

STYLISTICS PORTRAYAL OF DEATH IN SELECTED IGBO POEMS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study hinges on the stylistics portrayal of death in selected Igbo poems. Death is an enigmatic concept among the Igbo people. Thus, the concept of death takes on a multifaceted significance, permeating various aspects of Igbo life including their literature. The concept of death finds expression and diverse manifestations within Igbo poetic verses. This study, therefore, examined stylistic devices employed by the following Igbo poets-Obienyem, J. C.; Nzeako, J. U. T.; and Ajaegbu, J. W. to portray and represent death. The study employed Formalism literary criticism theory which emerged in the 1920s and 1930s primarily from the work of Jakobson, Eichenbaun, and Shklovsky, to analyze the texts. The research, as a qualitative paradigm adopted a descriptive approach to analyze the stylistics elements and language choices used by the poets. The findings of the study revealed the use of rhetorical devices, imagery, and symbolism to convey the theme of mortality. The analysis highlights the poets' adept use of personification, metaphor, and allegory to evoke emotions and provoke thought on the human condition. Varied perspectives on death were identified including the use of Christian imagery which highlights the notions of Heaven, Hell, Saints, and God's role in the process of death as prevalent among Christian-oriented Igbo. The study underscores the cultural significance of these poems in reflecting Igbo beliefs and attitudes towards death. This study contributes to a fuller understanding of Igbo literature, and the complexities of human mortality.

Keywords: Death, style, stylistics, Igbo culture, poetry

1. Introduction

Among the myriad aspects of Igbo culture, death occupies a prominent position. In Igbo cosmology, death is not merely perceived as an end but as a transition from one realm to another, and inevitable phase in the cyclical continuum of existence. Death is believed to mark the soul's journey to the land of ancestors, where the departed continue to influence the living, bridging the chasm between the mortal and the spiritual realms (Ephirim-Donkor, 2021). Death is an enigmatic concept among the Igbo people. As such, the concept of death takes on a multifaceted significance, permeating various aspects of Igbo life, including their literature. The concept of death finds diverse manifestations within Igbo poetic verses. While the Igbo tribe collectively endorses the significance of death in their culture, there is no homogeneity in the portrayal of death in Igbo poetry. Each poet might approach the subject differently, incorporating unique stylistics elements that express their personal understanding and cultural background.

This paper examined stylistics devices employed by Igbo poets to portray and represent death. It sheds light on how cultural background and religious perceptions portray of death, highlighting different perspectives on the enigmatic concept, death among the Igbo. In Igbo poetry, death is a recurring theme that has been explored by various studies (Uzukwu, 2012). Despite its abhorred nature among mortals, studies have delved into the subject of death, and how the Igbo tribe, in particular, endorse the unsavory and harrowing impact of death in their culture including in naming (Onukawa, 2016). However, there is a lack of comprehensive research that analyzes the stylistics elements employed by different Igbo poets to portray death in their works. Death holds immense cultural significance in Igbo society, and poems are influential

tools in shaping cultural beliefs and perceptions. The stylistics choices made by the poets might reflect and influence the broader cultural understanding of death and its role in life. Therefore, exploring these stylistics elements is crucial to comprehending the cultural implications embedded in the poems, and contribute to a fuller understanding of perspectives on death.

The paper hinges on the concept of Literary criticism to account for how stylistics elements such as imagery, symbolism, language use, and poetic devices uncover layers of meaning, as well as underlying themes, motifs, and narrative frameworks of the poetry. The study reports on a stylistic analysis of three purposively selected poems which have death as their central theme. They include "*Onwu*" by J.C. Obienyem, "*Onwu*" by J.U.T. Nzeako, and "*Onwu*" by C.W. Ajaegbu. Igbo literature, as a reflection of their cultural ethos, mirrors the deep-rooted beliefs surrounding death. Poetry, in particular, emerges as a powerful medium through which Igbo poets articulate their emotions, philosophies, and reflections on mortality. The three poems in *Akpa Uche*, stand as exemplars of this artistic endeavor. Through these poems, the study provides a glimpse into the portrayal of the complexities of death, as perceived through the eyes of the Igbo poet.

