



Showing and Telling as Techniques in Literary Writing: A Study of Selected Corpora from Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*

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Abstract

This paper examines Showing and Telling as discrete literary techniques in fiction, through a study of selected samples from Ayi Kwei Armah's (1968) The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born. There are a wide range of techniques deployed by literary writers in conveying themes, and such techniques are chosen for specific reasons. This study hinges on the Text Analysis Theory. The theory is suitable for the study as it explains how clause structure impinges on the narration of experiences, actions and events in literary texts. The study concludes that showing and telling perform significant functions in narration: providing useful details, describing settings, amplifying themes, making narration believable, and facilitating interpretation of events from readers' end. Although neither of the two techniques should be extraneous in a literary text, literary writers should combine both techniques for effective writing.

Keywords: Literary Writing, Showing, Telling, Fiction, Text Analysis Theory, The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born

INTRODUCTION

An investigation of the functions of **showing** and **telling** in literary writing is immersed in the view that literary writers engage in the mental task of matching "doing" "saying" to amplify their message and coherently convey themes. Like other kinds of writings, literary writing is not arbitrary; for example, writers of fiction, drama and prose rely on literary conventions in the presentation of theme, plot, setting, etc. In contemporary literature, **showing** and **telling** are fundamentally useful in revealing literary writers as creative writers who engage in rigorous mental indulgence (generating ideas and conveying them coherently and communicatively). In literature, literary techniques are deployed for specific functions. They are conveyed through different literary devices including the **showing** and **telling** techniques. This paper examines how these techniques operate in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*.

SHOWING AND TELLING AS LITERARY CONCEPTS

Showing is a literary technique that is suitable for the description of important scenes. It is a means of expanding the narration through the presentation of discrete actions as the plot unfolds. Literary writers focus on different aspects of the elements of literature, in the use of showing. For example, characterization can be explored, as a writer reveals a character's emotions, dressing, exploits, misfortunes, etc. A major ingredient of the **showing** technique is conflict.

Telling is concise, and it is useful in conveying writers'

message when it is used alongside **showing** in a narration. It is also referred to as summary, because only small portions of an entire narration are used for **telling**. When both techniques are used in a literary text, the pace changes from fast to slow. Given the fact that **telling** involves summary, literary writers require adequate mastery of grammar and diction for effective summary of different aspects of a literary text: setting, experiences, actions, etc. Visit file://C:/Users//ACER/Downloads/showing-vstelling for insights on the two techniques.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Text Analysis Theory

Marjory Meechan (2004) presents the Text Analysis Theory:

Text analysis, both written and oral, concentrates on the linguistic structure of discourse, both within and between utterances. These kinds of studies include analysis of pragmatics and speech act theory ... A prominent sociolinguistic approach to text analysis uses variationist methodology. The variationist approach to discourse operates under the assumption that although a variety of structures may be used to fulfill any one discourse function, patterns in the variation found in natural conversational speech show that there is structure in discourse. An important tool in variationist analysis is the sociolinguistic variable, which roughly speaking, encompasses alternative ways of saying something. For example, in (6) the variable involves question, which can have a variety of forms. Following the standard

conversation in variationist sociolinguistics, the question label is placed in parenthesis to indicate that it is a variable.

(6) (Question)

Wanna drive?

Do you want to drive?

You want to drive?

In the study of structure in discourse any set of utterances with equivalent discourse functions can constitute a variable. To determine which utterances are functionally equivalent, utterances in specific types of discourse units, such as narratives or lists, are analyzed to isolate their function. For example, narratives are composed of several different clause types. Abstract clauses, which contain a general summary of the experience to be narrated, will sometimes appear at the beginning of the narrative. More often, orientation clauses will begin the narrative to give the background to the story, including who was involved as well as where and when it took place. Complicating action clauses describe the events of the story and each event generally appears in the order it took place. Evaluation clauses consist of comments regarding the events. Finally, the narrative may end with a coda clause that serves to shift the time of the narrative back into present time. Example (7) shows a narrative analysis with most of these elements.

