

NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA

EHG 105



Introduction to Literature II Module 2

ENG 105 Introduction to Literature II

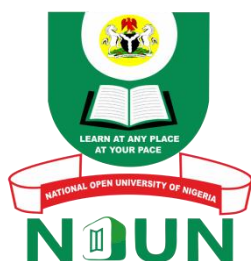
Module 2

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



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Module 2

Unit I Textual Analysis of Poetic Works: African Oral Poetry I

1.0 Introduction

If your outlook on poetry has been shaped mainly by your interaction with written poetry in the school environment, you are likely to have a limited experience of poetry. You will then see every poem as the work of an identifiable writer which can be read and enjoyed privately even when there is no prospect of ever meeting the author. On the contrary, every society seems to have a tradition of oral literature in which the emphasis is on the physical encounter between the poet and the audience.

In this case, however, the performer may not be the composer or author of the text he performs. Many of the poems that exist in this oral tradition are believed to belong to the community in which they are found, especially when their original composers may not be easily identified. When the songs, chants or recitations that are drawn from the oral tradition are then transcribed and translated, they tend to lose much of their vitality. This is the sense in which you will need to approach “Salute to the Elephant”, a traditional Yoruba poem which we shall study in this unit.

2.0 Objectives

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

- recognize some of the features in African oral poetry in “Salute to the Elephant”
- Identify oral poetry as a unique form of poetry with literary value.

3.0 Main Content

3.1 Background to “Salute to the Elephant”

The poem we are studying in this unit, “Salute to the Elephant”, is taken from the Yoruba oral tradition. It is greatly indebted to *Ijala*, the tradition of poetry associated with hunters among the Yorubas. *Ijala* simply relies heavily on the Yoruba praise tradition, *oriki*, and the object of admiration may be fellow hunters, Ogun, the patron god of Yoruba hunters, or animals. “Salute to the Elephant” is preoccupied with praising the elephant.

Self-Assessment Exercise I

Carefully read the following poem:

Salute to the Elephant

O elephant, possessor of a savings-basket full of money

O elephant, huge as a hill, even in a crouching posture

O elephant, enfolded by honour; drawn, flapping fans of war

Demon who saps the branches into many pieces and moves to the forest farm

O elephant, who ignores 'I have fled to my father for refuge',

Let alone "to my mother"

Mountainous Animal, Huge Beast who tears a man like a garment

And hangs him up on a tree.

The sight of whom causes people to stampede towards a hill of safety

My chant is a salute to the elephant

Ajanaku who walks with a heavy tread.

Demon who swallows palm-fruit bunches whole, even with the spiky pistil-cells

O elephant, prince named Laaye, massive animal black slightly in complexion

O elephant, who single-handily causes a tremor in a dense tropical forest

O elephant, who stands sturdy and erect, who walks slowly as if reluctantly

O elephant, whom one sees and points towards in all one's fingers.

The hunter's boast at home is not repeated when he really meets the elephant.

The hunter's boast at home is not repeated before the elephant

Ajanaku looks back with difficulty like a person suffering from a sprained neck

The elephant has a porter's-knot without having any load on his head

The elephant's head is his burden which he balances

O elephant, prince named Laaye, "O death, please stop following me"

This is part and parcel of the elephant's appellation.

If you wish to know the elephant, the elephant who is a veritable ferry-man

The elephant who in honour marches, the elephant who continually swings his trunk,

His upper fly-switch,

It's the elephant whose eyes are veritable water-jars

O elephant, the vagrant par excellence,

Whose molar teeth are as wide as palm-oil pits in Ijesaland
O elephant, lord of the forest, respectfully called Oriiribobo
O elephant, whose teeth are like shifts.
One tooth of his is a porter's load, O elephant, fondly called Otiko
Who has a beast-of-burden's proper neck
O elephant, whom the hunter sometimes sees face to face
O elephant, whom the hunter of other times sees from the rear
Beast who carries mortars and yet walks with a swaggering gait
Primeval leper, animal treading ponderously.

(trans: A. Babalola)

Read the poem again, paying attention to its subject matter and technique.

3.2 Theme/Subject Matter

This poem is a praise song in the tradition of Ijala, Yoruba hunters' chant. It celebrates the awesome presence of the elephant by recognising its intimidating size, its destructive nature and its economic value. Much of the poem identifies the attributes and tendencies of the elephant that the poet finds remarkable. In actual fact, the poem does not say a lot. All that we have in the poem is a situation in which repetition is overused and the same ideas are stated over and over again.

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

Find out the number of times "O elephant" occurs in the poem. You will discover that it occurs in no fewer than fifteen times.

3.3 Technique

What you need to note here is the fact that almost every element of technique in the poem cannot be separated from the nature of the poem as a product of the Yoruba oral tradition. Let us take a look at some of the devices.

