

NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA

EHG 105



Introduction to Literature II Module 1

ENG 105 Introduction to Literature II

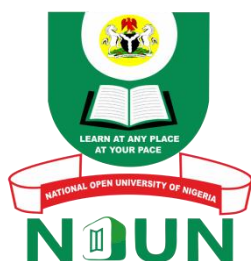
Module I

Course Developer/Writer

Oyeniya Okunoye, National Open University of Nigeria

Credits of cover-photo: Henry Ude, National Open University of Nigeria

National Open University of Nigeria - University Village, 91 Cadastral Zone, Nnamdi Azikiwe Express Way, Jabi Abuja, Nigeria



www.nou.edu.ng centralinfo@nou.edu.ng

oer.nou.edu.ng oerunit@nou.edu.ng OER repository

Published in 2021, by the National Open University of Nigeria

© National Open University of Nigeria 2021



This publication is made available in Open Access under the [Attribution-ShareAlike4.0 \(CC-BY-SA 4.0\) license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/). By using the content of this publication, the users accept to be bound by the terms of use of the Open Educational Resources repository nouonline.net of the National Open University of Nigeria.

The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of National Open University of Nigeria concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. The ideas and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors; they are not necessarily those of National Open University of Nigeria and do not commit the organization.

How to re-use and attribute this content

Under this license, any user of this textbook or the textbook contents herein must provide proper attribution as follows: “First produced by the National Open University of Nigeria” and include the NOUN Logo and the cover of the publication. The repository has a version of the course available in ODT-format for re-use.

If you use this course material as a bibliographic reference, then you should cite it as follows: “Course code: Course Title, Module Number, National Open University of Nigeria, [year of publication] at nouonline.net

If you redistribute this textbook in a print format, in whole or part, then you must include the information in this section and give on every physical page the following attribution: Downloaded for free as an Open Educational Resource at nouonline.net If you electronically redistribute part of this textbook, in whole or part, then you must retain in every digital file (including but not limited to EPUB, PDF, ODT and HTML) the following attribution:

Downloaded for free from the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) Open Educational Resources repository at nouonline.net

Module I

Unit I Textual Analysis of Poetic Works: African Poems I

1.0 Introduction

You will remember that in ENG 104: Introduction to Literature I we introduced the main forms of Literature. This course builds on what has been done in ENG 104. It particularly concentrates on the two forms of Literature that have not been fully discussed: Poetry and Drama. This unit focuses on an African poem.

2.0 Objectives

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- discuss the thematic concern in the poem analyzed in the unit
- identify the literary devices adopted in the poem
- explain the effect of the identified devices in the poem.

3.0 Main Content

3.1 Dennis Brutus' "Letter to Martha I 7"

"Letter to Martha I 7"

In prison
the clouds assume importance
and the birds

With a small spice of sky
cut off by walls
of bleak hostility
and pressed upon by hostile authority
the mind turns upwards
when it can –
there can be no hope
of seeing the stars:
the arch and fluorescents
have blotted them out –
the complex aeronautics
of the birds
and their exuberant acrobatics
become matters of intrigued speculation
and wonderment

cliches about the freedom of the birds
and their absolute freedom from care

become meaningful

and the graceful unimpeded motion of the clouds
a kind of music, poetry, dance –
sends delicate rhythms tremoring through the flesh
and fantasies course easily through the mind
where are they going
where will they dissolve
will they be seen by those at home
and whom will they delight.

Dennis Brutus

Self-Assessment Exercise 1

Read the following poem carefully. Find out if the title of the poem and its first line throw any light on what the poem is about.

3.2 Background to the Poem

The author of this poem is Dennis Brutus, a coloured South African. (Note that a coloured person in South Africa is a person of mixed race). He was opposed to the apartheid policy of the South African authorities and he was detained because of this in 1963. This poem is one of those he wrote while in prison to describe his experience. His prison poems were brought together as *Letters to Martha* and sent to his sister-in-law named Martha. This was a way Brutus beat the restriction to write publicly. The poem is in every sense not a conventional letter. You will observe that it is so compact and condensed. It is a good illustration of how poetry says so much in so few words.

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

Try to read the poem the second time so that you can benefit from the discussion that follows. This time around, pay attention to what the poet says at every stage, considering the insight you now have into the background to the poem.

3.3 A Brief Summary of the Poem

As you have earlier been told, this poem describes the experience of Dennis Brutus in prison. You will observe that the poem concentrates on the agony of the poet-persona. Note that we often hear a voice in a poem. It is possible for it to be that of another person. But when the poet is also the one talking in the poem, we refer to him as the *poet-persona*.

Now that you have read the poem again you will observe that Dennis Brutus is disturbed because of his isolation. People generally do not cherish their freedom until it is taken away by force. This adequately explains the experience of Brutus. The prison experience made him to realize that we often take our freedom for granted when we are not under any restriction. His thought was particularly directed at the freedom of the birds and clouds. He realized that while he was now confined against his wish, the clouds and birds were not restrained. This contrast is the basis of the argument in the poem.

The poet does not waste any time in telling us where he is. The first line “In prison” adequately tells us the location of the experience. The two other lines in the first stanza also introduce the reference to the birds and clouds. The poet moves on to elaborate on the limitation and deprivation imposed on his movement and liberty by the prison environment. He is conscious of the fact that he is a victim of an unjust and heartless system – the Apartheid administration. He cannot even see the sky. The fluorescent light – which is artificial – is the only source of light for him. He imagines and admires the movement of the birds in the sky.

