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Re-evaluating the convergence of form and content in William Shakespeare's "*Sonnet 67*" and Amu Nnadi's *a field of echoes*

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Abstract

Human experiences are a fundamental aspect of literature, and poets often strive to capture and convey these experiences in their work. However, to effectively explore and communicate human experiences, poets need to employ both form and content in their poetry. Form and content have been inseparable fields of study in literary scholarship, as they are intricately linked in the presentation of human experiences. The conventional notion that form and content are essential components of literary works has been a cornerstone of literary analysis. Literary scholars and researchers have long recognized that form and content are interdependent, with each informing and influencing the other. This study builds from the existing studies, which have recently established that, in any poem there is an application of form and content. Therefore, in respect to previous studies, this research concentrated on re-evaluating the convergence of form and content in William Shakespeare's "Sonnet 67" and amu nnadi's a field of echoes. This qualitative investigation adopted Marxism, a theory that underscores the relationship between or among social hierarchies in poetry, but focused only on the theorist's perspectives of form and content as its theoretical framework. The result reveals that William Shakespeare and amu nnadi, through their poetry ("Sonnet 67" and a field of echoes, respectively), have a point of convergence in their form, seen in their choice of words, content, and subject matter.

Keywords: amu nnadi, Form and Content, Marxism, Poetry, Subjugation, William Shakespeare

Introduction

Literary innovation has remained focused on societal concerns, topics, and issues that poets frequently address. To break away from the brutality of the ruling class, scholars express their sentiments, emotions, and thoughts through language. In other words, by using exaggerated language, which symbolises the present, past, and future of a society embedded with vices, they

demonstrate that it is not just a method of expressing creativity and ability but a tool for change and redirection. Similarly, Obi asserts that language is an important means of understanding and interpreting human beings, and other aspects of society, such as politics, religion, economics, social conflicts, class struggles and human conditions (487-490). Avci et al. observe that language is use for evaluating human actions (389). Hasan reveals that research has consistently shown that language is a crucial tool for interrogating literary works (122). Building on this idea, Nnolim pinpoints that literary creation, like art, employs language embellished with aesthetic accessories to create an engaging experience filled with African aesthetic, which lends it generic uniqueness (105-107). Hasan also emphasises that language decorated with literary tropes helps to convey meaning more effectively (131-132). Avci et al. argue that it is through language that institutions, poets, and individuals deploy various styles that enhance social communication (387). Nystrand asserts that language, a paramount tool in writing literature, helps draw learners' attention to form and content (392-400). Akwanya posits that language is not only a tool for communication but also used to demonstrate figures of speech, embellishments, rhetorical devices, poetic licence, or rule violations, form, and content, among others (116). Hasan also in his submissions, asserts that the investigation of form and content in works helps to uncover both direct and indirect information in poems (127-128).

Form and content have been explained by many scholars. Neal explains that the employment of form (structure) and content (meaning) helps to add importance and diverse interpretations to literary works (218-219). Lee et al. reveal that form demonstrates that conventions, organisations, style, and voice in the poem while content is the actual message of the poem (1401-1411). In view of this concept, form is the method of presenting poem while content is the information the poem presented. Scholars gave diverse views about form and content in poem. Bowers expresses that form and content have had a deliberate discourse for past two hundred years in literary criticism, which explains things, events, situations and issues in society (225-227). Ricoeur states that studying form involves examining an object's structure, genre, and style (136). Duff and Maley argue that to study a poem, scholars should first and foremost examine the organisation and substance of any poem (3-5). Lee et al. express that form and content are not only seen in literary works but also in scientific works (1401-1402). Leen in his investigation of Martin Amis' Time's Arrow, reveals that content is the core or backbone of form and is the pillar that supports the form's growth (26-27). Akwanya further notes that form is what distinguishes poetry from other genres (106). Mart elucidates that incompatibility of form and content leads to poor understanding, while

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a well-developed one produces good learning outcomes for readers (52). Nevertheless, this helps to put authors under control as they use words to express themselves creatively. Given these arguments from different scholars, this research re-evaluates the point of convergence at which form and content intersect in William Shakespeare's "Sonnet 67" and amu nnadi's *a field of echoes* through the lens of Marxist theory's view on form and content.