The paper begins with a brief discussion of Igbo poetry and its cultural implications, stylistics elements and the theory of literary criticism. This is followed by a contextualization of the study, which highlights previous studies, then the study objectives and methodology. Then, an analysis of the three poems is presented and discussed, highlighting the stylistics devices employed by the poets to portray death, and different shades or perspectives on the concept of death which are embedded in the poem.

Igbo poetry

Igbo poetry stands as a testament to the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, originating from the vibrant oral tradition that has permeated Igbo society for centuries. It encompasses a diverse range of forms and genres, each with its own unique stylistics characteristics and thematic concerns. At its core, Igbo poetry is deeply rooted in the oral traditions of the Igbo people, with skilled poets, known as "*udedede*" delivering verses accompanied by rhythmic chants and musical elements during communal gatherings and ceremonies. These poetic performances serve not only as entertainment but also as educational tools, engaging the community in a shared experience of cultural heritage (Isichei, 1976).

Among the various forms of Igbo poetry are chants, dirges, praise poetry, and narrative poems, each serving different purposes within the cultural and social contexts of the Igbo community. Chants are often used in rituals and ceremonies to invoke ancestral spirits or seek blessings from the gods, while dirges serve as poignant expressions of grief during funeral ceremonies (Nnamani, 2019; Echema, 2010). Praise poetry, on the other hand, celebrates individuals, families, or deities, highlighting their virtues and contributions to the community (Ndubisi et al., 2019). Narrative poems, meanwhile, recount myths, legends, and historical accounts, offering insights into the cultural identity and worldview of the Igbo people (Afigbo, 1981). Themes commonly explored in Igbo poetry reflect the cultural values, beliefs, and experiences of the Igbo people. These themes include cultural identity, communal values, spirituality, and the cyclical nature of life and death. Through poetry, the Igbo people articulate their sense of belonging, solidarity, and resilience in the face of adversity, reinforcing the bonds that unite them as a community (Okoye & Okoye-Ugwu, 2021).

Igbo poetry remains a vital repository of historical accounts, myths, and legends within Igbo culture. Through poetic performances, history is preserved and transmitted across generations, ensuring that cultural narratives remain alive and relevant (Afigbo, 1981). Poetry also serves as a conduit for passing down cultural knowledge, wisdom, and values from one generation to the next.

Stylistics elements or devices

Stylistics device is a structure used in language to create impact. There are many different literary devices to choose from, and each one can be used to create a different effect. When used properly, stylistics devices

help readers and listeners to appreciate, interpret and remember words. You might have used literary devices in your writing many times without realizing it. However, being able to use them purposely means being able to consciously control how the writing is likely to be received. The term stylistics device is used to describe figures of speech that involve non-literal language. For example, metaphor and simile. Therefore, a stylistics device can be used in the role of either a rhetorical device if it's used to convince, or a literary device if it's used to express something.

According to Echema, (2010), stylistics devices have a profound impact on the quality of writing. They create a sense of uniqueness and individuality, allowing writers to craft their own distinct voice. By employing these devices effectively, writers can evoke emotions, create memorable characters, and transport readers to vivid and captivating worlds. Stylistics devices, also known as figures of speech or literary devices, hold a significant role in adding depth, meaning, and artistic quality to pieces of literature. They are the colors that paint the canvas of prose, poetry, drama, and non-fiction, enhancing the vibrancy of the work and engaging the reader's senses. Some of the stylistics devices writers use every single day include simile, metaphor, hyperbole, personification, irony, alliteration, assonance and onomatopoeia. Others are oxymoron and euphemism, as well as imagery. A simile is a direct comparison using 'like' or 'as.' For example, "Her smile is as bright as the sun." A metaphor is an indirect comparison, stating one thing is another. For instance, "Time is a thief, stealing precious moments." A hyperbole is an exaggeration used for emphasis. Like saying, "I've told you a million times." Personification is a literary device that attributes human characteristics to non-human entities. As in, "The wind whispered secrets in my ear." Irony conveys a meaning opposite to the literal one. Such as, "It's raining on my wedding day, how ironic." While Alliteration is the repetition of initial consonant sounds. Like, "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers", Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds. For example, "The fat cat sat on the mat." A euphemism substitutes a mild or indirect expression for something unpleasant or harsh. For instance, "He passed away" instead of "He died".