He again recalls that the common reference to the liberty of the birds can only be meaningful to someone like him who has lost his freedom. He focuses again on the clouds and expresses his admiration of their movement. He is particularly bothered that the freedom which nature makes available – as we see the birds and the clouds enjoy it – is not available to him. Ironically, freedom has more value for him than the birds and the clouds.

This naturally leads us to a discussion of the theme of the poem.

3.4 The Thematic Interest of “Letter to Martha I”

You need to note that we have just considered an aspect of the poem, that is, its subject matter. This is different from its theme. The subject matter only tells us the topic that a particular poem engages. For instance, if we have many poems that talk about imprisonment like the poem we are studying does, we can conclude that they have the same subject matter.

This however does not indicate that they will make the same statement about imprisonment. That is what will give each of them its peculiar identity. The theme is the statement a poem makes about its subject matter. The theme is the central argument or thesis that runs through the poem. You need to note that a poem may have more than one theme.

In the case of “Letter to Martha I”, the main concern of the poet is about the value of freedom. The experience of imprisonment made the poet-persona to realize the fact that he had taken his liberty and freedom for granted until he lost the freedom of movement. He then admires the birds and clouds whose freedom and liberty cannot be curtailed.

His opinion about the contrast between the freedom of the clouds and the birds suggests that the very act of denying men their God-given right to freedom of movement in the name of imprisonment is man-made. The evidence that such a deprivation is not natural is seen in the different situation in which the clouds and the birds find themselves. This is a subtle condemnation of imprisonment as man’s own invention.

3.5 Poetic Devices/Technique

Every poet makes use of devices and techniques that make his work succeed. These vary from poem to poem as you will soon see in the poems we are going to study. What we do in each case is to draw attention to devices and elements of technique that we find remarkable in each poem.

Self-Assessment Exercise 3

Let us identify relevant elements of technique in “Letter to Martha I”.

Diction

The choice of words in this poem is remarkable for its precision and economy. You will, for instance, observe that “In prison”, which comes as the first line of the opening stanza, indicates the setting of the poem. The imprisoned poet would definitely want to say so much in few words, especially because some limitation was placed in the exercise of his rights. Such expressions as “bleak hostility” (line 6) and “complex aeronautics” (line 14) are also effective in suggesting the relationship of the poet with the state and the versatility of the birds in the world of the poem.

Rhetorical Questions

You will note the occurrence of rhetorical questions at the end of the poem. The questions are placed at the appropriate place so as to help intensify the amazement of the poet of the liberty of the birds. Even though the questions are not meant to be answered, they emphasize the futility of the freedom of the birds when compared with the detention of the poet.

Tone

Tone defines the attitude of the poet to his theme and subject matter. The prevailing tone in the poem is one that nostalgically recalls the loss suffered by the poet due to his imprisonment and subtly criticizes the system that authorized the denial of his freedom.

Contrast

The poet succeeds in driving home his message by using contrast. This comes out in the way he establishes a difference in his condition and the condition of the birds and the clouds. The clouds are free and unhindered while he is restricted. The impression he creates is that the clouds and the birds are in the ideal world – the world of nature. This also implies that he is condemning the system that imposes limitation on his liberty and movement. He consequently suggests that imprisonment is man-made and against the natural order of things. Man then emerges as an inventor of evil, especially when imprisonment is unjust and unnecessary.

4.0 Conclusion

One thing that should be noted about the poem is that there is a close link between its concern (i.e. subject matter and theme) and its form (i.e. technique). This is always the case in every successful literary work. The technique and devices that the poet adopts often turn out to be dictated by what he/she has to say.

5.0 Summary

Dennis Brutus’ “Letter to Martha 17” demonstrates that poetry may be the product of a personal experience. But the poem succeeds in making a statement that has timeless relevance. It portrays imprisonment as man-made and undesirable.

6.0 Self-Assessment Exercise

1. Discuss the subject matter and thematic interest of Dennis Brutus' "Letter to Martha 17".
2. Carefully examine the technique of Dennis Brutus' "Letter to Martha 17", drawing attention to the effectiveness of any FIVE elements of technique employed in the poem.

7.0 Reference/Further Reading

Brutus, Dennis. (1988). *A Simple Lust: Collected Poems of South African Jail and Exile, Including Letters to Martha*. London: Heinemann.

Unit 2 Textual Analysis of Poetic Works: African Poems II

1.0 Introduction

In the previous unit, we examined Brutus' poem in which personal experience serves as the source of poetic exploration. The poem we shall study in this unit is different in the sense that it draws on a shared experience – the European engagement of Africa. But what it has in common with the first poem is the adoption of lived experience for literary expression. You will soon discover that this is a common feature of African writing. African writers generally draw on the experiences of their people or their personal experiences in their writing.

2.0 Objectives

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- discuss the thematic preoccupation of the poem
- relate the thematic interest of the poem to its technique
- clarify the relevance of the experience of the poet to the proper reading of the poem.

3.0 Main Content

3.1 Background to the Poem

You will need to appreciate the fact that African history has been a major source of inspiration for African writers to understand the poem we are discussing in this unit. The particular aspect of African history involved is the colonial experience. But you must realise that the creative writer does not merely reproduce history. History is most of the time seen by a writer as a raw material in the sense that it allows the writer to use it for his own purpose. What writers then do is to take such aspects of history as they find interesting. They often end up giving history their own interpretation. You may therefore assume that the writer does not pretend to be presenting an objective version of history.