Review of Criticism and Justification

Form and content are essential literary elements that take thecentre stage in the study of literature. They enable literary writers to employ certain principles in a work, grouping them according to shared characteristics within a specific framework. This differentiation allows for distinct categorisation of literary works. Neal examined the relationship between form and content using Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess* and William Dunbar's *The Goldyn Target*. The scholar defined content as meaning and expressed that form refers to the formal features of literary works, while meaning encompasses the subject matter and themes (218). Moreover, form is the "what" and meaning/content is the "how". Form and content in a work of art help to reveal the genre (Nagy-Kolozsvari 4). Additionally, they also reveal the method, structure and contour. The forms employed in artistic works can manifest in various ways such as rigid, pure, unified, closed, harmonious, open, stylised, classical, basic, special, conventional, dominant, and experimental forms (Klarer 15-61). Furthermore, this diversity in form helps determine the norm of the artistic work. The method of literary presentation influences its form and content (Egginton and Wegenstein 19-23). The message also influences the form and content. Abrams writes that form is not merely a fixed container, like a bottle, into which the content of a work is poured. Instead, form is an emotional power that varies from work to work, and a shaping principle that controls and synthesises all components into a beautiful and effective whole (107). The statement implies that form controls content, but that is not entirely accurate. Form and content are interconnected and interdependent, working together in harmony, with neither overpowering the other. Wimsatt and Brooks explain that the concept of form is a complex entity encompassing multiple elements, including rhythm, metrics, diction and imagery (15-28). Furthermore, form also comprises rhyme, figurative language, tone, mood, style among other aspects. Eagleton notes that form changes, transforms, evolves over time to influence content (21-22). This observation suggests that form is merely a manifestation of content, but that is not entirely true. Rather, form and content are mutually influential, with each being a manifestation of the other.

In addition to the above, researchers have expressed diverse opinions on William Shakespeare's "Sonnet 67" and amu nnadi's *a field of echoes*. Xue in his investigation of selected sonnets (Sonnets 1, 18, 35, 54, 67, 70, 95, 98, 99, 109 and 130) reveals that all of William Shakespeare's sonnets employ words with multiple meanings to facilitate clearer understanding of his poems. For instance, the word "rose" conveys immortality, love, beauty, and youth (1-5). Moreover, in "Sonnet 67", the sonneteer also uses the rose to illustrate the unproductive ruling class, as evident in the phrase "rose of shadow". In "The Concept of Love in Shakespeare's Sonnets", the author argues that the representation of love in William Shakespeare's one hundred and fifty-four (154) sonnets convey various meanings (Ma 919-921). Notwithstanding, in "Sonnet 67", for instance, the discussion of love appears to be concerned with the downtrodden masses. Bates contends that William Shakespeare's sonnets contain excellent poetic probes that reveal profound truths about life, surpassing both his predecessors and successors (106). However, "Sonnet 67" explores the marginalisation of the poor by the rich, a pervasive issue in life. Another study demonstrated that all one hundred and fifty-four (154) of William Shakespeare's sonnets are embedded with Renaissance ideals (Peng 88-90). Clearly, all the sonnets, particularly "Sonnet 67", are imbued with the renaissance ideal of creativity in poetry. Shrank after examining William Shakespeare's sonnets, noted that they showcase the poet as both a dramatic and non-dramatic poet (275-277). Similarly, the sonneteer is dramatic in portraying societal ills through meaning or content of his sonnets, and non-dramatic through the lines or forms in his sonnets. In her diploma thesis, Jandačová builds upon Ma's argument by revealing that William Shakespeare, the renowned sonneteer, portrays love as encompassing shortcomings and life's complexities (27-43). Subsequently, Shakespeare also depicts untrue love as exemplified by unproductive bourgeoisie. Matthews reveals that the ideas or messages in one hundred and fifty-four (154) sonnets of the sonneteer were derived from the Bible (1-4). Consequently, the biblical teaching of "love your neighbour" or humanity towards others, is depicted in "Sonnet 67". Vendler proposed that the distinctive artistry of Shakespeare's sonnets lie in their diverse styles, varied syntax, organisational structures, imagery, couplet ties, symbols, figures of speech, rhyme, rhythm, and Anacreontic narratives. These elements make Shakespeare's sonnets uniquely brilliant, trending and distinctive for both present and prospective readers (43-652). Nevertheless, these artistic elements also encompass subject matter, themes and diction etc. Another researcher focused specifically on "Sonnet 67", revealing that the poet employed parenthetic atheism and sustained adynata as the rule of form guiding the sonnet's composition (Edgecombe 169-172). Notably, rules

