

CREATING POETRY

By Kithaka wa Mberia

1. GENERAL REMARKS

Different poets create poetry differently and none of them can convincingly claim that their approach is the standard one. However, there are certain trends that all poets share. For instance, inspiration precedes writing. Moreover, in many cases, writing is followed by rewriting. Some poets, including seasoned ones, rewrite their poems several times before they are satisfied with the outcome.

I have indicated that different poets have different approaches to creating poetry. What I give you below, therefore, are creative considerations and stages that characterise my own creative process. It works for me and, probably, it will for you. If sections of the process do not seem appropriate for you, try to develop a method that best suits you.

2. INSPIRATION

The creative process begins with an urge, sometimes irresistibly strong, to express a feeling, an idea, an opinion, a wish or an observation. This urge, otherwise referred to as inspiration, is normally triggered by a factor or a combination of factors either internal or external to the poet. The urge may be occasioned by an important realisation after an occurrence or after observing a natural phenomenon, a social event, person's appearance or after reflecting on some aspect of life.

If inspiration does not come to you as an aspiring or an established poet, do not spend a lifetime waiting for it. Take the initiative and look for it! This can be done by reading books, travelling, meeting and talking with people and always keeping your eyes and ears wide open every time you are awake. In this regard, it is very important to sharpen your sensibilities and to learn not take anything for granted. You should let both physical and

social environments provoke your thought process almost on a continuous basis. **And** do not assume you can see, hear or feel. Most people don't; if they do, they see, hear or feel in a way that their seeing, hearing or feeling is virtually irrelevant. A poet, or indeed any other artist, must learn or consciously teach herself or himself to see, to hear, to feel in a way that arouses curiosity. You should train yourself to ask (in your mind), "Why?" every time you see, hear or feel something. Attempting to answer that question will lead to consideration or reflection which in turn is an important ingredient in creativity.

Sometimes, the creative process may begin not with an inspiration to write just one poem but rather from a conscious decision to intervene against, for instance, an unacceptable social set-up. You may decide, for instance, that you want to be a poetic voice in your society's political reality. If that is the case, you need to be highly informed on what goes on in the political arena and to spend time on enabling yourself to correctly interpret what the political arena has to offer.

3. INTUITION AND RESEARCH

A poet creates a poem using knowledge relevant to the subject matter of the poem. A poet may have acquired that knowledge without making a conscious effort to do so. In other words, the poet may use just their intuition. Many poems are created in this way - with the intuition acting as the sole source of information for the composition. However, whereas quite often we have a good level of intuitive understanding of issues, there are areas where our knowledge is limited and, therefore, needs to be supplemented. Suppose you wish to compose a poem on a subject on which you have insufficient knowledge or information. Do you use your insufficient understanding in your composition or do you give up and suppress your desire to create? Well, you should do neither. Instead, you should add to your knowledge on the subject of your interest. This can be done through research. However, I am not referring to the research of the academic type whereby you begin with a research proposal containing a statement of the problem, objectives, research

questions (or hypotheses), theoretical framework, methodology and all that. No. You can find out a lot about your subject by reading, discussing the subject with friends, colleagues and people knowledgeable on the issue, or by visiting places that will give you more information of the type you need.

4. IMPROMPTU SCRIPTING

Poets sometimes move straight from getting the inspiration to the composition of a poem. In other words, after the onset of inspiration, they move on to composition without preparation in the form of research, length reflection, compilation of notes or doing an outline of the intended poem. This approach to composing poetry is valid and it can lead to the realisation of powerful poems. However, sometimes the poet ends up with a composition that may not qualify as a poem on the grounds that it consists of a mere description of phenomena or observations lacking in the depth that one would expect in a poem.

I have occasionally used impromptu scripting to compose some of my poems. However, often times, after reading the results the following day or some days later, I discover that what I thought was a poem is a sham. It turns out to be a shallow text in a verse form. It may turn out, for instance, to be a mere depiction of feelings or basic reality. Feelings or basic reality may be processed and packaged so as to point us to some truth and, therefore, become literature, but their mere depiction would be too simplistic to qualify as art.