Hyperbole

The use of exaggeration in the poem is consistent with its intention to praise the elephant. This is a feature of Yoruba praise poetry, *oriki*, which is dominant in Ijala. You need to note that the hyperbolic expressions in the poem generally take the form of descriptive labels or epithets. Examples are:

"Demon who swallows palm-fruit bunches whole, even with the spiky pistil cells"
(line 12)

"O elephant, who single-handily causes a tremor in a dense tropical forest"
(line 14)

Apostrophe

The recurrent use of “O elephant” in the poem serves the purpose of creating the impression that the animal is being addressed in the poem and therefore emphasises the fact that the elephant and all its characteristics are significant in the world of the poem. The address occurs at the beginning of the lines.

Metaphor

In a bid to give concrete suggestions about the elephant and thereby deepen our insight into its nature and habits, appropriate metaphors are employed in the chant. For instance, the reference to the elephant as “demon” (line 4) indicates its abnormal and often destructive nature. It is also called “veritable ferry-man” (line 24) to indicate that it is a killer. The reference to the elephant as “primeval leper” (line 37) is a description of its rough and short toes that invite comparison with those of a leper.

Simile

You must know how a simile differs from a metaphor. Comparison in a metaphor is direct, while it is indirect in a simile. The poem employs the two types. The similes in the poem help to effectively evoke the desired image of the elephant. To emphasize the strength of the elephant, it is described as “Huge Beast who tears a man like a garment” (line 7). The elephant is also the animal “Whose molar teeth are as wide as palm-oil pits in Ijesaland” (line 29).

Onomatopoeia

The use of *Oriiribobo* (line 30) and *Otiko* (line 32), which are suggestive sounds, is intended to reinforce the idea that the elephant is extremely big.

4.0 Conclusion

“Salute to the Elephant” is a product of the oral poetic imagination. What it has in common with “Ode on a Grecian Urn” by John Keats is the commitment to celebrating the object that constitutes its focus.

5.0 Summary

Whatever we regard as the pleasure and literary merit of the poem is just a partial reflection of the full experience of the poem. The poem is best enjoyed in the context of performance in which the appropriate musical accompaniment, dance and the involvement of the audience will give life to the poem.

6.0 Self-Assessment Exercise

“In terms of its preoccupation and method, ‘Salute to the Elephant’ can only be properly understood as operating in the oral tradition”. Justify this statement.

7.0 References/Further Reading

Finnegan, Ruth, (1970). *Oral Literature in Africa*. London: Oxford University Press.

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Unit 2 Textual Analysis of Poetic Works: African Oral Poetry II

1.0 Introduction

You will recall that, in introducing our discussion of the African tradition of oral poetry in the last unit we drew attention to the fact that many of the songs that circulate orally in most African communities cannot be traced to particular individuals who can be regarded as their composers. This is not always the case. Certain composers within the oral tradition can be identified.

In fact, in some cases, their imprints can easily be recognized in their compositions. This is the case with Komi Ekpe, the composer of the song/poem we shall study in this poem. His work operates in the tradition of poetry of abuse called **halo** among the Ewe people. The Ewes are found in Ghana, Togo and Benin Republic.

2.0 Objectives

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

- identify the features of the song of abuse
- analyze the sample poem.

3.0 Main Content

3.1 The Poetry of Abuse

Different societies have their own ways of classifying poetry. It will be wrong for you to assume that just, because the English poetic tradition recognizes such forms as the ode, the sonnet, the ballad and others, the same classificatory scheme must exist in African oral poetry. In fact, different societies in Africa have their ways of classifying the poetic forms within their cultural environments. Even though certain poetic types occur in many cultural environments, each society has a unique way of classifying its poetry. The reason for this is obvious: poetic expression is closely tied to culture. The fact that certain poetic forms exist in a society may be a reflection of their cultural identity.

The poem that we shall study in this chapter belongs to a popular form of oral poetry in many West African societies. Even though this type of poetry is given different names within different environments, it seems to have a common identity. It is for convenience, best called the song of abuse. The Yorubas call it *Efe*. It is known as *Halo* among the Ewes, while it is called *Udje* among the Urhobos. As the name suggests, the song of abuse is basically preoccupied with satirizing people and it is an important instrument for regulating morality in the traditional African context. This probably explains why the poet often enjoys some immunity.

Self-Assessment Exercise 1

Identify three forms of song of abuse in West Africa. What purpose does this form of poetry serve?

3.2 Theme and Technique in the Poetry of Abuse

The primary concern of the poetry of abuse is to expose misconduct and thereby make the person so attacked an object of ridicule. This form of poetry always claims to be promoting some moral principle.

The poetry of abuse generally relies on metaphors and similes in achieving its goal of outright condemnation of its satirical butt, that is, the target of the satire. Exaggeration is a common feature of the poetry of abuse. Imagery drawn from the animal world is often dominant. In many cases, especially when the song is a product of a conflict between two women, there is always an excessive use of similes that tend to emphasise physical oddities about the satirical butt.

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

1. What is the main thematic concern of the song of abuse?
2. Mention three common devices in the poetry of abuse.

3.3 Analysis of a Sample Song of Abuse

The poem you are about to read is a typical Halo composed by an Ewe singer called Komi Ekpe. The song was originally sung in Ewe and translated by Kofi Awoonor, an Ewe scholar-poet who has also drawn on the Ewe poetic tradition. Komi Ekpe, as at the time of singing this song, was already seventy-six years old.

