

A STYLISTIC AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF ZAMBIAN PRISON POETRY: THE CASE OF MWEMBESHI MAXIMUM SECURITY PRISON

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Abstract

How the same theme is expressed in different poems, among different poets, is an interesting area of inquiry because style can determine the treatment of theme. Thus, this article dealt with a stylistic and thematic analysis of selected poems written by inmates of Mwembeshi Maximum Security Prison, and the relationship between the poetry and the prisoners' prison experience. The study proceeded from the premise that inmate poetry offers authentic experience about life in prison. To achieve its aim the study utilised thematic and stylistic analysis of the poems. Among the key findings of the study is the idea that the poems were not only authentic but were reflection of the deepest feelings of the writers, thematically fresh and touching. The study concluded that most of the poems exhibit themes and stylistic approaches that reflect their prison lived experience and that not all poems use figures of speech to express their prison lived experience.

Keywords: *thematic analysis, stylistic analysis, prison poetry, life in prison, prison live experience*

Introduction

This article is an attempt at analysing the stylistic and thematic patterns in selected poems written by inmates at Mwembeshi Maximum Security Prison of the Zambia Correctional Service. The study uses a theoretical framework anchored on stylistic and thematic analyses and triangulates these with social constructionism theory. One of the established avenues for capturing the profiles and voices of inmates is through expressive and literary arts such as poetry. This is because inmates use poetry to document the circumstances that led them to prison, what prison has been like, and their fears and hopes for the future (Smith, 2011).

Poetry is a powerful tool for introspection and its expression can be both healing and empowering as it opens the mind to the possibility of improvement and liberation, as with conscientisation. This benefit is not only to the poet, but through sharing, to the listeners who may be influenced to write their own poems and tell their own stories, resulting in a snowball effect. This makes poetry, in the context of prison systems, an equalising platform that offers inmates reclamation as a key population that is usually silenced by dominant groups and power structures (Maracle, 1996). In this regard, therefore, poetry serves a social function and can provide commentary on social issues in a similar manner as do other artistic expressions such as comedy and African oral narratives (Chilala, 2011; 2018).

Accordingly, this study increased the understanding of the prison experiences in Zambia through the stylistic and thematic content analysis of poems written by inmates at Mwembeshi Maximum Prison. The study investigated what can be

learnt from the prison experiences reflected in poetic productions of inmates that could assist in understanding the needs and fears of prisoners in Zambia. In addition to examining the stylistic and thematic make-up of the inmates' poetry, the study interpreted what the prisoners had to say about their lived experiences, and assessed the various meanings that their narrations had regarding their conditions that could be of value to the ongoing paradigm shift from punitive to corrective approaches in Zambia.

Statement of the Problem

The relevance of prison poetry has not been fully understood. There seems to be insufficient literature regarding inmate written poetry in Zambia. The lack of substantial research output, in the form of articles and books on this topic, is an attestation of a knowledge gap which this article rectified. Therefore, the research problem was that there were no known studies that were undertaken to analyse the arts in general, and poetry in particular, as practised by inmates in Zambia with regard to stylistic and thematic aspects. Further, to establish how the findings relate to what studies have established elsewhere through stylistic and thematic analysis of inmates' poetry the circumstances that led to the imprisonment, the prison experience, among other aspects. Stated as a question was knowledge gap that this study was interested in: What are the stylistic and thematic characteristics of selected poetry written by inmates at Mwembeshi Maximum Correctional Facility in relation to their prison experience?

Study Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

1. To investigate the stylistic content of selected poems by inmates at Mwembeshi Maximum Correctional Facility.
2. To explore the emergent themes in the selected poems; and
3. To examine the significance of the themes and stylistic content of the selected poems in relation to the prison experience under the Zambia Correctional Service.

Methodology

The study applied a qualitative approach. The study design was exploratory, which method-wise employs the documental analysis informed on a stylistic and thematic basis. The data was collected from an already-existing collection of poems, which were written by prisoners. A triangulated analysis is adopted and involves comparing the thematic, symbolic, and poetic devices presentation in the poems under study.

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

This study is guided by two analytical approaches: stylistic and thematic. The data was, therefore, presented under the three objectives. The presentation of data was done hand in hand with the discussion of findings.