Sometimes, when I read a shallow piece that I wrote in the belief that I was scripting a poem and discover that it is salvageable, I salvage it by extensively reworking it to give it depth. However, other times, I simply tear the piece of paper on which I have written the text or delete the work from the computer screen. This experience with impromptu scripting, I believe, is encountered by many poets across the globe.

5. AN OUTLINE AS A BLUEPRINT FOR A POEM

Another approach to creating poetry is to begin with an outline to make the exercise of composing more systematic. Think of the usefulness of an outline when one is writing an essay, a report or a speech. It works like a roadmap enabling the writer to know where he/she is going and how to get there without spending too much time trying to navigate through bamboo and around swamps. An outline takes the poet through the various stages of the poem up to end. Ideally, the outline should not be written in commonplace language but, rather, in creatively manipulated language that will feed directly into the poem during the scripting.

Field notes may precede an outline. If a poet, for instance, is travelling or taking part in or witnessing an activity and, because circumstances at the particular time do not allow her/him to compose a poem or to do a reasoned outline, they can preserve in memory what they have witnessed by jotting down their experience. Such a situation calls for taking down field notes which need not be as systematic or as organised as an outline. Furthermore, they do not have to be written in the artistically fine language that should be ideally used in an outline. Without the field notes, the poet may not remember what was seen or heard and thereby losing a chance to create a poem or poems. As an illustration, I present below field notes that I made in November 2005 on my trip to the Caribbean Islands of St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix. The notes specifically record my impressions of St. Thomas.

St. Thomas

-main thoroughfare

- jewels: diamonds, ordinary gold, white gold, emerald, sapphire
- rings, necklaces
- watches

-old Danish buildings

- jewelrally shops
- restaurants, clothes shops, shops for other products

- thoroughfare beside the sea
- Green House – band music on Fridays
 - disco music on Saturdays
 - many people; many girls – some seated perhaps waiting
for their luck
 - good food; many people during lunch and dinner
 - many people outside when there is music, long hair, perhaps some
are drug peddlers
 - selling drinks and food to people in vehicles
- many tourists
- tourist ships at the shore
- casual wear
- minibuses without glass in their windows
- Emancipation Garden
- day-time structures: T-shirts some with bob Marley’s portrait; curios
- hovercraft – to and from St. Croix
- small boats
- steep hillsides – houses look as though they could let go and tumble down
- at night lights on the steep hillsides look like stars
- green landscape
- adequate light
- clean sea
- many people with dreadlocks
- trips to Africa: Ghana, Senegal, Nigeria
- dreams of seeing Africa: Ghana, Senegal, Nigeria
- patriotic awakening among some of the people
- urge for freedom
- Emancipation Garden
 - a portrait of patriot holding a machete and blowing on a sea shell
 - portrait of a European administrator (?)

6. LANGUAGE

The language of good poetry is different from the language that we ordinarily use in our day to day activities, that is commonplace language. Unlike commonplace language, the language of good poetry is sifted and reinforced. It is economical, fresh, elegant, intense and memorable. The economy, freshness, elegance and intensity found in poetry is achieved through creatively manipulating language. This creative manipulation of language is neither arbitrary nor haphazard. It is guided by conventions that can be learnt and mastered.

When people ask whether writers are born or made, they miss the point. The question creates an unnecessary dichotomy. Writers are both born and made. They are born because one has to leave their mothers' wombs with brains that are already programmed for intelligence. But writers are also made. They are made because, either through conscious learning or informal exposure and practice, they acquire artistic skills with which to create their literary works. In poetry, these skills mainly involve understanding how to use language manipulation devices. These devices, also called compositional devices, include metaphor, simile, symbolism, personification, rhetorical question, irony, hyperbole, synecdoche, paradox and oxymoron. (For a more comprehensive listing and description of the devices, see "Creative Writer's Language Toolbox" elsewhere in this website)

Let me state categorically that creative manipulation of language is essential in poetry. Occasionally, one comes across compositions which are labelled poetry but which employ such mundane language that they really do not qualify for the label *poetry*. They may contain excellent ideas. But excellent ideas alone do not make a piece artistic. Art is ideas presented in a consciously crafted and delightful way. A poet and, indeed, other creative writers, need to have more than just ideas however insightful those ideas are. It is imperative to also have a language competence as well as a good grasp of compositional devices to enable him/her manipulate language to the desired level.