of form also reflected Marxist views. Another scholar, Chunli Ma conducted a study on William Shakespeare's sonnets titled "The Physical Beauty in Shakespeare's Sonnets", revealing a recurring motif of beauty mentioned sixty-nine (69) times throughout the sonnets. This motif appears in Sonnets 1-2, 4-7, 9-14, 17, 19, 21-22, 24, 27, 34, 41, 53-54, 60, 62-63, 65, 67-70, 77, 79, 83-84, 93, 95, 101, 104, 106, 115, 127, 131, 134, 137, and 150. The sonneteer employed this motif to portray both physical and spiritual beauty (111-117). However, "Sonnet 67" also presents a contrasting theme, exploring the motif of dehumanisation.

Furthermore, Michael Chiedoziem Chukwudera, in *Kalahari Review*, asserts that the poetry collection *a field of echoes* conveys the truth about life, expressed through both indigenous and non-indigenous languages. He concludes that this blend of languages renders the poetic message vibrant and accessible. However, the truth about life encompasses the mistreatment and oppression inflicted upon people by those in power. James Eze, in his blurb for the poetry collection, notes that it evokes the spirit of Ezra Pound's Imagist movement. He praises the poet's mastery, observing that their craft has transcended mere mediumship to become an embodied, authoritative presence, an avatar. Moreover, the poet transcends his role by embodying an avatar, masterfully exploring his craft. Notably, his work alludes not only to Ezra Pound's Imagist movement but also to Karl Marx's Marxist ideology, revealing a rich tapestry of influences. In another insightful commentary, Igali Conquer posits that the poem is essentially a dirge. Nevertheless, this scholar's assertion only scratches the surface, as the poem not only mourns but also fervently advocates for the marginalised and impoverished masses who are being oppressed by the government, wealthy elites, and ruling classes. Another commentary on the collection of poems likened the poems to words of a Russian poet, Osip Mandelstam that through the poet's poems masses are fed to the brim (Chinedu Ezeanah). Actually, through the poet's artistic writing the masses knowledge is nourished.

Theoretical Framework

Marxist literary theory critiques the capitalist structure in society, specifically the relationship between the bourgeoisie (the rich) and the proletariat (the poor). Consequently, the poor or proletariat class is turned into an object of oppression, hardship, and struggle. In response, Marxist writers use their artistic works to challenge these injustices and promote human liberation. In turn, seeking to protect humanity from suffering. In combating social injustices through their evocative language, Marxist writers employ the concept of form and content. This guiding principle helps them to

determine how and what to present in a work, distinguishing their approach from other literary theories. Mishra posits that the Marxist concept of form and content is rooted in the dynamic interaction between individuals and their society, as well as the societal backdrop and historical context. He further emphasises that Marxist give primacy to content and highlights the various points of intersection and interplay between form and content (159).