Hm hm hm. Beware,
I will place a load on Kodzo's head
Nugbleza informed me that
It is the women of Tsiamé
Who goaded Kodzo into my song.
Questioners, this becomes the evil firewood
He'd gathered; his hands decayed.
His feet decayed
I am the poet; I am not afraid of song
Kodzo, winding in the air, his anus-agape
His face long and curved
Like the lagoon egret's beak

Call him here I say call him
and let me see his face.
He is the man from whom the wind runs
The man who eats off the farm
He hasn't planted;
His face bent like the evil hoe
On its handle. Behold ei ei ei
Kodzo did something. I forgive him his debt.
I will insult him since he poked
A stick into the flying ant's grove
Amegavi said he has some walk
And he took Kodzo's part.
The back of his head tapers off
As if they'd built a fetish hut
On his breathing spot
His face wags, a fool with a white ass.
The monkey opened his anus
In display to the owner of the farm.
The lion caught a game, alas,
His children took it away from him
Kodzo's homestead shall fall
Shall surely fall.
Questioners, let evil men die
Let death knock down the evil doer
If I were the fetish in the creator's house
That will be your redemption
Kodzo, this imbecile, evil animal

Who fucks others' wives fatteningly
His buttocks run off, his teeth yellow
His penis has wound a rope around the waist
Pulling him around and away,
His backside runs into a slope,
His eye twisted like the sun-inspector,
He has many supporters in Tsiamé
His mouth as long as the pig
Blowing the twin whistle
Something indeed has happened

– Komi Ekpe

Halo, the tradition of poetry to which this song belongs is not so prominent among the Ewes again, just because the tradition of abuse is generally becoming unpopular in most communities in the face of growing urbanization and the impact of modernity which do not tolerate the slander and defamation that the song of abuse promotes.

In this song, Komi Ekpe attacks Kodzo and his supporters, the women of Tsiamé, who encouraged him to abuse Kodzo. You need to note that *halo*, as a tradition of verbal combat, could either draw individuals together (as in this case) or pitch two sections of a community in verbal warfare. The ensuing contest is between two *halo* poets, Kodzo and Ekpe. All that can be said about the poem is that Ekpe feels provoked by the rumour of an impending verbal assault from Kodzo.

Almost every song of abuse employs the same devices. All that is involved in the *halo* is a verbal exchange in which emphasis is on visual imagery. This explains the recurrent use of similes and metaphors, both of which combine to blackmail and discredit Kodzo. The *halo* makes use of homely imagery and repeated insults. Consequently, the insults sound monotonous. A closer look at the devices employed in the poem is necessary.

Exaggeration

This is about the most important strategy in the poetry of abuse. This often occurs through the piling up of attributes and qualities that are meant to portray the person being attacked as either ugly, detestable or immoral. In this poem, exaggeration is the device employed in creating a bad image for Kodzo. His physical appearance is described as horrible. A few examples are:

The back of his head tapers off
As if they'd built a fetish hut

On his breathing spot (lines 24-26)

his mouth as long as the pig
blowing the twin whistle

Something indeed has happened (lines 44-46)

He is the man from whom the wind runs (line 15)

Metaphors

Metaphors help to deepen the assault on the target of the abuse. The same effect is achieved through the use of metaphors and similes. Effort is generally made to draw on imagery from the immediate environment. This makes it homely. For instance,

“the evil firewood

He’d gathered ... (lines 6-7)

is a reference to the attack of Kodzo on Ekpe. As far as he is concerned, it is going to spell his doom. It is not merely an accidental assault but a deliberate effort at engineering his own disaster. By saying that the women of Tsiamé “goaded Kodzo into my song” (line 5), Ekpe means that the women of the said village caused the verbal combat between him and Kodzo. In describing the act of provocation that Kodzo’s assault on him represents, Ekpe says that:

“... he poked

A stick into the flying ant’s grove” (lines 20-21)

This suggests that this act of provocation would be disastrous to him.

Similes

You must have also noticed cases of indirect comparison in the poem. The similes help Ekpe achieve his purpose of abusing the poet. They particularly draw attention to his physical appearance, emphasizing his ugliness. He, for instance, says

His face long and curved

Like the lagoon egret’s beak (lines 11 – 12)

His mouth as long as the pig

Blowing the twin whistle (lines 44– 45)

His eye twisted like the sun-inspector, (line 42)

Diction

The device of words in the poetry of abuse, as is evident in Ekpe’s song, is characterised by obscenity. In the bid to abuse, the poet resorts to dirty details about the one being attacked. It is impossible to verify the validity of the claims made about the satirical butt. This is just an extension of the abuse. Expressions that are banished from decent interactions are used especially when the moral life of the persons concerned is the focus. We find statements like.

Kodzo,.....

Who fucks others' wives fatteningly by

(lines 37 – 38)

His penis has wound a rope around the waist

(line 39)

You should however note that what we consider indecent today is not so offensive in ordinary discussions in the traditional African society. As the values of that society are giving way to the new order represented by the modern, in which Western values and estuzel principles rooted in Christian and Islamic practices are becoming influential, traditional practices are increasingly becoming strange.

