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## A LEXICO-SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF GEORGE HERBERT'S 'EASTER WINGS'

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### Abstract:

*The issue of sexism in media has been a persistent concern, with numerous studies highlighting how media portrayals can This paper examines a linguistic study of George Herbert's employed 'Easter Wings'. It reveals the peculiarities of the style of the poem. The graphological feature was discovered to be prominently foregrounded, and this has an input into the other features in conveying the message of the poem. The poem is religious, within the literary genre of poetry, and different linguistic choices have been used to define the lexico-semantic and graphological features of the poem. The theory adopted shows that style is a choice and a deviation from the norm. This opens to the monists' view that style is inseparable from the content, and thus, there is relationship between the message and the medium. The poem which is shaped into wings, distinguishes and also contributes to the content and the title of the poem.*

**Keywords:** Poem, Lexico-Semantic, George Herbert, linguistic, Style, Content..

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### Introduction

Metaphysical poets were contemporaries of the Elizabethan poets during the renaissance: a period between the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century. Metaphysical poetry differed remarkably from earlier poetry and the poetry of the Elizabethans, who embellish their works with flowery images, while idealizing and idolizing womanhood. Metaphysical poets draw their images from different fields of endeavour: Science, Mathematics, Alchemy, religion and so on, and convey their message through what Dasyuva and Jegede (1997) refer to as 'rugged rhythm'. Here, the womanhood is subjected. Metaphysical poetry is characterized by conceit, that is, a kind of unusual comparison through metaphor or simile. It is also argumentative in nature, especially the poetry of John Donne. Other features include concentration and with, such that the mind of the reader is seriously engaged in meaning explication, especially as the images and symbol are drawn from different fields, which may not bear any comparative relationship with the subject matter. Some of the metaphysical poems were secular while some religious, as the poets allow their spiritual experiences to influence their poetry. Metaphysical poets include John Donne, Andrew Marvell, Henry Vaughan, Richard Crashaw and George Herbert, whose poem 'Easter wings', published in the collection titled *The Temple* in 1533, will constitute the focus of this paper. Herbert's poems are religious, and the subject matter usually revolves round man, his fall, the consequences of sin and redemption. The major preoccupation of this paper finds expression through the field of stylistics, as the linguistic tools employed by Herbert will be considered in relation to the style and content of the poem. However, it is worthy of note that this is not the first work on George. Herbert's 'Easter Wings'. The literary analyses of the poem exist in literature, but the focus here is linguistic and not literary.

### Biography of the Poet– George Herbert

George Herbert, the poet, was born in Montgomery, the country of Wales on April 3, 1593. He was raised in England. He was a 17th Century English poet, orator and priest of the Church of England. He attended Trinity College, Cambridge. He wrote poetry in English, Latin and Greek. He wrote devotional verse using simple, direct speech. His poems are on religious themes and associated with the writings of the metaphysical poets. In 1633, all his English poems were published in *The Temple: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations*. Some of his other works include 'The Windows', 'The Altar', 'The Collar', 'Redemption', 'Death', 'The Elixir', 'Discipline', 'Joseph's Coat', and so on. Other metaphysical poets during his time are John. Donne, Andrew Marvell, Henry Vaughan, John Cleveland and Abraham Cowley. He died of consumption (tuberculosis) in 1633 at the age of thirty-nine.

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### Stylistic

There are controversies surrounding the study of style. The first is between literary and linguistic scholars. Harold Whitehall's view that "as no science can go beyond Mathematics, no criticism can go beyond its linguistics". This engendered reactions from literary scholars like Bateson, who firmly asserts that "an academic alliance between linguistics and criticism is a vain hope" (see Spencer and Gregory 1964 and Fowler 1971). These are sharp views at two extremes. However, 'Stylistics' has been viewed as a peace maker between these two warring parties, as the field establishes the fact that language and literature are interrelated and interdependent. Osundare (1982) captures the relationship between these two fields objectively as a symbiotic one, when he says that:

*Language is not just a medium of literary expression, but enabling factor, indeed the main pillar of the literary edifice, a vital affective tool, which aids the status of literature as a transitive enterprise*

He further states that:

*In its own turn, literature enriches language ideationally, lexically and structurally. It extends its expressive and cognitive frontiers and creates new possibilities where there was none before.*

Stylistics thus defined, is:

*That part of linguistics, which concentrates on variations often but not exclusively, with special attention to the most conscious and complex uses of language in literature (Turner, 1979).*

The second controversy in the study of style borders on whether content is separable from style or not. The organists contend that 'content and style' constitute such unity as exists in the onion, which is made up of layers, whose body

*Contains finally no heart, no kernel, no secret, no irreducible principle, nothing but the infinity of its own envelops, which envelops nothing other than the unity of its own surface" – Barthes (1971:10)*

The ornartists, on the other hand, denies such unity between content and style, since, it is possible to say the same things in different ways. For them, the 'what' is distinct from the 'how', and can't be fused together. These arguments, like the first, are carried to the extremes, where no consideration is given to the possible overlaps in both views. For Osundare (1982), a good work of art is;

*Nothing but a studied and well-wrought integration of form and content: what exists between these two is a dialectal relationship in which form shapes content and content in turn illuminates form.*

The above view will be concretized in the subsequent analysis of Herbert's "Easter wings", as the style of the poem exerts a considerable amount of influence on the content, and the content gives voice and meaning to the style or form.

### Theoretical Framework

There are different approaches to the study of style but for the purpose of this paper, focus will be on the approaches proposed by Enkvist et al (1971), and which Lawal (1997) has repackaged as: *Style as choice from variant forms, Style as a deviation from a norm, Style as idiosyncratic and constant forms and finally Style as the relationship between the message and the medium*. Style as choice from variant forms is concerned with the writer choosing from the wide pool of language choices of words which best convey his meaning and intention. These choices are made at the paradigmatic and syntagmatic levels. Style as a deviation from the norm thrives on the writer's ability to violate or tinker linguistic rules at different levels without loss of meaning. For example, in "Easter wings", the poet tinkers the rule of lineation to form a pair of wings in the two stanzas of the poem which bears relation to the two that is the title and poem. The graphological features are foregrounded to the point that the audience notices how the style of the poem deviates remarkably from the norm. A look into other poems by Herbert will reveal that his subject matter revolves round the fall and suffering of man, and the place of God in man's redemption. So, his style is idiosyncratic and constant. Style as a relationship between the message and the medium opens up to different theoretical perspectives such as: dualism, monism and pluralism (Leech and Short 1981). Herbert used language creatively with a style peculiar to him to convey his message (content), which revolves round man, his fall and redemption.

**Analysis**

Herbert is a religious poem written during the Renaissance English period. It is a metaphysical poem. Metaphysical poets are any of the poets in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century England who inclined to the personal and intellectual complexity and concentration that is displayed in poetry. In the next section, a lexico-semantic and graphological analysis of the poem will be examined.

**Lexico-Semantic Features of the Poem, ‘Easter Wings’**

The poem manifests different meaning relations both at the syntagmatic and paradigmatic levels. Syntagmatic relations are the relations which a linguistic item bears with related items through their co-occurrence. The analysis below will border on meaning relations such as synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy and collocations. The table below summarises the meaning relations in the poem.

Table 1: Meaning relations

S/N	FEATURES	FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION	PERCENTAGE	EXAMPLES
1.	Synonymy	11	39.29%	further/advance sickness/ affliction fall/victory, most poore/ most thinne, etc.
2.	Antonymy	2	7.14%	fall/victorie
3.	Collocations	8	28.57%	wealth and store, tender age sickness And shame, Easter wings.
4.	Hyponymy	7	25%	victory – rise, flight, sorrow sickness, Shame, affliction
	<b>Total</b>	28	100	

The relationship of synonymy holds stronger than any other meaning relation, as the poet employs words of similar meanings to make clear his message. The other synonyms that give backing to the loss of man includes sorrow/affliction. The use of the synonyms is deliberate as the holy bible records that the consequences of sin are affliction, sicknesses, shame and sorrow - Isaiah 53:4-6. Thus, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ constitute the ultimate purpose of Easter, which bailed man out of these consequences. Hence, the poet could look up to God in prayer for deliverance.

