

Literature as an inquiry into the meaning of life

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ABSTRACT: *This paper contributes to the unending content and form argument in literary criticism. It examines the subject from the standpoint of content which correlates with the aspect of meaning in imaginative literature. While not denouncing the relevance of form, the paper attempts to show that the essential activity in the literature is the enquiry into the meaning of life. It constitutes the reason-for-being of literature; more so because in a work of literature, form derives its nature and essence from the works concerned for meaning of life which it (form) also serves to portray. Illustrations are drawn from literary works selected from European countries and Nigeria, representing Africa.*

cross the past two thousand years and more, philosophers and critics have generally grounded their commentaries on imaginative literature in three different principles. These are: the principle of beauty, form and meaning which correspond respectively to the aesthetic, morphological and historical perspectives on literary criticism. Thus, a literary work of art is examined as an object of disinterested contemplation of beauty or a composite system of constitutive, formal elements or an act of enquiry into the meaning of life.

In his contribution on the subject, Irele attempts to suggest that the aesthetic perspective has at present practically run its course and that literary scholarship is no longer concerned with the definition of beauty and its manifestations or realizations in characteristic genres. In his opinion therefore, the field of literary criticism is now divided between two groups of scholars; on one hand, those who approach literature with a concern for its meaning, and on the other, those who are pre-occupied solely with form and the constitutive elements of the text considered as autonomous (1 -2).

Abiola's view is not universally accepted. For example, Murray Krieger, declares his abiding interest in the aesthetic dispensation which requires that the literary text be set up as an idol to be adored and endlessly interpreted. He describes with glee his fascination with the theory and practice of aestheticism in which literary language is manipulated to give aesthetic pleasure, saying: "I still am excited by the prospect of more words about words, and still believe they can be instructive words. For me, the manipulations worked upon ordinary

language to make it function as extraordinary as it does in our best literature must continue to defy these attempts (including Irele's) to deny the differentness of literature in contrast to the rest of discourse" (24).

The example of Krieger shows that the aesthetic dispensation is still alive, contending with those of form and meaning for attention and supremacy. This then is the tension between the three perspectives on literary criticism: like the blind men and the elephant, each of them has centred its attention on a salient aspect of literature which has been emphasized over and above the others (Strauch, 1).

In fact, the dimensions of beauty and form are extremely intolerant of the perspective on meaning. The apostles of beauty, for instance, argue that the end of literature is not to teach but simply to exist and be beautiful. A work of literature should therefore not be judged by non-aesthetic standards such as historical or social significance. Instead, it should be "set apart from the world and from the rest of the world of language, just as we frame a painting to cut it off from the surrounding wall and place it in the separate sanctity of the museum" (Krieger, 20).

In a similar manner, the apostles of form argue that literature is a verbal art, not a reflection of society or a battle-ground of ideas. They therefore resist evaluating the subject matter, message and social significance of a work of literature. Rather, they dwell exclusively on artistic devices peculiar to literature such as literary language and the act of speech itself. As Roman Jakobson put it, "the object of study of literary science is not literature but literariness, that is, what makes a given work a literary work", (quoted in M. H. Abrams *A Glossary of Literary Terms* 2005). The literariness of a work consists in the foregrounding of artistic devices so much so that a work of literature is reduced to the sum total of the artistic devices in it.

All this is the formalist's version (or his bastardization) of the venerable content - form argument in literary criticism. It attempts to erase, the content/meaning component of literature while erecting form into prominence and dominance thereby suggesting that form is the essential activity in literature.

The inadequacy of this perspective has been noted by several critics especially Chinweizu (1975) and Irele. However, an illustration will clarify it.