Stylistic analysis

In this article, stylistics provided a way of integrating two subjects, language and poetry -in-language. Stylistics is a systematic teaching of poetry, and helps in deepening the process of understanding. Niazir (2010), describes stylistics as a study of language in literature and that it is a part of linguistics. By analysing the linguistic pattern of a poem, it gives answers to questions such as how literary effects are encoded in the language of the poem written by inmates. The goal of this approach, according to Niazir (2010), is to decode meaning and structural features of literariness by identifying linguistic patterns in the poems. Stylistics is the only linguistic discipline which allows the analysis of a literary poem and their literary meaning by way of linguistic techniques.

Niazir (2010), notes that style includes a writer's way of thinking about their subject and their characteristic way of presenting it for a particular reader and purpose through linguistic choices. That means, style is not mere ornament; it conveys vital details of meaning and evolution, which define the nature of inmates, their basic attitudes, presuppositions, moral stance, and relationship to their subject and audience. Style may convey the writer's attitude to social realities such as race, age and gender (Chilala, 2013). Cahnmann (2003), further suggests that writing poetry calls for a heightened sense of language and style; the poet must consider the sounds of phonemes, prosody, and tone, and coordinate these with syntactical structures of word order and semantics (verbal meaning).

The stylistic analysis of poetry written by inmates at Mwembeshi Maximum Correctional Facility has brought out seventeen literary devices, namely: free verse, repetition, parallelism, symbolism, metaphors, similes, imagery, satire, proverbs, parables, oxymoron, anaphora, alliteration, epistrophe, apostrophe, allusion, and rhyme. These literary devices were used to help bring abstract prison lived experiences of inmates to life in a manner that captures a reader's attention and makes them vicariously share into a life experience in a typical Zambian correctional facility.

The poems exhibit patterned elements like sounds, phrases, sentences, and words, free of the artificiality of a typical poetic expression that is confined to rules and regulations, to communicate experiences and reflections before and during the inmates' life in the prison as well as their hopes and fears in the post-incarceration phase of their lives. The use of stylistics in free verse helped inmate poets to share their lived experiences more as a story that is easily relatable to the reader. It also helped them to enjoy the freedom of sharing their story using whichever words their vocabulary could afford.

When considering the narrative poems of writing in free verse, there is often a freedom-consciousness, which Du Bois (1903) says is "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others". The prison operates as both a geographical/mental location that separates the prisoner from the "free world" and if this world is to be expressed in a poem, the writing process must be free of rules, the inmate poet writes in free verse in order to bridge the gap between isolation and freedom. The free verse stylistic pattern in poetry, by incarcerated people, often expresses the

space between themselves and the outside world, serving as a bridge between the two populations with an equal freedom of expression.

Therefore, the theory of stylistics is used in this study to explore how the emergent styles contribute to the development of the poems. Apart from one, all the poems analysed in this study used free verse. This means that the inmate poets depended on patterned elements like sounds, phrases, sentences, and words, free of the artificiality of a typical poetic expression confined to rules and regulations, to communicate their experiences and reflections before and during their life in the prison, as well as their hopes and fears in the post-incarceration phase of their lives. The use of free verse helped the inmate poets to share their lived experiences more as a story that is easily relatable to the reader. It also helped them to enjoy the freedom of sharing their story using whichever words their vocabulary could provide.

It is important to note that the wide use of free verse is also reflective of the level of exposure to poetic writing and training of inmate poets as well as their African story telling background. It is also reflective of how the inmate poets are averse to being bound by the rules and regulations of both life and confinement, which may explain why they were inmates in the first place. and the imagery in poems written by inmates at Mwembeshi reflect the inmates' prison experience and rehabilitation.

Thematic Approach

Thematic analysis has been described as “a foundational method for qualitative analysis” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 78). Willig (1999), points out that thematic analysis can be a constructionist method which examines the ways in which events, realities, meanings, experiences and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society. It can also be a ‘contextualised’ method, sitting between the two poles of essentialism and constructionism, and characterised by theories such as social constructionism.

