
Module for Bachelor of Education Programme (Primary and JHS)

EBS121SW: STUDIES IN AFRICAN POETRY

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UNIT 1: INTRODUCTION TO AFRICAN POETRY

In this Unit, we shall discuss the various aspects of African Poetry. We shall consider some definitions of African Poetry and proceed to explain oral and written poetry, categorisation of African poetry and factors characterising African poetry. You will also be introduced the various elements and imagery as well as the sources of African poetry.

Learning outcome(s)

By the end of the unit, the participant will be able to:

- Explain African poetry in his/her own words.
- Distinguish between oral and written poetry.
- Identify and discuss the various categorisation of African poetry.
- Explain to their pupils the various elements and imagery in African poetry.

SESSION 1: WHAT IS AFRICAN POETRY?

This session shall open up to you what the general concept of poetry is and delve into how African poetry as influenced by our social, historical, cultural and political experiences. The session also examines features that make the African poetry truly African. Lastly, we shall examine features that make the African poetry truly African.

Learning outcomes

By the end of the session, the participant will be able to:

1. Explain the terms “Literature” “African poetry”, and “oral and written African poetry”;
2. Discuss the forms and features of African poetry.
3. Argue that the African novel is truly African in character in spite of the fact that it is written largely in non-African languages.

Definition of Literature

We will commence our discussion with explanations on basic terms such as “Literature”, “African poetry”, and “performance” which are key concepts of the unit.

Generally, the term literature is perceived as reflecting life in that it is a piece of literary work which projects its author and its background, and its society. Literature is an imaginative verbal (oral and written) composition that demonstrates a good sense of artistry. This composition, since it is created by an author, it will reflect the author’s experiences of life. It will also reflect the society the author is familiar with or he/she intends to create in the story. An author can create a literary piece about a familiar society or imagine one, as well as its humans (characters). So basically, literature is considered as imaginative creativity using language. Do you think it is possible to read about real

character in literature? YES. These are types of literature we call autobiographical or biographical literatures. What do you think these are? Think about them. We shall revisit these terms later.

Definition of African poetry

We are examining the African poetry but let us first look at ‘Africa’ and then we put the two together to make meaning. Why do you think the sub-heading is labelled African poetry? We have said that literature reflects societies i.e. the background of the author, the society about which the author is composing the story or the society the author creates in the story. All these reflect the experiences of the people from which the author emerges. From this we can describe a literary work as African if its content reflects African experiences. Can we then say that a piece of literature can be described as American, Asian or European? Can we describe a poem as Ghanaian, Mfantse, Nigerian, Igbo etc? What reason(s) will account for this? Write down your views.

Poetry as a genre has a long tradition; from the perspective where it refers to the use of terse language to the modern description of it as a verbal literary composition woven in lines, stanzas and usually in a figurative language that normally conceals its immediate meaning. Does the description bring to mind any such a composition? Again, poetry is a composition that reflects experiences in a language that demonstrates rhythm, sound effect and intense emotion (Gray, 1984:162). Poetry as a literary genre is the oldest in the literary tradition, followed by drama and then prose. A poem can be very long i.e. epic narratives or very short. Do you think poems can share the same literary elements such as clear evidence of plot, character, setting, subject matter, theme, and importantly, narrative technique with drama and prose?

Generally, the poem is about a person (biography or autobiography), the history of a people or a person, or a reflection on aspects of life. These inform the subject matter and themes, and styles in the composition. We will examine some these elements in our subsequent discussions.

What is African Oral poetry?

Oral literature is by definition dependent on a performer who formulates it in words on a specific occasion—there is no other way in which it can be realized as a literary product (Finnegan, 2012:4). By extension, the African oral poetry is the poetic compositions such as dirges, praise poems, appellations, incantations etc. are not written down but are performed on occasions. For instance, dirges and funeral libations are performed during funerals. What is your definition for African oral poetry? The basic definition is the verbal composition that is passed by word of mouth. It is important to note that oral poetry is an integral part of the traditional life. Among other features of African oral poetry is that it reflects the beliefs and worldview of the people. Traditional dirges, narratives (epics) panegyrics and libations are rendered verbally and through a performance. It must be added, in modern contexts, some of these texts are written down for preservation but they evince the features of traditional African oral poetry (Read Angmor, 1996:7-9). The big question confronting scholars

of oral poetry is ‘does an oral poetry ceases to be oral when it is written?’ This calls for a debate. Let’s engage in that.

What is African written poetry?

