

The functionality of objects in my poetry by Lisa Julie

Abstract

In this paper, I will be reflecting on the functionality of objects in my own poetry. I will discuss the process of selecting specific objects to perform certain tasks in a poem. Furthermore, I will discuss the potentiality of objects; how and why objects can be looked at as magnetic fields in poetry. I will look at the space an object inhabits and the space objects often command in poetry. Apart from the value and influence of objects, I will discuss elements of voice and structure in my own work.

My interest in the functionality of objects in poetry stems from the argument that things or objects often know more about us than we know of them. The idea of how an object can particularize a space and how it can disrupt a space are examples of the potentiality of objects in poetry. Thinking about a specific space usually involves the visualization of certain objects in it or surrounding it. In poetry, objects command their own space. In other words, objects become dynamic entities –they become magnetic fields for ideas such as memory and emotion.

In my first poem, “I left the window open” I wanted to explore how certain objects could potentially disrupt a space. There is no direct comparison between the objects in the poem and the individuals inhabiting the space. Instead, the objects are manifestations for the underlying themes of the poem; they represent the mood. The poem is about the interactions of objects and people.

“I left the window open”

Last night while we slept.
I left the window open.
The rain came in.
It damaged the book you were reading.
The one you left on the windowsill.
Black rippled pages –curved and crippled.
Like the wicks of burnt out candles.

Like the ones we used last night.
The wind came in.
It blew the ashtray over.
The one you left on the windowsill.
A heap of cigarette butts and burned out match sticks.
Like the hardened wax of used candles.
Like the ones we used last night.
The wind came in.
It tore the pictures off the wall.
The wind came in and rearranged the papers you left on the floor.
This morning before we left.
You closed the window.
You paged through your damaged book.
You found the place you stopped reading.
You folded the corner of your black rippled page again.
This morning before we left.
You picked up your ashtray.
You scooped up the dirt again.
You picked your pictures and stuck them on the wall again.
You picked your papers and again I opened the window.

My shift to the analysis of objects in poetry began with my introduction to Sylvia Plath's work. In her famous work entitled "Mirror" Plath goes beyond the norm of using an object to delineate a specific space. Instead, the mirror (the object) is in fact, the speaker. The mirror has no opinions and it only relates what it sees. Despite the mirror's objectivity, it seems to have a personality of its own. The mirror has its own history which has been shaped by everything it has seen and witnessed. Plath's ability to create a narrative from the perspective of an object is something that has inspired me in my own writing and my own selection of objects.

Something that arose from reading and engaging with Plath's "Mirror" is the question –what are the differences between objects and things? And do they play different roles in poetry? I suppose we've adopted the argument that an object becomes a thing when it no longer serves its expected function. However, objects and things often overlap in meaning and purpose. In the poem "Things and a child" I wanted to describe a room with things that the speaker has

no sense of attachment to. The ambiguity of things and objects became more apparent when I started to call these things by their actual names. The conclusion I came to was that the speaker and the tone of the poem dictates whether or not the “things” serve any real purpose. The poem therefore explores the idea that the separation of “things” and “objects” is often a subjective exercise.

“Things and a child”

I live in a room with things that are not mine.
A statue of an angel child.
A Sunday Missal.
Gifts for his first Holy Communion.
I live in a room with things that are not quiet.
Photographs in plastic frames.
Frames that don't hang straight: framed people laughing.
I live in a room with things that don't stop working.
Thirty phosphorescent stars glued to the ceiling.
Lenticular images of Noah's Arc and Jonah and the Whale.
I live in a room with things that speak.
The months of the year in Helvetica above the door.
A door that's always open.
Sounds from inside the house.
Sounds he needs to hear.
Sounds that help sleep and a neon box labeled “Mediations
for superheroes”.
I live in a room with things that move.
Two cartwheeling legs and ten sticky fingers.
I live in a room with things and a child.

The following poem explores similar ideas to “Things and a child”. The poem “Things no longer there” began as a class exercise. Our prompt was to write a poem about things no longer at the dinner table. Again, the idea of calling something by its actual name, for example, hydrangeas instead of flowers or citronella oil candles instead

of candles transformed the potential of the poem. The poem, at the end, became a poem about astute detail. It became a poem about the absence of particular objects and its effects rather than the absence of needless “things”.

