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Absent: The English Teacher

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TOWARDS A STYLISTIC RE-READING OF JOHN EPPEL’S ABSENT: THE ENGLISH TEACHER

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to articulate the reasons behind the structure and style John Eppel employs in his novel Absent: The English Teacher. Approaches to John Eppel’s creative works have been myopic and slight. Attention has not been paid to the technical achievements and the deliberate construction that Eppel uses in his novel Absent: The English Teacher. This paper eschews prior readings of this work in order to formulate a new one based on structure. By dealing with the unusual elements of the novel the paper explains the alternative ways of representation and storytelling found in the novel. The inclusion of certain structural elements in the novel by Eppel is found to be deliberate. It is concluded that the structure of the novel is appropriate to the story because of the occupation of the protagonist. Multi-genre inclusion in the prose of the novel is identified, assessed and the impact towards its contribution to the narrative objectives is highlighted. This paper argues that Eppel should rightly be considered a member of the Zimbabwean literary establishment based on his innovative creativity.

Keywords: Zimbabwean literature; John Eppel; white African writing; stylistic interpretation; African literature

INTRODUCTION

John Eppel is one of Zimbabwe’s most accomplished writers. Although he is overlooked in discussions about the Zimbabwean literary canon, his works are authentically Zimbabwean. One of the reasons why Eppel is overlooked might be because white Zimbabwean writing has mostly been side-lined by black critics of Zimbabwean fiction. In addition to this, as a novelist, Eppel does not adhere to the autobiographical form that many Zimbabwean white writers use when elucidating their stories. His novels
are difficult to place thematically within the corpus of white Zimbabwean writing that includes autobiographies such as Peter Godwin’s *Mukiwa: A White Boy in Africa* (1996) or Ian Smith’s *Bitter Harvest: The Great Betrayal and the Dreadful Aftermath* (2008) for instance. Eppel mainly uses satire in his works in order to illustrate his vision. This is also another area of contention and discomfort when it comes to Zimbabwean literature. Satire is not broadly praised and few writers dare to embrace it. The few writers who attempt to include satire in their works are the new generation of writers amongst whom Pettina Gappah and Brian Chikwava are counted.

Using one of his more recent literary outputs, it is the intention of this paper to highlight that Eppel has been under-studied in Zimbabwean literary criticism. This is regardless of the fact that Eppel’s writing is intricately woven. This paper argues that there are two main features that make *Absent: The English Teacher* stand out within the canon of Zimbabwean literature. The first element is the presence of a second omniscient narrator. This form of narration is not usually found in books by Zimbabwean authors. The second element is the inclusion of drama in the prose. *Absent: The English Teacher* is a novel so the reader would not expect to encounter drama or any of its conventions in the text. The inclusion of drama in the prose and also the conflation of the two in the novel, is analysed to show that it is a substantial deviation from the norm, especially in the Zimbabwean context.

It is demonstrated that Eppel employs many styles and structures found in English literature in order to tell the story of an English teacher. The eclectic and sometimes revolutionary approaches to storytelling that Eppel uses represent pioneering methods in terms of Zimbabwean literature. In digging deep into a scathing commentary on English literary teachers, Eppel has reinvigorated and added to the number of storytelling techniques available to Zimbabwean creative writers. This is why these features of *Absent: The English Teacher* elevate Eppel to the level of a great Zimbabwean writer and disarm his critics.

Current superficial readings of Eppel have not fully assessed his stylistic merits and accomplishments in structure. It is hoped that this discussion will begin the impetus towards more holistic readings of Eppel’s work. These readings will hopefully not be centred on categorising Eppel as a white Zimbabwean writer but on singling out his rambunctious stylistic talents.

Although this paper concerns itself with his prose it should be noted that Eppel is also a prolific poet and his poetry involves personae who seek to distance themselves from the racist Rhodesian establishment (Muvoto 2010, 212). Black nationalist critics of Eppel’s poetry have not been kind. There have been allegations of apathy toward the condition of the black nation in Zimbabwe in his poetry. Zimunya (cited in Christie 2013) states “John Eppel’s *Sonata for Matabeleland* promises a lot in its title ... Inevitably, though, the vision remains ethnically white—one hesitates to say ‘settler’ for fear of perpetuating the emotive.” This, coming from a major black poet and literary critic, might therefore explain the rift between Eppel’s oeuvre and his inclusion in the
Zimbabwean literary canon. It is this antipathy towards Eppel’s works which this paper will demonstrate as unwarranted and devoid of merit.