From the discussion above, what do you think could be the meaning of ‘written African poetry? Many factors have accounted for the change in mode of transmission and preservation of literary materials, particularly African poetry. Can you guess some of the factors? Literacy and break in traditional communities are among the factors. Following socio-politico challenges of the colonial period and the socio-economic challenges of the post-colonial era entrusted the need to share the challenges to individuals who saw poetry as the appropriate mode of expression. Written poetry therefore refers to poetic texts that are written down. This is main a feature of modern poetry which has individual creativity (Read Angmor, 1996, pp. 95-120). The anthologies available for study fall within this category of African poetry. Mention five popular poets and a poem each of the five. In a lot of cases, oral poetry has been antecedents/sources of written poetry. Read Awoonor’s “Songs of Sorrow” and Clarke’s “Abiku”.

THE FORMS AND FEATURES AFRICAN POETRY

African Traditional Poetry

Poetry has been and continues to be part of mainstream life of the African. This is expressed in the role’s poetry plays in the various stages of life of the African. Generally, the traditional poetry is determined by the occasion and it is performed by a trained poet (griot). Below are a number of them

Panegyric is a traditional praise poetry usually performed by traditional griots (composers and reciters) for a chief or an important person. It recounts the attributes of the object of praise and projects him/her in hyperbolic metaphors.

Elegiac poetry is traditionally composed and performed to mourn the dead or lament a situation or an occurrence. The content is determined by the status of the object or the nature of the occurrence. The Akan funeral is an example. In contemporary times, groups are formed who perform such elegiac poems when contracted. The performance is however in the traditional context and relevance.

Religious poetry takes different forms as occasions merit specific poetic performances. These are closely linked to religious activities. Libation, incantation, propitiation etc. Mantic poetry, Sotho divining praises and Odu Ifa are some examples. Modern religious sects have such poetic compositions that reflect their beliefs and they include Mfantse Methodist lyric and the Islamic tradition

There is also the special purpose poetry - war, hunting, occupational and military poetry. There is Akan hunting, asafo, war, occupational poetry. You can ask the elders of your community to perform some of these poems for you to listen. You can also attend social gatherings such as funerals.

Children's songs and rhymes are common poetic genre of Africa. Traditional lullabies and nursery rhymes, children's games and verses are good examples. Do you know of any lullaby or rhyme performed for children in your community? Please, share with your class. (Finnegan, 2012:111-291)

Nationalistic Poetic Groupings

The insurgence of Africans follows the effects of colonial presence. The attendant consequences spurred the zeal in Africans to group and trumpet their reservations through poetry. These groupings though regionally identified, addressed aspects of Africa's ordeals through poetry. Can you mention some of them? Let us introduce them here for you to read on each

Négritude movements comprised poets from French West Africa who felt disadvantaged in their relationship with the colonial masters. Their poems sought to reinstate Africa to her glorious past. In their poems, Africa is usually personified as an adorable woman whose strength and virtues surpasses everyone. Read Senghor's "I will pronounce your name"

Southern African poets concentrated on the imbalances that existed in their societies such that the indigenes were deprived of their inherent right to life, association, education and decent livelihood. The effects of Apartheid constituted their subjects. Msthal's "A Nightfall in Soweto" is a good example.

North African poets are usually not mentioned in African anthologies because of their close affinity to the Arab world whose culture seems different from that of Africa sub-Saharan. Google and dead Mohammed Achaari's poems.

Anglophone West African Poets are basically Ghanaian, Nigerian, Gambian and Sierra Leonean poets whose poetry speak to the concerns of the Anglophone West African. Mention can be made of Casely-Hayford, Osadebay and Dei-Anang through to Kwesi Brew, Kofi Awoonor, Wole Soyinka and many others. These poets wrote on colonial-related subjects through to struggle for independence and contemporary discussions on introspections. (Read the introductory part of Senanu et al 1988:6-17).

African Poetry Written in non-African Languages

Almost well-known and studied African literary texts are written in non-African languages. The question of language in African literature has been a great debate among both African and non-African literary scholars. (Read "Decolonizing the Mind Ngugi W'athiong'O). It is therefore often argued that African literature written in non-African languages cannot be truly African. It is true that the African poetry which is the subject of our discussion in this course is often written in English, French and Portuguese. A number of factors account for this.

Do you remember that Africa was colonized by some European countries? Do you also recall that the education that equipped the Africans to write was introduced by the Europeans, and their languages were (and continues to be) used for instruction in the schools? In the case of Ghana, English language becomes convenient for all Ghanaians as English is a language spoken by all language users. The English language has become the language of use in our schools, offices, courts,

parliament, media and all major state institutions. Our national laws, including the constitution, are written in English. The languages that the colonialists bequeathed Africans have become their mainstream languages. Ghana, for example, has about forty-nine languages of which just nine are taught and studied. If we were to study African poetry composed in Ghanaian language, which language do you think we should adopt? How do the non-speakers of the language read the poem? It is then most appropriate for poets who wish to reach a wider readership to adopt a language that is used by larger people; English meets this demand in Ghana and other English-speaking countries in Africa, French does same in French speaking countries and Portuguese in Portuguese speaking countries.

