

## **Style of Presentation as a Reflection of Circumstantial Mood: An Example of *The Waste Land* and *A Plague of Many Colours***

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### Abstract

The manner of presentation employed by an author speaks volume, not just of the author's intention, but of the shared feeling of the time about which the author writes – circumstantial mood. The early twentieth century and the early twenty first century – the post-World War I and the Covid-19 pandemic era – are captured in *The Waste Land* and *A Plague of Many Colours* respectively, not in their thematic contents, but in their modes of presentation. This study examines how the forms, structures, and general layout of events reflect the general mood using post-structuralism as a guide. The study concludes that the unusual length, unequal stanzas, and fragmentation in *The Waste Land* are reflections of the general mood of the early twentieth century. The study also concludes that the aesthetic of mixed-genres that are evident in *A Plague of Many Colours* is a reflection of the Covid-19 pandemic era.

**Key Words:** circumstantial mood, mode of presentation, post-structuralism, fragmentation, mixed-genres

### Introduction

Often, creative writers make efforts to record striking events which occur in human societies, presenting such events as historical phenomenon of a particular time in human history or making imaginative remarkable statements about such events. This is albeit merely mimicking human conditions in order to educate, inform, or correct. This effort to record striking events, impactful occurrences, is the reason Zumaray Wajed and Ezzatullah Saghar explain that creative writing “serves as a means of intergenerational communication by articulating the intricacies of existences” (1). This is also why Z. N. Meliyevna explains that

every creative writing has an “archival value” (164) and because he concentrated on how poetry documents historical events, he adds that poetry captures “the spirit of different ages” (164).

The archiving of historical events in literary works is not only done through direct recording or presentation of contents which thematically present and address certain points; it is equally done artistically through the style a writer has chosen. Felix E. and Arcilla Jr. share this view when they state that poets record striking events and complex societal occurrences through “artful use of metaphors, personification, imagery etc” (1). In sum, Felix and Arcilla argue that the general style of a poet may significantly be a reflection of socio-historical occurrences. Implied in the explanations of Felix and Arcilla is that poetic style includes the structures, the forms, and the general layout of poems. Therefore, style can reflect occurrences just like thematic content.

Sometimes, the style a writer employs may not only make a direct recording of events and may not directly reflect socio-historical occurrence; it may be a recording of the general disposition of the people who experienced a particular phenomenal occurrence in a particular time in human history. This general disposition which can be described as circumstantial mood because it is often an incidental general feeling of a people is what Zumaray Wajahed and Ezzatullah Saghar refer to in their argument that creative writers do more than “articulating the consequences of societal-accepted occurrences” (2). For the authors, the feeling of the people who experience certain occurrence is as well important to creative writers. This type of mood is often external to the literary work which reflects it, and Meliyevna has agreed that creative works can “produce various effects” (166), one of which is a mood that is external to a work.

Because of the externality of circumstantial mood to the work which reflects it, it is often eschewed by most scholarly critics who consider styles of writers in literary works. Hardly have scholars made efforts to link a writer's manner of presentation to the disposition of people in the writer's time. This study attempts to give attention to this neglected aspect of literary works. Hence, it focuses on the reflection of the mood (general disposition) of the world in trouble moments as evident in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Vicky Sylvester's *A Plague of Many Colours*.

It is worthy of note that any writer who chooses to represent circumstantial mood through style, and particularly mode of presentation, may have to do what other writers have not done; hence, the writer may have to go against established norms. For this reason, post-structuralism provides an appropriate framework for analysis in this study. According to Hans Bertens, Post-structuralism generally goes against the norm in every instance of life and according to Gilles Deleuze, Post-structuralism promotes going against traditional views and mode of representations. Here, both Bertens and Deleuze highlight the basic tenets of Post-structuralism which include questioning fixed meanings, challenging structures of any kind, and challenging traditional mode of thinking.

In this study, Post structuralism is used to mirror how T.S. Eliot and Vicky Sylvester went against certain literary and creative norms in their writing of *The Waste Land* and *A Plague of Many Colours* in order to represent the general feeling of people at various times in human history. It is commonplace for creative writers, especially poets to employ forms and structures for aesthetic purposes and this has become a traditional pattern of representation and mode of thinking. This pattern of representation and mode of thinking is challenged by Eliot and Sylvester in *The Waste Land* and *A Plague of Many Colours*. Hence, the forms of *The Waste Land* and *A Plague of Many Colours* and the structural representations of ideas and images in them are considered as deviations from known structures, patterns of representation and common mode of thinking. ***The Waste Land and the Troubles of the Early Twentieth Century***

According to William Keylor, the early twentieth century was bedevilled by troubles that were way beyond the imagination of people. Keylor goes on to list the First World War as one of the most devastating occurrences of the twentieth century, which affected people and presented them with conditions with which they struggled for a long time. These challenges of the twentieth century, the problems of early modern society, had great influences on creative writers who made efforts to creatively document historical events and draw attention to the troubles that befell people at that stage in human history. These influences were the observations Folasade Hunsu made and explained that the modernist writers of the early modern society made attempts to represent the realities of their time.

