The Stylistic Effects of Ellipsis, Rhetorical Questions and Exclamations in Odun Balogun’s Short Stories

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Abstract
This paper examines the deployment of stylistic features in The Late Visitor and Adjusted Lives: Stories of Structural Adjustments against the background of the fact that the laconic short story sub-genre is characteristically shorn of the luxury of digressions, commentaries and elaborate descriptions in advancing its themes. The short story is characterized by a straight-to-the-point strategy of literary presentation. As a result, information about character, setting, and plot is always compressed so that so much is left unsaid. This paper studies the use of the ellipsis, rhetorical questions and exclamations as a communication enhancing strategy in compensation for the descriptive inadequacies of the sub-genre. It then argues that ellipsis, rhetorical question and exclamation produce significant aesthetic effects and provide enormous narrative information in meaning representation in relation to the depiction of the themes of economic deprivation, slavery, love, disillusionment, betrayal, poverty, and the conflict between tradition and modernity in the collections of short stories in both texts.

Keywords: Stylistic effects, Ellipsis, Rhetorical Questions, Exclamations
**Introduction**

This paper attempts to show that elliptical, interrogative and exclamatory constructions are deployed as a means of achieving terseness and tension in the portrayal of the themes of disillusionment, betrayal, poverty, love, slavery and the conflict between tradition and modernity in *The Late Visitor* and *Adjusted Lives: Stories of Structural Adjustment* (hereafter *Adjusted Lives*). Its intention is to underline the fact that the evaluation and interpretation of meaning in the discourse of the short story sub-genre can also be conducted through an analysis of syntax rather than the evaluation of lexical semantics alone, as is often suggested by many studies in literary criticism.

It examines terseness as an integral element of the narratology of the short story in Odun Balogun’s *The Late Visitor* and *Adjusted Lives*. It explains how the broad themes of slavery, love, betrayal, poverty, economic deprivation, disillusionment, and the conflict between tradition and modernity are effectively realised through the deployment of syntactic forms such as elliptical, question and exclamatory constructions; despite the characteristic terseness of the short story sub-genre. It thus provides evidence in demonstration of Allan Pasco’s opinion that “brevity determines the devices used and the effects achieved” in a text, and that “for a short story to succeed, the author must overcome the restraints of limited length and communicate not a segment, a tattered fragment, but a world” (127). In this paper, the short story is viewed as “. . . a stretch of fictional prose which is shaped and controlled so as to leave no margin of error in the way it creates a pleasing, unified impression on the reader’s imagination” (Valerie Shaw 22), and the choice of this perspective is informed by its appropriate emphasis on a stylized generic pattern closely related to the beauty and meaning it generates. In addition, it takes cognisance of tension, intensity and relevance as essential characteristics of the short story.

**Theoretical Background**

Geoffrey Leech and Mick Short’s theory of ‘style as text’ frames this study. This stylistics approach is adopted for its capacity to better illuminate textual interpretation by its integration of linguistics and literary appreciation. Stylistics matches literary interpretation with linguistic evidence as it combines the descriptive and analytical methods of modern linguistics and the interpretive goals of literary criticism. The view of ‘style as text’ relies on M. A. K Halliday and Ruqaiya Hassan’s definition of text as “any passage of whatever length, written or spoken, that forms a unified whole” (1) and suggests that style denotes the linguistic characteristics of a particular text. Our choice of this theoretical framework is based on the argument of Leech and Short, to which we subscribe:

The text is the nearest we can get to a homogenous and specific use of language. It is therefore the natural starting place for the study of style. In a text we can study style in more detail, and with more systematic attention to what words or phrases are chosen in preference to others. We can exhibit our material on the page and examine the interrelations between one choice of language and another. We can thus put our study on a firmer basis of observation and evidence than if we took a broader domain . . . the soundness of statements about wider matters such as authorial style relies ultimately on statements we can make about particular texts (11).
And, since our goal in this paper is to demonstrate the relationship between linguistic choice and aesthetic function in *The Late Visitor* and *Adjusted Lives* as we account for the terse style of both texts, we find this view of ‘style as text’ suitable, as it is compatible with the homogeneous use of language in the texts and, thus, enables us to show how language is deployed in a specific textual context within a specific genre of literature.