African Literatures Written in African Languages

Though we have indicated that most of African poems (those studied in schools) are written in non-African languages, it must be stressed that few of them are written in African languages. There is a considerable amount of literature produced in some African languages such as Hausa, Twi and Yoruba in West Africa; Amharic in Somalia and Swahili in Southern Africa. Such literary texts are as valid as any written in European languages. For example, Achebe intimates that while he writes novels in English, he authors poetry in Igbo. Ngugi Wa'Thiong'O has written several literary texts in his native Kikuyu language. Among the Mfantsees of Ghana, a lot of literary texts have been produced in Mfantse by J. A. Annobil.

However, these literatures have suffered serious setbacks. They have not received enough scholarly attention due to some reasons including the following:

- i. African languages are not as wide spread as the European languages. Ghana has forty-nine languages out which only nine are studied in schools. The implication is that not even all the native speakers of these languages will patronize the text except those who are literate in them. The question is how many Mfantsees are literate in Mfantse language to be able to read literary texts in Mfantse?
- ii. Formal education in Africa was introduced by the Europeans and they used their languages to teach in schools. In Anglophone countries, English language was used both as language of instruction and a subject of study. It means every literate in these Anglophone countries read and write in English language. This places writers in the English language at advantage and have wider readership. The same holds true for the Francophone and Lusophone countries. These languages are therefore more international in character and scope than the African languages.
- iii. The European languages have become the main languages of the colonized countries. It is the language of government, commerce, education, law and administration. The major national document of these countries are written in the European languages. In the simple terms, the languages are the lingua franca of African countries.

iv. Critics of literature have not shown any interest in literary texts in African languages.

Can you think of other reasons that make literature written African languages not patronized by the literary community?

Linguistic Categorizations of the African Poetry

We have already discussed the reasons that contributed to the dominance of non-African language in African literary text. By the colonial associations, the literary texts (African poetry) on the African continent are classified the language of composition such as Anglophone poetry (English speaking countries), Francophone poetry (French speaking countries) and Lusophone poetry (Portuguese speaking countries).

In most cases, the poems are translated from one language into another. For instance, the popular Negritude poems were composed in French language but have translated into the English language. It is the same in the case of the Portuguese poetry which have also been translated into both English and French languages. Poems selected in this course are samples from other languages but they are in English translations.

There is another layer of African poetry called African Traditional poetry. These are originally composed in the African languages but are translated into non-African languages for wider readership. What do you think is the difference between this and African poetry? African poetry is the broader genre within which African Traditional poetry is located. African Traditional poetry refers to the poems that are traditionally composed and owned, and reflect the beliefs, rituals, practices and the indigenous worldview of the people of its creators and audience. Can you discuss the features of the African Traditional poetry? The modern concept of African poetry encompasses both African traditional poetry and other poetic compositions of individual poets who arises as apt and succinct verbal form in expressing feelings and attitudes in such as an economically, politically, socially and culturally desperate times as Africans have been going through. Such poets include Kofi Awoonor, Wole Soyinka, Dennis Brutus, David Rubadiri, David Diop, Ama Ata Aidoo etc.

Factors that Determine the Characteristics of African Poetry

It is very imperative to observe that the language of a literary text is not the only criterion for defining the origin of the text. The identity of a poem is determined by a combination of elements including the following.

1. The author must be an indigene of the people he/she is writing about and for. In this case the author must be an African who shares in the challenges, hopes and aspirations of Africans.

2. The intended readers of the poem must be people whose challenges, beliefs, hopes and aspirations the poem seeks to highlight. The audience must therefore be Africans who identify with the issues and concerns raised.
3. The subject of consideration must relate to Africa. Is it in response to cultural beliefs, or in reaction to colonial experience or rural-urban migration with its related concerns etc.?
4. An African poetry must express African cultural, tribal, ethnic and national consciousness through the persona's voice and characters who easily identify as African. The tone, mood, atmosphere etc. must reflect the African.
5. The historical and geographical space should identify with Africa. The setting defines the events and issues for discussion, and the literary landscape of Africa is greatly influenced by this. For instance, the poetic concerns of southern Africans in the 1990s will not reflect in the poetry of North Africans.
6. Though the language of African literary texts is mainly non-Africa, there is a degree of African flavor in the language use. Culture, content and environment influence language use.

We can now agree that the language is not the only criterion used in determining whether a poem is regarded as African.