One of the devices which formalist critics often use to analyse; works of literature is the device of making strange or mystifying what is usually familiar. In order to show inadequacy, let us turn to the use of this device in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, particularly, the incident concerning the oddities in the handbook of

Aboliga the Frog. There is in that handbook, the account of a man who grows from infancy through adolescence to old age in seven years. It is therefore a story of human development which is a familiar phenomenon. However, the case is made strange, becoming an oddity, by the alarming speed of development, taking the man only seven years to grow from infancy to old age. Formalist criticism requires that the analysis ends at this point; but it is not enough. It is also proper to interpret the relevance: this technique to the meaning of the novel; and it is not hard to see what A-mah is getting at through it. He is using it to depict the alarming speed of decay and degradation in most African countries which have become an offal rarely six or seven years after independence. This is the kind of interpretation which formalist critics would refuse to do simply because it is outside the literariness of the work. Their refusal is a good example of poetic and intellectual mind closure.

The reversal of the formalist argument is the concern of my paper. In particular, my aim is to focus on the dimension of meaning and show that the act of enquiry into the meaning of life is the reason-for-being of literature. This does not imply that the categories of beauty and form are nonexistent or nonconsequential in literature and should be neglected in literary criticism. They are also important and worthy of examination too. In fact, a writer who is careless about form does so at his/her own peril. I have in mind Tunde Fatunde's *Oga Na Tif Man* (1986) and *Water No get Enemy*. The two plays are very poor in the aspect of form and as a consequence, their claim to dramatic literature is tenuous or to borrow Bemth Lindfors' expression, they are a good example of how not to write drama.

It is useful to confirm at this point that a work of literature consists of two major parts: content which relates to meaning and form. These are what -any writers refer to as message and medium, Romanus Egudu calls matter and manner and Lewis Nkosi designates as tasks and masks respectively. The two parts are inter-dependent, one informing the other. However content/meaning predominates in a work of literature. So, the essential activity in literature is not form. It is meaning. For, form derives its essence and significance from the concern for meaning.

A work of literature is a mimesis, a representation or reflection of life in which the author organizes, explores and evaluates the nature and meaning of life. And form is the medium for exploring that life.

Take characterization for instance. It is an element of technique which belongs to the category of form. But it has no essence or value in itself independent of the meaning of the work. A character is a formal element or vehicle for exploring the meaning of life and making a

statement about that life. The same is true of the language of literature. It is determined by the concern for meaning which it also serves to explain. As noted by Philip Rahv while commenting on the case of prose fiction, "the language should be appropriate to the matter in hand because the imitation of life is the novelist's essential activity and his language is merely a transparent window through which the reader regards this life" (quoted in Lodge 5).

As with language and character so with other elements of form such as plot and structure, narrative technique, setting and atmosphere. They all derive their essence and value from the concern for the meaning of life which restitutes the essential activity in literature.

The question therefore is, in the light of this argument, what then becomes the function of literary criticism? This question is necessary because it is the business of literary criticism to interpret literature and make it meaningful to the public. Criticism is based on literature which it uses as its subject matter and which it tries to account for succinctly. It dwells on, or is about literature as physics and biology are about natural forces and organisms respectively.

In order to perform this function of about-ness and account for its subject successfully, criticism must address itself to the essential activity of literature which again, is the enquiry into the meaning of life. Thus, the function of criticism becomes that of discerning and assessing the nature and quality of life in a given work of literature, its moral discriminations and values. This invariably involves an examination of the various elements of form, showing how they manifest and elucidate that life.

It seems to me important for academic humanists to justify their preoccupation in terms of the nature and needs of their society. This is especially significant for the literary critic because he/she is a professional mediator, interpreting a work(s) of literature and making it/them meaningful and relevant for a reading public.

Accordingly, the validity of the conference' theme, from my point of view, is rooted in the African literary tradition (which consists of both creative and critical endeavours). Written and unwritten records show that the African literary tradition is characterized by a dynamic creative temper and it stresses the practicality and function of art. In this tradition, art is regarded as a criticism of life and the focus is the challenges, dilemmas and problems confronting man in society and the attempt to resolve them. As Biodun Jeyifo rightly observes, "in Africa... literature is generally perceived as a cultural institution whose production and reception are held to be deeply implicated in the destiny of the continent and its people" (ix). Wole Soyinka makes the point clearer when he says: "the artist has always functioned in African

society as the recorder of the mores and experience of his society and the voice of vision in his own time. It is time for him to respond to this essence of himself (21).