Thematic analysis was used for interpreting the poems written by inmates. This allowed the study to understand the potential of any issue more widely within the poems written by inmates. By using this analysis there was the possibility to link various concepts and opinion and compare these with the poem that had been gathered. Ayres (2008), posits that thematic analysis is a data reduction and analysis strategy by which qualitative data are segmented, categorised, summarised, and reconstructed in a way that captures the important concepts within the data set. Thematic analysis was, in this case, primarily a descriptive strategy that facilitated the search for patterns of prison experience, rehabilitation, and other themes within the poems. They also used thematic analysis to identify patterns of prison experience; interpreting and classifying poems, according to themes; and interpreting the resulting thematic structures by seeking commonalties, relationships, overarching patterns, theoretical constructs, or explanatory principles.

The thematic analysis established eleven themes that meticulously coded the complete lived experience of an inmate. The poems included childbirth as

punishment, disillusionment, dehumanisation and servitude, futility of life and labour, crime and god: prison as a home of god, tragic flaw, and rehabilitation in confinement, religious faith in offender reformation, ancestral moral authority, powerlessness, isolation and fear. The analysis of these themes has shown how inmates used poetry to profile the circumstances that led them to prison, what prison had been like to them, and their fears and hopes for the future.

When a writer renders a situation or a feeling into a thematic form, the poem says something unique, something that could not have been said in any other way (Satterwhite, 1999). The original feeling or the emotion is intensified by the act of consolidating the thought into a thematic form. Cahnmann (2003), suggests that writing poetry involves a balance of freedom and constraint; poets use structured themes to support their creative play. Writing poetry calls for a heightened sense of language, with style; the poet must consider the sounds of phonemes, prosody, and tone, and coordinate these with syntactical structures of word order and semantics (verbal meaning). Phrases and sentences are ordered to create images, meanings, logic, and narrative (Cahnmann, 2003; Leavy, 2009). Cahnmann (2003), also suggests that regular and irregular rhythms, such as patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables, may have special meaning in each situation, end stops, punctuation, white space, and short lines focus visual and auditory attention, heightening the word impact. When discussing poetry and its possible emotional effects upon both the poet and an audience, “poetry is a risky business” (p. 30). She also goes on to say, “Through poetic craft and practice, we can surprise ourselves and our audiences with new possibilities” (p. 34).

Leavy (2009), expresses sentiments like Cahnmann’s regarding expressive elements of poetry. She mentions that poems are highly attentive to space, which includes breaths and pauses, and words are used sparsely to create a feeling (p. 64). In other words, poems use language, rhythm, and space to create sensory scenes where themes emerge from the careful construction of both language and silences. “In this way,” Leavy (2009: p. 64) writes, “a poem can be understood as evoking a snippet of human experience that is artistically expressed in a heightened state” (2009). Leavy also mentions that poetry evokes multiple layers of meaning. Poetry defies singular definitions because what is absent in the text is just as important as what is present; poetry mirrors the complexity of prison identity, and the difficulties of recognising who an inmate is and who they want to be. According to Leavy (2009), it evokes emotional responses; sometimes uniting humankind, other times, causing disparity as it captures the human condition and social realities, while reaching broad audiences.

Besides the structured style and themes that poetry brings to the understanding of the prison lived experience, Merriam(1964) explains that poems often have cultural thematic meaning, and that often clearly reflect the culture of which they are a part: “Through the study of poetry,” Merriam (2009: p. 207)writes, “it may well be possible to strike quickly through the protective mechanisms to arrive at an understanding of ethos of the culture, and to gain some perspective of the psychological problems and processes peculiar to it”. Poetry can be used and/or

created for a variety of cultural reasons, including relieving psychological tension, or for correcting erring members in a society (Merriam, 2009: p. 207).

The Poetic Aesthetic of Incarceration

Most poetry writing studies involving prisoners are poetry therapy case studies, which suggest that poetry writing has the potential to positively affect forensic clientele. Implications of poetry for those who are incarcerated includes developing a new skill, gaining a sense of satisfaction from the poetry writing process, finding satisfaction from pursuing detailed work over a period of time, improving one's ability to plan tasks and solve problems that require multiple steps, increasing pro-social skills, gaining a greater respect for others, finding a productive use of leisure time, and relaxing in a pro-social way (Fulford, 2002; Gallagher & Steele, 2002; Harbert, 2010; Rio & Tenney, 2002; Roma, 2010; Sheehan, 2010). Publications also suggest that poetry writing is a psychologically safe way to express emotions (Cohen & Hickey, 2012; Cohen & Wilson, 2012; Elsila, 2005; Harvey, 2010; Palidofsky & Stolbach, 2012; Roma, 2010; Tiernan, 2010; Sheehan, 2010; Wolf & Wolf, 2012), and that incarcerated poetry writers often derive a sense of increased self-worth from the activity (Cohen & Hickey, 2012; Harvey, 2010; Roma, 2010; Sheehan, 2010).

