images and symbols all these have a purpose in the overall meaning of the poem.

Format of questions in poetry.

The questions set in poetry usually focus on the following aspects;

- a) Title
- b) Who the poet is
- c) What is the audience
- d) What the poem is about/subject matter.
- e) Feelings that is how the poem affects you and these include the poet's feeling, the speaker, and your feelings.
- f) Characters in the poem.
- g) Devices or elements in the poem or what makes the poem interesting.
- h) Your reactions to the events in the poem.
- i) Similarity between the poem and your community.
- j) Meanings of certain words and phrases in the poem.
- k) Why you like the poem or what makes it interesting.
- l) What makes this poem interesting to read.

These could be the reasons why a reader decides to choose a poem.

- Title
- Choice of words
- Message of the poem
- Lessons learnt from the poem
- Brevity/length of the poem
- Simplicity of the language used
- Easy to understand/ comprehend
- The tone, mood, atmosphere in the poem.
- Relevance to the society
- Personal experience related to the poem
- Theme and rhythm
- Repetition
- Structure/stanza.

END.

(Copy these notes and read them as they will be explained when you return.)

Good luck in your endeavors. C/O OSINDE DIANA

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