This charge is also loaded with a potent charm for literary critics today because we live in a society that demands practical solutions. In a society such as ours in Nigeria where nothing works and man is afflicted with dehumanizing conditions, it becomes an unnecessary luxury, amounting to Nero's pastime to dwell exclusively on artistic devices and ignore those problems of life which writers explore in their works.

This perhaps explains why Nigerian critics are regularly drawn to the treatment of the meaning of life in literature. Romanus Egudu, for example, has made the subject indubitably his own. In many of his works such as *Modern African Poetry and the African Predicament*, "Pictures of Pain: The poetry of Dennis Brutus", "The Colour of Truth: Lenrie Peters and African Politics" "Okigbo's Distances: A Retreat from Christ to Idoto" and "The Serrero and the Dove: Woman's Survival in Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Cd*. Egudu examines the nature and quality of human life in works of African literature. His examination contains many brilliant and deep insights into the subject which is my way of affirming the point that this conference with its theme is a worthy dedication to Egudu's critical endeavour and that he merits it.

However, Egudu is not alone in this enterprise. Other famous Nigerian critics such as Kolawole Ogungbesan, Ime Ikiddeh, Emmanuel Obiechina, Abiola Irele, Dan Izevbaye, Steve Ogude, Ernest Emenyonu and Charles Nnolim have also in their works examined works of literature as enquires into the meaning of life. My preoccupation in this paper must therefore be seen in its proper perspective; it is a continuation of a dominant re*: in African/Nigerian literary criticism.

In what follows, an attempt is made to examine selected works of literature with a view to discerning and assessing the meaning of life explored in them. Illustrations will be drawn from Sophocles' *King Oedipus* Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Albert Camus' *The Plague*, Niyi Osundare's *Excursions* and Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*. These works have been chosen because each of them represents a significant version of the enquiry.

Let us begin with Sophocles' *King Oedipus*, the quintessence of Greek drama which Peter Rudnytsky also describes as "the preeminent classical text in the western tradition" (quoted in Ahl 91,1). As Frederick Ahl informs us, the play was probably first staged between 429 and 425 BC (7). Since then, especially from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the play often recurs in discussions on

literature as meaning because it raises certain fundamental issues about human existence.

The incident in the play which provides a clue to its major preoccupation is the one concerning the riddle of the Sphinx to the people of Thebes. In the riddle, the Sphinx asks for the name of the creature which walks on four legs in the morning, two in the afternoon and three in the evening. Oedipus who is able to solve the riddle declares that the creature is man. This is a clear indication that the play is a riddle about man. It is designed to investigate the meaning of man's life on earth, and it tries to answer two related questions on that life. One of them is the question of self-identity or awareness. This is the problem which Oedipus vows to solve when he says "I must pursue this trail to the end, till I have unraveled the mystery of my birth" and "I must unlock the secret of my birth" (55). In a deterministic order, what is to be will happen regardless of mortal attempts to evade that fate" (quoted in Ahl, 5).

For example, when Oedipus is born, his parents consult Phoebus' oracle to know his destiny. The oracle predicts that the child will kill his father and marry his mother. The effort of the parents to evade the prediction by attempting to kill him comes to naught. For, the shepherd to whom the child is given to kill in the forest sympathises with him and gives him to another shepherd who in his turn gives the child to the king and queen of Corinth who adopt and bring him up to adulthood. Again, the adult Oedipus consults the oracle for his parenthood. But, rather than lead him to know his true parent, the oracle repeats the earlier prediction. In order to avoid committing patricide and incest, Oedipus runs away from Corinth only to migrate into a territory where he carries out the oracle's prediction. The point which emerges from all this is that Oedipus is a puppet in the hands of the gods.

This point is clarified and made persuasive to the readers through the various elements of form in the play. Prominent among these is plot which Aristotle describes as the "end and purpose", the "life and soul" of tragedy. In fact, this play serves Aristotle well in the *The Poetics* to clarify the nature of plot in tragedy.

