

Structure and meaning in Soyinka's works: a case study of *The Road*

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ABSTRACT: *To an average student or a graduate of Literature, the works of Wole Soyinka are obscure and incomprehensible. The Road, one of Soyinka's most discussed plays, is not free of these obscure and incomprehensibility claims. In fact, The Road has often been described by critics as "an enigma" and "a problem play". Others have attempted a metaphysical interpretation of the play. One of the reasons why The Road is associated with these views is the complexity of its structure. This arises as a result of the organization of the various units of the text and the dramatic techniques deployed by the playwright. This paper, therefore, is an exploration of the structure of this play. At the end, it is observed that despite the complexity, the structure projects the meaning of the play. This, in a way, suggests that the artistic merits of the play lies essentially in its structure*

Introduction

Wole Soyinka, one of Nigeria's foremost dramatists, is a significant figure in the development of drama in Nigeria. A prolific writer, he has published many plays, poems, novels, and essays. His ultimate concern as a literary artist is his society. He "focuses more directly on the living to enable him to anticipate and safeguard the future which he considers the primary concern of the writer" (Kolawole Ogungbesan, 175). This is very explicit in his published works. As a visionary writer, he exposes and satirizes the ills in society for a betterment of the future.

To an average reader of his literary works, Wole Soyinka is a literary giant but very difficult to understand. A casual reading of *The Interpreters* with its curious opening sentence and the organizational pattern of the novel underscores this point. Equally, plays like *A Dance of the Forests*, *Madmen and Specialists* and poems like "Purgatory" and "Death in the Dawn" appear puzzling and obscure from the perspectives of language and form. To accentuate this point, Mr Onigbinde of *Sunday Concord*, in reaction to Soyinka's Nobel Prize for Excellence in Literature notes, on February 23rd, 1992, that:

To an average literature student, the name of Wole Soyinka is only meaningful within the context of FRSC because the Nobel Laurete (sic) for literature does not exist in his learning (qtd in Adejare, v)

The Road (originally titled “The Road of Life”), one of Soyinka's most analysed plays, is not free of this claim of obscurantism. Several critics have reacted differently to the play. Eldred Jones concludes that Professor, the main character in this play, does not tell us the meaning of the “Word”. He is of the view that the play, like its main character, remains an enigma (77). Dan Izevbaye sees it as “one of Soyinka's most exciting plays, it is also a problem play”. (52)

One reason why *The Road* is associated with this obscure claim is the complexity of its structure. This arises as a result of the organization of the various units of the text. Though it affects understanding, it is used by the playwright to project the messages of the text as we shall see later.

In a bid to dissociate *The Road* from this obscure claim, some critics have been concerned with a metaphysical interpretation of the play and the enigmatic Professor and his quest for the “Word” as a clue to the ultimate understanding of the play and its message. This is obvious in Obi Maduakor's inclusion of the play among the five metaphysical plays in his discussion of the works of Wole Soyinka. Also, Steve Ogude has observed that quite a good number of critics have tended to see the “Word” as a key to the character of Professor and indeed the key to the ultimate meaning of *The Road*. (53) These approaches have yielded varied results. Yet none has looked at the aesthetics of the dramatic structure and its organizational patterns and how this is used to realize the message of the text.

In the analysis of the textual techniques used to realize meanings in *The Road*, we shall adopt Oluwole Adejare's approach in analysing Soyinka's texts. Adejare identifies textual technique as one of Soyinka's literary idiolects. Textual technique subsumes text structuring, text incorporation and descriptive pattern. In this paper however, we shall focus on text structuring which is concerned with the organization of the different units of a text. Such organizational pattern affects comprehension and can also be used by a writer to project the themes /messages of a text. Our concentration therefore is on the units of structure above the sentence level. The emphasis is on the structure of the text and its organizational strategy. This approach is appropriate as Soyinka handles various themes/subjects at every level of his writing through the techniques he employs.

