

# Transmuting Modern African Poetic Imagination To A Reality

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## **Abstract**

Poetry happens to be one of the genres of literature the poses a problem to learners due to misconceptions which arise as a results of complexities associated with choice of words many poets employ. This paper attempts to identify the problems the readers encounter and also shows the way to handle the poetic literariness so as to transmute african poetic imagination to reality. A concerted effort is made to analyze "Whole Soyinka's Death of Dawn" and J.P Clark's, "Return of the Fishermen". In the first poem, Wole Soyinka re-echoes his belief in existentialism as notion which provokes this poem. Apart from his complex diction, he uses the technique of contrast and irony to reveal the fertility of human ingenuity. On the other hand, J. P Clarks made profuse use of imageries, well structured rhyme scheme to depict that mood of the fishermen over the catch. These poems provoke emotion about life and experiences.

**Keywords:** *transmuting, African Poetry, Imagination, Literariness, Reality.*

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## **I. Introduction**

Of the three major genres of imaginative literature, poetry, prose and drama, poetry is perceived as the most difficult and it appeals less to a majority of readers. The two major reasons ascribed to it is that poetry is a complex art form and demands the greatest aesthetics input on the reader. The second reason is that the mechanical processes of poetry are too concentrating and exiting and they draw freely on the vast resources of language that are beyond the readers purview. Vincent (1975) states that the problem is not the inability of an ill-equipped reader to disentangle the poet's language and synthesize it but simply the problem of importance. Nwokwu F (2022) Opines that the best way to eliminate or at least reduce the problem is by giving a complete orientation, a revision of ideals about and attitude to poetry.

To express confidently what a poem means, it is absolutely necessary that the poem be looked upon as a highly ordered organism and should be considered wholly. It is necessary to realize that the meaning of a poem goes beyond the immediate postulation it makes. In most cases, the meaning is embedded in the imagery of the poem which provides the internal dynamics of the poem. It carries the burden of the thought and world view of the poet's profound ideas and attitude.

Emezue (2012) argues that if it is acceptable that a literary work is an artistic medium for expressing emotions; it can also be accepted that these emotions are products of what have been experienced physically in a real, socially, built world of ideologies, events, circumstances, tasks, obligations to mention but a few.

For many, poems do not go beyond discerning its meaning and identify a few metaphors and similes and perhaps making a naïve remarks about rhythms and rhymes. The emphasis on meaning has affected the appreciation of poetry in many ways in contrast to its form. It is therefore, necessary to consider poetry not only what it means but how it means. This will give an idea what a Modern African Poetry Portrays.

One of the main factors which perhaps inhibits an attempted explication of Modern African Poetry is the general insensitivity of the average reader to words and words ordering in a poem and the ultimate effect which particular collections produce. Many readers of poetry do not have a feeling for words and they are unable to appreciate the way a poet uses words to achieve a purpose in which process lies the true measure of poetry. Thus, it is inappropriate to limit the appreciation of poetry to the lexical interpretation of a word but a poem should be wholly appreciated.

Emezue (2012) posits that the Modern African Poet does not have any comparable literary mine of communal reference except in the traditional oral literature having been nurtured on Western Poetry. He opines

that the best way to break away from the strangle-hood of a foreign poetic practice would seem to be a marriage of the traditional African Poetic elements and Modern European Poetic forms. The possibility and success of this synthesis is demonstrated by the refreshing vigour of the rhythm of Okigbo's last poems and some of J.P Clark's Casualties. For the beauty and achievement of this poetic practice, the use of magery and ideas drawn from the African environment give Modern African Poetry a unique identity.

There is also need to stress that one basic obstacle that stands in the way of intelligent appreciation of Modern African Poetry is futile knowledge of the elements of poetry like rhyme, rhythm and metre. Emenyonu (2020) expresses fear that metre in particular occupies such an important place in the repertoire of the African reader that he expects every poem to be written according to the direction of a particular basic metre. He stresses that where this is absent, he is disappointed and is inclined to dismiss what he has before him as not poetry. The best poetry must communicate. The use of metres and ability to arrange words in stanza's does not make a good poetry. What rather make good poem is a prof us of vagaries of imageries, diction, tone, thematic procreations and other literary devices. These help to shape a well crafted poetry. However?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is formalist school. The main concern of formalist criticism is the exploration of the poetic form or "literariness", of a text. To Roman Jakobson, the poetic function is dominant in texts which focus on the message for its own sake. The notion of "defamiliarization" was later introduced by Victor Shklovsky as an aspect of the poetic function of language. He claims that as things become familiar to us, we stop noticing them. Thus, the role of literature or art in general is to make people view the world from a new perspective, to defamiliarization the familiar and then make them re-perceive what they have stopped noticing because of its familiarity.

