



Thinker's Journal

Maiden Issue



A Publication of The Faculty of Arts,
Godfrey Okoye University, Enugu

THINKERS JOURNAL

PUBLICATION OF THE FACULTY OF ARTS,
GO-UNI. VOL. 1 NO. 2 Sept., 2019.

**A COMPARATIVE LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL NUANCES IN
RICHARD CORBET'S POEM 'TO MY SON' AND WOLE SOYINKA'S POEM
'DEDICATION'**

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Abstract

Richard Corbet was a 17th century English poet, while Wole Soyinka is a 20th century poet. Although their periods of writing give a considerable gap, the themes are common to both; that is the protective, guiding love of a father for his child. Both propose niceties for their children from a very tender age, but because their cultural backgrounds differ, each tries to stress areas of importance and how he wishes his child to be successful in life. These both do, with cultural nuances. These cultural undertones are identified through the linguistic choices made in the two poems. This is the power of language in literature. This study was organized, using the provision of the theory of Chomsky's Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG), which views language use from graphological, phonological, syntactic, and lexico-semantic levels. This approach is combined with the provisions of Beaugrande's text linguistics. This eclectic method, results in the employment of Carter's model of analysis of Hemingway's 'Cat in the Rain'. This model first interprets the text before proceeding to analyse the text's linguistic components. With this, a holistic study of the poems is assured.

Key words: cultural, nuances, generative grammar, language and linguistics.

Introduction

Children are God's precious gifts to men and whoever enjoys this great favour tries to maximize its benefits by putting great effort in raising the child. Various axioms underscore the need for this parental and or communal assignment, where it applies. An injunction like, 'spare the rod and spoil the child', and a saying like 'the child is father of the man', points towards the benefit that accrues from giving children good training, for a successful adulthood.

Richard Corbet, an English poet of the middle (17th), wrote his poem at the celebration of the birthday of his son, Vincent, November 10th, 1630 at the age of three. Richard rose to a high position in public life as a bishop. In this poem, he bases his wish on an inestimable favour which is also priceless in human life. He values health more than wealth. He supports the axiom that says that good health is wealth; a healthy nation is a wealthy nation; a healthy body develops a healthy mind. One who is extravagantly wealthy, may unfortunately expend his money to cure diseases or afflictions which could diminish his wealth. Good health is undoubtedly paramount in the hierarchy of favours from God.

On the other hand, Wole Soyinka, an acclaimed poet, playwright and novelist, distinguished himself in the arena of African and especially Nigerian literary scenes. He is a Nobel Laureate of Literature. His themes cover a range of experiences namely cultural, personal, political, social, natural, interpersonal among others. It is no wonder then that, he has dabbled into this theme, more so, as it concerns his only daughter Moremi, whom he cherishes dearly. His poem 'Dedication', is for Moremi. This paper attempts to draw out the similarity and differences in the way these two poems are presented. The use of linguistic approach in the analysis of literary works, although complementary to literary criticism, amazingly gives a holistic treatment to poems. Linguistic analysis supplies the 'missing link', which

the literary critic brushes over in his comments on language usage in any work studied. This approach will examine how various linguistic levels of English namely, graphology, phonology, syntax and lexico- semantics, are employed by the poets, to drive their messages to their audiences.

Corbet's 'To His Son' and Soyinka's 'Dedication', share a similar theme which is expressed in the poems and that is, the wishes of a father to his child. Both use a common language for writing but their usages spell out their styles of writing. Equally, both represent different cultures which they try to project in their different poems through their diverse use of language. Conversely, their wishes fall on different sexes of children namely, Corbet's Son and Soyinka's daughter. Their stylistic and intriguing use of language, exposes the contrast in their works. At the level of graphology, 'To His Son' is presented in a one block stanza which has twenty lines. It is unique in the sense that it is more than 14 lines which a sonnet houses, and does not conform to the conventional English poetry. In the case of 'Dedication, a regular three-line stanza is maintained throughout. It is also unique in that it violates the expected conventional four-line stanza. In both cases, the poets have their reasons for these kinds of structural layout.

Richard Corbet in his poem, pours out his heart totally in giving his wishes to his son. He has collected for his disposal to his son, all he thinks makes a successful and enviable character and he desires all of that to be together in a package to his son, hence the one block stanza.