The primary aim of this essay therefore is to make explicit the implicit dramatic techniques used by the playwright to organize the structure of the text. This has to do with examining the success of the play in view of what Dan Izevbaye calls “the union of theme and dramatic technique”. (52) This is what makes the play one of Soyinka's most interesting plays.

Text Structure

Text structure refers to the organization of the various units of a text. Structural analysis dispenses with criteria exterior to the text and focuses attention on the text as a construct whose model of functioning must be described (Josue Harari, 23). The structure of a text can be conventional (ordered) or unconventional (unordered).

The structure of most of Soyinka's works is unconventional. It does not follow a chronological order. In Part Two of *A Dance of the Forests*, Soyinka takes the reader back to centuries ago in the Court of Mata Kharibu. *The Lion and the Jewel*, with its simple structure, is not chronological. With its time frame of Morning, Noon and Night, episodes from the past are inserted in each of the three sections of the play. Equally, *The Interpreters* has an unconventional structure for a novel. Most of these works are often composed of episodes from different sources. In most cases, the episodes are not chronologically related. This brings about complexity.

The Structure of *The Road*

Structurally, *The Road* is complex in its organizational pattern. Through this strategy, the message of the play is projected. The play is divided into two parts with the Alagemo poem as a preface to Part One. This preface poem is important to the understanding of the play; but with its placement outside the two parts, readers tend to overlook its importance. The two parts of the play have no internal division into acts and scenes. Thus, it deviates from the traditional conception in which a play text is divided into acts and scenes. Instead, the actions move and blend from one episode to the other. With this, the structure of the play appears film-like. Thus, Soyinka rightly observes: "I first conceived it as a film. And I am still thinking of filming it" (qtd. in Ketu Katrak, 65). He shows bits of actions from within and outside the present scope of the play. This is done to portray fully the several messages of the play. The success of this film-like structure is achieved through the setting, plot, the use of flashback and pantomime as dramatic techniques.

Setting

The Road has only one setting. This single setting is made up of two sections: a road-side shack which houses the bar and the "AKSIDENT STORE", an upsided Mammy Wagon (Bolekaja) minus its wheels. The roadside shack has property like benches, empty beer cases, a table, a chair; motor spare parts like tires, hubs, twisted bumper, and at a corner, lies the spider's web. The other section is a corner of a church with a closed stained glass window with a cross surmounted steeple tapering out of sight. These two sides of the setting are

separated by a fence. This single setting provides a broad background for the actions of the play as the playwright manipulates the setting to realize the various meanings of the play.

In ordering the structure of the text, the actions of the play are made to take place on this single setting - both the flashback episodes and the present actions of the play. The setting is appropriate for these actions. However, since the actions are not unified, it makes the simple setting appear complex because the same stage props are manipulated for the performance of several roles. This may be clear in the theatre but as a text, it poses a problem of comprehension.

However, the setting helps to portray the themes of the play. The picture of the church that emerges in this setting is a combination of vanity (in the sense of preoccupation with externals and corruption (Jones, 71).). The juxtaposition of the church with the road-side shack which stands for the secular world portrays the secular inclination of the church. The fall of the church wall - "...the day the wall of Jericho fell down" (*The Road*, 163) - depicts the final preoccupation of the church with secularity. Rather than upholding the virtues of Christ, the bishop forbids it by not rebuilding the church wall. This, in a way, underscores the collapse of the church ethics in our society of today. The point made here is that the church is no more religious. It has become a "high society" (162) in the secular world. The visibility of the church on the stage is a constant reminder of Professor's days in the church. The first flashback scene which reveals this is triggered off by the sight of the opening of the church window and the sound of the church music. This is communicated to us through stage direction:

The Window of the Church is thrown open suddenly, revealing the lectern, a bronze eagle on whose outstretched wings rests a huge tome. Shortly afterwards music from the organ billows out towards the shack....(162).