In the play, plot operates by causality: characters and events are organized and linked together through cause and effect. Take for instance, the action concerning the riddle of the Sphinx which Oedipus solves. This action precipitates an effect in which Oedipus becomes the king of Thebes and this in its turn becomes the cause of another action in which Oedipus marries the queen of the late king who is his mother. The plot also operates through questions and answers, something similar to the procedure which police detectives use during investigation. In this regard, the various consultations with the oracle

are a good example of the question and answer technique. Even, the account of how Oedipus murders King Laius, his father, is dramatized through questions and answers between Oedipus and Jocasta. In addition, the events of the play are organized through flashbacks and reminiscences. The play begins very near the end when Oedipus is already old and king of Thebes; through flashbacks and reminiscences, past events in the life of Oedipus dating back to his birth are recovered and integrated with those of the present. For example, in the present world of the play, Oedipus is discussing with Jocasta his wife when a messenger enters to report that the king of Corinth is dead. This makes Oedipus to recall and recount to his wife an incident in Corinth where he consults an oracle about his parenthood and is told that he will kill his father and marry his mother. Thus, on the whole, the plot becomes the window by which the reader observes/regards Oedipus as he lives through the fate that is designed for him by the gods.

Sigmund Freud has interpreted the plight of Oedipus in the light of his (Freudian) theory and practice of psycho-analysis and has thereby broadened the frontiers of the play. In this interpretation, Oedipus' plight is a symbolic realization of the repressed double desire of the son to kill his father and to have incestuous relationship with the mother. So, Oedipus' plight is every man's plight and this, according to Freud, explains why every man who reads / watches the play sympathises or empathises with him.

Indeed, *King Oedipus* resounds with universal significance not necessarily because every man is destined to kill his father and marry his mother. But simply because in every society where the universe is experienced in a religious manner (be it Christian, Islamic, Buddhist or as in African traditional religion) man lives with the belief that he/she, through an external, divine agency, has a destiny to accomplish on earth, a destiny which may vary a great deal from one person to the other.

In addition, Fredrick Ahl reminds us that even in a universe without gods, an individual's destiny may be largely determined by persons or forces: aside himself. For example, one may be put in prison, living at a jailer's whim. At present, many Nigerian children fail WAEC and NECO; laminations due to the wreckless neglect of education by past leaders. Also, the destiny of future generations of Nigerians is today being determined by a corrupt leadership that is criminally devoted to the colossal looting of the public treasury. These examples show that the plight of Oedipus is an elastic bag which can be stretched to include various conditions in the life of man on earth.

The literature of the absurd provides another important variant of the enquiry in the western world. The enquiry is done from the standpoint of existential philosophy which explores the human experience of

nothingness, meaninglessness and absurdity in a world that is unknowable and is devoid of meaning, order, truth and value. As Eugene Ionesco has put it: "cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost, his actions become senseless, absurd, useless" (quoted in M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 1). This is what the literature sets out to demonstrate. Thus, in the literature of the absurd, the enquiry into the meaning of life is to show that man's life on earth is meaningless.

This comes out quite clearly in Samuel Becket's *Waiting for Godot*. In the play, two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, are waiting for a man called Godot but the man does not come. Still, they do not stop waiting. They continue to wait for Godot. This provokes in the audience/ readers various questions which pin point the absurdity or senselessness of the waiting game which is life. In fact, *Waiting for Godot* itself is a play of many questions with little or no answers, reflecting the absurdity of life. First, is: will Godot come? This question is not answered throughout the play. Even when Estragon assumes that "He should come", Vladimir corrects the assumption saying, "He didn't say for sure he'd come" (14).