(7) Narrative example from southern Alberta English Corpus ...

- a. Abstract Well, there was one time
- b. Orientation When I was driving with my mom
- c. Orientation I just – just got my learner's,
- d. Orientation We're going to my – had a banquet-hokey bouquet
- e. Orientation and it was snowing outside, everything
- f. Complicating action and all of a sudden, I just lost control of the car going down into a coulee.
- g. Orientation Cap'ssowy going over
- h. Orientation and I'm just turning it this way,
- i. Complicating action slammed on the brakes.
- j. Orientation There's my mom
- k. Orientation Just looking.
- l. Orientation just praying, eh
- m. Complicating action and I w – I just – I missed the barricade by this much
- n. Complicating action and then I came to a complete in an in – into ...
- o. Evaluation It was close
- p. Complicating action sa – I got out of the car.

- q. Complicating action I said, 'mom, you're driving now'.
- r. Evaluation I think that was the closest thing
- s. Evaluation that I came to even experiencing anything
- t. Evaluation that would be – even be close to death.

This approach to discourse can be very valuable for examining the role of discourse markers. These are elements that bracket utterances and organize the sequence and relationship between events and participants in the discourse ... Speakers are not generally aware of discourse markers but they are important signal in discourse. For example, in (7a), the speaker's use of well may be expressing the feeling that while the experience was harrowing, there was never any strong danger of death. Cohesive devices are also important for tracking participants and events in discourse, as an examination of temporal and spatial reference clearly shows ... Pragmatics and discourse analysis have revealed that speakers have conventions for reference in discourse. For example, the pronoun it is generally found after the full NP the car in discourse. This is called anaphoric reference. In less frequent cases, a pronoun may precede the full noun phrase, a case of cataphoric reference. For example, in 7g, the speaker might have used the clause in (8):

(8) It's slowly going over, the car.

The function and structure of discourse marking is still not very well understood ... one of the problems of studying discourse markers is the fact that they often perform multiple functions depending on the type of clause or adjacency pair where they are found and their position in the clause ..."

THE FUNCTIONS OF SHOWING AND TELLING IN LITERARY WRITING

In this section of the paper, we examine the functions of **showing** and **telling** techniques in literary writing as evident in their use in the data of this study (samples 1-7) below.

Showing

Sample 1

The conductor walks away down the road. In a few moments, the waiters can hear the sound of his urine hitting the clean-your-city can.

He must be aiming high.

Everyone relaxes visibly. The poor are rich in patience. The driver in his turn jumps down and follows the conductor to the heap. His sound is much more feeble(p. 39).

The passage reveals the different actions of the textual characters: the conductor (walks away down the road); the waiters/passengers (wait); and the driver (jumps down). The use of adverbials "down away" and "visibly" is message-laden. The writer helps the reader visualize the kind of scene and happenings they are familiar with while on a journey.

Based on the themes of the novel, the writer tries to convey the level of moral decadence that pervades post-colonial Ghana. The writer is therefore poised to present a scenario such as this, in which mindlessly and publicly, a citizen uses a non-verbal act to protest his dissatisfaction with the status quo, by urinating on a clean your-city-can. The characters' patience in waiting is described (showing) to depict how the masses suffer from prolonged hardship, occasioned by bad governance and corruption. Thus, literary writers deploy body language as a **showing** technique. By showing the actions of intra-text characters, literary writers spur their readers to think, speak and act on what they read. Characters' actions and experiences change as the plot unfolds. The pace of a literary text is usually enhanced when characters set the scene and engage in action and reaction. Through the actions and reactions of characters, the readers' interpretation of such characters, becomes easier.

Sample 2

Once when the man was travelling to Cape Coast, three different policemen have stopped the little bus and asked the driver for his Quarter License. The driver had not brought it yet, and each of the policemen had said to him, in front of everybody, "Even Kola gives pleasure in the chewing." In each case the driver had smiled and given the law twenty-five pesewas, and the law was satisfied (p. 95).

