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## EMOTIONAL VULNERABILITY IN OCEAN VUONG'S WORKS: A LINGUISTIC APPROACH

**Summary.** The article analyzes emotional vulnerability in Ocean Vuong's work, particularly *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, from a linguistic perspective. It examines Vuong's use of adjectives and how they contribute to emotional complexity. The study further delineates four particular types of adjectives that enhance its arc: the emotive, the metonymic, the temporal and the embodied, and details how they amplify the fragility and instability of Vuong's characters. Vuong's choice of descriptors generates and escalates lexical tension by stacking the gentler with the more violent («tender» and «crushed flowers»), thereby revealing how fragile human connections are.

The metonymic adjectives by applying a sensory quality to an abstract noun, deepen the emotional strata of the text. The description of memory as «bruised but persistent» creates physical vulnerability, whereas temporal adjectives like «fleeting» portray the ephemerality of beauty, love, and life. Vuong's embodied adjectives like «raw» and «mottled» anchor abstract emotions in their physical sensations, producing an emotional landscape that is vivid and tactile. This method of referencing communicates existential vulnerability and the instability of marginalized identities in larger cultural contexts.

The research is based on linguistic, literary, and other theories, including those of Halliday, Jakobson, and Lakoff, to show how the adjectives in Vuong's language together create emotional microclimates, as it is all used together: clouds of feeling. The study finds that the interplay of emotional states and external pressures shapes emotional experience through linguistic choices, highlighting their impact on the portrayal of vulnerability.

The findings add to broader conversations around themes of vulnerability and marginalization in literature by examining how Vuong's use of language communicates the fleetingness, fragility, and persistence of the human spirit.

**Keywords:** emotional vulnerability, linguistic techniques, Ocean Vuong, character development, metaphoric vulnerability.

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## ЕМОЦІЙНА ВРАЗЛИВІСТЬ У ТВОРАХ ОУШЕНА ВУОНГА: ЛІНГВІСТИЧНИЙ ПІДХІД

**Анотація.** Стаття аналізує емоційну вразливість у творах Оушена Вуонга, зокрема *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* та *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, з лінгвістичної перспективи. Дослідження розглядає використання прикметників і те, як вони сприяють емоційній складності тексту. Виділено чотири типи прикметників, які посилюють цю складність: емоційні, метонімічні, часові та тілесні. У статті детально проаналізовано, як ці прикметники підсилюють крихкість і нестабільність персонажів Вуонга. Вибір описових слів створює і загострює лексичну напругу шляхом поєднання делікатних і жорстких виразів («tender» і «crushed flowers»), демонструючи вразливість людських взаємин.

Метонімічні прикметники, які надають абстрактним поняттям сенсорних ознак, ще більше поглиблюють емоційний пласт тексту. Наприклад, опис пам'яті як «bruised but persistent» надає їй фізичної вразливості, а часові прикметники, такі як «fleeting», підкреслюють ефемерність краси, любові й життя. Тілесні прикметники Вуонга, як-от «raw» і «mottled», укорінюють абстрактні емоції у фізичних відчуттях, створюючи яскравий і тактильний емоційний ландшафт. Такий підхід відображає екзистенційну вразливість і нестабільність маргіналізованих ідентичностей у ширших культурних контекстах.

Стаття застосовує лінгвістичні, літературознавчі й інші теорії, зокрема теорії Галлідея, Якобсона та Лейкофа, щоб показати, як прикметники у Вуонговій мові створюють «емоційні мікрокліматичні зони», тобто хмари почуттів. Дослідження демонструє, що взаємодія емоційних станів і зовнішніх впливів формує емоційний досвід через лінгвістичні вибори. Отримані результати стимулюють ширше обговорення тем вразливості й маргіналізації в літературі, показують, як мова Вуонга передає ефемерність, крихкість і стійкість людського духу.

**Ключові слова:** емоційна вразливість, лінгвістичні прийоми, Оушен Вуонг, розвиток персонажів, метафорична вразливість.