Curses

You may have observed that Komi Ekpe does not stop at abusing Kodzo. He goes ahead to invoke curses on him. This shows the extent that those engaged in verbal combats can go. He declares at the height of his anger:

Kodzo's homestead shall fall (line 31). This indicates how destructive the conflict between two halo poets can be. This may indicate a readiness to employ supernatural forces against the one being attacked.

Conversational Quality

The song of abuse is normally addressed to a person or a group of people. What you will notice in the sample we are analyzing is that the singer assumes he is addressing Kodzo. He often uses what is very close to the direct address by occasionally mentioning Kodzo's name.

We can assume that Kodzo is not in sight. But the fact that the song of abuse is addressed to him is not in doubt. The impression created in the poem is that the song itself is a response to Kodzo's song. It may then be said that Ekpe's song represents his own turn in a verbal combat. The poet draws attention to the fact that he is addressing Kodzo from time to time.

Kodzo, this imbecile , evil animal (line 37)

Tone

If you are asked to comment on the tone of the poem, you should not find it difficult to say that it is caustic, bitter and extremely critical. You cannot expect anything different from this in a song of abuse. The caustic nature of the tone reflects the desire to avenge the verbal assault earlier launched by the opponent.

Structure

This song is structurally divided into two parts. The poet starts with a justification of his verbal attack on Kodzo. This comes in the first nine lines of the poem. The remaining part of the poem is devoted to the verbal attack on Kodzo. This represents a logical programme in the song of abuse. The poet of abuse journals justifies his effort by stating that he has

been provoked or attacked unfairly by another person. This creates the basis for all the attack the poet plans to launch in retaliation in the rest of the poem.

4.0 Conclusion

The song of abuse is just a form of oral poetry. It was meant to be performed and not just read. Reading the transcribed version, which has also been translated from Ewe, does not give you a good experience of it. The element of performance distinguishes oral from written poetry. In reality, the performance of poetry in the traditional African context could involve drumming, clapping, audience participation, and the use of such musical accompaniment as the rattle or the gong.

5.0 Summary

The song of abuse is not just meant to entertain. It represents a deliberate effort at self-assertion and an important channel for dramatizing conflicts in African communities. Some contemporary African poets are either consciously or otherwise drawing on this tradition.

The influence of the poetry of abuse is evident in varying degrees in the works of Kofi Awoonor, Kofi Anyidoho (Ewe), Niyi Osundare, Femi Fatoba (Yoruba), Tanure Ojaide (Urhobo), and Okof p' Bitek (Acholi, Uganda). You need to note however, that all that we have in the works of these poets take the form of either the adaptation of the tradition of insult or the application of the principle in the criticism of the conduct of public office holders in post-independence Africa.

6.0 Self-Assessment Exercise

Compare “Salute to the Elephant” And Komi Ekpe’s “Hm hm hm. Beware”, paying attention to Subject matter and technique.

7.0 Reference/Further Reading

Awoonor, Kofi. (1974). *Guardians of the Sacred Word: we Poetry*. New York: Nok Publishers.

Unit 3 Practical Appreciation of Poetry I

1.0 Introduction

You would have observed that, in the previous units, we have been studying each poem in the context of the information available to us about the circumstances that produced them. The information may be related to the cultural practice or the socio-political situation of autobiographical details surrounding the writing of the poem.

No doubt, this helps to deepen our insight and gives us some measure of confidence in our interaction with the poems. But this is not always the case. In the first place, it is not possible to gain access to all the information we need to understand a poem.

Moreover, a certain degree of competence is needed to read any poem that you encounter at any time. The aspect of literary studies that develops this is called practical criticism. This explains why people are often exposed to what is called “Unseen Poetry”, which enables you to respond critically to a poem about which you may have no background information. The assumption is that there is enough in the poem to elicit some critical response from you. The thematic concern of the poem, its subject matter and the devices employed in the poem, are always the aspects that attract attention in this case.

2.0 Objectives

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

- recognize the practical criticism of poetry as an aspect of the study of poetry
- identify the elements of poetry that are relevant to its criticism.

3.0 Main Content

3.1 The Nature of Poetry

You have been reading some poems in this course. If you are asked to say something about poetry you are most likely to restate what so many students believe about poetry – that it is difficult. This is not always true. What many people do not realize is that poetry is closer to us than we would like to see it. You are probably from a society in which every stage in life or experience – birth, wedding, child naming, etc., is marked with a ceremony.

Each of such ceremonies attracts people and singing is often brought in. You may also be attending a church where hymns are sung. If any of these does not apply to you, you may have been fond of singing lullabies to children to make them sleep. All these activities have poetry. The problem we often have is with the formal study of poetry. The foregoing should convince you that poetry, apart from being the oldest and commonest of all the literary genres, is also the closest to us.