Foregrounding as a method of defamiliarization in textual composition enables the reader to perceive the familiar with a sense of newness. Simpson (2014) says that foregrounding refers to a form of textual patterning which is motivated specifically for literary-aesthetic purposes. Kamalu (2018) explains that the formalists are of the view that the primary aim of literature is to foreground its medium. In foregrounding, there may be the violation of category rules, the breach of selection restriction rule and repetition of grammatical patterns. Yankson (1987) asserts that foregoing bring the message of a text to the forecourt of the reader's attention.

Dada (2004) identifies metaphor, imageries, archaisms, pronunciations, use of dialects, neologism, figures of speech, italization and punctuation marks as some of the linguistic elements that are often foregrounded in poetic texts.

#### **"Poem Presentation of Wole Soyinka's Death in the Dawn"**

Traveler, you must set out  
At dawn. And wipe your feet upon  
The dog-nose wetness of the earth.  
Let sunrise quench your lamps. And watch  
Faint brush prickling in the sky  
Cottoned feet to break the early earthworm  
On the how. Now shadows stretch with sap  
Not twilight's death and sad prostration.  
This soft kindling, soft receding breeds.  
Racing joys and apprehensions for  
A naked day. Burdened hulks retrait,  
Stoop to the mist in faceless throng  
To wake the silent markets-swift, mute  
Processions on grey by ways.....  
On this  
Counterpane, it was \_\_\_\_\_  
Sudden winter at the death  
Of dawn's lone trumpeter. Cascades  
Of white feather flakes... but it proved  
A futile rite. Propitiation sped  
Grimly on, before  
The right foot for joy, the left, dread  
And the mother prayed, child  
May you never walk  
When the road waits, famished.

Traveller, you must set forth  
At dawn.  
I promise marvels of the holy hour presages  
as the white cock' flapped  
Perverse impalement-as who would dare  
The wrathful wing's of man's progression ...

But such another wraith! Brother,  
Silenced in the startled hug of Your invention-is this mocked grimace  
This closed contortion -1?

Analysis of "Death in the Dawn"

"Death in the Dawn" is one of the typical

Poems of Wole Soyinka. The poet begins as if he has some mysteries to reveal which has to do with life and death. He begins his description ingenuity by moving from contemplative and objective presentation to the terrifying twist in which the reader identifies himself with "I" of the last stanza. The suddenness and the mystery over whelms us as does the fertility of human ingenuity.

The poem, "Death in the Dawn" is worked out through a structure of contrast and irony. The title begins with irony and contrast. The connection of death which connotes darkness, cheerlessness, and finally with dawn which holds out the promises-of life, cheer, light and initiation.

Throughout the poem, Soyinka uses words and metaphors that have the right association and build up the relevant atmosphere to drive home his point.

The immediate event of the poem is the accidental killing of a cock by an early morning motorist who himself doies in a car accident shortly after. The poem starts on a peremptory tone and the poet's attitude is that of a person who has some special secret to reveal to a particular class of people; to experience this special knowledge, "The Traveller", is urged to start his journey very early in the morning. The note of urgency is adequately conveyed by the few stressed monosyllables of the first line and over all brisk sweep of the three-line stanza which forms the introductory part of the poem:

Traveler, you must set out At dawn. And wipe you feet upon  
The dog-nose wetness of the earth.

The poet's use of, "Let sunrise quench your lamps is an extension of the lines just referenced above. What follows immediately after is a reference to the appearance of the sky at sunrise as the rays of the sun pierce through the milky clouds. This picture is aptly conveyed by the metaphor, "Faint brush prickling in the sky". The feet of the farmers as they walk bare-soled on dewy surface is poetically imaged as, "cottoned feet". It is necessary to notice how the poet has subtly used the technique of iteration so far to emphasize dawn. Again, the poet uses images, metaphors, and association of words sufficiently to indicate the impending tragedy. He introduced the contrast, ambivalence, and duality which provide the structure of meaning in this poem. The poet uses the image of "Shadows". At dawn, shadows are long and this he connect with the rising life given sap of trees in the morning to inform the idea of life. This is quickly contrasted with the long Shadows which are associated with death and sad prostration. The rest of the stanza confirms our fears for the day that has just been born. It holds both joy and grief in store. The poet writes, solemnly reflect this perception:  
This soft kindling, soft receding breeds Racing joys and apprehension for A naked day.