In Sample 2, the writer uses **showing** technique to present the level of corruption in the society. Law enforcement officers (the police) are not supposed to take bribes from motorists. To capture the extent of moral decadence and corruption in the society, the writer shows the unlawful actions of the police (their utterance after stopping the driver). The driver's responses are also shown to drive out the theme of the novel; the citizens take advantage of the corrupt status-quo which allows them to go unpunished after committing an offence. In the text, the **showing** technique is intensified through the use of expressions with illocutionary-act potentials: "three different policemen" and "the little bus". The writer uses these expressions to convey a speech act of "condemning". The readers are shown that even though a little commercial bus does not convey enough passengers, the drivers are still exploited, even by unexpected number of policemen. **Showing** is a technique whereby events are presented in such a way that they unfold, and are understood through the actions of the characters. Writers rely much on this technique. Characters' actions arouse the reactions of readers. Through such actions, readers see how characters engage in conflict and dialogue; how they negotiate issues of love, adventure, revenge, man-hunt, ambition, etc. To describe any scene effectively, literary writers make characters set the scene as such characters interact with the setting.

Sample 3

The man walks into the hall, meeting the eyes of his waiting wife ... the eyes of a person who has come to a

decision not to say anything ... the children begin to come out of the room within ... They are not asleep, not even the third little one ... as if their mother's message needs their confirmation (p. 41).

In literary texts, micro structures (selected passages) project central and sub-themes. In Sample 3, the **showing** technique is psychologically rooted and context-revealing. The writer projects a typical family setting where a husband's failure to provide the basic needs of his family, results in the bad mood of members of the family. The actions of the family members are clearly shown: the man (walks into the hall); his wife (waits for him); and his children (begin to come out). Scholars of pragmatics opine that the psychological context of a communicative event is crucial for meaningful interpretation of the event. In the above passage, the **showing** technique is used to reveal the non-verbal face-threatening acts (FTAs) that the textual characters of a family setting perform. See Acheoah and Bamitale Balogun Janet (2023) for insights on the use of non-verbal communication in the performance of face acts.

Sample 4

Knock on the door ... and an old woman with her breast barely covered by her cloth comes in holding a little chipped enamel bowl at the tips of her finger.

'Good evening she says.'

... 'I am here again sugar. Would you be pleased to lend me a little sugar? Just for the children?'

'We have just finished our last ...'

On the old woman's face appears a smile half way between skepticism and triumphant belief. As she disappears through the door way she looks at the couple within and says 'Ah, this life!' (p.181)

Using the showing technique, the writer presents different actions of the poor woman: she knocks; she comes in; she holds a bowl, she greets, she requests, she looks, she disappears and she makes a comment. These actions are pungently shown by using qualifiers (adjectives) and modifiers (adverbs) which depict the abject poverty that the woman suffers. As facilitators of the **showing** technique, these adjectives and adverbs are ascriptives (as in Bach and Harnish's speech act taxonomy) in the sense that they ascribe qualities (features) to discrete referents (phenomena and actions in the text). As a literary technique, **showing** facilitates the presentation of themes, plot and setting.

Telling

Sample 5

That's not very much. But so many people would jump on me to help me eat it. Frowned. 'I am happy but I'm afraid.' But you know our Ghana. 'Ah, yes.' And everybody says the Ghana lottery is more Ghanaian than Ghana.

You are afraid you won't get your money? I know people who won more than five hundred cedi last year. The still haven't got their money. Have they been to the police? For what?