**Review of Related Scholarship**

Although available literature on *Adjusted Lives* and *The Late Visitor* suggests that very little has been done in terms of stylistic studies of both texts, a few other relevant studies that justify our engagement with Odun Balogun’s artistry exist. Reviewing *Adjusted Lives* with focus on Balogun’s thematic concerns, Ezenwa-Ohaeto observed that “a reasonable critical insight, a measure of interesting scholarship and an effective imagination” (1) are the three elements that helped Balogun in the narration of his stories in the collection. He added that the theme of adjustment which features in the lives of the characters is “reflected in their attitudes, notions and ideas, and it is portrayed from the local to the international levels” (1). Tosin Gbogi also examined *Adjusted Lives* and stated that “through well-etched and wise visuals of home and exile, Balogun presents a ‘pot pourri’ of carefully knitted stories in …*The Late Visitor*… each story bears an articulate testimony to the internal and external politics of the human mind.” He concluded that *Adjusted Lives* “represents a record of the confluence where persons and public politics intersect” (Web).

There are also a handful of reviews of “The Apprentice”, one of the short stories in *Adjusted Lives* and the overwhelming perception is that the story is allegorical in the way it is structured to teach the lesson that it is futile for people to attempt to run from their past. Chinua Achebe and C.L. Innes, for instance, note that “The Apprentice” is allegorical because Ogunmola, the major character, is:

Like Africa whose shores were flooded by the invaders who could not let it decide its own future; who would not let it be free to exhibit its unique traits or to decide its developmental path, but who would be influenced by people of doubtful capabilities with second class degrees all over the world compounding an already complex problem in the process (Web).

While affirming the allegorical interpretation, this assertion also lends credence to the widely held idea that short story writers, for memorability, exploit fables and mythologies in constructing their plots. Elvira Godono equally reviewed “The Apprentice” from the perspective of ‘motherism’, an African alternative to Western feminism. He stated that “the protagonist refuses to escape from his country. He does not choose exile, but struggles to preserve a bond with the story of his motherland, researching his roots in the family stories his mother told him” (n. p.).

Adopting the ‘return to motherland’ motif, Joseph McLaren examined *Adjusted Lives* from the angle of Africans living in the diaspora. He cited “The Hyde Park Preacher” as a story that reflects the position of Africans living in the diaspora and emphasises the need for them to return to their country. McLaren observed that *Adjusted Lives* is also a reflection of some of the reasons for which the writer has chosen to reside in the United States rather than in his own country, Nigeria. McLaren noted that “F. Odun Balogun identified family reasons and the Structural
Adjustment Programme in Nigeria as the causes for remaining in the United States following a fellowship” (424). Tanure Ojaide also examined Balogun’s Adjusted Lives with particular focus on its structure, thematic focus, characterisation and language. He noted that the structuring of the stories into sections such as “The Philosophy”, “The Heresies”, and “The Restoration” is chronological. By this he means that the structural division of the stories is such that it reflects the time and periods in the history of the nation, Nigeria, starting from the earliest to the present. This account alludes to the historical progression from the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, during which the first set of Africans were kidnapped and sold into slavery, through colonialism to the then contemporary Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) era. He further stated that the characters in the collection are graphically delineated so that they become indelible in the reader’s mind. On the theme, he remarked that the focus is on African and Western connections and the harsh economic conditions arising from the SAP regime. And for the language in Adjusted Lives, Ojaide found it quite thrilling, although weakened by the use of some English clichés like ‘from the horse’s mouth’ and ‘every Tom Dick and Harry.’

Odun Balogun also conducted a comparative study of Chinua Achebe’s Girls at War and other Stories and Taban lo Liyong’s Fixions. He examined their stories and provided details of recurrent themes, subject matters, setting, narrative devices, diction and literary devices. Their short stories, according to him, “are representative of the major thematic concerns and artistic trends in the African short story” (56). He added that Achebe’s stories are representative of traditional methods of writing in Africa because his stories are written in the realistic mode, while lo Liyong represents African short story writers who adopt the modernist experimental approach because he is “the most exciting of African avant-garde short story writers” (56). He then concluded that while “their stories contrast to produce the stylistic dichotomy between tradition and modernity, they are in agreement on their critical appraisal of Africa’s past and present cultures” (63). This thematic synchrony found in the writing of both writers also applies to the writing of Balogun, whose texts constitute the basic material for our current study.