**Problem Statement.** Emotional vulnerability has long been a compelling subject in literature, offering a unique lens through which to explore the intricacies of human experience. By foregrounding moments of fragility, discomfort, and emotional exposure, literary texts often reveal the deeply personal dimensions of fear, grief, longing, and loneliness. This unguarded emotional territory enables authors to strip away performative layers and reach toward a more hon-

est portrayal of what it means to be human. Characters shaped through such vulnerability emerge with heightened authenticity, and their emotional trajectories become powerful vehicles for empathy and reflection. In contemporary literature, Ocean Vuong stands out as a writer who not only foregrounds emotional vulnerability but does so with remarkable poetic and narrative finesse. His works are marked by a profound intertwining of themes such as love, trauma, memory, and

identity, all articulated through a lyrical style that enhances their emotional resonance (Lim 2020).

What makes Vuong's portrayal particularly significant is his deliberate and nuanced use of linguistic strategies to depict emotional states. His writing incorporates a range of emotive, metonymic, temporal, and embodied adjectives that do not merely describe emotions but evoke them, crafting vivid emotional topographies. These linguistic choices offer insights into the ways language can be used to communicate internal experiences that are often difficult to articulate. Thus, Vuong's work becomes a rich site for examining how emotional vulnerability is constructed linguistically and how such construction contributes to a broader literary understanding of human sensitivity and resilience.

**Literature overview.** Emotional vulnerability in literature is the state in which characters grapple with their most raw emotions – fear, loss, desire, or loneliness – and allow themselves to be open to experience and transformation. This vulnerability compels the reader to witness the rawness of the human experience, creating more relatable characters and poignant journeys. By inviting readers into emotional vulnerability, authors craft an opportunity for characters to grow and grapple with their identities or relationships. It is precisely the vulnerability that leads writers to create complex characters whose emotional development becomes the fulcrum on which the plot turns while encouraging the readers to contemplate more generally the nuances of human experience (McAdams, 2013; Brown, 2006).

Emotional vulnerability is a significant aspect of character development, as it demonstrates the complexities of the human experience. Portraying vulnerable characters is rewarding because human emotional vulnerability is a doorway leading to growth, conflict, and self-realization. Many works of fiction use vulnerability as an agent of change. Characters struggle with limitations and personal trials to take transformative journeys. The process of facing vulnerability is thus necessary for characters to attain emotional maturity, self-awareness, or catharsis. In this way, authors explore vulnerability to reveal how external circumstances and internal emotional states interact to provide motivation for and influence how a character progresses. It is through the act of vulnerability that readers are invited to travel

alongside a character as they process and struggle toward growth, and perhaps through emotive or existential angst (McAdams, 2013; Nussbaum, 2001).

In literature, emotional vulnerability also acts as a mirror to the human condition, allowing readers to reflect on their lives. As characters face and cope with their emotional difficulties, readers frequently recognize their own struggles mirrored in the text. This common ground creates a mutual vulnerability that heightens the connection between the audience and the story and the catharsis that comes through the personal lens of artistic expression. Characters who experience grief, loss, or trauma can feel relatable; a window into the human condition makes their vulnerability a point of connection for readers. In moving through vulnerability, characters not only expand emotionally but also tempt readers to journey into their own emotional territory. This mimesis creates a moment of mutual understanding and emotional catharsis through literature (Nussbaum, 2001; Goffman, 1959).

Emotional vulnerability can also function as a form of social and cultural critique. A lot of writers like to put their characters in situations where societal expectations, norms, and pressures add to their emotional sensitivity. At its broadest, characters from marginalized communities might face vulnerability linked to identity, race, gender, or class. By sharing their emotional truths, authors shed light on the emotional damage that societal rejection or discrimination can inflict on individuals, adolescents, or the community, giving readers insight into the broader forces affecting their lives. In demonstrating these vulnerabilities, writers invite an exploration of how human beings grapple with external emotional burdens and problematize the social structures that govern personal identity and experience (Butler, 1990; Brown, 2006).

In literary theory, emotional vulnerability is highly effective when it finds itself in concert with struggles, both personal and collective. This is a transition to emotional breakdown and self-discovery. Those who demonstrate emotional vulnerability can find a great deal of growth as they tackle relational and personal issues that take courage, empathy, and self-reflection. Instead of just a weakness, emotional vulnerability can be a strength. It is in moments of emotional vulnerabil-



ity that characters connect with other people and make peace with their pasts. The emotional evolution that comes through vulnerability frequently leads to characters reaching a place of self-acceptance or catharsis. Authors delve into themes of resilience, survival, and the nuances of human relationships by portraying these intricate emotional journeys (Brown, 2006; McAdams, 2013).