Other aspects of stylistics elements include imagery, symbolism, rhythm, and language use. They are used to convey meaning, evoke emotions, and engage audiences. Imagery and symbolism are often used to evoke vivid sensory experiences and evoke emotional responses from listeners. Rhythm, through the use of repetitive patterns and musical elements, enhances the poetic flow and captivates the audience's attention. Language use adds depth and complexity to the poetic language, enriching the overall aesthetic appeal. Overall, stylistics elements contribute to aesthetic appeal and emotional impact, enhancing effectiveness as a means of cultural expression and communication. Through the skillful manipulation of these stylistics elements, writers create immersive and evocative poetic experiences that resonate deeply with their audiences.

2. Formalism literary criticism theory

Formalism literary criticism theory emerged primarily from the work of Roman Jakobson, Boris Eichenbaum, and Viktor Shklovsky. It arose in the 1920s and 1930s, and gained grounds in literary expression as the years go by. Formalism literary criticism theory offers an approach for analyzing poetry, which provides unique insights into the formal elements, narrative structures, and thematic concerns of the poetry (Kaelin, 1964). *The sub-theory of literary criticism was influenced by the theory of language proposed by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure.* Formalist approach focuses on the aesthetic qualities of the text, examining elements such as imagery, symbolism, language use, and poetic devices to uncover layers of meaning and aesthetic techniques employed by the poet. (Ekwueme, 1973).

Further espousing the theory, Al Batir (2020) states that formalism looks at the form of the text. Formalist doesn't search inside texts for ideas from the outside world or about the authors themselves. It focuses on the "literariness" of text. The writer further held that Formalism focuses on:

- Style (language, figures of speech, diction, sentence structure, rhetorical devices).

- Literary devices and techniques
- Imagery and their types
- Symbolism
- Themes and motifs

The theory is used to analyze the text, logo centric, language words ideas, and how the idea forms the text. It assumes that the meaning of work, what the work says could be understood through the devices deployed, highlighting that literature focuses on the message rather than on the reader. It focuses on text as formal work of art. It ignored the text's historical, biographical and cultural context, and content. We therefore draw on the theory to account for how poets portray the concept of death in Igbo with a focus on the stylistics devices they deploy.

3. Contextualizing the study

In Igbo poetry, death is a recurring theme that has been explored by various studies (Uzukwu, 2012, Ephirim-Donkor, 2021). There is a scarcity of research that provides a thorough exploration of the stylistics techniques used by Igbo poets to portray death in their poems. Existing studies have tended to touch upon the theme of death in Igbo literature (Ebo, 2019, Okide, 2020), but they do not delve into the specific poetic devices and language choices employed by individual poets in conveying their perspectives on death.

Also, previous studies have tended to incorporate unique stylistics elements that express their personal understanding and cultural background about a variety of themes in poems (Adetuyi, 2017, Okide, 2020, Udechukwu, 2021), and there has been no discussion in this direction on the subject of death. This study seeks to uncover the diverse ways death is perceived and represented in poems.

By addressing these research gaps, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how death is stylistically presented in Igbo poetry and shed light on its cultural and literary implications. Moreover, this research will contribute to the field of Igbo literary studies and open avenues for further exploration of other themes and motifs in Igbo literature.

4. Research objectives and methodology

The study seeks to achieve the following specific objectives:

- To explore the various ways death is perceived and portrayed in Igbo poetry.
- To conduct a stylistics analysis of three selected poems on *Ọnwụ* by different Igbo poets.

To achieve these objectives, the study employed a qualitative approach to analyze the stylistics elements and language choices used by Obienyem, Nzeako, and Ajaegbu in their *Onwu* poems. The choice of these poems is informed by the fact that they have death as their central themes, and their authors are of diverse backgrounds and persuasions. The primary goal is to understand the unique perspectives of each poet on the theme of death and identify similarities and differences among their works. The selected poems were translated into English to ensure accessibility to a broader audience and gather contextual information about each poet and their cultural background. The data analysis process involved identifying stylistics elements, conducting a comparative analysis to identify similarities and differences, and interpreting the findings in the context of Igbo culture and literary traditions.

5. Stylistics Analysis of Poem 1: “*Ọnwụ*” by J.C. Obienyem

5.1.1 Theme

In the poem "Ọnwụ" by Obienyem, the theme of death is explored as an impartial and indiscriminate killer. In the first stanza, death is depicted as pervasive and infinite.