Moreover, Eagleton observes that form is subject to transformation, modification, and dissolution as content undergoes changes overtime (21-22). In this view, Eagleton posits that Marxist sees form essentially as an expression of its underlying content. Christopher Caudwell argued that form serves as a means to impose order on the chaotic views of a writer, which are likely shaped by middle class culture (226). According to Caudwell, a poet's social relationships determine their consciousness, which in turn influences their worldview and primarily, the form of their art. As social attitudes vary across individuals, the form of art is largely determined by the poet's class consciousness (226). Mishra further stated that, according to Marxist thought, literary works should reveal the organic relationship between form and content (159). This is because superficial stylistic observations can distort the content and at the end imprint a sense of vulgarity on the form.

Leon Trotsky's scholarly work, *Literature and Revolution*, offers a Marxist perspective on the relationship between form and content. According to Trotsky, form is shaped and developed in response to a new collective psychological need, which, like all else, is subject to social laws (96-141). Mishra further emphasised that form is an outgrowth of content, and that form has no inherent value unless it is inextricably linked to, and reflective of its content (159). The German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel supported the opinion of Marxist theorist Karl Marx in his work *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, which asserts that a specific content necessarily determines a corresponding form that suits it (614-623). Mishra further elaborates that a flawed form inevitably stems from a flawed content (159-160). Jameson posits that form is realisation of content within the realm of the superstructure (345-346).

Furthermore, Mishra explains that Marxist envision a dynamic, dialectical relationship between form and content. Although they acknowledge the interdependence of these two elements (form and content), Marxist finally prioritise content. He further explains that in Marxist criticism, a poet's outlook on the world plays a crucial role in shaping both content and form. This worldview is not fixed, rather it changes, often operating beneath the poet's conscious awareness. Consequently, it is the worldview that holds significant weight (159-160). Marxist concept of form and content can also

be seen in Georg Lukács' essay *The Ideology of Modernism*. In his work, Lukács, writing from a Marxist perspective, critiques modern literature for its preoccupation with style and technique, instead prioritising works that emphasise content over experimental forms that focus primarily on formal innovation (1218-1223). Mishra concludes his discussion on Marxist views of form and content by asserting that, from a Marxist perspective, form is practical and shaped by the content's inherent structure. Finally, the Marxist approach integrates subject, object, emotion, thought, individual and world, presenting a holistic synthesis (159-160).

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William Shakespeare and amu nnadi employ similar forms to explore their content, evident in their deliberate choice of words to convey their subject matter, which encompasses Marxist perspectives on form and content. According to Trotsky, form evolves in response to emerging collective psychological needs, governed by social laws (96-141). Jameson posits that form is the realisation of content within the superstructural realm (345-346). Caudwell asserts that a poet's attitude shapes form, and the form of poem is largely influenced by poet's class consciousness (226).

In light of these views, both poets create a new linguistic need, employing pronouns to convey class distinctions. This generates a collective psychological demand, governed by social rules that associate "he" with the bourgeoisie, wealthy elite, and government, while linking "she" to the proletariat, impoverished masses, and marginalised society. By applying this dichotomy, the poets establish social rules that convey the representations and psychological demands. Specifically, they portray the bourgeoisie as unproductive and proletariat as productive. This dichotomy is explored through the strategic use of "he" and "she", demonstrating how form emerges from content through choice of words, which constitutes the superstructure. The implications of associating pronouns with specific classes and attaching descriptive words to these representations are far-reaching. Essentially, the poet's choice of words serve as a call to action, advocating for the interests of the middle class. This reinforces the notion that a poet's attitude determines form, and, in turn, form reflects their class consciousness. This could be seen in "Sonnet 67":

> Ah wherefore with infection should he live,
> And with his presence grace impiety,
> That sin by him advantage should
> achieve, And lace itself with his society?