Whilst discussing Eppel’s first novel, *D.G.G. Barry’s The Great Road North* (1992), Christie (2013) observes that “given that its author grew up among the subject group, the humour is frequently in-house. That could explain why, together with a print run of just 500 copies published only in South Africa, it failed to make a splash in Zimbabwe.” This therefore shows that the focus Eppel has on white culture might not easily resonate with black readers who make up the vast majority of Zimbabwean literary consumers. The reader has to be well versed in white culture in order to grasp the “in house humour.” The unfamiliarity with white Zimbabwean cultural norms serves as a barrier to rapid uptake of Eppel’s work by black Zimbabwean readers. There seems therefore to be a marked marginalisation of Eppel amongst both readers and critics in Zimbabwe.

**A SYNOPSIS OF THE STORY**

This paper concerns itself with Eppel’s 2009 satirical novel *Absent: The English Teacher* (henceforth *Absent*). The novel is about George J. George and the series of unfortunate events that befall him in Zimbabwe’s second city of Bulawayo. George is a school teacher at Boys and Girls Come Out to Play Secondary School and he gets fired from this position. He is fired for imbibing cheap, mass produced, cane spirit during a school ceremony and whilst serving out his notice things take a turn for the worse. This is because one of his students, McKaufmann, plays a prank on him by providing a portrait of Ian Smith instead of one of the current president, Robert Mugabe, which George does not check. This occurs during a visit to the school by the deputy secretary for education and rural beauty pageants.

Things get worse for George as he is involved in an accident with Beauticious Nyamayakanuna, the mistress of the minister of child welfare, sweets and biscuits, which damages her “brand new, custom built Mercedes Benz” (Eppel 2009, 27). Without a job and with his pension eviscerated by hyperinflation, George reaches an out of court settlement and loses his house to Beauticious. He also has to work for Beauticious as a houseboy and he is relegated to the servant’s quarters of his former home.

The reversal of roles is handled well by George and in addition to doing the household domestic chores he also tutors Beauticious’s children in English literature. It is whilst working for Beauticious that fate conspires and he comes across Polly, a little girl who has seemingly been abandoned. In an act of redemption George treks deep into the Matabeleland bush in order to reunite Polly with her people at Empandeni Mission. At this point George has become very sickly and an impending doom is imminent.
SOME CRITICAL VIEWS ON ABSENT

In keeping with the general marginalisation of Eppel’s work there is very little high quality academic material on *Absent*. To add to the dearth of Eppel criticism, the few scholarly works that have written on *Absent* have largely taken it as one of the many entries on white Zimbabwean disenfranchised writing. Cuthbeth Tagwirei (2014, ii) notes that

writing by Zimbabwean whites is systematically marginalized from “mainstream” Zimbabwean literature owing to its perceived irrelevance to the postcolonial Zimbabwean nation. Through an application of Even-Zohar’s polysystem theory, this thesis argues for a recognition of white writing as a literary sub-system existing in relation to other literary and non-literary systems in Zimbabwe’s polysystem of culture.

Tagwirei thus considers Eppel as being relegated to the class of white Zimbabwean writing. This is a literary category denoted more by skin colour than content. This writing is not considered within the traditional category of authentic Zimbabwean writing. The tragedy therefore becomes doubled. First, *Absent* becomes part of white writing which is a term that boxes in the scope of its interpretation and, second, it becomes a part of literature not considered mainstream Zimbabwean. The mistake Tagwirei makes is one of classification. In order to pursue the polysystem objectives of his thesis he needs to classify it under white writing. Applying this racial reading leaves out the subtleties and also the overt characteristics of *Absent*.

According to Tagwirei (2014, 182) “*Absent: The English Teacher* demonstrates that blacks, now able to penetrate the echelons of power and those spaces formerly reserved for whites, can traverse the boundaries of whiteness. They can now enter places previously reserved for whites, occupy positions and roles that were once labelled white.” Tagwirei argues that it is whiteness and not whiteness that the empowered black middle class now possesses. This means that whiteness, which is the skin pigmentation, is replaced as an elixir for blacks by whiteliness, which encompasses social status, monetary benefits, and capitalist commodities. This is particularly evident in the way Beauticious shows avarice for the material things that George, in both his whiteness and whiteliness, has collected when they become hers as a result of the out of court settlement. Nyambi (2012, 12) also refutes the idea that Beauticious wants to be white; rather he argues that her socio-economic status is an extension of Minister Gonzo’s political power.