Key Ideas

- Literature is an imaginative verbal (oral and written) composition that demonstrates a good sense of artistry.
- Literature is considered as imaginative creativity using language.
- An author can create a literary piece about a familiar society or imagine one, as well as its humans (characters).
- Poetry as a literary genre is the oldest in the literary tradition, followed by drama and then prose.
- Poetry is a composition that reflects experiences in a language that demonstrates rhythm, sound effect and intense emotion (Gray, 1984:162).

Reflections

- How do I explain African poetry to my colleague participant?
- What are the various categorization of African poetry related?
- How has this session change my perception about African poetry?

Discussion

- Define African poetry to a JHS pupil.
- What is the relationship between the oral poetry and written poetry?
- Argue that when an oral poetry is written, it does cease to be an oral poetry.
- Identify two African traditional poetic forms and discuss two features of each.
- Mention any Anglophone West African poem and identify its message
- How is the traditional African poetry different from African poetry?

SESSION 2: ELEMENTS, IMAGERY AND SOURCES OF AFRICAN POETRY

Welcome to session 2. In this session, we are examining the elements and imagery in African poetry. We shall look at the structure, subject matter/theme, diction imagery, perspective of presentation and performance. Also, we shall identify the major sources of information in composing African poetry.

Learning outcomes

By the end of the session, the participant will be able to:

1. Explain the elements of African poetry.
2. Identify some dominant imagery in African poetry.
3. Relate the imagery with meaningful concepts in the African context.
4. Identify the major sources of information in creating African poetry.
5. Discuss their relevance in the poetic composition.

Structure

African poetic compositions follow specific structural pattern. Traditional African poetry follows an introduction, development of the subject from a lower level to the point of climax and continues to the conclusion. In some cases, the conclusion asks for favour or blessings for the well-intended people and curse for enemies (libation), sense of loss (dirge) or project the unique position occupied by the character of praise (praise poem). It must be indicated that every poem has both physical and internal structures that add to the complete understanding and artistic essence of the poem.

Subject matter/themes

The message of a poem can be described in general terms as subject matters or in specific terms as themes. A subject matter refers to the central idea of the poem in general terms in that it has general

application to several texts. It is usually rendered in single words such as love, knowledge. The theme on the other hand has direct reflection with the specific text under consideration and it is rendered in expressive form, a sentence, question, etc. and it makes meaning in relation to the poem e.g. 'loss of a benefactor due to death' in "Owusu". Themes are usually generated from the subject matter. Subject matters or themes are derived from the content and form of the poem. For instance, dirges mourn the dead, epics recount the heroic deeds of the object of discussion. Traditional poems have their messages in the purpose and occasion of the performance e.g. dirge or praise poems. There is the immediate literary and thematic relevance. The other poetic compositions may demonstrate immediate literary and thematic relevance, it could also have remote relevance couched in metaphors or satires e.g. "A Plea for Mercy" by Kwesi Brew or "An African Thunderstorm" by David Rubadiri. These will be discussed further in subsequent units.

Diction

Every poet has a message that is communicated through language and the poet chooses words according to the message and type of poem being composed. The poet selects from the repertoire words that could adequately communicate the message and reflect the form. Diction then covers the entire vocabulary and the grammatical arrangement of the words. The diction gives the poem its character, tone, mood and atmosphere. In traditional poems and in some cases, other African poetic forms, the occasion and purpose of performance determine its diction.

Perspective of presentation

It must be added here that different types of poems elicit different modes of presentation. Personas can present poems from the first person perspective, where the persona associates with the content to the third person where the persona only recounts or reports. Some poems are loud reflections in stream of consciousness where readers are led into the mind of the person. As you read the set poems endeavour to categorise the poems by their modes of presentation. Do you the mode of presentation has any effect on the message presented in the poem". There are poems that are presented in dialogue either one person (dramatic monologue/apostrophe) e.g. Soyinka's "Telephone Conversation" and more than one persona character e.g. Atukwei Okai's "Rosimaya".

Performance

Performance is a defining feature of African poetry. African poetry, especially traditional poems is performed on traditional occasions such as appellation, when a chief is to be addressed or libation during a ceremony. The occasion of performance determines the costume, items to use, posture etc. Can you describe a libation performance? Other African poetic forms are also performed but not with strict adherence to costumes, items and posture. The content and context determine the posture and manner of performance. In dramatic poetry, there is a character or characters who play roles e.g. Atukwei Okai's "Rosimaya"

IMAGERY IN AFRICAN POETRY

What is imagery?