………………………………………………….
For she hath no exchequer now but his,
And proud of many, lives upon his gains?
O him she stores, to show what wealth she had,

(1-13)

Also this could be seen in a field of echoes:

…and mind flutters to a close
eyelids to slumber
all over, a certain darkness emerges
earth is populated with nothing
but a tempered sight

night flashes white underwear
as meteor, quickly closes her thighs
mortified by the radiance of stars
she grows shy as mimosa pudica
dies from shame of too much conceit

(1-10)

The Marxist perspective on form and content emphasises that form imposes order on the chaotic views of the poet, shaped by middle class culture (Caudwell 226). Mishra clarifies that, from a Marxist standpoint, form is practical and derived from the content's inherent structure (159). In "Sonnet 67", the poet illustrates this concept by streamlining their views through deliberate word choice, exposing the suffering inflicted upon the masses by the government/ruling class. The poet employs the pronoun "he" to represent the government/bourgeoisie/ruling class, while using "she" for the poor masses/society. This dichotomy portrays the government/ruling class as incapable of producing or creating anything meaningful. The implications of these portrayals suggest that the poet consciously or unconsciously aligns with the exploited middle class. Hence, the poem's use of practical form enables readers to experiment with the words to uncover the poet's message, which emerges from the content inherent structure. This can be seen in the poem:

Why should poor beauty indirectly seek,
Roses of shadow, since his rose is true?
Why should he live, now nature bankrupt is,
Beggared of blood to blush through lively veins,
For she hath no exchequer now but his,
And proud of many, lives upon his gains?

> O him she stores, to show what wealth she had,
> In days long since, before these last so bad.
>
> (7-14)

Likewise, in a field of echoes, the poet employs deliberate word choices to convey a sequential narrative, liberating the oppressed society/ masses from oppressive national structures and restoring their dignity and courage to demand rights, justice, and equity. Through this narrative, the poet consciously or unconsciously aligns with the subdued middle class. This allegiance is evident in the poet's strategic use of pronouns. Initially, the poet employs ellipses to create suspense, delaying the revelation that "he" represents the tyrannical government/ruling class, while "she" symbolises the productive and morally upright middle class/poor masses. The poet illustrates the affliction and suffering inflicted by the ruling class, saying ". . . and flutters to a close/eyelids to slumber/all over, a certain darkness emerges" (1-3). In contrast, the poet associates "she", "white underwear", and "her thighs" with the subjugated middle class, emphasising their productivity and moral integrity. This dichotomy highlights the moral distinction between the despotic ruling class and the resilient, morally upright middle class. These are seen in his lines:

> night flashes white underwear
> as meteor, quickly closes her thighs
> mortified by the radiance of stars
> she grows shy as mimosa pudica
>
> (6-9)

Finally, the poet indirectly reveals his association of the government/ bourgeoisie/rich/ruling class by lamenting that despite the people's efforts to attain freedom from poverty, hardship, and suffering, they remain subjected to suffering, oppression, and hunger. This sentiment is expressed as "across the waistline of thought/a belt of black ink runs, crossing eyes/draining teas, sights of my muse" (21-23). The poet's exploration of these issues involves experimenting with deliberate word choices, which are evident through a close analysis of the poem's wording and content inherent structure.

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converge on a shared subject matter, employing Marxist perspectives to critique societal ills such as marginalisation, exploitation, subjugation, corruption, ill-treatment, poverty, leadership misrule, and unemployment inflicted upon the oppressed masses. According to Mishra, the Marxist concept of content emphasises human interaction with society. He further states that a poet's worldview plays a crucial role in shaping their content, and this worldview changes, often operating beneath the poet's conscious awareness (159-160). Both poets explore their worldview and the interactions between individuals and society, focusing on the relationship between the bourgeoisie and proletariat classes. Economic factors serve as indices demarcating these two classes. In "Sonnet 67", Shakespeare exposes the suffering inflicted upon the masses by the government/bourgeoisie/ruling class, portraying their actions as infectious and immoral. They prioritise self-interest while subjecting the masses to poverty, reveling in their perceived superiority while unwittingly sealing their own fate. This is evident in the poem:

> Ah wherefore with infection should he live,
> And with his presence grace impiety,
> That sin by him advantage should
> achieve, And lace itself with his society?
>
> (1-6)