The reading that Tagwirei offers is one based on skin colour and the distinction he makes between whiteness and whiteliness is a frivolous one. This is because whiteliness is merely an indication of socio-economic status. It should not in any way be linked to a particular race by invoking the connotative word “white” in the phrase white/liness. Tagwirei (2014) is not making a racist argument but, he does not make clear the difference between two terms that separately denote skin colour on the one hand and economic affluence on the other.
Also, it is not an accurate indicator of some of the insidious hallmarks of aristocracy. Even if George, by Tagwirei’s summation, has lost his whiteness, he still bears the traits of middle-class privilege which serve to denote it. He is well educated, has manners and keeps the traditions of British mannerisms that have been passed down to Rhodesians even when he is living in the run down servants’ quarters. This paper challenges Tagwirei’s readings which are wholly ill-suited to the text.

As alluded to previously, white Zimbabwean writings have been met with hostility by many black nationalist Zimbabwean critics. Magosvongwe (2013) is particularly hostile to the type of black majority rule depicted in Absent. The satire that Eppel uses is misinterpreted as a direct assault on the competences of blacks in running the affairs of the country. Magosvongwe (2013, 152) opines that

What is striking about this narrative is its biting sarcasm towards indigenous ownership and administration of the country. To a critical reader, it is clear that the author’s use of urban Bulawayo and George’s dispossession is allegorical. Absent is an allegory of the hotly contested issue of racial violence, black repossession of the country’s resources—principal of which is the land—as well as indigenous administration. Snippet references are made to land redistribution … claims to a boom in agricultural production couched in “the mother of all agricultural seasons.”

This interpretation is unacceptable for a few reasons. Magosvongwe (2013) mistakes Eppel’s satire for malice and veiled racism. Eppel is not directing the criticism at blacks but rather at a government that has failed both blacks and whites alike. The post 2000s were referred to as the lost decade in Zimbabwe because of hyperinflation, food shortages and the Murambatsvina clean-up operation meant to punish urban opposition party supporters (Kamete 2007). Eppel’s satire although aimed at the blacks in power is not specific to them nor is it malicious.

The comments on this novel have not all been negative. Robert Muponde (2009) sings the praises of Eppel’s novel by calling it a “welcome contribution to the literatures of the region.” Muponde argues that Eppel is at the forefront of depicting Rhodesian culture, which is slowly disappearing. It should be noted that Muponde’s review is written for the local publisher of Eppel’s novel. It is not a critical effort but rather a marketing attempt. The review actually appears on the publisher’s website. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the review sings the book’s praises. The review does however confirm the central battle in the novel. This is the battle fought by the protagonist to keep the discipline of English literature interesting and taught with enthusiasm. Muponde indicates that “[i]t is a story of the struggle of books over videos, i-Pods, hamburgers, pizza and Coca-Cola.” Eppel also takes up this battle through his portrayal of the story by using English literary traditions such as drama and innovative narration.

It should be stated here that the readings that have been applied by these scholars are not necessarily deficient. They are readings that serve to explain only a small part of the novel Absent and therefore relying on only these few readings becomes erroneous. This paper intends to greatly expand on the number of readings that have been applied to this novel. This is so as to show the depth and intricacy that Eppel applies to his work.
THE SARCASTIC AND ANNOYED SECOND NARRATOR

There is nothing within the scholarly discussions of Zimbabwean literature that serves to prepare the reader for the structure that is found in the narration of *Absent*. Having two narrators is not unusual in literature because a novel can have many different characters playing the role of the narrator at different stages of the novel. These characters, when they play the role of narrator, serve to show different viewpoints. An example of this can be found in Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987). In this novel, the three character narrators are Ikem, Chris and Beatrice. Beatrice serves to show the female voice and worldview in her portion of the narration of the novel. This is strategically used by Achebe to respond to allegations of him neglecting the female voice in his creative fiction.

Outside of the Zimbabwean and African literary context one might observe a multitude of narrative forms and narrators. Richardson (2006, 2) posits that

> Each of these developments suggests further steps along the same path: one goes from unreliable narrators to incompetent ones to delusional and then completely insane storytellers. One starts with flawed narration, goes on to more fragmented forms, and ends with the semi-coherent and utterly opaque. The represented consciousness is increasingly abnormal: we move from Woolf’s Septimus Smith to Faulkner’s Benjy to Beckett’s Molloy to Nabokov’s Charles Kinbote.