In the case of the poem we are studying in this unit, what is particularly interesting is the fact that it is purely a creative reproduction of history. The poem is based on the historic meeting of a prominent king in East Africa, King Mutesa of the Buganda with Henry Stanley, a European explorer, in the nineteenth century. The only aspect of the poem which is taken from history is the meeting of the two people.

All other details must be seen as a product of the imagination of the poet. If you have read "Journey of the Magi", a poem written by the English poet known as Thomas Stearns Eliot (better known as T.S. Eliot), what will immediately strike you is the fact that they are similar. The writing of this poem seems to have been influenced by Eliot's poem. This is evident in the first stanza of the poem which seems to echo the first stanza of "Journey of the Magi".

You will also need to note that this poem is a narrative like Eliot's. It is also narrated by a persona. The only difference between them is that the persona in David Rubadiri is merely an observer and not a member of the expedition of Stanley. The exact opposite is the case in Eliot's poem where the narrator is presented as a participant-observer.

Self-Assessment Exercise

What does David Rubadiri's "Stanley Meets Mutesa" have in common with T.S. Elliot's "Journey of the Magi"?

3.2 About the Poet

Now that you have gained some insight into the background of the poem, it may be necessary for you to also note some relevant information about David Rubadiri who wrote it. David Rubadiri is a leading Malawian poet. He is also a first-generation Malawian poet. He once served as an ambassador of Malawi.

3.3 David Rubadiri's "Stanley Meets Mutesa"

Now endeavour to read the poem. Bear all that you have been told in mind. It is necessary for you to read the poem at least twice. The first time you go through it, read aloud. Then read it again, paying attention to the significance of everything you read for a proper understanding of the poem.

Stanley Meets Mutesa
Such a time of it they had;
The heat of the day
The chill of the night
And the mosquitoes that followed.
Such was the time and
They were bound for a kingdom.

The thin weary line of carriers
With tattered dirty rags to cover their buttocks
The battered bulky chests
That kept on falling off their shaven heads.
Their tempers high and hot
The sun fierce and scorching
With it rose their spirits
With its fall their hopes
As each day sweated their bodies dry and
Flies clung in clumps on their sweat-scented backs
Such was the march
And the hot season just breaking.

Each day a wearing pony dropped

Left for the vultures on the plains;
Each afternoon a human skeleton collapsed,
Left for the Masai on the plains;
But the march trudged on

Its khaki leader in front
He the spirit that inspired
He the light of hope.

Then came the afternoon of a hungry march,
A hot and hungry march it was;
The Nile and the Nyanza
Lay like twins
Azure across the green countryside.
The march leapt on chanting
Like young gazelles to a water-hole
Hearts beat faster
Loads felt lighter
As the cool water lapt their sore soft legs
No more the dead of hungry hyenas
But only tales of valour when
At Mutesa's court fires are lit.

No more the burning heat of the day
But song, laughter and dance.

The village looks on behind banana groves,
Children peer behind reed fences.
Such was the welcome
No singing women to chant a welcome
Or drums to greet the white ambassador;
Only a few silent nods from aged faces
And one rumbling drum roll
To summon Mutesa's court to parley
For the country was not sure.
The gate of reeds is flung open,
There is silence
But only a moment's silence –
The tall black king steps forward,
He towers over the thin bearded white man
Then grabbing his lean white hand
Manages to whisper
"Mtu Mwenpe Karibu"
White man you are welcome.
The gate of polished reed closes behind them
And the West is let in.
David Rubadiri

Now that you have read the poem, you can look closely at the poem to discover its meaning and how its parts relate.

3.4 A Summary of the Poem

You will remember that we had earlier noted that the poem is an imaginative recreation of the historic encounter between Mutesa, an influential king in East Africa and Henry Stanley

in the nineteenth century. The poet, in recreating the experience, imagines the journey leading to this encounter. The poem can be divided into three parts, each coinciding with a phase in the journey. The first part (lines 1-26) records the difficult journey of Henry Stanley's expedition through the country. The second part (lines 27-41) tells us about the positive change of attitude that the expedition experienced on sighting the Nyanza. The last part describes the actual entry of the expedition to the village.

The poem is set in tropical Africa. This is indicated by the weather and vegetation suggested in the first lines. The expedition team first travelled through the country. Henry Stanley is presented as leading the expedition. In his company were black people who carried his loads. These "carriers" had "tattered dirty rags to cover their buttocks" (line 8). Their heads were also shaven. The journey was particularly tedious due to the harsh weather. The horses on which they travelled died only to be consumed by the vultures. Some members of the team were also lost. These were not enough to discourage them.

Henry Stanley's determination to get to the Buganda kingdom served as the source of inspiration for his team. They received encouragement on seeing River Nyanza, believing that they were close to their destination. They also became the more anxious and determined to accomplish their goal. Then they began to discountenance the weight of the loads they were bearing. They finally arrived at Mutesa's court and everyone seemed to be curious, watching them as if in suspicion.

The reception they were accorded was solemn, devoid of the rash celebration that is often marked with dancing and drumming. It dawned on them that Henry represented the white race. Mutesa's court was summoned and the "tall black king" greeted the "bearded white man" (line 55). This was followed by the closing of the "gate of polished reed" (line 60), marking the formal acceptance of the European incursion to East Africa.