Stanza 1:

Translation:

<i>O nweghi onye no n'akuku</i>	There is no one in a corner
<i>Ebe i naghị agaru.</i>	Where you do not reach?
<i>Ma o bu maara omaraire</i>	Or knows a cure
<i>Nke nwere ike igbote gi.</i>	That can prevent you.

Throughout the five stanzas, the poet skillfully presents death as an omnipresent force that reaches every corner of the world and spares no one. The poet employs various stylistic devices to depict death's pervasive nature and its lack of consideration for age, status, or appearance.

5.1.2 Personification

One of the primary stylistic elements used by Obienyem is personification, where death is depicted as a person with intent and agency. In the opening stanza, death is referred to as “*O nweghi onye no n'akuku*,” which translates to “There is no one in a corner”. The use of the personal pronoun “O” and the second person pronoun “gi” to refer to death, attributes human characteristics to it. The word “*akuku*” (corner) is used metaphorically to emphasize death's ability to transcend even the remotest corners of the earth, making it impossible for anyone to escape its reach.

5.1.3 Hyperbolic Imagery

The poet employs hyperbolic imagery to emphasize death's ubiquity.

Stanza 2:

<i>O nwere ala ebe i korọ ukọ?</i>	Is there a land where you are scarce?
<i>Nnụnụ nke Igwe agbanapughị</i>	Birds of the air cannot escape
<i>Ihe gakwudoro kpakpari nwa Okpongu</i>	Something that confronted the shrew
<i>N'ime onụnụ ala.</i>	Inside the hole in the ground

Translation:

In stanza 2, the poet asks, “*O nwere ala ebe i korọ ukọ?*” which translates to “Is there a land where you are scarce?” This rhetorical question serves to underscore death's omnipresence, asserting that there is no place where death is absent. The poet further illustrates this point by using the examples of birds in the sky and the shrew in the ground. Death's invasion of these two distinct realms demonstrates its disregard for natural boundaries and species.

5.1.4 Rhetorical Questions

Obienyem employs rhetorical questions strategically throughout the poem to emphasize the injustice and tragedy caused by death.

Stanza 4:

<i>Ọburu na o di ihe ozọ ka onwu,</i>	Death,	If there is something worse than
<i>Gini mere ka ajadu nwua n'okporo,</i>		Why should a widow die on the way,
<i>Mgbe o nara aga ibute ozu out nwa o mutara?</i>	Corpse of her only child	When she was going to carry the
<i>Asi m, gini mere Onwu ihapu okenye ruchere nku</i>		I said, why should death leave an
		Old person who grew wings
<i>Gbue nwa ya bu nwa nta?</i>		And kill the child that is young

Translation:

In stanza 4, the poet laments the death of a widow who lost her only child and questions, “*Ọburu na o di ihe ozọ ka onwu?*” (If there is something worse than death?). The question highlights the profound impact of losing a child, which goes against the natural order of parents outliving their offspring. The poet also questions why an elderly parent must witness the death of their child, accentuating the emotional turmoil caused by death's indiscriminate actions.

5.1.5 Symbolism and Metaphor

The poet employs symbolism and metaphor to convey the universal nature of death's victims.

Stanza 5:

Onwu, olee ebe mma gi di?
Onwu, I zoro ube gi ebee?

Translation:

Death, where is your cutlass?
 Death, where did you hide your spear?

In stanza 5, the poet lists men and women, rich and poor, as among death's victims, symbolizing that death does not discriminate based on social status. Death is portrayed as a warrior with a cutlass and spear, using these instruments to carry out its deadly operations. However, the poet questions the whereabouts of these weapons, hinting at death's intangible and elusive nature.

5.1.6 Cultural Significance

The poem delves into the cultural significance of death in Igbo society. Through the exploration of death's indiscriminate nature, the poet reflects on the communal understanding of death as an inevitable and impartial force. The personification of death may serve as a coping mechanism to comprehend the incomprehensible and find meaning in the face of loss and tragedy.

5.2 Stylistic Analysis of Poem 2: "Onwu" by J.U.T. Nzeako**5.2.1 Theme**

The theme of the poem "Onwu" by Nzeako is the contemplation and exploration of death. The poet delves into the nature, features, and dispositions of death through a series of rhetorical questions, personification, and Christian imagery. The poem reflects on death's ubiquity, its power, its selectivity, and its impact on humanity. It contemplates the purpose and existence of death, highlighting its complex and inevitable role in human life. Throughout the poem, the poet grapples with the concept of death from both a philosophical and religious perspective. He raises questions about the reasons behind death's creation and its role as an antagonist to humanity. The poet uses personification to give death human-like attributes, making it appear as a formidable and relentless force.