Richardson argues here for a progressive development of narrators who are enigmatic. That is to say there is something odd about the narrators who are entrusted with the narrative. The flaw in Richardson’s argument is that it is actually one type of narration. The characters from the works he gives as examples are all mentally insane or mentally incapacitated because of trauma. Kinbote is a megalomaniac, Benjy has a learning disability, Septimus Smith suffers from war trauma and Molloy is a figment of another character’s imagination. This therefore does not seem to suggest different forms of narration but rather varying degrees of insane narration. Furthermore, these are all characters in the narrative and they are not omniscient. There is no mention of fractured narration in terms of multiple third person omniscient narrators that take no part in the action of the novel. The import of this is that both African and European models of narration do very little to explain the type of narration found in *Absent*.

Although there are many structural oddities found in *Absent* the most striking one is the presence of a second omniscient narrator. That is to say, what sets *Absent* apart in terms of the African literary tradition is that there are two all seeing, all knowing and sagacious narrators. This second narrator is pronounced by the use of brackets. These brackets serve to signify that there is a break from the narration of the primary narrator who narrates the greater portion of the novel.

From the onset Eppel introduces these two narrators. The interplay of the two narrators can thus be observed clearly early on in the novel.

George was only half listening to the headmaster droning on about sporting achievements … er … inflation … er … Friday detention … er … how honoured the school would be to host
On the first page the primary narrator is telling us what George is doing. His narration is in the past tense and it is there to give information on what was going on. The voice of the second narrator, at this stage of the novel, is there to give supplementary information. For example, the additional information that most of the prefects were the children of board members is given by the second narrator and we can identify the voice of the second narrator because it is in brackets. The second narrator also expands on the behaviour of the two terriers by showing that they are not just faithful companions but they pillage pupils’ lunches. Eppel carries on with this stylistic method throughout the text in order to show the reader the times when the second narrator is speaking or interjecting.

Walsh (1997, 500) opines that “[o]f course, the point isn’t really that the narrator ‘knows’ at all; it’s that the author can’t know. The purpose of the narrator is to release the author from any accountability for the ‘facts’ of fictional narrative.” Walsh argues here that authors are inclined to give their narrators maximum responsibility and accountability for the story. Eppel seems to be giving the reader two sources of truth. This is so that any bias and subjectivity is limited as a result of the presence of two authoritative narrators. Any errors of narration will therefore not be blamed on Eppel but on the two culpable narrators.

The second narrator is mostly out of sync with the primary narrator and some disagreement between the two narrators is evident. When George finds Marvell’s poem humorous the primary narrator observes that “His pupils couldn’t understand why he found these lies so funny, so he had to explain (did you, though, George, did you really have to?) that ‘shrink beneath the plaid’ was an allusion to the penis under the kilt and that ‘mistake’—if you knew your Shakespeare—suggested adultery or, in this case, sodomy” (Eppel 2009, 2). The primary narrator here tells the reader why George had to explain the humour in the poem. The second narrator is however questioning whether George really had to explain this. This dual but parallel narration clearly shows that these are two distinct and separate voices and that they sometimes clash.

On the first page of the novel, quoted above, it is also clear that the primary narrator is interrupted by the second narrator. This is because the brackets come in the middle of the primary narrator’s sentence, before the primary narrator has had a chance to finish his narration and explanation of what is going on. This interruption is more evidence of the presence of a distinct second narrator.

Initially the second narrator is merely giving supplementary information but his voice develops and it begins to critique, berate and mock as the novel progresses. “He stopped to take a swig from his straw-infiltrated bottle of Skipper cane (beer and wine
had become too expensive for teachers, security guards and domestic workers) and suddenly realised that he had left the park and was heading vaguely in the direction of Gwanda” (3). Skipper cane is a type of cane spirit that is similar to rum and that is cheaply priced. As a result, it is imbibed by low-wage earning, working-class people like domestic servants. In Zimbabwe teachers were traditionally held in high esteem because teaching was one of the few white collar careers available to blacks under colonialism. The second narrator is mocking George here because teachers have been reduced to the same low-wage working class that guards and domestics are in. It should also be observed here that the voice of the primary narrator is neutral in describing what George is doing. He has no opinion and this serves to illuminate the vociferous musings of the second narrator.