The flashback which follows this reveals the theme of religious hypocrisy. Professor's sack from the church can be interpreted as a crossing of "the fence" which separates the two sides of the single setting, thus revealing two ways in which Professor seeks to understand the meaning of the "Word". This underscores religious hypocrisy and the involvement of church officials in the ordinary world of corruption and secularity. It depicts spiritual death.

Jones remarks that the stage is comprehensive because the roadside shack is a perfect set for a play whose characters and themes spring from the hazardous road (62). The Aksident Store with its stock of personnel and mechanical relics of numerous road accidents and

deaths is a grim reminder of the nearness of death to the pliers of the road. The theme of spiritual and physical death reflected by the graveyard inside the churchyard is suggestive of the fact that the church, a place for the renewal of life, is even dead. This is visible through the shack. Soyinka's setting thus offers a pictorial reminder of the various statements of the play.

The social meaning of the play is equally given appropriate emphasis in this setting: Professor performs his forgery there; it functions as a recruitment centre for political thugs to Chief-in-Town; it provides a hide-out for hemp smokers like Say Tokyo Kid and Particulars Joe, a corrupt police officer; and it is also a hide-out for the layabouts. Izevbaye summarizes the social and religious aspects of the setting thus:

The road, the corner of the church and an old mammy wagon used as the "Aksident Store" are not merely the physical setting but communicate through their usual everyday association with the religious and social dimensions of the play. (53)

The setting equally impairs understanding since it contributes to the complex structure of the play. This is because of the multiple and ununified actions that take place on this single setting.

Plot

The plot of a literary work refers to the arrangement of incidents in a cause and effect relationship. According to M. H. Abrams: The plot in a dramatic or narrative work is constituted by its events and actions, as these are rendered and ordered toward achieving particular artistic and emotional effect (233)

In *The Road*, what is easily comprehensible is that it consists of series of actions that are not ordered towards a particular effect. The text cannot be said to have a unified action. It is made up of series of actions that are not causally related. However, this is not to say that *The Road* is plotless. According to Izevbaye, "Professor's gift of words is effectively part of the plot, and is not merely a guide to his character".(6) Izevbaye goes further to say that Professor uses the "Quest" for the "Word" which he has not found the meaning at the opening of the play in shifting and frequently bewildering context (56). This is to say that Professor's quest for the meaning of the Word, even before the opening of the play (formerly in the church), serves as a unifying cord to all the episodes. This becomes clear in view of the fact that both the re-enacted acts and the present actions of the play are in one way or the other concerned with the quest. The re-enacted scene of Professor's days in the church shows how the Lectern bears the "Word". His taking Salubi to show him the fresh accident scene is the true path to the Word:

- Professor: Come then, I have a new wonder to show you... a madness
 where a motor- car throws itself against a tree....
- Samson: (*Suddenly alarmed*): Wait! What was that about an accident?
- Professor: Are you that ignorant to the true path to the Word. It is never an accident. (158:159)

Oyin Ogunba confirms the scattered episodes in the first part of the play and sees the incident where Murano is knocked down during the drivers' festival as the only episode that disjoins the unity of plot in the second part. To him, the flashback actions are part of a continuous action rather than a break in time. He concludes that all the scattered episodes in the first part begin to be gathered together in the second part and Professor and his bar become the centre of action. And by the time he begins to entertain his audience in his Sunday School manner of years ago, the unity of action has been fully realized. (150)

But one cannot say that *The Road* has a unified plot in the real sense of the word. The actions in a unified plot revolve around a single character with a cause-effect relationship. Abrams explains that a unity of plot should form an artistic whole and none of the component parts should be unnecessary. It is not a unified plot to present a series of episodes strung together because they happen to a single character (235). In *The Road*, the actions are not structured around a single character but more around the purposes and messages of the play. These actions are related not in terms of cause effect relationship but in terms of the purpose and messages. Soyinka unifies the divers messages rather than the actions. This affects the structure of the plot, hence the difficulty in understanding.