3.5 Thematic Concern

As an imaginative recreation of the historic visit of Henry Stanley to King Mutesa, "Stanley Meets Mutesa" thematizes the meeting of the African and the European, drawing attention to the importance which the visit – that at first appeared unimportant – would have. The encounter between Henry Stanley and Mutesa then becomes important for them as it marks the meeting of their cultures and the people they represented. In a sense, you may say that the meeting indicated in a symbolic manner the coming of colonialism to East Africa. The irony of the meeting is that the acceptance of Henry Stanley was to mean the forfeiture of his own authority and the right of his people to self-governance.

3.6 Technique

Let us now take a look at the devices that the poet employs in the poem. Our interest is in the effect of each of them. We assume that the devices contribute to the success of the poem.

Structure: You will observe that even though the poem has six stanzas its structural development is closely linked to its concern. The poem can be divided into three sections. The first (lines 1-26) has to do with the journey of Stanley's team, with particular focus on all that they endured. The second (lines 27-41) focuses on the change of attitude that the sighting of the Nyanza River brought. The last (42-end) describes the arrival of the expedition at Mutesa's court.

Symbolism: A symbol is anything or idea that represents something else. It should be obvious to you that the meeting of Mutesa and Stanley is symbolic of the meeting of the West with East Africa, each of them personifying the values of their people.

Contrast: One other element of technique that the poet uses is contrast. This occurs when ideas, experiences or people that are clearly in opposition are placed side by side to show this difference. Contrast occurs regularly in the poem. For instance, we are told that the initial discouragement of the expedition gave way to enthusiasm and renewed energy when they sighted the Mutesa Court.

The impression of contrast is also created in the alternating extreme weather conditions that the team had to endure: “The heat of the day/The chill of the night” (lines 2-3). Another significant case of contrast has to do with the disparity between the physical appearances of Mutesa and Stanley. Mutesa is the “tall black king” (line 54) while his guest is “the thin bearded white man” (line 55).

Irony: Do you not think that it is ironical that even though the expedition set out to merely discover the Buganda kingdom (as they claim to be “bound for a kingdom” (line 6)). This later meant taking control of the kingdom by extending the British colonial influence to it.

Metaphor: The reference to Henry Stanley as “the spirit that inspired” (line 25) and “the light of hope” (line 26) is apt, in the sense that in leading the expedition he provided the encouragement for members of his team.

Parallelism: There are cases of parallelism in the poem, all displaying the poet’s conscious attempt at achieving some beauty in the replacement of related or conflicting ideas. This has added some elegance to the poem as a whole. Examples include:

- The heat of the day
- The chill of the night (lines 2-3)
- He the spirit that inspired
- He the light of hope (lines 25-26)
- Hearts beat faster
- Loads felt lighter (lines 34-35).

Synecocoe: Synecocoe is a device which makes it possible for the poet to represent a part as whole. In this poem there is an occurrence of this in “The village looks on behind banana groves (line 42)

Here the action of the inhabitants of the village is ascribed to the village.

Simile: Indirect comparison, called simile, is also evident in the poem. Examples include:

The Nile and the Nyanza

Lay like twins

(lines 29-30)

The march leapt on chanting

Like young gazelles to a water-hole

(lines 32-33)

The use of simile in the poem reveals the ability of the poet to imaginatively impress facts upon the reader.

Diction: What is your impression about the words the poet uses? You may have observed that the words are generally simple and appropriate, the type suitable for a narrative poem of its nature.

Tone: You will also note that the attitude of the poet to his subject-matter is more of suspicion and mistrust, especially as the poem actually reflects on the experience being recreated. The benefit of hindsight enables the poet to read meaning to the meeting of Mutesa and Stanley.

4.0 Conclusion

David Rubadiri's "Stanley Meets Mutesa" is a narrative poem which can only be properly appreciated in relation to the historical event which it engages. It gives us an insight into the use that a poet can put the imagination. In a sense, the devices the poet employs and contributes to the success of the poem.

5.0 Summary

The poem is a typical African poem in the sense that it draws on history.

6.0 Self-Assessment Exercise

Comment on the effectiveness of technique in David Rubadiri's "Stanley Meets Mutesa."

7.0 References/Further Reading

Ogunbesan, Kolawole & D. Woolger, (1978). *Images and Impression*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Roscoe, Adrian. (1977). *Uhuru's Fire: African Literature: East to South*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Unit 3 Textual Analysis of Poetic Works: English Poetry I

1.0 Introduction

We have, in the last two units, examined two African poems. What seems to be common to the poems is a concern for shared experiences. In the next two units we shall be studying poems drawn from the English tradition. You must have been noting in the previous units the variety that characterizes poetic expression in terms of length, technique and the subjects of poetic exploration.

2.0 Objectives

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- discuss the thematic interest of the poem
- identify and relate the devices employed in the poem to its success or failure
- recognize the Sonnet as a poetic type.

3.0 Main Content

3.1 John Milton's "Sonnet XVII"

The following poem, Sonnet XVII, by John Milton, is to be studied in this unit. Read it carefully:

Sonnet XVII

When I consider how my light is spent,
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent

To serve therewith my maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning, chide
'Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?
I fondly ask; but Patience, to prevent

The murmur, son replies: 'God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts; who best

Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best; his state

Is kingly – thousands at his bidding speed

And post o'er land and ocean without rest:

They also serve who only stand and wait'

1652? 1673

- John Milton

3.2 Background to the Poem

John Milton lived between 1608 and 1674. He remains one of the outstanding and committed poets in the English poetic tradition. He was inclined towards religious poetry. His Christian outlook is given expression in much of his work. He is best known for ***Paradise Lost*** which he dictated while he was going blind. The poem was completed in 1665. His total blindness is dated between 1651 and 1652.