There is also an overwhelming doubt and uncertainty about the place/ location of the event. They are asked to wait by "the tree" but the structure standing in the place does not look like one, precipitating a controversy between the two waiters:

Estragon: *(despairingly). Ah! You 're sure it was here?*
Vladimir: *What?*
Estragon: *That we were to wait.*
Vladimir: *He said by the tree. Do you see any others?*

Estragon: *What is it?*
Vladimir: *I don't know. A willow*
Estragon: *Where are the leaves?*
Vladimir: *It must be dead.,.*
Estragon: *Looks to me more like a bush.*
Vladimir: *A shrub.*
Estragon: *A bush*
Vladimir: *A—. What are your insinuating?*
 That We've come to the wrong place (14).

As with the place, so with the day of Godot's coming. It is imbued with an overwhelming doubt and uncertainty as shown in the following dialogue:

Estragon: You're sure it was this evening?
Vladimir: What?
Estragon: That we were to wait.
Vladimir: He said Saturday. I think
Estragon: You think.... But what Saturday? And is it Saturday? Is it not
rather Sunday? Or Monday? Or Friday?
Vladimir: It's not possible!
Estragon: Or Thursday?
Vladimir: What'll we do?
Estragon: If he came Yesterday and we weren't here you may be sure
he won't come again today.
Vladimir: But you say we were here yesterday (15).

In spite of these doubts and uncertainties, the characters continue to wait for Godot indefinitely. Listen to them as they affirm their resolve to wait:

Estragon: And if he doesn't come?
Vladimir: We'll come back tomorrow.
Estragon: And then the day after
Vladimir: tomorrow.
Estragon: Possibly.
Vladimir: And so on.
Estragon: The point is-
Until becomes (14).

An inevitable question to ask in the circumstance is, why is it that the characters continue to wait for Godot in spite of all the doubts and uncertainties? The play does not answer this question. Neither does it answer the question about why the characters want to see Godot. It is indicated that they have made a request to him but what is the request or its nature? The reader is not told. Again, reference is made to Godot hundreds of times in the play but who is Godot or what does Godot represent? Again, this question remains unanswered within the play. In the absence of these vital answers, the waiting game becomes opaque, senseless and absurd.

The relevance of this to the matter in hand is that the "waiting game" is a metaphor for reflecting man's life on earth. As in that game, there are many unanswered questions about man's life on earth. For example, what is man on earth? Why is he living in this world? Where is he coming from and where is he going? Thus, through the waiting game the dramatist is making a fundamental statement on man's life on

earth. He is saying that man's life is inscrutable and meaningless. It is absurd.

This point is reinforced by the action of the characters while waiting for Godot. Properly speaking, it is their inaction because the characters do nothing while waiting. Rather, in order to "pass the time" (12), they "play foolish or cruel games and speculate" (Taylor 77).

For example, while Estragon plays a funny game with his boot, Vladimir does the same with his hat. Then both of them contemplate the dangerous game of hanging from a bough thus:

Vladimir: What do we do now?
Estragon: Wait.
Vladimir: Yes, but while waiting?
Estragon: What about hanging ourselves?
Vladimir: Hmm. It'd give us an erection',
Estragon: (highly excited) An erection!
Vladimir: With all that follows...
Estragon: Let's hang ourselves immediately!
Vladimir: From a bough? (They go towards the tree) I wouldn't trust it.
Estragon: We can always try.
Vladimir: Go ahead.
Estragon: After you.
Vladimir: No no, you first
Estragon: Why me?
Vladimir: You're lighter than lam.
Estragon: Just so! (17).

These and other incidents in the play are used to represent the activities concerning everyman's existence on earth, searching for meaning where there is none. Like those incidents in the play, man's life and his activities on earth are ridiculous, senseless and absurd.

What best illustrates the absurdity of man's life on earth is the subject of enquiry in Albert Camus' *The Plague*. It is the fact of death which reduces everything in human existence to nothing and which "at every moment makes life a broken circuit" (Wood 75, x).

For example, human beings strive to build prominence for themselves but they could suddenly drop dead and that would end it all. Or, a person fills up a cup of wine but cannot drink it because at that point he/she collapses and dies. In short, every moment can be the last in a man's life because of death which is the absurdity of life.