“Things no longer there”

The glass of whisky.
The only one he was allowed to have.
The comedy that followed.
Whenever he was allowed more than one.
The hydrangeas in the centre of the table.
Because he no longer had the energy to work in the garden.
The sixth chair.
Because somebody needed to put something somewhere high.
The citronella oil candle.
Because Ouma couldn't take the smell and the miggies didn't bother her anymore.
The hooters somewhere down the street.
That fetched the neighbours for the night shift.
The shouting competing with the hooters.
Because the children wouldn't stop laughing and rocking on their chairs.
The neighbour's idling tow-truck.
That revved over Ouma's prayer.
Die geprek oor die Heilige Gees.
First the nodding and then the yawning and then the sinking into the chairs.
The two children.
Because the schools weren't good enough and because Ouma no longer had the energy.

The poem “Scenes” came from an exercise in which we were asked to explore a specific space. The idea was to write a poem in which humans, objects and animals have the same sense of weight. At the end, the poem seemed to be significantly symbolic. The symbolism

seemed to stem from the interchange between the animate and the inanimate.

“Scenes”

The patio:

Three fruit flies compete for a half-eaten apple that somebody threw out of a window.

The ground is stained black with the insides of blackberries.

The children never watch where they are walking.

The ants are overjoyed.

The kitchen:

The avocado tree gave us three avocados this month.

Somebody wrapped them up in newspaper.

The sun lives in our kitchen.

The ferns are dying.

The miggies are overjoyed.

The window:

Three children are playing with a PVC pipe and stone.

Somebody threw it out with their dirt.

The guinea fowls are fighting back.

The children surrender.

The poem “Brother” began after a discussion about transitional objects in psychology and naturally, a discussion about children followed. I was beginning to think about how children play and the sense of deliberateness that children have when they choose toys. The whole idea of imaginative play is quite serious and I wanted to explore this idea in the poem.

Furthermore, I wanted to create a poem about imagination and at the same time –a poem about watching a child play.

“Brother”

He covers the moon with his left thumb

I don't have enough fingers for all the stars.

He holds my abalone ashtray against his ear

I can hear the waves.

He pulls his shoes out from underneath the bed
I don't think they can breathe.
He leaves his toy soldier in front of the door
It will keep us safe.

The final poem in this portfolio, explores the potentiality of objects in a noticeably different manner. The poem "Conversations" began as a response poem to Rosa Myster's collection of poems, *Modern Rasputin*. The collection deals with topics of friendship, romantic relationships, precocious children and much more. Despite the comical and often sardonic tones as well as the cosmopolitan themes, the collection is quite personal. I decided that I wanted "Conversations" to explore an "odd" familial dynamic. The poem, on the surface, seems to linger on random events and random conversations. However, I needed to be very deliberate in my selection of objects in order to qualify certain moments. In other words, the objects in the poem were selected to stimulate specific feelings.

"Conversations"

I wanted to tell you about our conversation on the beach
when he asked me to ask you for coral shoes.
I asked him if he wanted them to keep the sand out.
Or the water?
I wanted to tell you about our conversation at the bank when
he refused to take anything but R10 notes from the cashier.
I asked him if he liked the feeling of a pocket size bible in his
pocket.
I wanted to tell you about our conversation in the lounge
when he asked about the red stain on the carpet.
I asked him if it would ease his mind if I positioned that part
under the chair.
Or painted it black?
I wanted to tell you about our conversation in the car when
he made me play Lisa se clavier on re-peat.
I asked him if he once had a friend who drank apricot tea.
I wanted to tell you about our conversation outside the
church when he asked me if the wine was diluted.

I asked him if he thought God would disapprove of such an offering.

Or Peter and the rest of them?

I wanted to tell you about our conversation at the library when he asked the librarian to turn down the lights.

I asked him if he understood Heart of Darkness.

I wanted to tell you about our conversation at the dentist when he insisted on wearing sunglasses through his procedure.

I asked him if halogen causes cataracts.

Or sunstrokes?

I wanted to tell you about our conversation in the garden when he told me I drove my mother to in-sanity.

I asked him if he knew why a raven is like a writing desk.

I wanted to tell you all of these things because they seem to end right there.

Or is it that they never end?

In closing, the selected poems in this paper share at least one common feature. The poems all explore the interactions between objects and people. Instead of lingering the functionality of objects – what an object can do I wanted to produce a collection that deals with the common and not so common relationships of subjects and nouns, the relationship between people and things and things and places.