Furthermore, the poem brings in Christian imagery and perspectives, introducing the notions of Heaven, Hell, Saints, and God's role in the process of death. The poet acknowledges death's role in controlling world population and food supply, thereby presenting it in a pragmatic light. Ultimately, the theme of the poem centers on the existential and metaphysical contemplation of death. It offers a complex portrayal of death's significance and its implications for human existence, morality, and the afterlife.

5.2.2 Rhetorical Questions and Personification

In stanzas 2-4, the poet uses a series of rhetorical questions to directly address death, expressing his profound curiosity and fascination with its enigmatic nature. By posing these questions, the poet engages the reader in a thought-provoking exploration of death as a universal and complex phenomenon. The rhetorical style serves to underline the poet's emotional engagement with the theme, evoking a sense of wonder and contemplation.

Example from Stanza 2:

Olee ihe kere onwu n' uwa,
Mee ya onye iro mmadu niile?
Ma, mee ya o dighi atu egwu,
Igaa n' igwe mmadu gbuo mmadu?

Translation:

What created death in the world,
 And made it an enemy to all humans?
 And, made it fearless,
 To go to a crowd and kill someone?

Furthermore, the use of personification in describing death as a created being adds a layer of anthropomorphic qualities to the concept of death. This personification allows the poet to portray death as a formidable character with distinct attributes, such as fearlessness, memory, sight, and mobility. By attributing human-like traits to death, the poet humanizes the abstract concept of mortality, making it more relatable and accessible to the reader.

The poet's decision to directly question death emphasizes his desire to understand the reasons and motivations behind death's existence and actions. The questions about death's purpose and potency reflect the poet's grappling with the existential mystery of human mortality and the profound implications it holds for life and society. Through this stylistic approach, the poet invites the reader to ponder the nature of life and death, leading to a deeper contemplation of the human condition.

5.2.3 Imagery and Allusion

The infusion of Christian imagery and allusion in stanza 8 introduces a religious dimension to the poem and offers insights into the poet's perspective on death and the afterlife. By referencing Heaven and God, the poet aligns death with Christian beliefs and notions of the divine order. This inclusion of religious elements highlights the poet's understanding of death within the context of his Christian worldview.

Example from Stanza 8:

*Elegħi anya ike gi malitere n'igwe,
N'ebe ina-aruru Chineke oru.
N'ihina ina-akpolara ya ndi nso,
Ma ndi mmehie na-agana oku (ala) mmufo.*

Translation:

Probably, your power began in Heaven,
Where you work for God
Because you send His Saints home,
But sinners will go to Hellfire.

The mention of Heaven as the final resting place of the righteous and hellfire as the destination for sinners reflects the belief in the Christian doctrine of judgment and the concept of an afterlife. In doing so, the poet introduces a moral dimension to death, suggesting that it is not merely an end but a transition to a spiritual realm where the deeds of one's earthly life have consequences.

This Christian imagery also underscores the theme of judgment and accountability, as death becomes a means through which individuals are held accountable for their actions in life. It reinforces the idea that death is not an arbitrary force but a manifestation of divine justice, providing a framework for understanding the complexities of human existence and the consequences of moral choices.

5.3.4 Imagery and Symbolism

Throughout the poem, the poet employs vivid imagery and symbolism to convey the theme of death and its impact on human existence. Imagery is used to create sensory experiences and evoke emotions, while symbolism adds layers of meaning to the portrayal of death.

Example from Stanza 9:

Olee ihe mere na i dighi aku aka , Why is it that you do not knock,
Mgbe i na-aga igbu mmadu n'ala ya? When you go to kill a man in his land?

Translation:

The symbolism of death not knocking on a person's door before taking their life represents the suddenness and inevitability of death. The door, symbolizing the boundary between life and death, serves as a metaphor for the uncertainty of human existence. The lack of warning or opportunity to resist death's intrusion underscores the poet's reflection on the vulnerability of human life and the transient nature of mortality.