Incidentally you need to draw on this insight into Milton's blindness in order to understand the poem. In plain terms, the poem is about his blindness. It explores his blindness in the light of the Christian idea of stewardship in which man is seen as accountable to God. This comes out clearly in a parable told by Jesus during His earthly ministry about the Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew 25:14-30.

The parable talks about a lord who gave his servants various amounts of money. The wise ones invested what they were given while the foolish one simply buried his. Their master was pleased with those that profited from using their talents and blamed the one that foolishly buried his. As far as Milton was concerned, his blindness would make him bury his talent. His worry was whether God would blame him for not utilising his talent which he saw as the ability to write poems. In a sense, the poem is a product of Milton's anxiety.

Apart from the fact that the poem draws on Milton's personal experience, it is also a sonnet. That means it is a fourteen-line poem. The sonnet originated from Italy and was originally concerned with the subject of love. A sonnet is traditionally divided into two main parts: the first eight lines (called the octet) and the last six (the sextet). It is normal for the development of the idea in a poem to be based on this division. For instance, the octet can raise a problem which the sextet will resolve. Milton put the sonnet to a special use.

Self-Assessment Exercise I

1. In what sense is the Parable of the Kingdom of Heaven told by Jesus related to Milton's concern in this poem?
2. What two factors about the poem and the poet serve as background information for our understanding of this poem?

3.3 A Summary of the Poem

You must have observed from the background information provided to appreciate this poem that deliberate effort has been made to tell you what made John Milton to write this poem. Now read the poem again and try to answer the following question:

The poem, you will observe, starts with the poet-persona complaining. He was aware of the fact that he had some talent or gift from God which – like the servants in the parable told by Jesus – he had to put to good use and also profit with. At the same time he was conscious of his blindness. He felt that he was already going blind before half his days (“my light” line 1) was already gone. The loss of sight made him to consider the world as dark.

At the same time he would not want to bury his God-given ability to write poems, knowing the penalty that might come from doing otherwise (“which is death to hide” l. 3). His dilemma comes from the fact that while he would want to serve God he was naturally handicapped. But he would not know what would be his fate due to this. As far as he was concerned it was not unwillingness on his part that would make him not put his talent to use.

While the octet states the argument of the poet, the answer to his question comes in the sextet in which Patience, apparently a personification of the virtue, replies the agitated poet. He is told that God is not made richer by man’s works or the gift He gives men and that there are different ways to serve God. Some may have to patiently endure their agony. God is already in matchless glory and has countless angels at His service. Many other people would have to just express their commitment and service by merely waiting on Him if they have no ability to run errands. In short, there are various ways of serving God.

What you will observe in this poem is that it is more of an externalization of the thought of the poet. In other words, the poet seems to be thinking aloud in the poem. The first octet poses a question to which the sextet provides an answer.

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

In what way does the poem relate the idea of the talent to his personal experience?

3.4 Thematic Concerns of the Poem

The poem is primarily concerned with exploring man’s responsibility and accountability to God. The persona is burdened due to the awareness that he must put his God-given ability to use. But he sees his blindness as a barrier to realizing his desire of being a poet. The question this raises has to do with whether what God expects from people is based on their ability. In his own case it would not be possible to render the kind of service he would have loved to God due to his disability and he would like to be assured that his failure to execute his desire would not be taken as a form of irresponsibility.

There is also the related theme of God’s just treatment which emerges in the last six lines of the poem that is the sextet. The anxiety of the poet only gives way when he is told by Patience that God would not expect people to give what they do not have the ability to give to Him in the form of service. This presents God as just and considerate in His expectation. This would bring a lot of relief to Milton who already asked whether God would expect the blind to do as much as their counterparts with the benefit of sight.

Self-Assessment Exercise 3

1. Make a distinction between the octet and the sextet.
2. Identify the two thematic interests of John Milton's "Sonnet XVII".

3.5 Technique

Milton's "Sonnet XVII" succeeds largely because the poet has adopted approximate devices. The most important of them are as follows:

Biblical Allusion

The allusion to the Parable of the Kingdom of Heaven told by Jesus in Matthew 25:14-30 is so central to the success of this poem that attention has to be drawn to it. The allusion is important in the sense that it provides a basis for the persona to compare his state with that of the unfaithful servants that buried their talents. The ideas that are explored in the poem are also rooted in this biblical allusion. This suggests that it is impossible to properly appreciate the poem without a reference to the parable that inspired it. There is also an allusion to Matthew 11:29-30 where there is an encouragement to followers of Jesus to patiently bear their yoke.

Structure

You must have also observed that the poem is divided into two parts which coincide with the conventional division of a sonnet. The first eight lines (the octet) explore the problem bothering the persona while the last six (the sextet) answer his question and thereby render his anxiety unnecessary. This structure is logical as questions normally come before answers. This makes the poem complete in the sense that it is self-contained.

Diction

The fact that the inspiration for the writing of this poem is derived from the Bible is also reflected in the poet's choice of words. Much of the poem is built around the idea of the "talent" (line 3) which originally meant a weight of gold. In the context of this poem it means ability or a potential. There is also a reference to "yoke" in line 11. This is derived from the admonition of Jesus in Matthew 11:29-30 in which reference is made to the cost of following Jesus. These words are consistent with the concern of the poem and also appropriately used in such a way that their suggestions are not hidden.