It costs you more money if you go to the police, that's all' ... (pp. 18-19)

In the above passage, the writer tells readers (through the interaction of intra-text characters) about the deceit revolving around the Ghanaian lottery, and how the issue is worsened by the corruption ravishing the law enforcement agents (the police) who are supposed to arrest offenders. This passage reveals that in telling, literary writers hinge on personal ideas and experiences. The writer is familiar with the subject he narrates. Ayi Kwei Armah's depiction of colonialism and its attendant corruption in Nigeria is conveyed by his first-hand exposure to the colonial era in Nigeria. Adele Ramet (2007) presents the following as sources of ideas in creative writing:

- Keeping an eye on the media: Perhaps the richest sources of ideas are newspapers, television and radio;
- Airports, beaches;
- Coaches, buses, planes, ships;
- Cafés and restaurants;
- Personal experiences;
- Clubs...

Sample 6

So the sea salt and the sweat, together and the fan above made this stewy atmosphere in which the suffering sleepers came and worked and went dumbly back afterward to homes they had earlier fled.

There was really no doubt that it was like that in all their homes ... for those who had found in themselves the hardness for the upward climb (p. 20).

Telling is used in the above passage, to present not only the unhealthy working condition that the people are subjected to, but also the societal phenomenon whereby married people see workplace as a hiding place; a place to be so as to avoid the trouble in their homes for some moments. To deploy **telling** effectively, literary writers rely heavily on diction. For example, the expression "stewy atmosphere" strongly describes the physical scene. Aristotle (1998, pp. 109-110) cited in Lauri Ramey (2007, p. 48) submits that "perfect use of diction presupposes the use of ordinary clear words (which make writing understandable) and strange words (which make writing unique)." In literary texts, there is a lot to describe through appropriate use of vocabulary: characters, experiences, settings, emotions, etc. Commenting on the importance of describing fictional characters effectively, Adèle Ramet (ibid.) asks how a person feels and moves around the room if that person wears one or more of the following outfits:

- a full-length evening dress;
- top hat and tail;
- a wedding dress and veil;
- a dinner jacket and dress shirt;
- a business suit;
- old jeans and tee shirt; and
- nothing at all².

Sample 7

At a time like this, when the month was so far gone and all there was the half life of Passion Week. Lunchtime was not a time to refresh oneself. Unless, of course, one chose to join the increasing numbers who had decided they were so deep in despair that there was nothing was to fear in life. These were the men who had finally, and so early, so surprisingly early seen enough of something in their own lives and in the lives around them to convince them of the final futility of efforts to break the mean monthly cycle of debt and borrowing and borrowing and debt (pp. 21-22)

In Sample 7, the writer tells readers about the regular monthly hardship that the people suffer towards the end of each month: people lack money for enjoyment, people resort to borrowing to cope with their needs before their next salaries are paid. This situation is experienced by readers in the real world, and this makes the narration "easy to mean". Like the **showing** technique, the **telling** technique involves the use of descriptive words to anchor the narration and move it closer to reality. Realism is the core of fiction. Sample 7 shows that literary writers use the **telling** technique effectively by interpreting an experience.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the use of **showing** and **telling** in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, and notes that both techniques are fused to make verbal artistry more communicative. In both techniques, the writer's mastery of the five senses (touch, sound, sight, smell and taste) is crucial. The subjects of **showing** and **telling** (their referents) can only "ring true" if they align with realities in the universe of discourse – the readers' real world. This explains why literary writers attempt to make readers observe in their work, what these readers already know in society about the attitudes, feelings, appearance, aversion, ambition and mindset of certain individuals in society. To situate characters within certain human behavioural patterns, the readers rely on textual stereotypes. Stereotyping is essentially ideological, and this explains why the cultural backgrounds of characters are inseparable from characterization. A writer is expected to have sufficient knowledge of the culture he/she writes about, as epitomized by the characters³. To make fictional characters believable, writers explore creative intuitions.

Notes

¹The wrong spelling of the word is intentionally used by the author for thematic relevance.

² In addition, Adèle Ramet (ibid.) submits that “based on what the hero wears, he could be: a fashion-conscious young dandy interested only in his own appearance; and a man of action, uncomfortably restricted by his formal clothes.”

³ This is what Adèle Ramet (ibid.) calls “writing as an insider”

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