What we must however admit is the fact that poetry is unique. The major qualities of poetry which define its nature are as follows:

Economy: Perhaps this is one quality of poetry that makes many people fear it. Poetry economizes a lot in the use of language. What a novelist would describe in six pages can be expressed in just ten lines of a poem. This has implications for the use of language. Words may be loaded and even made to serve functions other than those that we traditionally assign to them. A good poet says a lot in a few words.

Suggestions: Whereas meaning is almost always stated in explicit terms in prose passages, poetry tends to be generally suggestive. This explains why words that are suggestive are often preferred in poetry. Poets tend to be more careful in the choice and use of words. They see some words as more appropriate than others. The fact that after reading some poems you still cannot say what their arguments are with confidence confirms this.

Poetic Licence: Poetic language tends to violate certain rules of grammar and creates new words and usages. The poet is therefore allowed to make use of language in very strange and often unconventional ways if the need arises.

This is why, for instance, we often have cases of inversion, i.e. the arrangement of a line of poetry in a way that disorganizes pattern. For instance, we can have “overcome we shall” in a poem as opposed to “We shall overcome” which is grammatical

Self-Assessment Exercise I

Identify three qualities of poetry that define its unique nature.

3.2 Basic Concepts in the Criticism of Poetry

Even though we are concerned with the practical criticism of poetry in this unit, it is important that you identify the elements of poetry that are relevant to this task. By elements of poetry we mean those features that should attract the attention of any one interested in studying poetry. We can only identify some of these.

Theme

Theme is the central argument or statement that a poem makes about its subject matter. It often runs through the poem. It is however possible to have more than a theme in a work. At times, a poem can have a theme and one or two sub-themes. The length of a poem may have to do with whether it will have just one theme. It is important to note however that theme is not the same as the subject matter of a poem. The theme of a poem can always be stated briefly. It is the statement the poet makes about the subject matter.

Subject Matter

The subject matter of a poem refers to the subject that it engages. For instance it may be love, war, politics, etc. Anything can serve as the subject matter of a poem. Let us identify the difference between subject matter and theme. If three poems, for instance, explore the subject of love, they are not likely to make the same statement about it. One can be about the mutual hypocrisies of two lovers while another is about unreturned love, and yet another about platonic love, that is, love that is devoid of any carnal desire.

The unique statement that each of them makes about love is what we consider their theme but they are on the same subject. If, however, you have to talk about the subject matter of a poem, all you need is to talk about all that it says. This will give anyone who is yet to read

it an idea of what it is all about. You will need to still note that theme and subject matter always go together because they are related. In fact, they are however considered together when we talk about the content of a work of poetry. Content, in this case simply has to do with what a poem or any other literary work says.

Form

If theme and subject matter constitute the content of a poem, then its other important aspect is the **form**. If content is about what a poem says or is about, form tells us how this is achieved. In other words, if form is the container, content is what it holds.

So many elements come under form. Most of these are often considered as elements of technique.

3.3 Elements of Poetic Technique

Poetic Form

In studying a poem, you need to find out if the poem has been written in conformity with the rules of a particular poetic form. It may be an ode, a sonnet, an epic or a ballad, etc. If it operates in any of the poetic forms mentioned above, it is closed form. Closed forms are poems which have rules as to how they are to be written in terms of length, rhyme scheme, structural development or function. The open form gives the poet a lot of freedom as to how to write, as the poem does not need to conform to any established pattern in terms of rhyme scheme or length of the poem.

Verification

Closely related to poetic form is verification. This refers to how the poem is written. You will need to find out if the poem is written in stanzas. If it is written in stanzas, how many stanzas make it up and how many lines are in the stanzas? You may also need to state whether the stanzas have the same number of lines. Some poets do not use stanzas. They rather use verse paragraphs. The verse paragraph uses an indented line, very much like you often find at the beginning of another paragraph, to mark another section of the poem. This is what we find in T.S Eliot's "Journey of the Magic".

Structure

The structure of a poem may be important if there is a link between the idea it explores and its physical design. For instance, you may have to find out if a particular section of a poem raises a question to which another provides an answer. It is not in every case that the structure of the poem is important.

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

1. Take another look at
2. John Milton's "Sonnet XVII" in Unit 3 and consider its structure in relation to its concern.
3. How significant is the structure of the poem?

Diction

You would have observed that we occasionally draw attention to diction in studying some of the poems in the earlier units. Diction is an important element in the study of poetry. In fact, you cannot overlook it if you want to gain an insight into the criticism of poetry.

Diction simply refers to the choice of words in a work. It is possible for a pattern to emerge as to how a poet uses words. In that case, some careful study of this pattern may deepen your understanding of the poem. A poem may make use of simple or difficult words. The words may be either monosyllabic or polysyllabic. If the words are generally simple, then it may be easier to understand the poem. You may also find out if the words are drawn from a field or a particular experience.

It is possible for a poet to draw his words from the vocabulary of religion, medicine, geography, warfare etc. For instance, a poet draws his diction from hunting in a poem that has to do with the love of a man for an unwilling lady. That is significant. At other times, the words used in a poem may be difficult or bookish or be very suggestive rather than being expressed in plain terms. The diction can either facilitate or impede your understanding of a poem. Normally, a poem that you understand at first reading is likely to be one which maintains its ordinary meaning.