One means by which the language of literature, particularly African poetry, differs from literal language is the use of imagery. In a sense, image refers to the word picture that creates pictures (as visual, auditory, tactile) or a description of some visible scene or objects. An image therefore is representation of real entities that appeal to the senses. Imagery however refers to all words which refer to objects and qualities which appeals to the senses and feelings (Gray 1984:102). In other words, imagery is the conceptual representation of the images in a literary text. It creates sense impression in the reader's mind. Imagery is also called figurative language or literary devices such as metaphors, similes, personifications etc.

Nature of Imagery in African Poetry

Poets use linguistic resources in the immediate environment to create images and imagery. An easy way to appreciate African poetry is to understand the imagery poets employ and appreciate its context of use. Imagery is grouped into bestial/fauna, plant/flora, life, death and situational imagery. Imagery is the concrete images that get established by associating abstract entities with concrete ones. For example, the imagery "bead" and "thunderstorm" in Aidoo and Rubadiri's poems respectively make the abstract concepts real for appreciation. A key understanding in African poetry is embedded in the African imagery poets employ.

Significance of Imagery in African Poetry

There are a number of benefits a poet gains when he/she uses appropriate imagery in the creative work.

1. We have said that it creates mental pictures in the mind's eye. In other words, it makes abstract concepts concrete as it stimulates the reader to see, feel, hear, smell, touch, taste and move.
2. It gives pleasure to the reader. As the reader connects the concept to the real object of association, discovery occurs and it induces positive surprise for pleasure.

Sources of the African Poetry

The development of poetry in Africa has seen a slow pace from through the first half of the twentieth century. It is from the 1950s that genre gained steady growth in Africa and a substantial number of poets have emerged since then. These poets have very useful information to share with their readers and they choose poetry as a medium.

In poetry, a number of factors account for the choice of information they share. In this, different writers will have different things to write about. Again, the period under consideration comes with its concerns. The following are some of the sources that provide information for the compositions:

a. Dispensational

An examination of African poetry reveals that there is a chunk that are composed from certain periods of Africa's historical perspectives. This categorizes African poetry into three dispensations thus:

- i. Pre-colonial poetry deals with life in pre-colonial Africa (i.e., life in Africa prior to the arrival of the Whiteman on our shores). This period sees poems composed on indigenous knowledge, beliefs, ritual ceremonies etc. They are about the life of the indigenous people. Panegyric, religious, funeral, ritual, historical, mythological, legendary etc. (Finnegan, 2012:81-106). These are usually communally owned poems and draw on orality and performance (Senanu, et al., 1986).
- ii. Colonial poetry concerns itself with the arrival and presence of the European on African soil. These naturally will contain issues like cultural conflict, missionary activities and Christianity, gradual grumbling of the traditional order, western education and its attendant effects, new governance systems and others. Creators of colonial poetry are individuals who attempt to share the challenges, aspirations of the African. This category also deals with agitation and struggle for independence and self-rule (Senanu, et al 1986).
- iii. Post-colonial poetry interrogates the effect of the encounter between the colonizer and the colonized. Such poets also examine issues related to the attainment of independence and self-rule and its effects on the African. These poems examine the governance of African nations by Africans where the white presence is absent and political control is in the hands of the African. These poems treat issues such as the expectations of the African masses in connection with the attainment of independence, disappointments, disillusionments and corruption. A good anthology is Anyidoho's *The place we call Home and Other poems*. These are poems composed by individuals who find synergy in poetic genre in expressing the feelings and concerns of the African (Tanure, 1995, p.4).

b. Subject/Thematic categorization

Contemporary poetry has departed from the poetry of the colonial period into doing introspective examination of the African. The poets compose poems on varied subjects and thematic concerns from motivational to love, social vices to political strife, post-election conflicts to violence, decay of moral values to restoration of African values etc.

Some other African poems are composed on theoretical basis. A number of these theoretical undercurrents that lend themselves to the interpretation of the African poetry include:

Feminist theory discusses the effect of male dominance on the woman, and seeks to advocate a meaningful balance between the men and women. There are a number of phases to this theory. Busia's "Liberation" is an example. In recent times, it has been realized that female poets are telling their version of the African story in poetry, and treat popular issues such as motherhood, marriage, childbirth and other gender related issues.

It must be mentioned that the categorizations are not absolute demarcations. What it means is that it is possible to develop a colonial subject in 2019 provided the occasion calls for it. Similarly, the contemporary issues are sometimes treated in periods other than post-colonial. Once again, the theories intermingle hence; a poem could have traces of a number of theories. It must be noted however that there is always a dominant theory that interprets the poem. Some of the theories would be discussed in the subsequent units.