Now, what is evident from the body of literature reviewed above is the fact that there is a paucity of studies of Balogun’s The Late Visitor and Adjusted Lives. In addition, the general impression created is that the evaluation and interpretation of the texts studied depend basically on the analysis of lexico-semantics, themes or narrative techniques. This study is an attempt, therefore, to provide a fresh stylistic perspective to the reading and interpretation of the narratives with focus on syntactic form.

Analysis of Stylistic Features

The focus here is on those stylistic elements that are deliberately deployed to produce the terse dynamic of the short story sub-genre while also effectively communicating the themes of economic deprivation, slavery, betrayal, disillusionment, poverty, love, and the conflict between tradition and modernity. The goal in this paper is to demonstrate the relationship between linguistic choice and aesthetic function. This, it is hoped, should reinforce the idea that the appropriation and interpretation of meaning in the discourse of the short story sub-genre are not entirely dependent on the use of formal lexical items alone.
**Ellipsis**

Ellipsis is marked by extreme economy of speech and writing (Merriam-Webster English Dictionary) and involves the omission of certain lexical and/or grammatical elements in a text. It is generally applied for rhetorical brevity and is often signalled in texts by the use of elliptical marks, usually three lineally arranged dots (...). In both texts, ellipsis, which constitutes one of the major syntactic forms deployed in *The Late Visitor* and *Adjusted Lives*, functions to achieve economy of space and lexical items, create suspense, and heighten tension. Instances of the use of ellipsis abound in both collections.

**Text 1**

(a) “But then it wouldn’t be my mother tapping me on my big toe because my mother was long . . . ” (*The Late Visitor* 13)

(b) “That was impossible and even, if it were possible, it would again be impossible because my mother was long . . .” (*The Late Visitor* 14)

(c) “Why didn’t he just shut up his mouth about it? Why did he have to behave so damn delicate? Why . . .” (*The Late Visitor* 23)

In the examples above, ellipsis essentially indicates omission and discontinuity. In *Text 1*(a), it marks the omission of some grammatical units of the construction. The omitted information is not easily recoverable from the context by the reader because it occurs as the story is just beginning to develop and this creates a feeling of suspense in the text. In *Text 1*(b), the omitted item is obviously understood and its repetition would have amounted to monotony and verbosity. The omitted word is ‘dead’ and it is left for the reader to fill in. By this, the writer achieves variety, rhetorical brevity and emphasis at the same time. In other words, this repeated omission of *dead* (that the reader also repeatedly fills in) ironically reinforces it in the mind of the reader such that ellipsis serves to further highlight and emphasize the belief of some cultural systems that the dead co-exist and physically interact with the living.

In *Text 1*(c), ellipsis both reinforces the questions in the mind of the character and invites the reader to join the contemplation. Ellipsis, in producing brevity, also enhances terseness as the sequence of questions raised by the narrator is broken. This abrupt termination creates tension and suspense and these, in turn, enhance the development of the theme of tradition versus modernity in the text.

**Text 2**

“My kind hearted brother writes: Agatha married a certain driver from the town of Ondo a forth night ago . . .” (*The Late Visitor* 26).

In *Text 2*, ellipsis indicates discontinuity. There are a number of other descriptive details that the narrator does not go ahead to provide. The exclusive focus on the marriage between Agatha and a driver suggests that it is the basic and crucial piece of information intended to be communicated at this point in the narrative. When the narrator fails to provide details about the marriage ceremony – the place, the guests, music, dance, entertainment, etc., and withholds a description of the driver, the narration is made terse, concise and compact in consonance with the structural texture of the short story sub-genre. This validates the opinion of Yomi Okunowo who suggests that ellipsis helps to ensure the economic usage of words in a particular text (79). Other instances of the
use of ellipsis are found on pages 16, 19, 22, 26, 50, 102, 103, 105, 106, 114 and 117.