Tone

The voice that you hear in each poem is that of the person called persona. The voice of the person merges with the voice of the poet at times. When that happens, we refer to the voice as that of the *poet-persona*. The speaking voice in any poem is the one that dictates the tone. Tone refers to the attitude of the poet to his subject. The tone can be sympathetic, bitter, cynical, sorrowful, or condemnatory, etc.

Self-Assessment Exercise 3

Take another look at Claude McKay's "If We Must Die" in Unit 5 and John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" in Unit 4 and compare the tone of the two poems. Describe the relationship between the tones of the two poems; are they similar or contradictory?

Mood

Mood is closely related to tone and it reflects the general atmosphere in a poem. It is a function of the poet's attitude.

4.0 Conclusion

In this unit, we have examined some elements of poetry that you will normally need to consider in your own criticism of poetry. Even though not all of these elements will be important in your appreciation of every poem, there is a need to pay close attention to them. All that matters is that you know how to recognise them.

5.0 Summary

The elements of poetry that you need to be familiar with are so many that it is not possible for us to exhaust the discussion in this unit. We shall continue with the topic in the next unit.

6.0 Self-Assessment Exercise

Discuss the theme of any FOUR poems you have studied in this course

7.0 Reference/Further Reading

Books, C & R. P. Warren (1938). *Understanding Poetry* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Unit 4 Practical Appreciation of Poetry II

1.0 Introduction

In the last unit, we started discussing elements of poetry in a bid to identify the principles relevant to the appreciation of poetry. We have not completed the discussion. This unit is the concluding part of the study.

2.0 Objective

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

- identify the elements of poetic technique that are relevant to the practical appreciation of poetry but are not discussed in the last unit.

3.0 Main Content

3.1 Elements of Poetic Technique (continued)

Imagery: An image is a mental picture which is created by words. It normally appeals to our senses. Can you remember any time you read something and it seemed as if you were imagining what you were reading? It is possible for this experience to come through the senses of sight, taste, hearing, touch or smell. In a way, the sensory appeal that images make to us is what enables us to partake of the experience that they are associated with.

If an image is then a mental picture that has reasonable appeal, it follows that we can experience it in various ways. Hence we refer to images that appeal to our sense of seeing as visual images. Those that appeal to our hearing are referred to as audible images. Gustatory imagery appeals to the sense of taste; motile or kinesthetic imagery appeals to the sense of movement, while tactile imagery appeals to the sense of touch. Imagery is closely related to the senses.

Symbolism

A symbol is an object, person or animal that represents something else. Symbols generally operate as cultural conventions. For instance, colours are made to suggest certain ideas. Red represents danger and passion in different contexts. The flag of a country is also a symbolic representation of the country in question. If an object can symbolize different ideas in various situations, then you will need to pay attention to what each represents in each context. The best known symbols may be the cross and the crescent. They represent Christianity and Islam respectively.

Symbols used in poetry may not be easily recognizable. It often takes repeated careful readings of the same poem to identify a symbol. A poet may decide to use known symbols or create his own symbols in a poem. In many cases, poets find it convenient to make some images to symbolize some ideas or experiences.

Self-Assessment Exercise

What is the effect of the use of symbolism in “Stanley Meets Mutesa”?

Pun: Pun refers to a deliberate effort at playing on words. Most of the time, this takes the form of making a word have more than one meaning.

Contrast: This refers to a situation in which ideas, experiences or people, are placed in opposite situations to draw attention to the differences between them. Consider, for instance, the ways David Rubadiri presents Henry Stanley and King Mutesa in “Stanley Meets Mutesa”.

Allusion: This refers to a deliberate reference to an experience or story outside the text which is related to the issues being examined. It is often intended to broaden our understanding of the matter or problem being explored. Thus, it is possible to have biblical allusion, historical allusion, literary allusion or even clerical allusion.

Metaphor: This is an imaginary comparison in which a direct relationship is established between two things or ideas. The basis of this link is always a shared attribute or quality. When, for instance, a man is described as a lion, what is implied is that he shares a quality identified with the lion, say boldness.

Simile: Unlike metaphor in which comparison is directly established between two things, simile effects indirect comparison. The relationship is introduced as **“and like”**. You may have discovered some similes in the earlier units in this study.

Rhetorical Question: A rhetorical question is a question which is meant to merely strengthen the point that is being made. It is therefore not meant to elicit an answer. It is assumed that the answer to the question is implied. You will remember that some of these were identified in “Stanley meets Mutesa”.

Sound Devices: Certain devices are associated with sounds. Among these are alliteration and assurance. Alliteration is the repetition of consonant sounds in a group of words. In “Good girls do not grumble”, alliteration is used because the same sound begins “good, “girls” and “grumble”.

Assurance: This on the other hand, refers to the repetition of vowels in a group of words. There is a case of assurance in “early efforts will effect a change”, i.e. “early”, “efforts” and “effect”.

Rhyme: Rhyme occurs when the last sounds at the end of a poem form a plural.