James Wood has observed that "Camus feels the meaninglessness of life because he sees clearly that everything he does is menaced by death" (75, x). This perhaps explains why Camus makes the menace of death the focus of his novel, *The Plague*.

The novel is set in Oran, an Algerian city in North Africa. The gates are locked so that nobody can go in or out of the city which is also under the scourge of the hot sun. In addition, a deadly plague afflicts the city by which hundreds and thousands of people die daily. As noted in the blurb of the novel. The Plague symbolizes the German occupation of France during the Second World War but the symbolic significance of the novel is larger than this. Life in Oran is a symbolic representation of the human condition on earth, showing that man is a prisoner of death and he must die.

Like the two previous works, *The Plague* is a novel of many questions. One of these concerns the causes of death and the question which the novel seeks to answer is, what has man done to warrant death or why must he die?

Father Paneloux, a character in the novel, tries to answer this question from the point of view of the Christian believer. The answer is contained in the two sermons which he preaches.

The first sermon is rooted in Christian orthodoxy and ties the cause of the plague/death to sin. Father Paneloux preaches that man has committed the sin of indifference to God and the plague/ death is necessary to bring him/her back to God. The plague/death is therefore a just visitation on sinners and a sacrifice for salvation.

However, this view suffers a setback when Father Paneloux witnesses the death of a child who is innocent and sinless. The question is, why should a child who has not committed any sin die? The incident does not fit into the orthodox view and it causes Father Paneloux to undergo a transformation and to change his view on the plague/death. His new view which he preaches in the second sermon is that there is no connection between sin and the plague/death. There is, in fact, no reason for its occurrence. It is not understandable and is therefore absurd. Yet, Father Paneloux accepts it because it is the will of God. In other words, Father Paneloux accepts the plague/death not because of sin but because it is God's will.

In the second sermon Father Paneloux expresses part of Camus's view on the subject - that is, the meaninglessness of the plague/death. But he also expresses a point which Camus contends with - that is, accepting the will of God on the plague/death and loving what

we do not understand. This, in fact, is where Camus disagrees vehemently with Christian existentialists such as Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard and Husserl, criticizing them "for their leap' into rational faith" (Wood, xx). Camus rejects the 'leap' because according to him, 'it means forgetting just what I do not want to forget - the unreasonableness of my world" (quoted in Wood, xii).

Instead of forgetting it, Camus chooses to resist and fight the - 'reasonableness of the world. Tarrou and Dr. Rieux are eloquent testimonies of that struggle in the novel. Tarrou, for instance, opposes all agents of society such as his father) that perpetuate the killing of people. Dr. Rieux fights the plague, treating the people and trying to save life. Dr. Rieux is not pessimistic even though the people keep dying. He keeps on doing the same thing, attempting to cure the people who have the plague. His effort is like that of Sisyphus in the Myth who keeps rolling his rock up the hill (Camus 1975). Thus Dr. Rieux's effort demonstrates what life is all about - a constant struggle against the unreasonableness of the world.

So far, the discussion has focused on works of literature in the Western

world. It is now proper to dwell on the treatment of the subject in works of Nigerian literature. One of them is Niyi Osundare's "Excursions".

As depicted in the title, the poem is cast in the form of a travelogue in which the travelers tour various sections of Nigerian society, documenting the life of the people they encounter on their way. The major stopovers in the journey are the rural community and city centres, including the streets, markets, motor parks, government offices and the university community.

Although the locations are different, the people are yoked together by poverty and misery. Their experience is the same a bizarre tale of woe, poverty and misery which enables the poet to demonstrate that man's life in Nigeria is marked poverty, misery and suffering.

For instance, the plight of the people is reflected by their physique: their eyes are sunk in the sockets, teeth bereft of gum, skins are scaly like iguana's, feet swollen like watermelon and the women's breasts are shriveled. The babies are afflicted with chronic hydrocephalus and the boys suffer from severe malnutrition as shown by their "kwashiorkor bellies", (7).