Key Ideas

- Traditional African poetry follows an introduction, development of the subject from a lower level to the point of climax and continues to the conclusion.
- A subject matter refers to the central idea of the poem in general terms in that it has general application to several texts.
- The theme has direct reflection with the specific text under consideration and it is rendered in expressive form, a sentence, question, etc. and it makes meaning in relation to the poem.
- The diction gives the poem its character, tone, mood and atmosphere.
- An image therefore is representation of real entities that appeal to the senses.

Reflections

- How would I describe the structure of poetry studied in this session to a friend?
- How can I link the subject matter of a poem to the theme?
- How would my knowledge of imagery help me to understand African poetry better?

Discussion

- Discuss **two** ways diction contributes to the overall meaning of a poem.
- What is the distinction between image and imagery in poetry?
- Discuss **three** reasons for which a poet would use imagery in a poem.
- Identify and discuss **three** images in a poem you have studied.
- Briefly discuss three sources of pre-colonial poetry.

UNIT 2: PRE-COLONIAL AFRICAN POETRY

In this unit, we shall also look at the strategies involved in studying poetry. We shall also deal with the literary appreciation of a dirge, a myth and an epic. It is our hope that you will have fun as you study African poetry.

Learning outcome(s)

By the end of the unit, the participant will be able to:

- Read a poem effectively and fluently.
- Discuss a poet's use of language and imagery.
- Identify the similarities and differences among the dirge, myth and epic poems.
- Do a literary appreciation of any given poem.

SESSION 1: PREOCCUPATIONS OF PRE-COLONIAL AFRICAN POETRY AND STEPS TO ANALYSE A POEM

Welcome to this session. This session we shall remind ourselves of the preoccupations of Pre-colonial African poetry and provide reasons why we need to study African poetry. Poetry is very important as it yields its beauty so easily to any reader. It provides mental and emotional enjoyment as it is about a phenomenon that is common to us. The selected poems reflect show our readiness to work to understand ourselves and our culture. His course is built on the assumption that we need to understand our literary sense as a basis to understand others. This session also presents very important steps to use to analyse a poem.

Learning outcomes

By the end of the session, the participant will be able to:

1. Mention and explain the main concerns of pre-colonial African poetry.
2. State the reasons why the study of poetry is important.
3. Read and enjoy any type of poetry.
4. Identify the main ideas and techniques used to analyze a poem.

Preoccupations of Pre-colonial African Poetry

In the previous session we examined the features of African poetry. Mention these features. The literary history of Africa is roughly categorized in relation to the coming of the white man. So we have pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods. What do you think accounts for this? Each of the periods has its developmental and thematic concerns. Let us say that during the pre-colonial period (before the white man arrived in Africa to influence our way of life) the poetry of Africa was

oral and mainly reflected the indigenous life of the traditional people. In this sense, the poetry was closely linked to a specific people and their culture. For example, in this unit, we shall study poems on Akan dirge, Fulani creation myth and an Africa legend of Sundjata. These poems are though related to specific African groups, they reflect the general literary prowess of the African and reflect the African worldview.

Written poetry was not very common within this period. Also, there were no nation states as it is today but were primarily ethnic groupings or states or kingdoms. Poetry of the period concentrated on the religious activities of the people e.g. libation, dirge or the socio-politico concerns of the people such occupational poems, praise poem, and other thematic concerns that were unique of the people. It is in this light that the poems in this unit would be studied.

Why we study poetry

Poetry can be defined severally possibly as a result of its very nature. What you should remember is that poetry is a literary composition which has a pattern quite different from that of prose or drama. It is structured in lines and poets are able to arrange words, use sounds and rhythm to foreground their message. The poem might be a narrative, dramatic or lyric. A poet always has something to say. It might be straight forward statement about a subject of public interest or it might be an expression of a private problem, joy or interest. Can you list some examples of these for FTF discussion?

A poet writes to communicate meaning and perhaps the first effort a reader makes is to extract this statement from the poem. The choice of words and their arrangement is made so that the reader will focus on these features of language which in everyday speech are usually glossed over. The poet combines various techniques to produce his or her meaning and it is on the success of these techniques that the beauty of a poem depends. Remember that the concreteness of the details chosen, the diction, the imagery and poetic devices, the sounds of the words and even the appearance of the words on the page foreground the message of the poem and create its peculiar beauty. Poetry is based on words and it is the mental equipment with which we approach these words that makes it possible for us to understand and enjoy the content of the poem.

Studying poetry is a way of responding fully to the work of art through an understanding of literary language use. Poetry will allow you to go beyond the surface meaning and to understand the intangibles of the literary work. You also have to focus attention on the sound patterns, semantic relations and the syntactic organization of any poem. These three aspects of language have the force of foregrounding the message of the poem for rhetorical purposes. They also have communicative value that can impose new meaning on any lexical item. What you need to know is that the creative writer, such as the poet, is always searching for the appropriate linguistic means to express the inexpressible.