Similarly, in *a field of echoes*, the poet conveys his emotions by lamenting the absence of effective governance, leaving the masses vulnerable. Affliction and oppression have become ubiquitous, instilling fear and breeding disillusionment among the people, who feel betrayed by the government's unfulfilled promises. This is reflected in the poem:

> …and mind flutters to a close
> eyelids to slumber
> all over, a certain darkness emerges
> earth is populated with nothing
> but a tempered sight
>
> night flashes white underwear
> as meteor, quickly closes her thighs
> mortified by the radiance of stars
> she grows shy as mimosa pudica

> dies from shame of too much conceit

$$(1\text{-}10)$$

Caudwell observes that in a Marxist framework, social relations shape consciousness, which in turn influences the poet's worldview, at the end determining the content (226). Mishra added by saying that a poet's class consciousness is reflected in their work, integrating subject, object, emotions, thoughts, individual and world (159-160). Both poets clearly align themselves with downtrodden middle class, who have been marginalisedby societal ills. This shared consciousness inspires them to advocate for the proletariat/ masses, who suffer from poverty, hunger and oppression. In "Sonnet 67", the poet passionately speaks out for the masses, questioning why they must beg for what rightfully belongs to them. The poet denounces the extreme oppression, inflicted by the government/bourgeoisie/ruling class, who subject the masses to hunger, poverty, and hardship. Subsequently, the poet offers a message of hope, suggesting that the wealthy elite's pride in their possessions will be short-lived, as their true wealth and freedom are merely illusions stored in the future. This could be seen in the poem:

> Why should poor beauty indirectly seek,
> Roses of shadow, since his rose is true?
> Why should he live, now nature bankrupt is,
> Beggared of blood to blush through lively veins,
> For she hath no exchequer now but his,
> And proud of many, lives upon his gains?
> O him she stores, to show what wealth she had,
> In days long since, before these last so bad.

$$(7\text{-}14)$$

Finally, in a field of echoes, the poet asserts that despite the government and ruling class disregard the downtrodden middle class fight for emancipation, hope still endures. Although their efforts seem futile, rejected, and discarded like trash, the poet still remains optimistic that their voices will eventually be heard. This marks a turning point, where the masses will no longer be subjected to suffering, suppression, ad hardship. Through this message, the poet seamlessly integrates subject, object, thought, emotion, individual and world. This synthesis embodies the Marxist consciousness and attitude, reflecting an unwavering commitment to the cause of emancipation from class differentiation. This could be seen in the poem:

sometimes a poem is dreamed

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as pollen, sometimes a twig
or line of awakening like this
tells you the mind is gone
to dwell, as smoke, among the clouds
(26-30)

Conclusion

This study's analysis reveals that William Shakespeare and amu nnadi employ Marxist frameworks of form and content in "Sonnet 67" and a field of echoes, respectively. Both poets employ similar perspectives to convey their messages. The Marxist concept of form and content is evident in their word choice, while the content is reflected in the poems' subject matter. In their choice of words, Shakespeare and nnadi associate the government/ruling class with "he", signifying unproductiveness, and the subjugated masses/ proletariat/society/middle class with "she", indicating productiveness. Their portrayal of form is guided by Marxist views, which consider form as: the realisation of content within the superstructure; shaped and developed in response to collective psychological needs; determined by the poet's class consciousness; and imposing order on chaotic views drawn from the middle class.

In addition to the above, both poets address the same subject matter, expressing the ideology of class struggle and condemning corruption, leadership misrule, unemployment, marginalisation, and ill-treatment of the masses. Their Marxist views on content emphasises: human interaction with society; the poet's conscious worldview dominating the poem; social relationships determining consciousness and attitude; and integration of subject, object, emotion, thought, individual and world. By addressing these issues, both poets advocate for meaning transformation, paving the way for an egalitarian society. Hence, re-evaluating the convergence of form and content in both poems demonstrates that it was achieved through the Marxist views of form and content employed in them.

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