Harvey (2010), a former inmate, suggests that a comprehensive reintegration process that included writing, poetry, music, and drama could help to reduce recidivism and produce productive citizens. Harvey (2010) claims that creative thinking through artistic activities could help prisoners survive the hustle and bustle of everyday life challenges beyond the prison walls, and she felt that individuals could learn how to use the creativity they had developed while incarcerated to keep them from returning to prison. Speaking from experience, she wrote, "I am a part of what 'The Arts' can offer ... HOPE ... CHANGE ... SECOND CHANCES" (p. 129).

While incarcerated at the York Correctional Institution for five years, Harvey (2010) participated in various arts-education opportunities. She attributed her success after time spent in prison to her arts-based prison educational experiences. She reported that her life was transformed through those experiences.

Prison has traditionally discouraged individuality in any form. The prison population is often in flux; some individuals are released, others transported to different facilities, or are sent to solitary confinement quarters, further complicating prison social opportunities and relationships. Poetry writing may provide incarcerated participants the opportunity and means to be expressive and connect with others through sharing their thoughts and stories as they create poems. The opportunities to make interpersonal connections, and build a sense of community, could be of great benefit to incarcerated human beings who are often viewed as mere numbers and statistics by the correctional system.

This inquiry analysed the stylistic and thematic characteristics of selected poems written by inmates at Mwembeshi Maximum Correctional Facility, and their relationship to, particularly how they socially constructed, the prison experience

in Zambia. The study looked at the stylistic content of emergent themes in poems written by inmates in the Zambia Correctional Service, and how these reflected the inmate's prison experience. The study further looked at the significance of this stylistic content and themes in relation to the prison experience in the Zambia Correctional Service. Thus, the study had three objectives: (i) To investigate the stylistic content of selected poems by inmates at Mwembeshi Maximum Correctional Facility; (ii) To explore the emergent themes in the selected poems; and (ii) To examine the significance of the themes and stylistic content of the selected poems in relation to the prison experience under the Zambia Correctional Service. The following sections give summary findings under each objective.

Stylistic Content in Prison Poems

The first objective established the stylistic content in the poems written by inmates in the Zambia Correctional Service. It investigated how the resources of a language code were used in the production of the actual messages in the poems (Shibu, 2006). By doing this, the study demonstrated how poems were a discourse, a communicative discourse, by inmates to share their prison experiences. The study showed that the inmates in their use of language patterns in their poems, created a form of communication using seventeen literary devices namely: free verse, parallelism, repetition, metaphors, similes, symbolism, imagery, anaphora, rhyme, alliteration, proverbs, adage, parables, onomatopoeia, oxymoron, epistrophe, apostrophe, satire, allusion, and pun. Each of these literary devices that constituted the stylistic content of the poems was used to bring out the themes that were discussed under the second objective. It was also shown that at the morphological level, the poems employed word forms such as proverbs and adages for the purposes of condemning certain behaviours. Additionally, that the poems further employed repetition for effective communication.

It also determined that the figures of speech employed at the stylistic level were used to create new meanings and reflected both the inmates prison lived experience and the inmate's psychological state. That, for instance, through suggestion of common qualities or relationships between two things, metaphors were used to enhance perception of ideas and to add variety to the language used. The imagery was used to create mental pictures that facilitate delivery, reception and recollection of ideas. Symbolism was used for euphemistic purposes as well as efficient delivery of messages realised through the imagery enacted in its use. Similes effected direct comparison and enhanced understanding whereas personification was used to bring abstract ideas to life, thereby aiding understanding of the prison lived experience. Furthermore, the free verse was used to aid the freedom of expression to both the inmate and poem. Satire was used to ridicule the prison system and its flaws, discrepancies, and inadequacies as a means of provoking the reader and challenging its viewpoints throughout the different poems. The study found artful ridicule, and exposure of the failures, of the correctional system in Zambia in such poems as *A President in the Correctional Facility* and *Bang Bang*.