7. COMPOSING

Composing a poem involves presenting ideas or thoughts in a systematic way using sifted and reinforced language. Such language is, among other qualities, economical, fresh, elegant, intense and memorable. The composition should be cohesive, complete and self-sufficient. It should not be necessary for someone reading the poem or listening to its recital to seek the intervention of the poet to understand it. A composer should ensure that the composition has a coherent content and that the composition communicates. **I have a dislike for obscurity in poetry and little regard for poets who imagine that being obscure is a mark of brilliance. It is not! Likewise, I pit critics who think that when a poet is obscure he/she is being philosophical. Nothing can be farther from the truth. Even the most complicated ideas can and should be communicated in a way that enables recipients to arrive at an interpretation. If the composer does not have the intention of transmitting a coherent content through the composition, he/she is engaged in a game of pretence rather than creating a work of art.**

8. REWRITING

When we come back to a poem that we have written, we may notice minor or major weaknesses in the work. Minor weaknesses may comprise grammatical errors, wrongly spelt words, misplaced punctuation, missing or repeated words, a failed attempt at the use of a compositional device or interpose words. More serious shortcomings include poor internal organisation such as inappropriate sequence of stanzas, abrupt and unconvincing beginning or end, gaps in the content perhaps requiring addition of one or more stanzas, stanzas or information that does not appropriately fit within the poem or a factual mistake. When we notice such weaknesses in a poem, it is necessary to rewrite it to effect changes. It should be noted that rewriting is not a one-off activity. There is nothing unusual in rewriting a poem three, five, eight or more times. Producing a good poem, just like producing a good play, novel or a work in the other genres of literature, requires hard work and perseverance.

10. LENGTH OF THE POEM

The length of a poem is determined by the scope of the subject matter. When a poet forces the poem to be shorter or longer than it should be, the arbitrariness of the length will probably become evident to the discerning reader. So, we should strive for the optimal length as dictated by the subject matter of the poem. Accordingly, there are very short poems, medium length poems and long poems. Some poems are so long that a single piece constitutes a book. Below is a poem by John Pepper Clark titled “Ibadan”, which, although only five lines, is complete:

Ibadan

Ibadan-

 Running splash of rust
and gold – flung and scattered
among seven hills like broken
china in the sun

Below are my two poems of different length. Both of them are translated into English from the from the Kiswahili originals contained in an anthology titled *Bara Jingere* published in 2001. The title of the anthology in English is *Another Continent* published in 2011.

Tears of Blood

Remorse, like a grandchild
Arrives in the due course:
In the arena of politics
We played with potter’s clay
Knowing not that toys

Would change form
Become insolent gods
And by sinking their nails
Into our nerve ganglions
Make us shed tears of blood

No Farewell to Dreaming

The red reality
Frightens the eyes
Confuses the mind
Like the midnight nightmare,
The teeth of poverty
Rend children into pieces
Like wild dogs
Ripping sheep into bits,
The poison of ignorance
Engulfs villages
Like mist or smoke
On a traveler's road,
The madness of corruption
Permeates all over
Like bilharzia germs
In a human body,
Breton Woods and accomplices
Suck our blood
Like a million ticks
On an animal's body,
And the insolent ogres
Stuck on the reigns of power

Have encircled us
With barbed wire
Like dogs-of-war,
Yet
We, the children of Africa
Rebuff bidding farewell to the dream-
Oh, golden dream
The dream of a morrow
Where crocodiles
Sun-bathing on red carpets
Will be yester tales,
A morrow when
Libraries and laboratories
Will light the valleys
And the hills of Africa,
A morrow when
Children will walk in the villages
Without being munched on the way
By measles and whooping cough
A morrow when
Children will lift their brain power
To the apex of the eucalyptus
Without being pulled down by poverty,
A morrow when
Agricultural technology
Will kiss the land
To produce a super potato
Bigger than Africa
So that, to the rubbish heap, we dish
This tin with which
With a smelly embarrassment

We make rounds around the glove
Begging for leftovers

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