In literary writing, too, vulnerability is realized semantically, mainly through language that communicates emotional exposure, fragility, and uncertainty. The dialogue and internal monologue of emotionally vulnerable characters directly reflect their inner turmoil, insecurities, and longings. Vulnerability can also be seen in linguistic markers, such as fragmented speech patterns that have the use of pauses, ellipses, and incomplete sentences, which can show emotional instability and the challenge of expressing complex emotions. Torn-up language like that mimics the disintegration of the self or the difficulty of articulating visceral feelings. In each of these characters, authors reflect beings in emotional turmoil, a condition which emphasizes the internal struggle and vulnerability of the character (Goffman, 1959; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Metaphors and imagery are, therefore, also used to show emotional vulnerability, with writers turning to imagery to portray frailty and emotional openness through metaphor. Compare characters to delicate objects, like glass or flowers – they are fragile on the inside and can be easily broken. These metaphors point to just how fragile the nerves are of the characters, how vulnerable a raw underbelly of emotions lies just below the surface. Metaphors of breaking or shattering are often a way to illustrate how the characters as susceptible to an emotional breakdown, underscoring the fragility of their feelings. By choosing these two words, authors enrich the reader's experience of vulnerability, making it the most critical theme to the character's emotional journey and development (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Swann, 2006).

**Aim and Objectives.** The aim of this article is to explore how Ocean Vuong linguistically constructs emotional vulnerability in his works *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, focusing on the stylistic and semantic features that shape the portrayal of fragile emotional states.

To achieve this aim, the study sets the following objectives:

1. To define the concept of emotional vulnerability in literary and linguistic terms.
2. To identify and classify the types of adjectives (e.g., emotive, metonymic, temporal, embodied) used by Vuong to convey psychological depth and emotional intensity.
3. To analyze the function of these adjectives in building emotional landscapes and evoking internal states of trauma, grief, longing, and tenderness.
4. To investigate how Vuong's stylistic choices reflect broader thematic concerns such as identity, love, and memory.
5. To interpret how linguistic devices such as metaphor, lexical tension, and conceptual dissonance contribute to the aesthetic and affective power of his narratives.
6. To assess how Vuong's portrayal of vulnerability serves both as an individual experience and a form of cultural or social critique.

**Methodology.** Applying the qualitative analysis method, this research analyzes Ocean Vuong's texts, cataloging the literary elements found in the novels *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*. Selected passages were closely read in this method to identify the usage and analysis of the linguistic techniques Vuong employs throughout his works to deliver a sense of emotionality. This study uses linguistic and literary principles proposed by Geoffrey Leech, Roman Jakobson, and George Lakoff as formal frameworks to explore the adjectives and their affective implications.

**Results and Discussion.** Ocean Vuong is proven to have a master level of wordplay that exposes his emotions through the careful selection of his adjectives. As linguistic theorist Geoffrey Leech classifies adjectives in *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* (Leech, 1969), Vuong predominantly employs «emotive adjectives» that do more than merely describe; they also suggest psychological states. This technique is particularly evident in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, in which Vuong writes, «His eyes – tender and curious – like crushed flowers in their sockets» (Vuong, 2019, p. 89). The opposition of «tender and curious» with the violent «crushed flowers» established what the linguist M.A.K. Halliday calls «lexical tension» in his *Introduction to Functional Grammar* (Halliday, 2004), in which

the difference between words that describe gentle and aggressive actions increase emotional stakes. The tender-sounding words he picks, like «tender,» suggest emotional openness, and they lose some of their benignity when followed by the violence of «crushed». This tension speaks to the treacherousness of human connection, which is one of the central concerns in Vuong's examination of love, trauma, and identity.

Vuong's nakedness is also more capaciously conveyed through what Roman Jakobson calls «metonymic adjectives» (Jakobson, 1960) in *Linguistics and Poetics* – descriptors that translate sensory characteristics between domains. In *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, Vuong calls memory «bruised but persistent» (Vuong, 2016, p. 37), giving a physical quality to an abstract idea. This metonymic transfer heightens the emotional heft of the adjective «bruised» implying that memory can be traumatized like the body but still resilient. Likewise, in characterizing his mother's emotional state, Vuong uses «intensifying adjectives» as linguist Dwight Bolinger terms them in *Degree Words* (Bolinger, 1972): «She was so terribly alive inside her stillness» (Vuong, 2016, p. 125). The godawful juxtaposition of «terribly alive» and «stillness» is an instance of what the literary theorist Lauren Berlant (Berlant, 2011) in her book of the same title, describes as «cruel optimism», a dysphemistic stylistic mode in which adjectives announce both opening and restriction. This tension between vitality and immobility captures the radical aspects of his characters' emotional lives, reflecting the duality of hope and despair that suffuses Vuong's narrative world.