Pun

You need to also note that the poet does not just carefully select words. He also plays on them. There are two of such that you need to pay attention to. The first is "dark" which occurs in line 2. It at once suggests that everything turned dark for Milton after his blindness and that the world is full of evil and ungodliness. The latter suggestion is essentially a Christian idea. The second word on which the poet plays is "light" (lines 1, 7). Light here also suggests Milton's lost sight and, by extension, his life. His relevance was, no doubt, reduced after the loss of his sight. This probably accounts for his lament as to the danger his condition would pose to his self-fulfillment.

Poetic Mode

The poem is presented as a dramatic monologue. This enables the persona to directly express his experience. The fact that the persona relates his experience in this manner makes it more believable.

4.0 Conclusion

John Milton's "Sonnet XVII" is an interesting exploration of the poet's personal experience. It demonstrates the viability of personal experience as raw material for poetic expression. The use to which the poet puts a religious conviction provides a basis for exploring his own aspiration in the light of the outlook on human aspiration that his religious persuasion dictates. The poet in a way reveals that religion and reason can be reconciled.

5.0 Summary

In this unit we have been able to study a poem which, in addition to being autobiographical, is also an example of the sonnet. It is also remarkable that the poem departs from the convention of exploring subjects of love in sonnets to treating a subject within the sphere of religion. This in a way demonstrates the capacity of poetic forms to lend themselves to uses other than those which convention assigns them when the need arises.

6.0 Self-Assessment Exercise

Examine the harmony between theme and technique in John Milton's Sonnet XVII.

7.0 Reference/Further Reading

Hollander, John & Frank Kermode. *The Literature of Renaissance England*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Unit 4 Textual Analysis of Poetic Works: English Poems II

1.0 Introduction

Our analysis of John Milton's poem in the last unit must have shown you how virtually any issue can be made a subject of poetic exploration. It is not in every case, however, that the poeticians draw on their experiences. There are occasions that they embark on exploring ideas which have timeless appeal. Poems with this kind of orientation do not lose their relevance as they state truths that can be appreciated everywhere and all the time. This is the quality that the poem we are studying in this unit, John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn", has.

2.0 Objectives

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- discuss the thematic concern of Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn"
- relate the use of imagery to the success of the poem
- establish the connection between them.

3.0 Main Content

3.1 John Keats

"John Keats" John Keats was born on October 31, 1795 in London.

3.2 Background to the Poem

It is important that the title of the poem indicates that it is an ode. The Ode is a poem that praises a person, an animal or an object. The poem then praises an urn from Greece. The urn is a container in which the ashes of a dead person are kept. It is often decorated and preserved by the loved ones of the dead from Greece and makes it an object of admiration.

3.3 Theme of the Poem

Bearing what you have been told about the poem in mind try to read the poem now

I

Ode on a Grecian Urn

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,

Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,

Sylvan historian, who canst thus express

A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:

What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about the shape?
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What mild ecstasy?

2

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit deities of no tone:
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Their soup, no ever can those trees be bare;
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Thou winning near the god – yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever unit thou love, and she be fair!
Ah, happy, happy, boughs! That cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the spring adieu;

3

And, happy melodist, unwearied,
For ever piping songs for ever new;
More happy love! More happy, happy love!
For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
Forever panting, and forever young;
All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,

A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

4

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?

To what green altar, O mysterious priest,

Lead'est thou that heifer loving at the skies,

And all their silken flanks wish garlands direst?

What little town by river or sea shore,

Or mountain –built with peaceful citadel,

And, silent be; and not a soul to tell

Why thou art desolate, can e'er return

5

O Attic shape ! Fair attitude ! with brede

Of marble men and maidens overwrought,

With forest branches and the trodden weed;

Thou silent form, dost tease us out of thought

As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral !

When old age shall tie generation waste,

Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe

Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,

Beauty is truth, truth, ----that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know

----- John Keats

Contrary to what we have been doing in the previous units, we shall start with the thematic interests of this poem and then go on to analyze it. The reason for this is that the theme cannot be separated from everything that is said in the entire poem

The poem is concerned with the permanence of art which contrasts with the transient nature of human life. The theme itself emerges from the observation of the poet. His admiration of the Grecian Urn made him recognize that, as against the ashes of the dead which it is meant to preserve; its beauty will last for generations.

The focus of the poet is concentrated on the decorations on the vase which depict various actions and scenes. These, to the poet, will outline the artist that created them. By extension he is drawing attention to the superiority of art to lived experience.

3.4 Analysis of the Poem

The object of admiration in this poem is a vase, which, as the title suggests, is of Grecian origin. As an ode, the poem praises the eternity of the urn. He succeeds in doing this by identifying each of the paintings on it and commenting on the permanence of art which each of them suggests to him. Let us analyse the poem based on the stanzas.

Stanza I

The first stanza, you should note, is a direct address to the urn. Keats sees it as “the still unravish bride of quietness” (line 1) to show that it is unchanging over a long time. He also describes it as “Sylvan historian” (line 3) to indicate that it has been in existence for long. He feels that the urn is more admirable than poetry. He then turns to the paintings on the vase and wonders what the stories behind the figures on the vase are. He is also not sure whether the personalities he has on the vase are gods or ordinary human beings. Other figures on the vase are that of a maiden that is being pursued and that of a piper.