The second narrator is particularly cruel when it comes to George’s shortcomings and frailties. *Absent* is riddled with sexual puns (Tagwirei 2014, 187) and the trope of sex is recurrent. When George fails to get an erection during foreplay with Wilhelmine the second narrator questions his masculinity and virility. George apologises: “‘I’m sorry, Mina,’ he muttered, ‘I’m too drunk.’ (Are you sure that is the reason, George?)” (Eppel 2009, 97). The second narrator seems to be questioning George’s flimsy excuse for failing to summon an erection in order to sexually satisfy Wilhelmine. The suggestion by the second narrator here seems to be that George has regular shortcomings when it comes to his penis and its ability to perform. Charles (2016, 119) sums it up by stating that “[i]n a nutshell, George represents the failure of white masculinity in post-independence Zimbabwe.” The second narrator perceives this and uses it to mock George.

At certain stages of the narrative the second narrator seems to be thoroughly annoyed with the philosophical opinions and repetition that George exhibits. When George laments the replacement of whites by the movement of blacks into the roles formerly held by whites the second narrator states “(all right, George, that’s quite enough moralising for one day!)” (116). When George uses too many ingredients in a dish the second narrator quips “(take it easy, George)” (116). This is a second narrator clearly opining on the positions the protagonist is taking.

Perhaps the most telling example of the second narrator’s irritation can be seen through George’s constant referral to paradox. George is an English teacher who sees paradox as an indispensable tool in literary analysis. As such, he mentions its significance several times during his literary analyses. Paradox is not only limited to literature but George also sees paradox in his everyday life. The reader is subsequently bombarded by referrals to paradox and the second narrator eventually gets irritated by it. The irritation is seen in the sentences: “(don’t tell us; it’s a paradox!)” (132), “Like all great symbols, it’s a paradox (ho hum, George)” (111), and “a word like nature becomes a paradox of a paradox of a paradox (Oh dear!)” (112).

The second narrator is thus clearly a distinct and critical being. This is because his thoughts are independent of those of the primary narrator and the protagonist George. His opinions serve to form a third voice in the text that seeks to give the reader an
additional opinion to consider. The inclusion of these many voices shows the detailed nature of the artistry that Eppel employs in the novel *Absent*. The many voices in the novel serve to show that George’s world is multidimensional and multifaceted. The manner in which Eppel includes a second omniscient narrator is unique in the Zimbabwean literary tradition.

**THE INJECTION OF DRAMA INTO PROSE**

Another peculiar gift Eppel gives Zimbabwean literature is the inclusion of drama in his prose. In certain parts the novel breaks into a full-blown play. The moments at which the novel breaks into drama are clearly discernable because the classic hallmarks of drama are present. There are stage directions in italics, dialogue, and the names of the characters speaking the lines are in capitals. Also present are scenes and even curtains.

There are two types of drama in *Absent*. The first type is the drama that seeks to articulate the action that is currently occurring in the novel. George is usually the main character and the scenes revolve around him. The second type is the drama that occurs when George is reading from a classic play. These are readings of Shakespeare’s plays and they are read by him and a willing partner. The willing partner is usually Ultimate, Beauticious’s daughter, during the English literature lessons she receives from George. This paper will however focus on the moments at which the novel turns into a play in order to depict the action currently occurring. The second type of drama, where Shakespearian and other plays are read, will be referred to only in passing in order to show connections to the first type of drama that depicts the current action.

The first occurrence of the prose breaking into drama occurs during a flashback when George is reliving a moment from his teaching days in Chapter 2. He is delivering a lesson on *Wuthering Heights* by Brontë and the drama section involves the back and forth George has with his students in class. There is a hasty and abrupt change from prose to drama because the novel’s second chapter starts in prose form. There is no marker or signifying symbol of the transition. There are just the stage directions followed by the dialogue.

God knows what the Cambridge examiners made of his pupils’ scripts. With glowing cheeks, he re-lived the lesson.

* [Typical classroom hubbub over which George speaks. Distinct sound of Brenda Fassie singing “Vusi Ndlela”]

GEORGE: Cut that music! [music stops] Moyo, will you please stop tapping your pen on your tooth and answer my question?

MOYO: Sorry Sir. What was the question?