On the other hand, Soyinka enlists the natural heavenly bodies and physical elements to act or participate in forming the being of his daughter. He calls on earth, air and sun to be part of the dedication thus:

Earth will not share the rafters' envy line 1

The air will not deny you line 7

These three elements, he invites, to honour their presence in the dedication of Moremi, hence the three – line stanzas.

Corbet makes effusive use of punctuation marks. Virtually, all the lines of the poem have either a comma, or a semicolon, or a colon, or a fullstop. These punctuation marks help to give the touch of directness of the speech or address e.g. 'I wish thee, Vin, before all wealth, both bodily and ghostly, health.' lines 3 – 4. In this same manner, punctuation marks have been closely used in 'Dedication'. Almost all the lines have one form of punctuation mark or the other like a comma, dash, a full-stop or a question mark.

Phonologically, these marks especially commas have affected the speed of rendition. In other words, as the commas are observed, the speaker pauses to make sure the message is well taken, even though the addressees are not expected because of their age, to understand the language of the speakers fully. However, people believe that there is power in words. Although the two linguistic levels earlier examined have made considerable contributions to the poems, the distinguishing levels in these poems are the grammatical and lexical. In Corbet's poem, the sentences are in the present tense. The line/ I wish thee well/ line 2, couches various forms of wishes which 'none can tell'. He starts to give his wishes by saying, 'I wish thee Vin, before all wealth, bodily and ghostly, health'. lines 3 – 4. He now spells out the supremacy of health over wealth. Phonologically, there are end rhymes in *thee* in lines 5 & 6, while *show* rhymes with *know* in lines 7 & 8. The same goes for *require* and *fire* for lines 9 & 10, *graces* and *places* for lines 11 & 12, *court* and *support* for lines 13 & 14, *many* and *any* for lines 15 and 16, *ways* and *days* for lines 17 and 18, and finally, *part* and *art* for lines 19 & 20. When this poem is rendered, one is catapulted into ecstasy of beauty of rhyme and rhythm, which is not the case

with Soyinka's 'Dedication.' Rather, there is an array of words, at the end of lines, which has no similarity of sounds between one line and the other e.g. There are words at the end of the lines like:

floors, fall, life lines 1 – 3
tuber, springs, hearth lines 4 – 6
top, hoe, squirrels lines 7 – 9 e.t.c.

This is perhaps to remind both the reader and the child being dedicated, that the event is a very serious one, though not more serious an event than Corbet's. Both of them are ruled by different passionate cultural drive, exposing in some cases social criticisms. Syntactically in the poem, 'To His Son', the sentence patterns are mostly straight forward simple sentences. Where there is a compound sentence, he joins it with a co-ordinator, thus:

What I shall leave thee none can tell
But all shall say I wish thee well; lines 1 & 2

Some of the lines of 'To His Son' are heavily modified e.g.

I wish thee learning, not for show
Not such as gentlemen require,
To prate at table or at fire, lines 7 – 10

Corbet rather pontificates and moralises . Those are his ideas of what make a good character which he wants his child to imbibe. The beautiful organization of Corbet's wish is worth highlighting. He subtly balances his statements with sentences which combine the direct wish and the opposite effect of the wish, preaching moderation in each case. Examine lines 4 – 6

Not too much wealth, nor wit, come to thee,
So much of either may undo thee. lines 5 & 6
I wish thee friends, and one at court,
Not to build on, but support;
To keep thee, not in doing many
Oppressions, but from suffering any, lines 13 – 16

Corbet as a modest, simple, but intelligent bishop, wants to plant into his son the ingredients of a successful living. In the hierarchy of virtues, he places health of both body and mind, above wealth, (but not too much of wealth), wit (not too much of it either), learning, (enough to instruct and know but not for show), his mother's graces and his father's fortunes, friends (good ones to help him especially lawyers at court, but not for him to use the friends to oppress others. Culturally, law is a cherished profession in European tradition. Among these he has not forgotten peace, which controls human behaviours and it is also the foundation for longevity. Corbet does not condone cutting corners but advises hard work:

I wish thee peace in all thy ways,
Nor lazy nor contentions days;
And when thy soul and body part,
As innocent as now thou art. lines 17 – 20