*With thee  
Oh let me rise  
As larks, harmoniously,  
And sing this day they victories:*

The victory referred to, is the victory over sin and all of its consequences; the victory on the cross and in the resurrection. I Corinthians 15: 35-57 buttresses this victory, as the power of death was conquered and the grave could not hold back Jesus from resurrecting and ascending to heaven. On the other hand, the poet has, as well, employed synonyms to emphasize the blessings of Easter- further/advance, wealth/stores, rise/light. This means that man can rise from his fallen state, fly on the wings of prayer and advance to the original state of wealth and store, as the first line reveals: "Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store". Antonymy ranks as the lowest in distribution and percentage with two occurrences at 7.14%. However, the occurrence of this meaning relation is very significant because, the poet sets in contrast the synonyms he has used to show firstly, the fall of man, and secondly, the rise or restoration of man through the wonders of Easter. Hence, the pair – ‘fall/victory’, which constitutes the antonyms, speaks for the two dimensions with regards to the state of man. The last five lines of each stanza dwell on the power of God, and the victory that Easter brought to man. The poet begins the second half of each stanza thus: ‘with thee’. The lexical item "thee" is an anaphoric reference to "Lord" in line one. Hyponymy overlaps with synonymy because the meanings of some lexical items are included in the meaning of others; hence, they are closely related in meaning, and would essentially fall into the same semantic



field. The hyponym 'victory' as included in its meaning, 'rise' and 'flight'. In the same vein, 'sorrow' includes in its meaning lexical items such as 'sickness', 'shame' and 'affliction'. The frequency and percentage of distribution is relatively high with 7 (25%). This makes for clarity, and helps in the understanding of the text as the meaning of one lexical item translates into another. Instances of collocation abound in the poem. They include: 'Easter wings', "tender age", "sickness and shame" wealth and store", The first is a rare kind of collocation as the word 'Easter' often goes with words like 'day', 'holiday', 'Sunday', 'Monday' and 'tide', but it seldom goes with 'wings'. The use of 'wings' is not in isolation as the poet makes mention of "larks (bird), which are naturally known with 'wings and flight'. Having commented on the fall of man, the poet prays to God to make him (man) rise as larks, and of course, on the wings of prayer through poetry. The use of 'wings' is therefore significant as a collocate of 'Easter' because, the resurrection of Jesus is a guarantee that man could rise from his fallen state, if he recognise and confess his sin and then pray to God for help and forgiveness. 'Easter' and 'wings' are therefore strung together to represent "Easter prayer". Moreover, poetry is associated with wings, that is, the power of imagination that could fly and take the individual to a height of ecstasy. Thus, the collocation, as well, means 'Easter thoughts', which brings to man, resurrection and victory over sin and its consequences. Other collocations are regular or usual: "sickness and shame", 'tender and age", with the exception of 'wealth and store", which though is irregular, is not far-fetched. The frequency and percentage of distribution of collocation in the poem ranks next to synonymy with 8 (28.57%).

### Graphology

One of the major interesting features of Herbert's "Easter wings" is its shape. Herbert's creative ability becomes pungent on the reader or audience when the poem is turned vertically. From this view point, the two stanzas can be seen as two pairs of wings rising upwards. This graphic onomatopoeic design speaks much of the title as well as the major activities associated with 'Easter'. For instance, the wings can be related to the two angels who appeared to Mary Magdalene at the sepulchre on the morning of resurrection. Apart from the shape of the poem, the graphological foregrounding of lines of the poem demands attention. The lines are unevenly distributed to account for the supremacy of God over man. The poem uses this to express the depreciating and deteriorating condition of man as a result of sin, until man is reduced to "most poore" and "most thinne". On the contrary, as man turns to God to help in repentance, the lines increase in length until man is able to fly on the wings of Easter. The use of punctuation marks, especially colons, has striking effect. The colons serve as synopsis of the story the poet tries to put across. The first colon appears in line five, intimating the readers with the place of God in the restoration of man. A most striking appearance of this punctuation mark is in lines nine and eight of stanzas one and two respectively. This simply explicates what 'Easter' stands for, which is victory over sin and its consequences: sickness, shame, sorrow, affliction and eternal death. As can be deduced from the poem, the word "victorie" brings about "flight", which enables the poet in stanza one to move on to perfection, and in stanza two to live above the predicaments of life.

### Conclusion

The poet has used different symbols and other figurative devices to support his message on religion, death and the futility of life. There is a lot of use of imagery and biblical allusion. Herbert used the language of the era in which the poem was written. The theme of religion dictated the lexical choices used by the poet – 'Easter', 'victory', 'Lord', etc. The poem can be easily understood and the poet's style of deviating from the norm contributes to its meaning.

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