GEORGE: [sighing with irritation] How does the author use dogs to get Lockwood into the bed with panelled sides so that the crucial dream can take place? (6)
This back and forth between George, Moyo and other students continues for quite some time. The inclusion of drama in the prose makes the narrative more vivid. This is because drama offers an opportunity for descriptive dialogue. Capturing the back and forth between teacher and students would be difficult given the constraints that prose has when it comes to quoting speech. Representing many competing and disorderly voices through direct speech would lead to prose that is jagged. Also, the feat of capturing the chaos depicted in the classroom scene would prove to be a herculean task for the primary narrator. It is doubtful that he would be able to accomplish this arduous labour. This is especially true considering the fact that the second omniscient narrator is already helping the primary narrator to accomplish his narration duties.

In the above dramatic classroom scene there are many interjections from different students, a chorus of voices shouting and students speaking over each other, to each other and to George. These simultaneous actions can only be described comprehensively through stage directions. This pandemonium is therefore accurately portrayed through drama. It is therefore deliberate that Eppel uses this form, albeit in the middle of flowing prose.

The play ends as quickly as it began and the novel resorts back to prose for a short time. There is no curtain but rather a simple transition.

GEORGE: There’s no absolute proof …

The bell signalling the end of the period came to George’s rescue, and he slumped onto his desk while the pupils fought their way noisily out of the classroom. (8)

It is peculiar here that Eppel would choose to resort to the primary narrator instead of stage directions to signal the end of the lesson and the move from drama back to the prose that started Chapter 2. This is because when the scene starts there are stage directions before the dialogue. The move to prose is only for a short paragraph. After this paragraph there is the transition back to drama.

It is during this transition back to drama that Eppel seems sloppy in his handling of the intersection of drama and prose. There is an apparently premature introduction of stage directions before the prose has stopped and the drama has begun.

His next class was beginning to arrive. [slightly higher pitched voices]. The noise was deafening. George checked his timetable.

GEORGE: [Muted voice] Form Three. What are we doing? (8)

The information that there were higher pitched voices is in italics and therefore these are stage directions. These stage directions serve no purpose in the prose component of the chapter and they are anachronistic. They should function only in the context of the drama part of Chapter 2. This error on Eppel’s part is evidence that what he is attempting to do is grand in ambition and sometimes it is beyond him. However, the inclusion of drama in the second chapter is appropriate and mostly handled well in order
to enunciate the chaos in the classroom. After the scene with the form three class the narrative changes back to prose up until the conclusion of the chapter. Chapter 2 serves to introduce the reader to the hybrid form and structure that is to be found in the novel. It is also an introduction to, and a foreshadowing of, Chapter 3.

Chapter 3 is wittingly titled “A Weekend in Elsinore.” This title keeps in line with the theme of literature and literary allusions found throughout the text. This is because in the chapter George gives a lesson on *Hamlet* to the chief inspector. The play *Hamlet* by Shakespeare is set in the Danish city of Elsinore. Chapter 3 has no prose in it and just like *Hamlet* it is a play in its entirety. Structurally it is a vast improvement on Chapter 2 because there are more conventions of drama present. Some of these conventions include scenes and the use of curtains. The play in Chapter 3 is made up of eight scenes. It is introduced through stage directions and it is terminated through the use of a final curtain. The scenes in Chapter 3 show the arrest of George, his interrogation by the police, his interaction with other prisoners in the cells and the lesson on *Hamlet* that he gives the chief inspector.

Chapter 3 serves as the *magnum opus* of the primary narrator as a playwright. This is because it is the lengthiest foray into drama as an alternative to prose as a story-telling medium. After Chapter 3 there are only short snippets of drama that occur. Although they are not as long as a chapter they do serve to highlight crucial moments in the novel. The first instance of this is when George and Joseph the gardener are having supper on the outside fire (59). The conversation about the missing pot lid degenerates into a rapid fire exchange between the two domestics. This rapid exchange is based on nothingness and it results in inaction. The moment is best captured through the dialogue of drama.

This instance of two characters dwelling on nothingness is a foreshadowing of the next instance of the use of drama in the play. Eppel next resorts to drama to show the blurring of the lines between George’s universe and fictional literary worlds. This occurs when George’s illness gets the better of him and he faints whilst serving the minister and the Nyamayakanunas (115). The dialogue begins with the voices of those that are around him at the time. All of a sudden Vladimir and Estragon appear and begin interacting with the minister. Vladimir and Estragon are the two central characters in Samuel Beckett’s play *Waiting for Godot* (1953). The minister delivers almost all of the lines from Pozzo, another character from *Waiting for Godot*, except that in the instances Pozzo mentions his name, Gonzo substitutes it with his own name—Gonzo. In the novel the character name remains stated as MINISTER although the words are almost verbatim Pozzo’s. The sudden appearance of Beckett’s characters can be considered a form of magical realism because they do not exist outside a fictional literary universe.