In addition, the people engage in all sorts of miserable and unproductive forms of work. For example, the family head roams the bush, trapping rats and insects; farmers undertake subsistence farming, "shaving earth's head with long hoes", while labourers in various

companies work under conditions of intense exploitation so much so that inspite of their hard work, the slave master" pays them "a few kobo"(8).

As a consequence, the life of the people reflects abject poverty and misery. This shows as a multitude of people converge the streets begging for alms. Also, pregnant women contend with hawks and vultures as they rummage garbage heaps for rotten remnants of food from the table of the few rich people in society. Thus, "Excursions" is an expose of the life of the masses of the Nigerian people. It shows that, that life is hard, miserable and subhuman.

It is hoped in the poem that a revolution will liberate the people from the forces of oppression, poverty and misery ushering in "a life full and free" (15). But how the revolution will come about is not explored therein and this exposes it to the inadequacies of hope without struggle.

Any examination of literature as an enquiry into the meaning of life must involve the writing of Soyinka, particularly, his drama because it offers a significant insight into the subject of enquiry. As noted by the Swedish Foundation while presenting him for the Nobel prize in literature in 1986, "Wole Soyinka is a play-wright and poet who in a wide cultural perspective and poetic overtones fashions the drama of existence" (quoted in Ronald Austin Wells, 1988, 1). *A Dance of the Forests*, his first major play, demonstrates the truth of this comment. The play dramatizes the nature/meaning of life in Nigeria but the treatment applies with equal validity to other African and developing countries.

A Dance of the Forests was written for Nigerian independence in 1960. It also uses the national independence celebration called in the play as "the Gathering of the Tribes" as its central action. Adenebi, a character in the play, articulates the nation's mood and expectations of the occasion when he says: "The accumulated heritage - that is what we are celebrating. Mali, Songhai, Glory. Empires" (8).

Yet, the focus of the play is not so much on the celebration in the town as it is on events taking place in a forest nearby. Th is shift of focus is what links the play to the theme of this conference. For, the shift is a dramatic device for Soyinka to make the point that the attainment of independence "is not an occasion to bask in unreal glories or rejoice complacently" (Ogunbesan 75). Instead, it is for a thorough examination of how the people have been living and to make adequate plans to safeguard the future.

In order to inquire into the life of the Nigerian people, Forest Head summons three of their representatives - Adenebi, Dernoke and Rola - into the forest where they are confronted with their community's

way of life, laying it bare for the readers/audience to see. As expressed in the language of the play, it is "to pierce the encrustations of soul - deadening habit and bare the mirror of original nakedness" (82).

Forest Head has gone to this length because he is burdened and disenchanted by the way of life of the human community, a way of life that is evil and despicable. This much is stated by him thus: "the fooleries of beings whom I have fashioned closer to me weary and distress me" (82).

Two of those "fooleries" of the Nigerian people that distress him are bribery and corruption and intra-mural killing, that is, killing one another. Their perpetration by the people is the subject of enquiry in the play and what Forest Head wants to "pierce" through.

The enquiry is carried out in various ways. It is, for instance, carried out through the process of question and answer between Forest Head and the three representatives of the human community. In this process, Forest head masquerading as Obaneji knows all things including all the crimes (regarding bribery and corruption and intra-mural killing) committed by the representatives. From this advantageous position, Forest Head asks questions and makes comments before the representatives about their crimes and thus evokes those crimes in their consciousness - in his words, to "torture awareness from their souls" (82)

In order to avoid repetition of material, it is expedient to delay the illustrations of those crimes till the next item of discussion. The item is structure: the manner of composition, the way in which the constituent parts of a work of literature are organized or arranged to provide a total poetic experience. This is even so because the matter is pursued further in the play through the structure.

Elsewhere¹, I have identified analogous structure as the dominant kind of structure in the play. My concern here is to show how the analogous structure serves to inquire into the meaning of life in Nigeria.

Analogous structure is derived from analogy, a term used very often in studies of biology, ethnology and comparative religion. It often refers to a condition in which different elements and organs manifest or are adapted for the same function. Analogy therefore refers to a similarity of function.