Likewise, the poet's choice to depict death as a "created being" with extraordinary powers adds depth to the portrayal of death. The idea of death being a super human figure endowed with fearsome qualities resonates with the poet's view of death as a formidable and inevitable force in human life. This symbolism reinforces the sense of powerlessness and awe that death evokes, further intensifying the thematic exploration of mortality and its impact on the human psyche.

5.3.5 Repetition

In stanza 11, the poet utilizes repetition to emphasize the universality and inevitability of death. By repeating the phrase "*Death is what awaits all people*", the poet underscores the fundamental truth that

death is an inescapable aspect of the human experience. This repetition serves as a poetic device to drive home the central theme of the poem and leaves a lasting impression on the reader.

Stanza 11:

Ọnwụ bụ ihe na-eche mmadụ niile, Death is what awaits all people,
Ọnwụ bụ ihe na-eche mmadụ niile, Death is what awaits all people,
Ọnwụ bụ ihe na-eche mmadụ niile. Death is what awaits all people.

Translation:

The use of repetition in this context also evokes a sense of solemnity and solemn acceptance of the inevitability of death. It invites the reader to contemplate the transience of life and the impermanence of all living beings, fostering a sense of introspection and reflection on the significance of mortality. The repeated phrase also acts as a refrain, anchoring the poem's thematic exploration and providing a cohesive structure that guides the reader through the poet's reflections on death. This repetition serves as a narrative thread, tying the stanzas together and unifying the poem's overarching message, contributing to its overall aesthetic and artistic coherence.

5.3.6 Contrast and Irony

In stanza 12, the poet uses contrast and irony to praise death for its role in reminding people of the importance of fear. The contrast lies in the praise given to death for instilling fear, which is then connected to the fear of God as a positive attribute.

Stanza 12:

Otuto dịrị onwụ, nke na-echetara mmadụ, Praise be to death, for reminding people,
Ma na ọ dị mma ka mmadụ na-atụ egwu. That it is good for people to fear.

Translation:

This ironic praise of death for promoting fear as a virtue echoes the theme of the poem, emphasizing the poet's perspective on death as a catalyst for moral reflection and spiritual awareness.

5.4 Stylistics Analysis of Poem 3: "Ọnwụ" by C.W. Ajaegbu

5.4.1 Theme

The theme of Ajaegbu's poem "Ọnwụ" revolves around the profound and enigmatic nature of death. The poet contemplates the various attributes of death and its impact on human existence. Through the use of rhetorical questions, vivid imagery, and allegorical representations, the poem explores death's inexorable and impartial nature, portraying it as a mysterious and formidable force that operates beyond human understanding and control.

The poem's theme delves into the universal human experience of mortality and the existential questions it raises. It highlights the suddenness and unpredictability of death, likening it to a thief who snatches lives without warning. The theme also touches upon the idea of death as an appointed fate, beyond human manipulation or negotiation. Additionally, the poem contemplates death as a debt owed by all, emphasizing that death spares no one and treats all individuals equally, regardless of their status or achievements in life. Ultimately, the theme of the poem prompts readers to confront their own mortality and the impermanence of life. It evokes a sense of awe, wonder, and contemplation about the mysteries of death, inviting readers to reflect on the transient nature of human existence and the enigma of what lies beyond life.

5.4.2 Rhetorical Questions and Extended Metaphor

In the first stanza, Ajaegbu employs a series of rhetorical questions to directly interrogate the nature of death. The use of rhetorical questions adds to the poem's enigmatic tone and reflects the poet's contemplation of death as a profound and mysterious phenomenon. By questioning death's nature, the poet conveys his sense of wonder and awe in the face of mortality, inviting the reader to join him in pondering the complexities of life's ultimate end.

Stanza 1:

*Onwụ! Olee ebe ị dị?
 Ị dị ka onye ọrụ ubi,
 Nke na-adighi eche ọka ya ka ọ chaa,
 Tupu ọ ghọrọ.*

Translation:

Death! Where are you?
 You are like a farmer,
 Who does not wait for his corn to ripe,
 Before he harvest

Also, Ajaegbu employs an extended metaphor by likening death to a farmer who harvests unripe crops. This metaphor serves to vividly illustrate the premature nature of death and its impact on human potential. The comparison between an unripe crop and lives cut short before fulfillment creates a powerful and poignant image, evoking emotions of loss and lamentation.