4.0 Conclusion

In this unit, we have identified elements of poetry that were not discussed in Unit 9. You need to realize that all these do not necessarily have to be present in a poem.

5.0 Summary

It is only necessary to be familiar with the elements of poetry so that you can identify and draw attention to them in your own appreciation of poetry.

6.0 Self-Assessment Exercise

John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" in Unit 4 is mainly concerned with describing the urn and the images on it. What kind of imagery is dominant in it to the use of such figures of speech as simile and metaphor? We shall take a look at them shortly.

7.0 Reference/Further Reading

Brooks, C & Warren, R.P. (1938). *Understanding Poetry*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Unit 5 Appreciating a Poem

1.0 Introduction

In the last two units we have examined the elements of poetry. The units are meant to acquaint you with what we often consider in the appreciation of poetry. The point has to be made, however, that the appreciation of literature or what we call literary criticism, is a skill you develop with practice. Familiarity with the elements of poetry that we have considered is always necessary. But having these concepts is just to prepare you for the appreciation of poetry itself. We intend to put the principles into practice in this unit by demonstrating the procedure for the practical appreciation of poetry.

2.0 Objectives

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

- identify the procedure for the appreciation of poetry
- recognize the elements that are relevant to the appreciation of a poem
- apply the procedure outlined in the sample appreciation in the criticism of a poem.

3.0 Main Content

3.1 Reading the Poem for Subject Matter

The appreciation of poetry may be more demanding than the appreciation of drama or prose narrative just because poetry tends to be more imaginative, suggestive and often difficult. What this implies is that, it is easier to misinterpret a poem. The right approach to the reading of poetry, therefore, is to be more patient and more discerning. The first step in the reading of a poem is to discover its subject matter. This is generally easier to discover than the theme (s).

A careful reading of a poem may give an idea of what the poem is about in a general sense, depending on how difficult the poem is. But it is not proper to depend on just one reading of the poem. There is always a temptation to feel that one has gained enough insight into the poem to be able to read it.

While some poems can be understood the first time you read them, others need to be read over and over again. The risk one stands if one depends on just a reading of a poem to form one opinion about it is that of misreading poems that are deceptively simple. The fact that a poem does not use difficult words may not suggest that it is simple. It may just be a convenient way for the poet to hide its meaning.

In fact, we often make a distinction between denotative and connotative meanings in poetry. The denotative meaning of a poem will reflect the meaning of a poem that emerges from the dictionary meaning of the words in it. While the connotative meaning comes from what the entire poem suggests. This may not be apparent and demands some careful exploration.

Repeated readings of a poem will always help you to guard against hasty and often wrong judgment about what a poem is about. A second reading should lead you to a better understanding of the poem. You will normally feel more confident to answer questions on the poem after the second reading. You may, however, need to read it again to confirm that your understanding of a poem is correct. Repeated readings may still be necessary to answer specific questions.

In sum, what you do when you are answering questions on what a poem is about is to see if you can paraphrase the poem as a whole. This normally helps you to answer questions that have to do with what the poem is about, that is, its subject matter. A summary may not be exactly the same as the paraphrase as it may not be as detailed as a paraphrase.

Hence a summary may be too short to make any meaning.

Self-Assessment Exercise I

1. Why is it necessary for you not to depend on only one reading of a poem?
2. What is the difference between the denotative and connotative meanings of a poem?

3.2 Discovering the Theme

We have already observed that it is easier to discover the subject matter of a poem than its theme. This should just tell you that, there is a difference between the two. You must however not that once you have been able to discover the subject matter; you are not far from discussing the theme.

Theme is the central argument or idea in a poem. It may not be explicitly stated and may even not be present in some poems. Some poems simply state their themes in the first line. In some others, it emerges as a repeated statement which sums up the note of the poem.

We must also import that it is easier to discover the themes of some poems than others. What is always needed is to ensure that you properly read a poem before attempting to comment on its central argument. Do not forget that it is possible to have more than a theme in a poem. Why there is main theme you can also have sub-themes.

3.3 Commenting on the Form of a Poem

You will recall that we have in the last two units drawn attention to the fact that a poem is made up of basically two components: Content and Form. While content embraces subject matter and theme, form is concerned with everything that has to do with method, style or technique. These include poetic form, verification, diction, symbolism, imagery, allusion, tone, mood, rhyme scheme etc.

It is good that you are already familiar with these elements of technique but you must realize that not all of them will occur in one single poem. This then suggests that you should be sensitive enough to discover the elements of technique that feature in a poem. In most cases, however, diction and tone tend to be important in reading almost every poem.

All that we have said boils down to the fact that you do not have to fix your mind as to what you are going to say about a poem until you have read it. You cannot talk about allusion, for instance, while discussing a poem if it does not occur there. At the same time,

it is necessary to say that your ability to comment on a poem will reflect a lot about your exposure and critical judgment. This explains why some people are quick to draw attention to certain elements in a poem.

3.4 A Sample Appreciation

Let us now apply the procedure that we have developed to the reading of the following poem

Read this poem carefully and answer the questions that follow.