Again, the essence of studying poetry is to afford you the opportunity to develop linguistic and intuitive insight to appreciate the aims of literature, namely, the aesthetic, moral, social values and

the message the poet wants to highlight. There is no other way for you to understand and respond to any work of art than through literary language use. Here, you will have the opportunity to deal with how the poet patterns language at all levels of linguistic organization, that is, phonetic, semantic and syntactic, to create his or her unique vision of life. The poet expresses his or her sensation, perceptions and themes primarily by means of language. What do you think are the issues poets talk about? Can you list what they want to achieve? Write down your answers for FTF discussion.

You should note that since poetry is language in use, you have to move away from preoccupation only with themes towards a greater exploration of the language of literary works. This will be beneficial to your communicative competence since there seems to be no difference between conventional language and the language of literature. Poetry is to be enjoyed because it has a message that is communicated through a specific medium.

Basic Steps to Follow

Dear participant, you need to follow certain steps to enable you to analyze any poem. It is important to identify the main ideas and techniques used by the poet to highlight them. This way, you will be able to understand or comprehend and explore all the features of a poem. Let's continue.

1. You have to examine the title, form and shape of the poem. The title of the poem serves as a summary of what you should expect in the poem. Find out if each line of the poem ends with a punctuation mark such as a comma, dash, colon, semi-colon or full stop. Sometimes the next line runs into the next line. This is called enjambment (run-on-line) and it affects the rhythm and flow of the poem. A poet does this for a purpose. It is a technique and you do not have to pause at the end of the line when you are reading. If you pause, you will not understand what the poet wants to convey. Let us use the example in Michael Echeruo's "Lullaby".

Sheep and dogs and kids
besides the hearth
sleep beyond all reproach.

There is only one sentence although there are three lines. You do not pause at the end of each line till you end the last line. The lines flow together and become more coherent. The poet uses enjambment to emphasize a phrase or idea. In the extract, the poet is emphasizing the idea of freedom where the sheep, dogs and kids are not hindered in anyway. Can you find other examples for discussions?

2. You have to read the poem aloud so that you can feel the mood, tone, pace and rhythm. Here, mood refers to the poet's emotional condition which can be deduced from the words he/she uses in addition to his/her general style. To find the mood, ask yourself whether the poet appears sad, happy, or angry. The mood can also be identified by considering the tone in which he/she says what he/she wants to say.

By tone, we mean the way the words work in the poem. It is about feelings and thoughts since it is about general vocabulary used. It refers to what emanates from the voice, mood, manner, attitude, and outlook of the poet. It is a person's emotional coloring and can be heard in many ways including the choice of images, in the length of the vowels and consonants used. Some people explain mood and tone together. This is the state of the poet when he is expressing the inexpressible. It reflects the feeling of the poet which the reader cannot feel except through the words of the poem. Indeed, the mood of the poet can be derived through the words. For example, in David Diop's "The Vultures", his tone is two-fold. He adopts an angry tone in addressing the white colonists and slave masters at the beginning of the poem.

In those days
When civilization kicked us in the face
When holy water slapped our cringing bows
The vultures built in the shadow of their talons

In the last stages of the poem, he adopts a mild soothing tone in comforting Africans and assuring them of a hope of revival:

In spite of the desolate villages of Africa torn apart
Hope lived in us like a citadel
• • •
Spring will be reborn under our bright eyes

Can you identify which images and words help to create the mood and the tone from the extracts from "The Vultures"?

3. It is important to identify the speaker or the speaking voice and think about the voice and tone.
4. You have to also think about the setting of the poem. The events in any literary piece of work take place in a particular place and at a particular period of time. It is important to read the poem to find out where and when the story or event happened. Stories in any poem are conditioned by the setting and the more we try to understand the historical and cultural setting of any poem, the more we will understand and appreciate the poem. It is important to also take note of the time since it may have a bearing on the story the poet would want to share. You need to ask and answer some questions: Does the setting create any prevailing feeling in the poem? Does the setting affect the mood of the speaker? The following word may be used to describe the mood and atmosphere of the poem: peaceful, serene, warm, dark, desolate, pensive, tense, lonely, solemn and quiet
5. After that, you have to figure out the subject and theme(s) of the poem. This is possible if you pay attention to diction, repetition and devices used. To identify the theme, there is the need to read the poem carefully and form an idea of what the poet talks about. Sometimes, the title of the poem itself can help you in finding the theme. For example, in Kwesi Brew's "The Dry

Season”, the title informs the reader what the poem is about. In Michael Echeruo’s “Lullaby”, the title does not provide a clue. It is about the continuous change of things in nature and the environment in which man finds himself.