Stanza 2

Keats now concentrates on the paintings on the urn. He draws attention to the superior beauty of the imagination. For instance, he feels that the music of the piper on the vase is to be preferred to audible music because it is permanent. He therefore encourages the piper to play on. In any case, the piper cannot do otherwise. He is bound to play on so long as the tree under which he plays cannot leave him. All other paintings and scenes on the vase are bound by the same principle. The lover that is in pursuit of the maiden will, so long as the vase exists, be ever caught in the pursuit and he will never succeed in getting at the woman. His consolation is that at the same time, the maiden will also not be lost. This suggests that their age will endure and the woman also will never age.

Stanza 3

What you will observe in the third stanza is show an effort to restate a similar argument. This time around the focus of Keats is shifted to the piper under the tree. The leaves of the tree, according to Keats, will also never be shed just as the piper will also keep piping. He would never grow tired or lose his earnestness.

Stanza 4

The next painting that engages the attention of the poet is that of people going to offer a sacrifice. Led by a priest, they head for an altar. He imagines that the city from which they are coming will have to endure their absence for ever as the permanence of artistic representation will make it impossible for them to ever return. This is a way of saying that the town has lost them forever.

Stanza 5

In this last stanza, the poet returns to the vase, describing it as “Attic Shape”, suggesting something made in the ancient city of Athens. It is beautifully made of marble. He emphasizes the ideas of timelessness that the vase provokes. This almost suggests that it

creates the impression that the world of the imagination is more real than the world of men, in addition to its beauty, just because it is permanent. The urn is ageless and appears to be a “Cold Pastoral” because it is silent and because it is drama from the rural world. Keats believes that the urn will outline many more generations. He draws a compromise between the urn and truth because the two share the quality of permanence.

Self-Assessment Exercise 1

1. How many paintings are identified on the urn?
2. How does each of them relate to the theme of the poem?

Poetic Devices

“Ode on a Grecian Urn” no doubt makes a remarkable impression because of what it says but we stand to appreciate it better by & examining the devices it employs.

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

Take another look at the poem. Which techniques can you identify?

Rhetorical Questions

Read through stanza one again. What do you observe? The last four lines end with a question mark. The use of questions in this manner is important. The questions are not meant to be answered. They are called rhetorical questions. The answer to them is assumed to be self-evident. The questions give force to the amazement of the poet on seeing the urn. They suggest that he admires the urn.

Repetition

Certain words and ideas are repeated in the poem. This has the effect of emphasizing the idea that Keats attaches importance to consequently; his central argument in the poem is reinforced in the process. For instance, “happy” is repeated four times in stanza three. Happiness is associated with the permanent state of the painted tree and the paper under it. “For ever” is also used in stanza two and repeated five times in stanza three.

Paradox

There is a case of paradox in this opening statement in stanza two:

“Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard. Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on”. Even though this may not immediately make some sense, it is still true. What exists in the world of art may be better when we consider its permanence. Music that is heard will soon fade away and be forgotten while the one that is imagined will outline it.

Transferred Epithet

There is a case of transferred epithet in “pious morn” in line 37. The piety ascribed to the morning is odd. Only human beings can be described as pious. The suggestion that the expression makes is that the morning on which the people set out to make the sacrifice is a holy day.

Rhyme Scheme

The poet has made effort to a regular rhyme scheme in the poem.

Allusion

Keats alludes to Tempe, Arcady and Attic which are places in ancient Greece in which pastoral poetry flourished. This is the relevance of the poem to the timeless men of art.

Tone

The attitude of the poet to his subject, which gives an insight into the tone of the poem, is one of admiration. The poet-person sympathetically identifies with the enduring quality of the urn.

4.0 Conclusion

“Ode on a Grecian Urn” is interesting, in the sense that it concentrates on a single idea. The poet does not make the work boring in spite of the fact that the various images he employs reinforce the same idea.

5.0 Summary

The enduring quality of “Ode on a Grecian Urn” derives from the fact that issue it engages will also appeal to people of all races and all ages. The timeless man of art is a recurrent theme in literature.

6.0 Self-Assessment Exercise

Critically discuss the thematic concern of John Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn”. How do any three images in the poem reinforce this thematic interest?

7.0 Reference/Further Reading

Gettings, Robert. (1996). Selected Poems and Letters of Keats London: Heinemann.

Unit 5 Textual Analysis of Poetic Works: African American Poetry

1.0 Introduction

You may have observed that what the poems we have been studying have in common is that they are written in English, in spite of the fact that they are drawn from different backgrounds. To a certain extent, poetic works project the cultural environment within which they are produced. For instance, our focus in the last two units was on English poems.

You would have observed that Milton's sonnet and Keats' ode do not draw so much on shared experience or make much social reference that will require familiarity with history for you to understand them. The same cannot be said about African poetry and poems originating from the African-American or West Indian traditions. Much of the poetry of these regions is rooted in history and social experience. This therefore necessitates that we draw on relevant insight that will deepen our understanding of the poems we are studying.

2.0 Objectives

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- establish the link between African-American history and African-American poetic expression
- interpret Claude McKay's "If We Must Die" in the light of the African- American experience
- relate the form of "If We Must Die " to its thematic interest.

3.0 Main Content

3.1 African – American Poetry

African-Americans are people of African descent in America. Their ancestors were originally taken to America as slaves; but they have since been legally integrated into the African national life as citizens. The journey towards freedom from slavery, discrimination and marginalization for the people was not so easy. What you need to note, however, is that African-American poetry has recorded the diverse experiences of the people over the centuries.

A study of African-American poetry will give some insight into the collective struggle of the people for justice, fair treatment and integration within America. Right from the Negro Spirituals, religious songs that flourished on the plantation, the work of such pioneer African-American poets as Phillis Wheatley through the poetry of Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, Countee Cullen to the work of Amiri Baraka, Ntozake Shange, the collective experience of the Black Community has fed the African poetic imagination.