Text 3

“In his last letter, he had pleaded: ‘Mother, please take care of yourself. You know there is nothing that would give me more happiness than to be able to show my appreciation for all you suffered on my account . . .’” (Adjusted Lives 32)

Ellipsis in Text 3 also indicates that the letter is longer than what is represented in the narrative. However, the narration applies the principle of relevance and leverages on the resulting tightly patterned structure. Ellipsis here thus serves to underline the strong filial relationship between the mother and her son. As the narration trails off with the ellipsis marks, we are invited to acknowledge the relentless plea for understanding and forgiveness by the son to his mother over his failure to return home when others were returning. This adds to the terse structure of the narrative. Other instances of the use of ellipsis in Adjusted Lives abound on pages 36, 37, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 53, 62 and 63.

All through The Late Visitor and Adjusted Lives, ellipsis is a recurring and striking syntactic feature. Ellipsis performs both dialogic and narrative functions: dialogic when occurring in dialogues and narrative when appearing within the authorial narrative. Generally, ellipsis enables the omission of trivial and irrelevant elaboration so that much depends on the suggestiveness of signs and inference by the reader. In allowing the reader fill in the narrative gaps through imagination, the reader becomes an active participant in the creation of the fictional world. And, in all the instances of the use of ellipsis, the narration is shorn of verbose descriptive detail that would have otherwise made the narratives too elaborate to qualify as short stories. Unlike the novelist, the short story writer is deprived of the luxury of extended elaborations. He is constrained to represent only events of crucial relevance to his plot. Thus, in The Late Visitor and Adjusted Lives, the narration can focus “only on those details that are ‘bound’ to the pre-established plan” (Charles E. May, xvi). Ellipsis thus functions in the stead of irrelevant lengthy description, elaborate narrations, pleas, explicit thoughts, orations, etc., so that the reader’s focus is directed towards the central message being conveyed.

From the basic information and sparse descriptions provided however, the reader still gains amazing insights as he makes inferences from the linguistic signposts (in this case, ellipsis) placed by the narrator. This validates Julio Cortazar’s assertion in Charles May that “the short story’s significant element is the act of choosing a real or imaginary happening that has the mysterious property of illuminating something beyond itself” (xvii) which, in the words of Cortazar, can be attributed to the genre’s “technique of compression and intensity” (xvii).

The result of the skilful use of ellipsis (as a narrative strategy for condensing time and space) is the creation of the effect of brevity which, according to Viorica Patea, is “relevance, intensity and tension”. Note that tension is a significant element for the advancement of themes in the short story. The overall effect of the deployment of this technique is a tight dramatic patterning of events which, as Barry Pain says in Charles May, creates “a very curious, haunting, and suggestive quality” (25) in both narratives. In other words, Balogun evokes various emotional responses with a minimum of means but with a greater intensity in the
reader than a novelist would do through detailed and elaborate description.

2.1.2 Rhetorical Questions
The interrogative construction is visually recognisable as it is signalled by a question mark. The interrogative sentence has the rhetorical function of asking a question and most interrogatives request information or at least invite a reply. In some cases, however, the interrogative expression may neither actually request information nor invite a reply. Where this is the case, it may have been deployed only as a rhetorical question. The rhetorical question is basically deployed for the aesthetic effects that it has the capacity to create. M. H. Abrams and G. G. Harpham define the rhetorical question as “a sentence in the grammatical form of a question which is not asked in order to request information or to invite a reply, but to achieve a greater expressive force than a direct assertion” (347). The rhetorical questions are the focus of this section of our work. It is observed that they are used to condense information so that so much is ‘said’ within a few lines as the reader ponders over some of the questions asked. In some of the stories in The Late Visitor and Adjusted Lives, there is a predominant use of rhetorical questions: characters ask questions expecting no answers, responses or replies from anyone in particular.

Text 4

How else would you know what killed the dead? Who to blame, or not to blame? Whether to rejoice or be sad? Which precautions to take? Which burial observances to follow to the letter, which to discard? How to know whether you are burying a human dead or spirit dead? How else do you read the will of the dead? How to know how soon the dead intends to return? How in general penetrates the world beyond for directions to our actions here on earth on such a momentous occasion as the departure of a relation from this reality to that other? (The Late Visitor 17/18)

The character’s thoughts are compressed into this mix of rhetorical questions which at once impose an oratorical flair and an inquisitive, contemplative tone on the narration. In the latter sense, the rhetorical questions signal interior monologue on the part of the narrator who has both a personal burden of coming to terms with the folly of expansive and expensive obsequies, his own insistence on consulting the Ifa priest, before committing his dead father to the grave, and of convincing the reader about same. The narrator’s interior monologue serves here to advance the plot of the narration.