Corbet has outlined his personality and subtly exposes his dislikes. In this poem he forewarns his son against certain bad character traits like being stinking rich such that he becomes overbearing, oppressive, talkative and boastful especially 'prating at tables' about successes achieved. Corbet knows that good morality is utmost because he realizes that human beings are answerable to their Creator at the

end of their lives. There are expressions used by Corbet which euphemises situations. He says ‘What I shall wish thee, none can tell’. line 1. In other words, people’s expectations of what he would leave his son with, is different, i.e. ‘none can tell’, meaning that no one expects what he has in mind for his son. He advises his son to make friends especially ‘one at court’. This shows the lives of Europeans who carry out litigations to settle cases and who trust the efficacy of the judiciary. At the end of his son’s life Corbet expresses it as, ‘when thy soul and body part,’ he would not be disadvantaged. He also admires the good qualities of his wife where he says, ‘I wish thee all thy mother’s graces .line 12 and modestly talks about his achievements – (I wish thee) ‘Thy father’s fortunes and his places’. line 12 .‘His places’ here mean his positions in public life. This wish has a gender implication because a woman rarely has fortunes; rather she is homely, graceful and full of admirable comportment, while the males are expected to hustle and make fortunes. Consequently, Corbet wishes his son to combine his mother’s qualities with his (Corbet’s) to make a round character.

Comparatively, Soyinka’s ‘Dedication’ is more or less confrontational. The poet tries to fight to protect his daughter against unhealthy attitude of envy and of evil machinations of wicked people in his society. Syntactically, he couches his desires for his only daughter, in metaphors. He invokes the air, the earth, the sun to protect her:

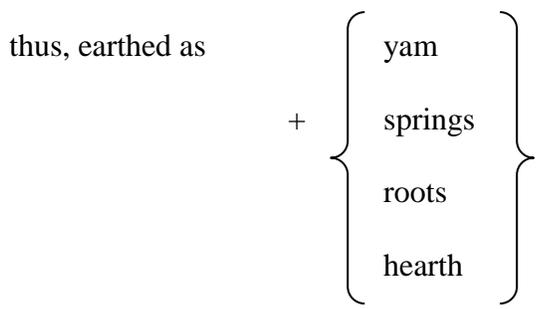
Earth will not share the rafter’s envy (line 1)

The air will not deny you line7

Long wear the sun’s shadow; run naked to the night line 12

In stanzas 1 – 3, Soyinka hands his daughter into the protective care of the physical elements and uses simile to drive home his points. He gives the baby a pinch of soil and says ‘Taste this soil for death and plumb her deep for life’. line 3. Soyinka’s wish is that this baby should taste the soil because when she dies she will be a part of the soil but in the meantime, he prays that the soil should cover her as ‘this

yam wholly earthed, yet a living tuber' line 4. She would be earthed as this yam, earthed as springs, as roots, as hearth. This forms a pattern which is shown diagrammatically



The 4 NPs are in syntactic relationship with the verb 'earthed' and in paradigmatic relationship with each other. They are semantically related to the general feature /+ nature/ and phonologically related by sharing the same rhythm, because the words are all monosyllabic. The three levels namely syntactic, phonological and semantic, all converge to reinforce one another. In stanza 4 the poet wishes his daughter to be as ageless as dark peat. In other words, she will not get old in time by her looks and physique. In stanza 5, the poet uses items of significance in child's dedication in his culture namely, pepper, palm oil, wine, cam wood, chalk, salt, rain-water, and each performs its role in the life of the child as can be seen from the poem. Pepper which is a kind of spices in African culture is used to prepare food to bring out some flavour and pepper could be green when unripe and such unripe ones are less hot. The red pepper which is ripe is very hot and when used much, for the same purpose of cooking, could make the meal unpalatable and unenjoyable. The poet instructs thus:

Peppers green and red – child – your tongue arch
 To scorpion tail, spit straight return to danger's threats
 Yet soothe with the brown pigeon, tendril dew between your lips. lines13-15

The child is now given a weapon to fight her enemies, that is, both green and red pepper to plant in her tongue and the tongue should be ready for action as the scorpion's tail is arched, to spit straight to return

danger's threat, when necessary. On the other hand she should 'coo tendril dew' between her lips when not in active warlike state. This very tongue should shield her 'like the flesh of palm, insealed as the heart of kernel', should be 'held skyward', 'cupides in thorn nesting', lines 16 – 17. In each case there is profuse use of simile to state the normal and abnormal use of each of these items in human endeavours. The poet in lines 18 – 22 states:

A woman's flesh is oil – child, palm oil on your tongue.
Is suppleness to life, and wine of this gourd
From self – same timeless run of runnels as refill
Your podlings, child, weaned from yours we embrace
Earths' honeyed milk, wine of the only rib.