For instance, "thorns and spines are analogous structures being defensive in function" (Dutta 81,59). The point to note is that as an element of structure analogy emphasizes features which are similar in function among different items and connects them together by those features. Thus, analogues structure is used in this paper to refer to a manner of composition in which the constituent parts, of the play -

characters, images and events - are linked namely, bribery and corruption and intra-mural killing together by a similarity of function, this comes out quite clearly in the play in the episode concerning "the welcome of the dead" which is dramatized through the flashback technique.

In this episode, Aroni waves his hand in a circle and recovers the court of Mata Kharibu from the past, about eight centuries back. He confronts the representatives of the living generation with it and thus unites the past and the present. Aroni's choice is no accident. The court of Mata Kharibu presents people whose "link with the living has fully repeated its nature, has reimpresed fully on the tapestry of *Igbehinadun*, in approximate duplicate of actions...(and) approximate duplicate of motives" (50).

In other words, the representatives of the living generation - Adenebi, Rola and Demoke - are the incarnations of the major figures in the court of Mata Kharibu - the Court Historian, Madam Tortoise and the Court Poet respectively. This means in terms of structure that through the similarity of their function, the ancient figures and representatives of the living generation manifest and are tied together by the same identity and destiny.

For example, the Court Historian and Adenebi are intellectual frauds and they are steeped in crime. The historian accepts a bribe from the Slave Dealer and thus, precipitates disaster for sixty full-grown men"(61). In the same way, Adenebi takes bribes at the council and inflates the capacity of passenger lorries. In a recent accident involving one of the Lorries, "the Incinerator", sixty five people are burnt to death. Madam Tortoise and Rola are notorious whores who drive men to madness and self destruction. Men kill and commit suicide for their love and "the graveyard is filled with their lovers" (21). The Court Poet and Demoke are artists and both of them are murderers. The Poet eliminates his "novice" and Demoke murders Oremole, his apprentice. Also, both crimes are motivated by envy.

The records may be updated by recent events in Nigeria's social, politico-economic history. For example, since the inception of the fourth Republic in 1999, cases of bribery and corruption have increased astronomically and they have become truly primitive. State Governors, Ministers, Commissioners, Legislators, Permanent Secretaries, Directors and other government officials loot government coffers and cart away billions of naira. Bank executives expropriate shareholders' funds and public officers brazenly demand for bribes. Intra-mural killing has also been on the increase.

Examples include the assassination of Bola Ige, Alfred Rewane, Aminasari, Dikibo and Funsho Williams incident which support the view expressed by Soyinka that "there is a nest of killers in the PDP"².

All this shows that the living generation is a repetition or a continuation of the criminal tendencies of the past. Continuity is seen here as a process in which different generations past, present and future are woven together and fused into one comprehensive view, defining the meaning/pattem of life of the Nigerian people. And it shows simply that life in Nigeria is characterized by bribery and corruption and intramural killing. It is perhaps, necessary to add that the revelation is done not merely for its own sake but as a pre-requisite step for changing from the old to a new way of life in Nigeria. Forest head makes this point when he says: "...hoping that when I have tortured awareness from their souls, that perhaps, only perhaps, in new beginnings" (82).

I have argued in this paper that the enquiry into the meaning of life is an essential activity in literature. It is, in fact, the reason-for-being of literature. This is even so because in a work of literature the various elements of form derive their nature and significance from the work's concern for meaning. This view has been substantiated with illustrations drawn from works of literature in the Western world and Nigeria, representing Africa. In conclusion, I wish to confirm that the concern for the meaning of life in works of literature will always be a potent charm for any critic deserving of continued attention.

NOTES

1. Simon Obikpeko Umukoro, "An African Perspective on Dramatic Structure ? *Theatre Studies Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1993, pp. 19-29.
2. Wole Soyinka, "July 18 Letter To Obasanjo," Forwarded by Mobolaji E. Aluko, Ph.D.
<http://wwwAV.dawodu.com/aluko66.htm> pp. I -4.

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