The plot structure of *The Road* can be described as episodic. The episodes move from one to the other without a chronological tie. The film-like technique enables Soyinka to bring in various episodes that clearly show his various themes to bear on the plot. For instance, in the first few pages of the play, we see Samson and Salubi waiting for Professor to forge a driving license for Salubi. Next, Samson acts the millionaire and Salubi re-enacts Professor's days in the church. With these early actions, Soyinka projects some messages of the play with a humorous and satirical thrust. These actions portray forgery, false claims, political thuggery, corruption and religious hypocrisy which are prevalent in society. It is the messages which order the structure of the plot rather than a particular emotional and artistic effect. The various

messages demand various episodes hence the picaresque technique which makes the text complex.

Flashback

Another major source of complexity in the ordering of Soyinka's text is the frequent use of flashback. This artistic device is richly explored in his novels, plays and even poetry. *The Interpreters*, for instance, opens with a group of friends called the interpreters in Club Cambana. Next, the narrative shifts from Club Cambana to Egbo and his friends' visit to Osa and further to Egbo's childhood visit to Osa. These last two episodes are re-enacted in the opening pages of the first chapter. Flashback episodes are equally inserted into the simple time frame of *The Lion and the Jewel*. And in "Idanre", the seven parts of the poem are not chronologically arranged. "The beginning" which is supposed to come first occurs as the fourth section. This makes "Deluge", "And after" and "Pilgrimage" flashbacks in terms of how the events occur.

Generally, Abrams defines flashback as:

an interpolated narrative or scenes (often justified as a memory, a revelry, or a confession of one of the characters) which represent events that have happened before the time at which the work opened. (236)

In the case of Wole Soyinka, he uses it with modification and this is responsible for the complexity of his works. Oluwole Adejare identifies two ways in which flashback techniques can be realized (120). First, through digression: this is when a writer stops the progress of his story at a point and goes back to pick up a different strand of the story; and second, a writer may choose to exploit the memory of a character to link the past with the present. The resultant structure blends the two into one. This he describes as mortised flashback. The general effect is to make narration as close as possible to reality. Wole Soyinka explores both ways in *The Road*. This results in its complexity because incidents from the past and present are juxtaposed. It also affords him an avenue to manipulate time past with time present in the play.

By the time the action of the play opens, several events have already taken place. Professor has already left the church on account of corruption and blasphemy. Kotonu, the driver of "No Danger, No Delay" and Samson have escaped an accident on the road the lorry which overtook them ran into a river. Sergeant Burma, who fought in the Burma Wars, a driver and later a salesman in the "Aksident Store" has died. Even the drivers' festival on which occasion Murano was knocked down has passed and Kokol'Ori, a truck pusher and father of Kotonu, has died in a road accident. All these incidents are re-enacted in the present. Since they are used to further the action of the play, they

appear like present performance rather than flashback events. Ironically, they appear more memorable than the fresh actions of the play. Some of these flashback incidents are worth recalling. For instance, the incident where Samson and Kotonu re-enact their escape from an accident:

Samson: Look out Kotonu! (*A violent screech of breaks*)
 Kotonu: It's all right, I've seen it.
 Samson: For God's sake be careful.
 Kotonu: You are wrong. This hole was never dug for me.
 Samson: Does this wretched bridge look choosy to you? Just be careful that's all.
 Kotonu: I tell you the hole was never dug for me. It isn't one mile since they overtook us remember?
 Samson: Get out of the rotten edge.
 Kotonu: (*Coming away.*) You fret too much. (196-197)
 or, how Professor's memory is explored to espouse his past atrocities in the church:
 it is, I think, likely that I left the church coffers much depleted.. but I remember nothing of this.
 or,

. . . I wished to retire into business. My pension would have sufficed but since I was sacked for blasphemy I was due for none. I forget how much it was, it is so difficult to remember details.... But still, this business of church funds addles my thoughts. (206)