5.4.3 Imagery

In the second stanza, Ajaegbu employs vivid imagery to liken death to a thief:

Stanza 2:

*Onwụ! Ebee ka ị bi
 Nna m ji egbe achọ gị;
 Nne m ji aka odo etu gị;
 Ma ha ahughị gị.*

Translation:

Death! Where do you live?
 My father is looking for you with a gun;
 My mother is looking for you with a pestle;
 But they did not see you.

This imagery conveys the idea that death operates stealthily and unexpectedly, snatching lives without warning. By describing death as a thief who comes unnoticed and escapes without detection, the poet captures the suddenness and unpredictability of mortality.

The imagery of the father and mother searching for death with a gun and a pestle respectively highlights the futile nature of human efforts to confront and resist death. The use of physical weapons against an intangible and metaphysical entity underscores the powerlessness of humanity in the face of death's inevitability.

5.4.4 Personification and Allegorical Representation

In the third stanza, Ajaegbu employs personification to characterize death as a creditor whose debt cannot be redeemed:

Stanza 3:

*Onwụ! Gịnị ka ị bụ?
 Ugwo gị enweghị ọsịsa;
 Agbo gị enweghị nyigharị;
 Onye ị kpọrọ oku ga-azarịrị.*

Translation:

Death! What are you?
 Your debt cannot be redeemed;
 Your appointment cannot be postponed;
 Anyone you beckon on must answer.

The allegorical representation of death as a creditor conveys the idea that death is an entity with its own agency, acting independently of human will or intervention. The personification of death as a creditor suggests that death is a relentless and relentless force, to which all mortals are beholden.

5.4.5 Indifference of Death

In the concluding stanza, Ajaegbu explores the indifference of death to the status and worth of individuals:

*Ị maghị onye ukwu, You don't reckon with the high and mighty,
 Ị maghị onye nta. You don't reckon with the lowly.*

This sentiment echoes the previous poems, where death is portrayed as a leveler that treats all individuals equally, regardless of their societal standing or accomplishments. The poet's lamentation that death should have regard for some persons reflects the universal desire for preferential treatment and exemption from death's grasp. However, the poet ultimately conveys the inevitability of death and the fact that all individuals, regardless of their station in life, are subject to its decree.

Summary and conclusion

Through a meticulous stylistic analysis of the three Igbo poems, “Onwụ” by J.C. Obienyem, “Onwụ” by J.U.T. Nzeako, and “Onwụ” by C.W. Ajaegbu, we have unraveled the complex portrayal of death in Igbo poetry. The analysis revealed the poets' adept use of rhetorical questions, vivid imagery, personification, and extended metaphors to explore the enigmatic nature of death and its profound impact on human existence. In Obienyem's poem, death is depicted as an enigmatic traveler, journeying from town to town, evoking a sense of fear and uncertainty. The use of personification and vivid imagery creates a haunting portrayal of death as an omnipresent and unstoppable force, preying on humanity regardless of age or status. In Nzeako's poem, death is personified as a fearless killer, a being with no regard for human life, and an entity with unyielding strength. The rhetorical questions and personification used by Nzeako emphasize the mysterious and powerful nature of death, raising questions about its creation and purpose in the world. In Ajaegbu's poem, death is likened to a farmer who harvests unripe crops, a thief who operates stealthily, and a creditor whose debt cannot be redeemed. Ajaegbu's masterful use of imagery and extended metaphors highlights the premature and unpredictable nature of death, as well as its impartiality and inevitability.

The stylistic analysis of the three Igbo poems on death has provided deep insights into the portrayal of mortality in Igbo literature. The poets' use of rhetorical devices, imagery, and personification has created powerful and evocative representations of death, capturing the universal human experience of grappling with mortality. Death, as depicted in these poems, is not merely a biological event but a profound existential and cultural phenomenon. The poems reflect the Igbo people's complex beliefs and attitudes towards death, ranging from fear and awe to acceptance and resignation. The poets' skillful use of stylistic elements amplifies the emotional impact of their works, evoking empathy and contemplation in the readers.

Furthermore, the poems' focus on death as an impartial force that treats all individuals equally reflects the Igbo worldview, where death is seen as a universal debt that all must pay. The poets' exploration of death's attributes and mysteries reflects their deep engagement with cultural and philosophical themes, making these poems a valuable contribution to the corpus of Igbo literature.

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