It is important to note, in conclusion, that all the poems used free verse apart from one poem. This showed that the inmates shared their lived experiences as stories in order to make them easily relatable to the reader. It also showed their orature cultural background, limited vocabulary and exposure to poetic writing and training. Only eight of the studied poems used parallelism and repetition. This device showed how the inmates endeavoured to re-enforce and re-emphasise their lived experiences to their audience and invoke sympathy, empathy and support.

The metaphors and similes were used by only three poems: *The Work I Never Knew*; *A President in a Correctional Facility*; and *A Bitter Prison* to create a satirical irony to critiquing the correctional system and society as well as to convey the difficult experiences of an inmate in the correctional facility. The irony was how society assumes to cultivate good behaviour using bad places that prisons are. Nonetheless, the poems still expressed hope that just like the biblical Samson found “honey from a carcass of a lion”, the inmates would find “a better future from a bitter prison”. The metaphors and similes were punctuated by symbolisms and imagery to invoke the senses and imagination of the audience to vicariously experience the lived prison experiences of the inmate poets. This was ably achieved by picking characters, places, words, actions, and objects as symbols and images to convey their lived experiences before and during incarceration as well as how they visualise their post-prison life.

Three poems, namely: *It is Useless*, *Buried* and *Enlighten Me*, used anaphora. This literary device helped these three poems to emphasise and reinforce the meaning of the recurring themes particularly the theme of *Futility of Life and Labour* and *Religious Faith in Offender Reformation*.

Rhyme and alliteration were only found in two poems: *It is Useless* and *Enlighten Me*. This is also true for onomatopoeia and allusion which were found in only two poems each. Onomatopoeia was in *Bang Bang* and *Buried* while allusion of the biblical stories of Samson and the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus was found in *A Bitter Prison* and *The Devil Appeared* respectively. The use of these devices gave these poems a beautiful flow which also reinforced the cited recurring themes. Further, the devices revealed that the inmate poets who used them, had practiced writing poems before participating in the creative writing training workshop during which the studied poems were generated.

The following literary devices were rarely found but only in one poem each: proverbs and adages, oxymoron, epistrophe, apostrophe, satire and pun. Proverbs and adages were found in the *Bang Bang* poem. The proverbs and adages were derived from the Bemba language and the poet used them to make his lived experiences relatable and acceptable as a general fact or truth about the life of inmates in Zambia. Oxymoron was in the poem, *Buried*, and was used to enhance concept of the uncertainty of life during and after incarceration as an underlying cause of the powerlessness that characterise inmates.

Epistrophe or epiphora was found in the poem *This Little Life of Mine*. The word “may” was retained at the end of successive verses of the poem to a regular rhyming. This poem was also the only one that used apostrophe where inanimate

and even absent objects and ideas particularly the month of May, liberty, freedom, immorality and life were addressed as human beings present. This emphasised the theme of the inmate's crime as to when and how it was committed and the consequences he suffered.

The poem titled *A President in the Correctional Facility* is the only one that used satire and particularly to creatively ridicule, and expose the failure, of the correctional system in Zambia. Relating to satire was the use of pun in the poem titled, *Bars*. In punning the words pen and pain, the poet did not just use these identical sounding words with different meanings to make the poem witty but to convey a serious lived experience of both the murder that he had committed, and his prison experience was as terrible as the pain his victims suffered.

Emergent Themes in Prison Poems

The second objective explored the emergent themes in poems written by inmates in the Zambia Correctional Service and how they reflected their prison experience. The question that was asked to achieve this objective was: How did the emergent themes in poems written by inmates in the Zambia Correctional Service reflect the inmate's prison experience? There were four recurring themes namely: *rehabilitation in confinement*, *religious faith in offender reformation*, *regret*, *powerlessness*, and *fear*. These themes were found in all the poems. Then, the following themes were only found in respective poems: *childbirth as punishment* (Bang Bang), *disillusionment* (The Work I Never Knew; and Bang Bang), *dehumanisation and servitude* (A President in a Correctional Facility; Buried; A Bitter Prison; Enlighten Me; and This Little Life of Mine), *futility of life and labour* (It is Useless; Buried; A Bitter Prison; and This Little Life of Mine), *crime and God: Prison as the Home of God* (The Work I Never Knew), *Tragic Flaw* (This Little Life of Mine), *ancestral moral authority* (The Devil Appeared).