The terse style of the author is also demonstrated in the sense that the few rhetorical questions that are posed in the narrator’s voice serve as interior monologue. It presents the ideas, enclosed in a pithy structure that the author is trying to communicate to his readers. These include the importance of conducting an investigation of one’s dead before burying them, the need to discourage the practice of partying and over-celebration at burial ceremonies, establishing the truth about reincarnation of the spirit of a dead person, and the importance of knowing the ritual to perform in order to ensure the smooth transition of a dead person into the world beyond. As a matter of fact, these rhetorical questions function as the literary anchor of the story. The rhetorical questions, thus, perform an emphatic function as they reinforce the narrator’s belief in and conviction about traditional customs and
practices. The interrogative expressions, thus, invite the readers to participate, whether consciously or subconsciously, in the assessment and evaluation of the message(s) in the texts. This is because the answers to the rhetorical questions that are posed here cannot be found anywhere in the story. In other words, these questions arouse the emotions of the readers and lead them to empathise with the protagonist and critically evaluate and reflect on the narration.

The above technique enhances the involvement and participation of the readers in the events going on in the fictional world but also, more significantly, ensures that the narration is shorn of details and elaborations that would have resulted in copious verbosity. Through this artistic device, the readers are creatively awakened to focus on the main issues while the texts achieve rhetorical brevity (by the compression of events and situations while effectively communicating the message that there is the need to respect tradition and that there are consequences when traditions are ignored), and transfers the burden of generalization and rumination unto them. In the process, their emotion is stirred up to attune with the prevailing mood in the text. This involvement enhances the readers’ comprehension of the message in the text and, as a consequence, induces in them the feeling of love and respect for the dead.

Text 5

And haven’t I been paying for it ever since – this amputated limb? From then on, hasn’t it been always calculations! Calculations!! And nothing but calculations?!!! And are you not forced into it at every bend whether you like it or not? Even when you passionately desire only the pure fire of love, that was reminiscent of the first throb of your heart? (The Late Visitor 25)

Text 5 is obtained from the story titled “Calculations”. The theme communicated here is that of lost love. One can see that the lead character is reasoning within himself and his expression shows his resignation to the situation in which he finds himself. He would have loved to change the situation if he had the power. But since he is incapable of doing that, he gives up and accepts the life that fate has chosen for him. In Text 5, the narrator’s emotion of anger and feeling of regret are captured in rhetorical questions. This use of rhetorical questions amplifies the protagonist’s angst and further projects the theme of lost love. The use of this linguistic feature ensures the reader’s sustained interest in the story and heightens his empathic feeling of regret along with the protagonist following the loss of his love by reason of his calculations. These rhetorical questions become strategies for the creation of the melancholic mood needed for the reader to follow and appreciate the salient lessons about the far-reaching effects of our present decisions and mistakes which emerge from the depression and feeling of loneliness accompanying losing one’s love. And because the short story writer is not privileged to have the space in his plot to digress, indulge in lengthy description of environment and emotions, and give individual characterization, he has the responsibility to ensure that his narration is tightly patterned to realise symmetry of effect. The use of rhetorical questions therefore contributes significantly to the terseness in the style deployed by the author in The Late Visitor and Adjusted Lives.

Exclamatory Constructions

The exclamatory constructions are used to convey puissant emotions of anger, disgust, contempt, mockery, disappointment,
surprise, excitement and hatred. The several instances of the use of exclamatory constructions and how they enhance terseness in relation to the theme of the text are discussed below.