In stanza three, the poet continues the head by posing that the motorist that has been joyously racing in the soft morning air accidentally kills a white cock. This threatening doom is the burden of the rest of the poem. The act of killing a white cock is symbolic because in traditional African Societies, "white cocks" are meant for sacrificial ceremonies. Soyinka works through metaphors and symbols to indicate clearly the sense of inevitability and callousness which are his concern in this poem.

The fourth stanza of this poem provides something like a bridge and a bastion. It brings out more prominently the religious aspect of this poem, an aspect which continued in the next stanza.

The right foot for joy, the left, dread  
And the mother prayed, child  
May you never walk  
When the road waits, famished

This stanza deftly rehearses and brings to a head ideas expressed earlier in the poem; it goes further to focus our attention to the new twist which the poem is to take. For the first time, the first person pronominal form "I" is used to show the full presence and involvement of the poet. The Ironic and religious notes here are worth attention:

I promise marvels of the holy hour presages

The “holy hour” not only refers ironically to dawn-time for early morning prayers”, but also too the idea of sacrifice which we came across earlier in the poem.

The last stanza is the most cryptic of all.

The motorist has had a sudden and fatal accident, caught and mangled in the twisted heap which a moment before was his pleasurable all to mobile. Soyinka’s portrayal of this final scene is vivid, even bizarre. The expression on the face of dead man is a mocked grimace and the whole wreck with the man trapped inside is, “this closed contortion”. The poem must have deliberately used those alliterative sounds to aid the note of finality on which the poem ends. The note of personal identification with the dead motorist in this stanza is signaled by “Brother” shows that none is exempted from the curse of the road mishap.

In terms of poetic techniques, this poem is cont conventional because it is not written according to a basic pattern and rhymes. His (Soyinka) technique is to use lines of different lengths and varying emphasis and shifting caesuras fro rhythmical purposes. This is done in order to create tension through his rigorous syntax and strong poetic diction which requires a reader to ponder on every line of the stanza. At the end, the poet has, succeeded in employ in thex literary devices as end at showcasing the aesthetics of African Modern poetry and strong message embedded in the art.

### **J.P Clark’s “Return of the Fishermen”.**

Pins and needles effervescent up heel,  
Dabble, dabble, dip paddle blades,  
And silent you furrow up from sea.

O’ quick now goes the sun to sea,  
Tick-twit, squirrels stow their seeds  
And now is the squirming down keel  
Come, said the kingfisher, you feel  
Beat, Behind there breaks the village  
Profile, and filled is the quay.

Analysis of the Poem, “Return of the Fishermen”.

This is a short poem describing the approach of fishermen with their heavy catch to the shore at the end of the day. The striking thing about the poem is the way the poet uses fewer words to successfully convey vividly the visual auditory and kinetic impression which the poem expresses.

These fishermen approaching the quay can easily be visualized. It can also be quickly seen the action of paddling against the setting sun and the “path” cut by the approaching canoe as the fishermen. The poet employs the onomatopoeic device to demonstrate the sound made by paddles dropping in and out of water as the canoe courses along under their impulse.

Dabble, dabble, dip addle blades,  
And silent you furrow up from sea.  
The poet specifically reveals that it is evening but this fact is unmistakably imaged in this stanza:  
O’ quick now goes the sun to sea,  
Tick-twit, squirrels stow their seeds

There is an impressive range of tone even in such a short poem to transmit the atmosphere and scene which the poem captures. Another intriguing as peel of the poem is the way the poet uses rhyme scheme to ensure the structural clarity of the poem with subtle repetitions and inversions so that all the details seen rolled into one ball. This is a good example of a poem in which metre, rhyme, and diction are skillfully blended and work together to create mood and scene, and evoke a sense and feeling of a place.

J.P Clark’s poem reveals the poet’s background and he uses profuse imageries to portray it like one of his other poem, “Night Rain”.

## **II. Conclusion**

African poetry is not just an imaginary work of art; it can be transmuted to a reality when the reader understands that a poet uses fewer words to pass a bulk message. Thus, it is not appropriate to limit the appreciation of a poem to a lexical interpretation of words, but a poem should be wholly appreciated. Soyinka’s Death in the Dawn and J.P. Clark’s Return of the Fishermen demonstrate different experiences the poets share. The first one evolves emotion of sober reflection which he juxtaposes it with contrast and irony. The second poem reels out joy, the happy mood of the fishermen over the catch. In nutshell, the poets have succeeded in transmuting the African poetic imagination to a reality.

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