The recurring themes demonstrated the general atmosphere that characterise the correctional facility of Mwembeshi. The theme of *religious faith in offender reformation* showed how the chaplaincy of the Zambia Correctional Services and other religious organisations that evangelise in prisons have, through their religious activities, provided hope and motivation in the inmates to change, and seek forgiveness and the love from God. This kind of hope is essential for post-release change or development for inmates. The theme of powerlessness shows how vulnerable the inmates feel and this feeling is both physical and psychological. If harnessed well, it is a requisite for adjustments and adaptation both in prison and beyond. This is especially true when linked to the final recurring theme of isolation and fear that shows the need in the inmate of freedom and the experience of a normal life in a human community. The poems show the fear in inmates about whether or not they would reintegrate back in society or upon their release they would still live in isolation because of stigma against them.

The different poems found in different themes, reinforced the underlying messages in these recurring themes. They admonished crime and warned society of its consequences. For example, the theme of childbirth as punishment, in the

Bang Bang poem, shows how the inmate wishes to amend his misdeeds against his mother who symbolises both his biological mother and society as his motherland. This theme reinforces the concept of forgiveness embedded in the recurring theme of *Religious Faith in Offender Reformation*. This recurring theme is also reinforced by the theme of *Crime and God: Prison as a Home of God*. Then, the theme of *Futility of life and labour* reinforces the recurring theme of *Isolation and Fear* just like the theme of *Ancestral Moral Authority* emphasises the recurring theme of *Rehabilitation in Confinement*.

Through the theme of regret, the inmates advocated for adherence to the rule of law and communicated messages which mentor society to refrain from harmful behaviours that make people become social misfits. Then the theme of *Crime and God: Prison as a Home of God* implored the Zambia Correctional Service to establish how they can diffuse the daily challenges of incarceration to provide a better environment that leads to repentance and salvation through the Christian framework of God. The idea of God serves as a constant reminder of the crime the inmate committed and that man is incapable of being perfect because only God is holy. Given this kind of reflection, the poems encourage proper conduct and condemn bad practices that are detrimental to religious morals and general cultural moral standards.

Apart from the themes reflecting the prison lived experience, there is a reflection of life after prison. The poem titled '*The Work I Never Knew*' for example, explore the theme of Isolation and Fear in a post-prison era. Under this theme, the poem captures the fear and the isolation experienced by the inmate within the prison cells, and which fear and isolation continues even after being released thereby tempting the inmate to recede to crime and return to prison.

Themes and Stylistic Content of the Selected Poems in Relation to the Prison Experience

The last objective of the study was to examine the significance of the themes and stylistic content of the selected poems in relation to the prison experience under the Zambia Correctional Service. It is clear from the discussion of the findings of this study that there is need for the Zambia Correctional Service to make structural and programmatic changes for it to fully migrate from punitive system to restorative justice. These changes should focus on addressing issues that deteriorate the lifestyles of inmates in prison. Further, the transitional periods of parole or initial reintegration in society should be prioritised to avoid recidivism. Further, the study showed that poetry is beneficial not just for making visible the voices of inmates but as a therapy for mind-set change and behavioural transformation.

Conclusion

It may be concluded that literary devices were used to give the poems beauty and form. Further, they emphasised and reinforced the themes which were used as a medium of disseminating the inmates' prison lived experiences, the prison conditions and the inmate's psychological state including hope and fear of post-

prison life. Furthermore, the reinforcement and emphasis showed how these themes have practical implications for the policy, programmes and practice of the Zambia Correctional Service. The implications were predominantly bent on how to transform the system into a correctional away for the current punitive system still in practice.

The literary devices employed played both an artistic and functional purpose. For functional purposes, they revealed the prison living conditions, the inmate's prison experience and the inmate's psychological attitudes towards rehabilitation and discharge. The shared artistic approach between style and theme played an important role in the reader's insight of the poems. This means that the style in which the lexical items have been used helps in the understanding of the poems' themes hence aiding the reader's experience of the poet's prison lived experience.

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