The temporal dimension of vulnerability also shows up within Vuong's writing, as expressed in what the linguist James Pustejovsky identifies as «temporal adjectives» in *The Generative Lexicon* (Pustejovsky, 1995). Vuong's repeated use of adjectives such as «brief», «fleeting» and «momentary» communicates the ephemerality of beauty, love, and life itself. This generates what the critic Judith Butler calls «linguistic precarity» in *Precarious Life* (Butler, 2004) – the anxiety that vulnerability is itself, by its nature, impermanent. In a moving passage from *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Vuong writes, «The most beautiful things are the most useless: lilies, summer storms, autopsies, and broken English» (Vuong, 2019, p. 157). By pairing the temporal implicature in «summer storms»

with the irreversible permanence signified by «autopsies», «summer storms, autopsies» creates what the linguist Eve Sweetser (Sweetse, 1990) terms «conceptual dissonance», a device that averts the reader's attention from the surface meanings of such beautiful language to the transience of beauty, the fragility of only beautiful things. Vuong's temporal adjectives conjure the ephemerality of life, and this existential vulnerability is pervasive in his oeuvre.

Vuong's genius of vulnerability applies, too, to what cognitive linguist George Lakoff has classified in *Metaphors We Live By* (Lakoff, & Johnson, 1980) as «embodied adjectives» – adjectives that connect emotional states with what is felt corporeally. So, too, in his descriptions of trauma, grief, and love, he often uses words like «raw», «aching» and «mottled» to describe the physicality of emotional pain. In one especially moving passage from *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Vuong writes, «The nail salon. Those mottled hands reaching for us. The pink-stained uniforms. The painted names» (Vuong, 2019, p. 72). Mottled as a descriptive serves what narrative theorist James Phelan calls a «character indicator» in *Reading People, Reading Plots* (Phelan, 1989), where a single descriptor is charged with the emotional freight of whole narratives about labor, immigration, and sacrifice. The «mottled hands» bear the mark of both the toll of labor and the fragility of rage among Vuong's immigrant figures, as they endure the outcomes of displacement and marginalization.

By describing vulnerability through these targeted adjectives, Vuong produces what the affect theorist Sianne Ngai calls «emotional microclimates» in *Ugly Feelings* (Ngai, 2005) where linguistic spaces become corporeal sites of vulnerability. Whether it is the «bruised» memory, the «passing» beauty of summer storms, or the «mottled» hands of immigrant laborers, Vuong's adjectives craft elaborate emotional landscapes that embrace the dimension of human fragility. Connecting theories of language and literature to an examination of Vuong's broader use of adjectives allows us to see how writing captures the marginal, impermanent, and corporeal nature of affective experience.

**Conclusion.** Through this mirroring of his characters' inner fragility with outer markers of transience – bruised bodies, ephemeral moments,

mottled hands – Vuong builds a thread of human vulnerability that is at once subtle and titanic. This multidimensional approach makes his prose an immersive experience, dynamic on the page, where each descriptive detail seems to echo the weight of cultural memory, emotional pain, and existential uncertainty. His adjectives are linguistic conduits that connect abstract feelings to their corporeal counterparts, raising the story's emotional stakes and pulling readers into the interstitial worlds of trauma, love, and the negotiation of identity.

The lexical precision of Vuong's writing reflects the way language can be both a mirror and a

magnifying glass for the human condition, revealing its fragility while bending its significance. His deft weaving of adjectival threads – emotive, metonymic, temporal, embodied – highlights the inextricability of linguistic representation from the lived experience of vulnerability. Through a braiding of literary theory, cognitive linguistics, and affect studies, Vuong's prose is one that meditates on the duality of hope and despair, permanence and ephemerality, beauty and pain.

Further research could explore emotional vulnerability in the works of other authors, comparing the findings with the results of this study.

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