The first example illustrates a case of an episode which is mortised into the on-going action while the last is a digression, (see Adejare, 120)

To achieve artistic success in the text ordering through the use of flashback, Soyinka employs "semantic ties" to mortise episodes (Adejare, 122). The episode in which Samson re-enacts Professor's past activities in the church is naturally recalled by the opening of the church window and the church music, thus a reminder of the church's concern with secular issues . Equally, the re- enactment of Sergeant Burma's past is mortised into the ongoing action through the discovery of Sergeant Burma's military uniform by Particulars Joe in the "Aksident Store". The church window and the music from the church and Sergeant Burma's military uniform are semantic ties which Soyinka uses to mortise past episodes into the present. This makes the flashback episodes blend unnoticed with the present episodes, thereby making it difficult for readers to identify when an action slips into the past and when it returns to the present. It is only the episode of the driver's festival that does not conform with this pattern. It appears to be forced into the structure of the text.

Despite the complexity occasioned by this use of flashback, Soyinka deftly handles it by using it to project themes that would have been outside the present scope of the work. The flashback on Professor's days in the church reveals the themes of blasphemy, hypocrisy and corruption. It also brings the themes of death by accidents on the road and the weakness of the Europeans through Sergeant Burma who fought in the Burma wars. By using flashback, Soyinka comments through Sergeant Burma that the whites are fallible and lack justice.

Through flashback, the theme of man's inhumanity and cannibalism is also revealed. The cannibalism of Sergeant Burma is a carry over from the white men (he fought in the Burma wars for four years and spent one year as a prisoner of war). Through his involvement in the war, Soyinka exposes and satirically condemns the universal practices of cannibalism. He sees the technological advancement of the whites who manufacture weapons that easily destroy human beings as promoting cannibalism. In a bid to test the efficacy of their weapons, they engage in fighting wars over nothing. Sergeant Burma sees himself as a salesman for the Aksident store, therefore, out of such a bloody war he sees nothing wrong in stripping accident victims and the crashed cars to furnish the store with goods. In an outright condemnation of wars, Soyinka states ironically and sarcastically that:

It is peaceful to fight a war which one does not understand, to kill human beings who never seduced your wife or poisoned your water. Sapele to Burma- that was a long way for a quarrel.(216)

The last sentence in the above quotation also condemns Africans' involvement in European wars. And to make Sergeant Burma's cannibalism and bestiality more vivid, Samson mimics him:

When persons die'e don die and dat one don finish. I beg if you see moto accident make you tell me. We sabbee good business ... sell spare parts and second -hand clothes.... Me wey I don see dead body to tey I no fit chop meat unless dem cook am to nonsense? (218)

The reward that Sergeant Burma gets from this war that turned him into a cannibal is dishonour. Through flashback, Soyinka reveals the theme of racial prejudice. The whites refuse to honour Sergeant Burma with the king George's medal because he is black. Even when the general says he should be given Victoria Cross, the colonial government in Africa refuses for fear of his becoming a "political agitator". This underscores the theme of injustice as he says "Haba! Justice no dey for white man world "(*The Road*, 217)

Pantomime

As noted above, the use of flashback in *The Road* appears interesting and more easily recalled. This is because of the playwright's presentation of the episodes through the use of pantomime. Pantomime refers to acting on the stage without speech, using only posture, gesture, bodily movement and facial expression (Abrams, 209). The play opens with a pantomime. Words are done away with. This opening scene dictates the mood of the play. In this opening scene, we see Kotonu, Samson and the layabouts sprawled on the floor while Salubi lies on two benches with Murano coiled under Professor's table. Murano wakes up and sets out to tap palm-wine. Samson makes several attempts to wake his colleagues but fails; he begins to poke the spider's web. This mime suggests an aspect of the play's message. It suggests the characters are idlers who are being exploited and used by a superior, the proprietor of the shack. Equally, their stillness and the spider's web suggest a metaphor for the road which lies and waits for its victims.