The Pulley

When God at first made man,
Having a glass of blessings standing by,
Let us (said he) poure on him all we can,
Let the world's riches, which despaired lie,
5. Contract into a span

So strength first made a way
Then beauties flow'd, then wisdom, honour, pleasure.
When almost all was out, God made a stay,
Perceiving that alone of all his treasure,
10. Rest in the bottom lay

For if I should (said he)
Bestow this Jewell also on my creature,
He would adore my gifts instead of me,
And rest in nature, not the God of Nature.
15. So both should have be.

Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with ripping restlessness
May tesse him to my breast

3.5 Questions and Answers Questions

Questions

1. Comment on the subject matter of the poem.
2. What would you consider the main argument of this poem?
3. What do you find remarkable about the structure, diction and tone of the poem?
4. How appropriate is the image of the pulley to the concern of the poem?
5. Comment on the use of pun in the poem.

Answers

1. The poem imaginatively recreates the story of creation. God is presented as not only the creature of man but also as the one who bestowed blessings – riches, strength, beauty, wisdom, honour and pleasure on him. God however stopped when rest, the last of the blessings, was about to be granted. God decided not to granted rest to man because he felt man would be self-sufficient if given rest. Giving man rest, God felt, would make him adore the blessings rather than Himself – Rest would then be the only channel God would use to draw man to Himself, for, so long as man is restless, he would always be drawn to God.
2. The central argument in the poem is man's dependence on God. This is tied to man's lack of self-sufficiency which would have enabled him to feel that he could do without God. Restlessness is the channel through which God draws man back to Himself. This, the poem argues, is what indicates man's need of God.
3. Structurally, the poem is divided into four stanzas. The first three lines have five lines while the fourth has three lines. The first three stanzas narrate the story leading to God's insistence that man should depend on Him. The last simply states the result of this – God's decision to deny man rest.

The choice of words in the poem is appropriate. Even though the words are largely archaic, indicating that the poem was written long ago. We, for instance, encounter words like “glasse” (line 2), “poure” (line 3). “Jewell,” (line 12), and “tosse” (line 18). It is not difficult to understand these words because there are only slight differences in their spellings. The tone of the poem is argumentative. This aligns with the biological pattern of the structure of the poem. The poet reconciles his thought with his tone.

The image of the pulley is made symbolic in the poem. It assumes the status of the conceit. The conceit occurs when an effort is made to establish a relationship between things or ideas that look unrelated at first. In this poem what you will observe is that there is an effort to create a relationship between the pulley and man's restlessness which is seen as the very instrument God uses to draw man to Himself. The pulley then becomes the symbol of restlessness. It is appropriate as a symbol.

The deliberate play on the word “rest” in the poem is very effective. It at once means rest and the rest, that is, what is left after God had given man a lot of blessings. This reinforces the argument of the poet

Self-Assessment Exercise 2

Read the following poem and answer the questions that follow it.

I want to Go to Keta

I want to go to Keta
before it's washed away
Before the palm-trees wither
And drawn outside the bay.

I want to go to Keta
Where boys drum all the day
And the girls dance agbadza
To keep the tears away.

I want to go to Keta
While yet they live who care
to point out like a star
that frothing spot out there

Where they would sit with dada
Those days the sea was land
I want to go to Keta
While yet there's place to stand.

I want to go to Keta
before the tenderness
of grief so keen and bitter
chills to cold callousness

and the vagueness of laughter
drowns the shared joy of pain.

I want to go to Keta –

It might not long remain.

- Kobena Eyi Acquah.

1. Comment on the central argument of the poem.
2. How does the use of repetition enhance the success of the poem?
3. Does the tone of the poem have any relationship with its thematic interest?

4.0 Conclusion

The practical appreciation of poetry that you are being introduced to can be very exciting. You only need to develop your critical ability by interacting with many poems. Do not forget that each time you are asked to comment on a poem that you have never seen or read, the questions you will be asked will normally be based on what is said in the poem. You are not expected to bring in any information that is not contained in the poem into your reading of the poem.

5.0 Summary

What this unit and the two earlier ones are intended to achieve is to introduce you to the practical criticism of poetry. It is not even possible to teach you everything that you need to know about the appreciation of poetry in one single course.

As you keep on reading and writing about literature you will acquire both the skill and the language needed for the study of poetry.

6.0 Self-Assessment Exercise

Read the following poem and answer the questions that follow it.

For Ken

Compressed giant,
This loss, proportioned
More than the cause
Is larger than you
In size.

It is equally only
By the daily departures
In turns and scores,
Of the finished and fed-up
And the eternal tears drilled

On the sorrow-laden land.

The injury is written
Deep in my soul
Learning a manuscript
To remain and remind
Me of the deeds
Left undone

1. Comment on the subject matter of the poem.
2. How do the subject matter of the poem and tone reveal the form of the poem
3. Which word in stanza tells you about the poet's vocation? Comment on it effectively and the insight it gives into the poet's diction.
4. Why does the poet particularly miss Ken?

7.0 Reference/Further Reading

Brookes, C. W & Warren, R.P. (1938). *Understanding Poetry*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.