*The Waste Land* is one of the literary expressions of the modernist writers in which T.S. Eliot draws attention to the vagaries of the early modern society and the challenges (the realities) the people in the early modern society faced. Eliot captures his view of the modern world in the metaphoric title *The Waste Land* which symbolically describes the early modern world as a destroyed society with disillusioned people. With the description of the modern world offered in the title, Eliot has guided readers on how to understand the literary principles he has employed in the poem especially the style. Published in 1922, *The Waste Land* is a free verse written in five sections of unequal lines and stanzas. The sections are sub-titled thus: “The Burial of the Dead”, “A Game of Chess”, “The Fire Sermon”, “Death by Water”, and “What the Thunder Said”. Collectively, the poems symbolically and significantly deal with various aspects of the realities of the early modern age expressed through style.

*The Waste Land* deviates from established literary tradition in style and experiments with new ways of representing the ugly realities of modern world. One of the uniqueness of *The Waste Land* in style is its structure. It is no doubt, a poem of unusual length, containing four hundred and thirty four lines that are patterned into five sections of forty four stanzas. As

at 1922 when it was written, it was the longest poem in English Language and apart from unusual length, the stanzas have no resemblance as they contain varying lines and length of sentences. For instance, “The Burial of the Dead” has five stanzas which have 18, 24, 17, 14 and 3 respectively as the number of lines in them whereas “The Fire Sermon” has sixteen stanzas which have 9, 6, 15, 4, 8, 27, 7, 8, 9, 13, 13, 4, 11, 1, 3, and 1 as the number of lines in them respectively.

Prior to the advent of modernist writing of the early twentieth century, poems appeared in fixed forms with stanzas of a poem looking alike. Within a particular poem, there were the same number of lines, length of lines, metrical patterns, and rhyme schemes. Apart from the fact that *The Waste Land* does not conform to the idea of same stanzas, *The Waste Land* has no rhyming pattern. Although a poet like Walt Whitman had experimented with unrhymed poems (blank verses) in the Nineteenth century, the blank verse became popular among the modernist writers among who was T.S. Eliot. It is worthy of note that the blank verse was not necessarily a way of beatifying poem among the modernist writers; it was a remarkable pattern that reflects the mood of the early twentieth century. Hence, the unrhymed stanzas in *The Waste Land* did not result from Eliot’s attempt to beatify his poem, but from his attempt to show the prevailing mood in the time he wrote the poem.

Another uniqueness which marks a point of departure in the style of *The Waste Land* is fragmentation. Fragmentation is one of the styles the modernist literary writers employed to show how disjointed things were in the early modernist society and the disunity of ideas and events in the world. In *The Waste Land*, fragmentation is evident in the flow of thought (i.e. the idea being expressed), and the imagery created to convey messages. Unlike the consistency of the flow of ideas in poems like “The Ballad of Gentleness,” “Ode to a Nightingale,” “A Dying Christian to his Soul,” and “The Eagle” all of which represent the

poetics of the Renaissance, the Romantic, the Neoclassical, and the Victorian writers respectively, ideas in *The Waste Land* are presented in a disjointed manner. For instance, in “A Game of Chess,” the first speaker recounts what transpires between an aristocrat woman and a man who makes attempt to woo her. This idea is expressed thus:

The chair she sat in, like a burnished throne  
 Glowed on the marble where the glass  
 Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines  
 From which a golden Cupidon peeped out  
 [Another hid his eyes behind his wing] (lines 77 – 80).

The second speaker recounts the experience of an alienated woman in a poor neighbourhood as follows:

Under the firelight, under the bush, her hair  
 Spread out in fiery points  
 Glowed into words, then would be savagely still  
 “My nerves are bad to night. Yes, bad. Stay with me”  
 “Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.” (lines 108-114)

The ideas (flow of thoughts) expressed by the two speakers above are fragmented in a sense that there is no linking line or stanza that could make the ideas coherent. Further in “A Game of Chess,” a discussion between two women is presented without a link with the preceding ideas. The discussion is presented thus:

“What shall we ever do?”  
 The hot water at ten  
 And if it rains, a closed car at four  
 And we shall play a game of chess.  
 Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door.