The language and dialogue of this play tell us only part of the story: visual items are necessary for a full understanding of the play's message. Although this is true for all dramatic pieces - visual items complement dramatic speech, but in *The Road*, that which is heard is challenged by that which is spoken (Izevbaye, 53). For instance, Murano, one of the characters in the play, is dumb. So, it is through mime that we realize his role in *The Road*. This is why Izevbaye further describes *The Road* as "a dramatization of the limits of language" (53). This frequent use of mime is probably one of the reasons why it poses a problem of comprehension.

In this use of mime two characters are important: Murano and Samson. Murano is used by Soyinka to express his own view about the essence of death. As revealed by the flashback scene of the drivers' festival, Murano is knocked down by Kotonu's lorry. In an introductory note to the producer, Soyinka tells us that he functions as an arrest of time or death. Thus he is closer to death as Professor reveals:

When a man has one leg in each world, his legs are never the same. The big toe of Murano's foot- the left one of course - rests on the slumbering chrysalis of the Word... (187)

Murano's muteness communicates the impossibility of expressing any knowledge he might have gained by his nearness to death. His experiences cannot be projected through any human medium. This makes him inaccessible to the living (Katrak, 70). Although Professor prides himself in "waiting till his tongue be released (desperately) in patience and in confidence" (223), Soyinka flaws his quest (and all human quests) for the essence of death through Murano's muteness.

Of importance too is the mimicry of Samson. According to Jones:

It is through the mimicry of Samson that the play slips out of the present and extends its range with personalities and scenes from the past as well as the contemporary outside the actual events of the play. (61)

Samson's mime appears humorous but through him Soyinka satirizes aspects of society. Of importance is his miming of Professor's days in the church. Through this, Soyinka attacks blasphemy, the hypocrisy and corruption in the church. The church has become a "high society". In the words of Jones again, "the picture of the church that emerges through Salubi's mimicry is a combination of vanity in the sense of a preoccupation with externals and corruption".(61) Through their mimicry of a peculiar African millionaire, Soyinka achieves a satirical humorous effect and condemns the attitude of most African millionaires.

Finally, Samson's mimicry of Sergeant Burma is worth quoting. Through this, Soyinka tells us an exaggerated story of the Africans during the white men's wars. It reveals the vanity of Sergeant Burma and his empty boast:

(gives a quick act of polish to the medals... Assumes full military bearing.)

They wan' give me the King George Cross self, but you know how things be for Blackman. My Major recommend me for the decoration but dey begin ask how dem go give Blackman dat kind honour? Another time the general send cable gram wit' im own hand. 'E say, gi'am Victoria Cross. Dey for give me dat one but when the governor for home hear wetin dem wan' do, 'e cable back say if den give me dat kind superior medal I go return my country begin do political agitator. Haba! Justice no dey for White man world. (216- 217)

These and other cases of mimed episodes are used by Wole Soyinka to achieve various effects and they equally contribute to the complexity of the play's structure. This is because the flashback scenes are mimed by the characters in the play. Thus, characters like Samson and Salubi play dual roles in the text.

Conclusion

So far, it has been observed that *The Road* has a complex structure. This complex structure is occasioned by the dramatic technique used by the playwright. The single setting, the ununified plot, the digressions and mortised flashbacks are techniques through which Soyinka "films" different aspects of the corrupt society which he creates in the play. The use of pantomime makes the actions visual and

more memorable. These dramatic techniques allow Soyinka to dispense with story elements in the text and so, no unified plot. He relies on the juxtaposition of incidents from the past and the present through the use of flashback. These may be aesthetically satisfactory to the writer and discerning readers but it creates a problem as there is no clear indication as to when an action slips into the past and comes back to the present. This lack of inter-textual boundaries requires the reader's creative and interpretative responses to arrive at the various messages and themes of the play which are projected through the complex structure. Although *The Road* is difficult due to its complex structure, it is through this complex structure that the playwright makes his statements of meaning.

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