Soyinka makes no pretensions about his tradition. He drops palm oil on the child's tongue to show suppleness to life i.e. she should be prepared for ups and downs of life; for the wine put on her lips serves as a refill to her podlings which are her mother's breasts, because the African nursing mothers are given small measures of palm wine to activate the continuous supply of breast milk to feed and sustain the baby until he/she is weaned. When she is weaned, the child now struggles in life to achieve success. 'Now roll your tongue in honey till your cheeks are / Swarming honeycombs, your world needs sweetening, child/' lines 23 – 24. The items camwood and chalk, the poet puts on the child's heart, is for 'flight of blemish' line 26. Salt, to taste long on her lips, 'that you may seek none from tears' line 29.

Rain - water / is the gift / of gods, – drink of its purity, bear fruits in season / lines 29 – 30. When she bears fruits she should / :

/haste to repay /

/The debt of birth / yield man – tides like the sea /

/And ebbing, leave a meaning on the fossilled sand/ lines 31 – 33

The messages given in Corbet's poem 'To His Son' and Soyinka's 'Dedication' for Moremi, are comparatively similar, although they differ in their presentational style.

Whereas Corbet's poem contains what he feels are the ingredients of good character which can assist his son in future, [if he abides by them,] to fit in well into his society, Soyinka leaves us with a bit of insight into the hurdles which a growing child would cross on his or her way to success in life. Whereas Corbet is concerned with his son being as innocent as he is in his childhood, until when his body and soul would part, (for which achievement demands a lot of sacrifice), Soyinka out rightly prepares his daughter against odds in his culture and how to go about them.

At the same time, he (Soyinka) envisages success from which she; (Moremi) must fulfill the expectations of the family and that of the society which are, to 'make haste to repay the debt of birth' line 32. That simply means she is expected to cater for her parents, siblings and other relations perhaps in their old age. Secondly, to / yield man – tide like the sea / and ebbing, leave a meaning on the fossilled sands/ 32 & 33. is the same message of leaving behind this planet, a good name.

In presentation, Corbet and Soyinka use the same direct and monologized style, calling the child's name, 'Vin.' in the case of Corbet while Soyinka calls 'child' at almost every admonition given. Whereas Corbet addresses his son in straight forward and simple language, Soyinka goes with telegraphic statements, for example , / camwood round the heart, chalk for flight / of blemish – see? It dawns! – antimony beneath. Armpits like goddess, and leave this taste long on your lips / lines 25 – 28. One needs to read hard to get the message, let alone the child Moremi. Soyinka uses proverbs in his poem like / For the hoe that roots the forest ploughs a path for squirrels/ lines 8 – 9. That means that for anyone who tries to undo you may in return be doing something beneficial to you. He, Soyinka profusely uses simile to draw a picture of what he says, by using 'as' and like e.g. / To warmth of waters, earthed as springs / As roots of baobab, as

the hearth line 5 & 6 . /Like a top spin you on the navel of the storm/ lines 7 – 8. Be ageless as dark peat... line 11, Shield you like the flesh of palms ... line 16 , Armpits like a goddess ... line 27

Soyinka employs metaphors to couch his messages and creates nonce words and borrows some words from some disciplines like / skyward held Cuspids in thorn nesting ... / line 16 – 17 Cuspids is not a literary word but borrowed from building and construction, to express sharp pointed edges. 'Insealed' is a nonce word which he coins to express how deeply the child would be shielded like the heart of kernel.

'Podling' is the metaphor for breast, earths' honeyed milk' means the goodies of life, 'man – tide' is success in its fullness, 'debt of birth' is a child's responsibility to his / her parents when he / she is grown up, 'ebbing' means the final state of life.

In conclusion, the poems 'To His Son' and 'Dedication', are beautiful poems from which have been disclosed a lot of information about the different cultural set ups namely European and African cultures in child's upbringing and have also shown the literary styles of both Corbet and Soyinka. Both poets have their distinct styles. Finally, while Corbet uses queen's English for his expressions in his poem, Soyinka mesmerises his readers with disjointed images thrown about the poem and those exert much mental energy on the part of his audience.

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