When Lil’s husband got demobbed, I said  
 I didn’t mince my words, I said to her myself,  
 HURRY UP PLEASE. IT’S TIME (lines 134 – 141)

Imagery is usually a coherent sensuous figure in the literary tradition which preceded the advent of modernist literary expression, a literary tradition which expresses the difficulties of living in the early modern time. For instance, in “A Dying Christian to his Soul,” the image of someone who has lost his life and who no longer exists in the world is created, and in the three stanzas of the poem, other images and symbols are created around the central imagery to express how the soul of the dead proceeds into eternity. With such a description, the imagery is coherent. In *The Waste Land* imagery, becomes a broken incomplete figure or series of incoherent images. In “The Burial of the Dead,” for instance, a descriptive image of a disappointed woman is created to depict the level of deception in the modern world. The woman speaks of her disappointment thus:

“You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;  
 “They called me the hyacinth girl.  
 -Yet, when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden  
 Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not  
 Speak and my eyes failed. I was neither  
 Living nor dead, and I know nothing (lines 35 – 40)

Perhaps, someone whom the speaker in the excerpt above trusts so much has disappointed her while trying to get rich, and the experience of the speaker has been described in a way that a reader can decipher the extent to which she was deceived and dealt with. However, what becomes of the disappointed woman is not described further than line forty. Instead, another descriptive image is made of a clairvoyant whose power can no longer save from troubles: “Madame Sosostriis, famous clairvoyante / Had a bad cold, nevertheless / Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe,” (lines 43 – 45). The image of this symbolic clairvoyant shows that human beings in the modern society cannot solve the challenges of keeping the society peaceful and ordered despite the wide increase in knowledge; but the

image of the clairvoyant woman, like that of the disappointed woman, ends without further description of what becomes of her.

The image of the clairvoyant woman is immediately followed by yet another descriptive image of a city with many dead people: “Unreal City / Under the brown fog of a winter dawn, / A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many / I had not thought death had undone so many” (lines 60 – 66). This unreal city described is not the city in which the clairvoyant woman lives; it is aloof. In short, “The Waste Land” shifts between issues and images in attempt to convey important modernist ideology. Hence, it is fragmentary and points to the modernist notion that the world and things in it cannot be ordered.

### ***A Plague of Many Colours and the Mood of Covid-19 Pandemic***

*A Plague of Many Colours* draws attention to the difficulties, pains and the general complex experiences of human societies in the Covid-19 pandemic era. Mngumba Vicky Sylvester uses the title to direct attention to what is contained in the work, and employs an appreciable aesthetic quality of arranging events in somewhat progressive manner. Hence, while “many colours” in the title symbolises various effects the Covid-19 pandemic had on people, presentations in the work begin with the description of the coronavirus as a cause of restriction in African societies, and progress into an expression of the trauma which the restriction caused African people, and then progress into an expression of the good side of the coronavirus and its consequent lockdown.

Notwithstanding the beautiful creative inputs made in the creation of *A Plague of Many Colours* which have been identified in the paragraph above, *A Plague of Many Colours* is a mishmash of genres containing various forms of literary and non-literary expressions under the sub-titles: “The Tales”, “Text Messages of Pain”, “Laughter”, “Poems”, and

“Articles”. This layout, an assortment of works that belong to different genres into a single book, is a poststructuralist orientation which challenges any traditional norm. The norm has always been a presentation of a book in a layout that clearly situates it within a particular genre. Hence, it is common to have a collection of poems, a prose narration, a drama text, or a collection of short stories. *A Plague of Many Colours* does not belong to any clearly identifiable genre.

Like the style in *The Waste Land*, the style in *A Plague of Many Colours* is not necessarily a product of an attempt to make a beautiful presentation of a mixed genre book; it is a careful presentation of a work that reflects the mood of the Covid-19 era. It is worthy of note that the Covid-19 pandemic is one of the most devastating occurrences which the world has witnessed since the end of World War II. It is as well worthy of note that due to the rate of deaths, the economic impact, and the restriction it created among people and societies of the world, people were thrown into a horrible state of confusion and disorganisation. It can be said, therefore, that the circumstantial mood during the period of Covid-19 pandemic was that of confusion and disorganisation. This circumstantial mood is one of the points Obiora Ogbonna highlights in his assertion that “*A Plague of Many Colours* is a statement on the various facets of the Covid-19 pandemic” (4). The circumstantial mood is external to *A Plague of Many Colours* as it is not in the thematic content; however, it reflects in the style which Sylvester employed.

### Conclusion

Both T.S. Eliot and Mnguemba Vicky Sylvester went against established norms in *The Waste Land* and *A Plague of Many Colours* respectively. Eliot went against poetic tradition of the pre-modern era in attempt to reflect the feeling of the early modern era while

Sylvester went against established norm of presenting every work in a specific genre in an attempt to reflect the feeling of the Covid-19 pandemic era. Hence, each of them uses style of presentation as veritable aesthetic tool to draw attention to what the circumstance they wrote about presents to human society.

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