This phantasmagoria is used effectively by Eppel to represent the distortions of reality that George experiences and consequently the merging of fact and fiction into faction. This interface is probably the only time in Zimbabwean literary history where there is a collision of two fictional literary universes. The reference to *Waiting for Godot* by Eppel is homage to the theatre of the absurd movement that Beckett’s play is
considered part of and it suggests that some parts of *Absent* fit appropriately into this aesthetic and theatrical movement.

The two instances of absurdity, the frivolity with Joseph and the fainting spell, represent complex ideas that can only be explained by the quintessential forms of literature such as plays. What this means is that only literature can explain the predicament that George finds himself in. It should be expressed at this juncture that the fainting incident is the only moment in the novel where drama is used to present both current action and extracts from fictional literary texts.

There are instances in the novel when the prose breaks into the dialogue of a famous play. This happens again when George is going through a Shakespearian text with a student. Ultimate and George go through the first lines of act 1, scene 1 of the play *Macbeth* (51). What is interesting to note here is that the character names are not those of the three witches in the Shakespearian play, but rather those of George and Ultimate as they recite and read from the text. This is because they alternate in speaking the lines regardless of which of the three witches from *Macbeth* is speaking. This happens again when George is giving a lesson to Helter and Skelter, who are Beauticious’s sons, on *King Lear*. George reads the part of King Lear and Helter reads the part of Cordelia (110).

The occasions where George and a student are reading from Shakespeare and when the action in the novel is depicted as a play serve to show how deeply George is imbued with the discourses of literary analysis. George is an English teacher and so it would only make sense for his story to be told in a literary way. That is, the inclusion of drama shows the reader how far George has descended into the abyss of literary symbolisms and paradoxes.

The injection of drama into the novel is made even more appropriate by the fact that Eppel himself is a teacher of English literature. Therefore the subject material being discussed will be expressed well because it is handled by someone with considerable knowledge in the area. George is a master at interpreting Shakespearian plays. It is only natural that the reader experiences George’s world in the form of drama. As George explains drama to his students, the reader can apply the literary skills he is imparting to also explain the instances of drama found in the novel *Absent*.

**CONCLUSION**

It was the thrust of this paper to show that John Eppel is an innovative artist who uses uncommon stylistic and structural elements in order to tell the story of George J. George. Narrative innovation in *Absent* is deliberately employed in order to ensure that the story of a man who is slowly engulfed by literature is told well. The introduction of two omniscient narrators is there to show that George’s world is multifaceted and multidimensional. The two opposing viewpoints found in the primary narrator and the second narrator offer the reader a gateway into multiple readings of the text. In addition,
the ironic voice the second narrator offers exposes the contradictions in George’s life and shows the reader that he is “unaware of the paradoxes that surround his background and the methods of his teaching” (Muponde 2009).

The blending of drama with prose by Eppel serves to heighten particular tribulations and emotions that the protagonist experiences. Drama is carefully inserted at particular instances in order to show rapid dialogue, absurdity and the merging of fact and fiction. Drama within prose offers narrative possibilities that are beyond prose alone. The use of drama shows that George’s story can only be told in ways that accommodate action as reflected in stage directions and the dramatic hyperbole of theatre.

John Eppel has many other structural oddities that were excluded from analysis in this paper for reasons of economy. One of these is the inclusion of poetry in the novel Absent. There are many references and insertions of verse that serve to move the narrative forward. Also, in terms of narrative structure the story closely follows the plots, in certain sections, of many popular literary works. Literary terms are given as titles to chapters and those chapters bring out the features of the literary term, with one prominent example being Chapter 9, which is titled Deus ex Machina. This paper focused on drama and the narrators because these are the salient aspects of structure in the novel.

John Eppel has been overlooked by Zimbabwean critics and this paper, it is hoped, managed to employ new readings of his text that are outside the traditional ones. Readings that follow models that demarcate white Zimbabwean writing as separate and cast minority writing as critiques of post-independence black rule were sidelined. Attention was paid to the structural features that make up Eppel’s writing. The features were shown to be unique and they legitimise Eppel as a member of the Zimbabwean literary establishment.

REFERENCES