Self-Assessment Exercise I

1. What is the quality that African Poetry and African-American Poetry have in common?
2. What has been the major concern of the African-American poetic imagination over the centuries?

3.2 Claude McKay: The Man and His Art

Claude McKay was born in Jamaica in 1890. He came to America in 1912 where he encountered racial discrimination in an intense form. He identified with the cultural awakening in Harlem in the 1920s and came to be a major voice among the Harlem Poets. His poetry projects a Pan-African nationalism, a response to the racial oppression in America, the celebration of the black identity and the survival of the black man. His work is marked by a great deal of anger, displeasure and impatience with the American establishment.

Ironically, the sonnet form proved so useful to him in expressing his anger and displeasure. His work has since been absorbed into mainstream African-American poetry. “If We Must Die”, which we shall be studying in a moment, is his best known and probably most anthologized poem.

3.3 “If We Must Die”

If we must die, let is not be like logs. Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot, while round us bark the mad and hungry dogs, making their mock at our accursed lot. If we must die, O let us nobly die, so that our precious blood may not be shed. In vain, then even the monsters we defy shall be constrained to honour us through death. O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!. Though far outnumbered let is show one death – blow! What though before us lies the open grave? Like men we’ll face the murderous, covered pack, pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back

3.4 Background to the Poem

The poem is likely to be better appreciated when read in the context of the experience that inspired it. McKay was conscious of the racial discrimination in America. This manifested in the lynching of black people in the south and the dehumanization they endured in the work. The poem itself was written as a response to the Chicago riot in which well over thirty people were killed, injured and more than one thousand people were rendered homeless.

3.5 Themes

This poem is a passionate call on blacks to resist the oppressive and dehumanising assault of the white majority on the seemingly helpless black community. The anger of the poet is apparent and certain thematic interests emerge in the poem, in spite of its shortness.

Martyrdom: Black martyrdom in the face of the sustained assault from the intolerant whites is encouraged. Martyrdom emerges as the logical and dignifying alternative that the black have to resort to. This is justifiable because there was no basis for the dehumanizing permeation of the blacks in the first place. So long as the act itself was baseless and unnecessary it was also ungodly. This would suggest that the blacks are undoubtedly the victims.

The bestiality of white oppression: The poem draws attention to the related idea of the bestiality of the white oppression. In apparent negotiation of the idea that blacks are sub-human the poet represents the acts of oppression and degradation the white visit on the black as not befitting decent human beings. Hence they are represented as dogs.

Nobility of the Black Cause: No examination of the poem will be adequate if you overlook the fact that it takes the nobility of the black struggle for granted. The call to martyrdom itself is based on the assumption that the hatred of the blacks by the white establishment should be seen as ungodly. It is possible to ask: Why should a people be blamed for being members of a different race? Resistance is clearly depicted as just, necessary and indispensable.

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

1. Identify the three main thematic concerns of Claude McKay's; "If We Must Die".
2. How does an insight into the background of the poem help in deepening our appreciation of the poem?

3.6 Technique

Form

You have probably noted that the poem is a sonnet. But unlike the traditional sonnet that celebrates love, this poem is made to serve as a vehicle for racial propaganda. The poem is basically a passionate outburst addressed to the black community in America. It is best read as an urgent summons to purposeful resistance.

Tone

The tone of this poem particularly appeals to us as it is an element that facilitates its success. Anger, you will note, is the ruling passion in the poem. The anger energizes the message it bears so long as the poet does not pretend to be objective or conciliatory. What he writes is a call to war and a different tone would not have matched this declaration of war. The anger and passion that energize the poem simply stress the seriousness of the poet.

Exclamation

There is a recurrent use of exclamatory remarks in the poem. These are marked by the use of exclamation marks in lines 8, 9 11, 12 and 14. The urgency of the struggle and the resolve of the poet and his people in the face of the opposition from the whites necessitate this.

Imagery

The poem effectively uses audio-visual imagery. The poet particularly relies on imagery drawn from hunting. The relationships between the blacks and whites are represented through the use of appropriate imagery. The white oppressors are seen as "dogs" while the victims, the black are shown as "logs". This at once shows the bestiality of white oppressors and the fact that the blacks are apparently the underdogs. The "dogs" are said to be "mad" and "hungry" to emphasize the irrationality of their actions.

Repetition

The poet finds repetition useful in the poem. The central idea about the possibility of dying is re-tested in various ways. For instance, the idea expressed in line 1 is repeated in line 5. The repetition helps in restating the petition of the poet and proves effective in a speech-like poem like this, which is intended to achieve some lasting effect.

Self-Assessment Exercise 3

How do the devices used in this poem enhance its success?

4.0 Conclusion

The poem studied in this unit is remarkable in the sense that it demonstrates the possibility of making the sonnet serve a purpose other than the expression of sensual passion. Tone incidentally, becomes very important in the poem. The harmony accounts for the success of the poem.

5.0 Summary

In any study of this poem, the fact that Claude McKay employed the sonnet for his own purpose should be emphasized. The form, no doubt, demonstrates its capacity for a variety of uses.

6.0 Self-Assessment Exercise

Examine the use of tone, repetition and imagery in enhancing the concern of Claude McKays' "If We Must Die".

7.0 Reference/Further Reading

Dasylva, A.O. & Jegede, O. B. (1997). *Poetry in English*. Ibadan: Sam Bookman.