**Text 6**

‘But it was my mother. Who else would it have been’! (13)

‘The idea! A woman long since dead paying a night visit’! (15)

‘May be I was becoming a somnambulist. A somnambulist! That was unlikely’. (The Late Visitor 15)

Exclamatory sentences show this character’s doubts about the experience she had just had from the encounter with her long dead mother. Her thoughts are presented as exclamations (graphically signalled by exclamation marks) and dramatically reveal her effort at persuading the reader to accept the fact that a long dead woman can be seen by the living. The exclamations function as a stylistic technique enabling the rhetorical brevity of what would have otherwise been a detailed description and amplifying the main theme of conflict of reality versus superstition in the text. This strategy enhances the projection of the idea that supernatural events such as communication between the living and the dead are an integral part of physical human existence that should not just be considered to be superstition. In addition, this creative technique invites the readers to ponder and reflect on the possibility of circumstances that are supernatural within our immediate environment. Supernatural and religious issues are by nature not easy to describe. They usually require lengthy, persuasive explanations and rhetorical prowess to win a listener over. Yet, the same message is effectively communicated through the medium of the short story despite its attendant limited volume by the use of exclamatory sentences.

**Text 7**

‘But for you to do that! You; whom I love so!’ (Adjusted Lives 43)

The exclamatory marks in **Text 7** help to convey a feeling of disappointment and regret. One of the characters exclaims to the protagonist expressing his feeling of disappointment. This exclamatory form helps the stimulation, in the reader, of the desire to connect the antecedent situation in reference to the present circumstance in the story. It also triggers suspense as the reader anticipates both the reaction of the protagonist to his master’s emotional outburst and his possible response to the ill-treatment that might result from this disappointment. The immense quantum of unhappiness, displeasure and disappointment felt by the master for the action of his apprentice are encapsulated and expressed in just a few words that are yet potent enough to evoke a feeling of pity from the reader. In addition, the strategy propels and projects the story’s main theme of resistance. It resonates the apparent exhortation of the readers to resist succumbing to emotional blackmail or pressure from other people who are essentially driven by the desire to superimpose their own views.

**Conclusion**

Everyday situations and events, with all the uncertainty and complexity associated with them, constitute the subject matter of both short story collections. Portraying this subject matter is an enormous task requiring elaborate characterisation and a detailed representation of environment. But with a tight patterning of events, aided by the deployment of certain syntactic features, the
emotions of the reader are aroused and redirected to the beautiful mystery of the world before him. There is an intensive compression of events in the narratives through the effective use of selected syntactic forms that engender rhetorical brevity and terseness. The feeling of perplexity, awe and mystery that pervades the short stories are made patent through the effective exploitation of syntactic features such as ellipsis, interrogative and exclamatory constructions, here deployed as strategies of brevity. The same feeling of perplexity evoked by these features aids the realisation of the tone and mood of the narrative with a minimum of means.

Ellipsis facilitates the omission of trivial and irrelevant explanations, the avoidance of verbosity in the narrative, and the quickening of the tempo of reading. Interrogatives enhance the narratives’ oratorical force and depth of inquiry, both of which get the reader thinking while so much is then left to his imagination. The rhetorical questions produced by interrogatives further enhance the projection of the subject matter and concretise it more adequately for the reader’s understanding. These enable the ‘showing’ rather than ‘telling’ of what is taking place in the story and this is an important dramatic characteristic of the short story. Of this dramatic quality, Odun Balogun says:

In some respects, the short story resembles drama with its emphasis on action and dialogue. The short story usually concentrates on a single or a few actions and it often likes to make the plot permanently memorable by dramatizing it in vivid action and effective dialogue. Even though African short story writers also compose introspective works, the vast majority of their stories are dramatic and some are strikingly so (29).

Exclamatory sentences convey feelings of disappointment, disenchantment, and neglect in the texts and create the relevant tone and mood of perplexity and mystery. With this atmosphere already created, the themes such of disenchantment, slavery, economic deprivation, and loneliness are more effectively elucidated.

The short story writer dramatizes the character’s thoughts, actions and dialogue rather than embark on lengthy descriptions to create clear and memorable themes, and this is effectively achieved through the artistic use of ellipsis, rhetorical questions and exclamations. These clearly heighten the tension in the narratives and create the ambient mood necessary for the advancement of the themes therein. The significant aesthetic functions of these syntactic categories reinforce the idea that the interpretation of meaning in the discourse of the short story sub-genre is not entirely dependent on a focus on basic lexical items alone.

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