6. You should identify the sound devices such as alliteration, onomatopoeia and assonance. In “Night Rain”, John Pepper Clark uses a lot of alliteration. This conventional device of sound is the repetitive use of consonantal sounds. The emphasis is placed on the sound rather than the letter or the spelling. Remember that the alliterated words must have the same pronunciation. The repetition of the same consonantal sound must occur in words that are quite close together, either on the same line or perhaps near the end of one line and the beginning of another. The following lines illustrate the sound devices:

Line 4: “Doped out of the deep”. The /d/

Line 5: “I have bobbed up belly wise” /b/

Line 6: “From stream of sleep” /s/

Line 15: “Great water drops are dribbling” /d/

Line 31: “But turn, brothers, turn upon your side” /t/.

The sounds /d/, /b/, /s/ an /t/ are repeated. It is important to note that these sounds are called soft sounds and they help the poet to establish or create the tone of the poem which is one of quietness and sadness. These alliterative sounds also help to create a soothing regular torrential rhythm in the poem. They also help create and enforce the right atmosphere of the “drumming”, “droning” and “dribbling” of the rain. **Can you find any examples for FTF discussion?**

Elements of Sounds in poetry

You must remember that any sound features that a poet may employ to echo, suggest or enact meaning can work in conjunction with the meaning of the poetic text. In effect, the sound features must enhance meaning. Sometimes the repetitions may not be alliterative but may contribute to the elegance and meaning of the poem. Let’s use examples from Kwesi Brew’s “A Plea for Mercy”.

“We have come to your shrine to worship”,

“pressing their lips against the bosom of the sea”;

“...peasants home from their labours”

“lips tremble”,

“firefly vie

The sounds /w/, /p/, /l/, /b/ are labial sounds made using one or both lips. These sounds enhance meaning since the poem is a desperate cry for redemption. A plea must be made in a tone that is not harsh. It is made for deliverance from the dangers of the supernatural. At another level, the plea is for political and economic independence that has eluded the people.

Another sound device that enhances meaning in a poem is onomatopoeia. It is the effect that is created when a word is used to suggest its meaning. Again, it is where the sounds of the object being described. Onomatopoeia helps to establish the atmosphere in the poem. Let us refer to “Nightfall in Soweto” by Oswald Mtshali. The poet uses onomatopoeia in Line 28: “I tremble at his crunching footsteps”. This sound device is used to describe the grinding sound which the thick boots of the officer makes as he strides along. It suggests the wickedness of the police as they patrol at night. The “crunching footsteps” placate the wickedness against the blacks in Soweto.

7. It is important to identify poetic devices such as similes, metaphors and imagery and how they add to the theme(s) and meaning. They help the poet to communicate his or her ideas. These poetic devices can also be called figurative images and they establish connections between things one normally would not associate. Whenever a poet uses a figurative image, he/she may want to expand the sensory perception beyond the literary meaning. Remember that there are other qualities that are added when figurative image is used.

- a. It gives pleasure or surprise to the imagination. For example,

“His beard, like any sow or fox, was red”

And broad as well, as though it were a spade

The description of the person makes him look ugly. The connection between the man’s beard and that of a sow or fox creates a surprise.

- b. It intensifies the deeper intention in the poem by adding the new dimension of the figurative images. The use of figurative images contributes to the overall mood or tone of the poem.

Imagery in African poetry

Images can be classified in order for the reader to enter the poet’s mind, share fully in the experience that he/she offers to the reader and to discern his/her intention so that the reader is able to make a balanced judgement of the poet’s success or failure. Let’s look at the terms used when a poet creates sense impression.

- i. An image that stimulates the sense of sight is called a visual image.
- ii. An image that stimulates the sense of hearing is called an auditory or audile image.
- iii. Tactile image stimulates the sense of touch.
- iv. An image that stimulates the sense of smell is called olfactory image.
- v. Gustatory image is an image that stimulates the sense of taste.
- vi. A motile or kinesthetic image appeals to the sense of movement.

When you read the poem, ask yourself why the poet uses a figurative image and what does the image add to the whole poem? Let's look at "Nightfall in Soweto" and the poet's use of simile. Remember that a simile is an explicit connection where one thing is like another. Two things are brought together and the connection is made clear to the reader through the use of such words as "like" or "as". Simile comes from the Latin word "similes", which means similar or like. Nightfall is compared to an incurable disease that afflicts human beings.

"Nightfall comes like/ a dreaded disease"

The effect of this simile is to vividly foreground the damage that nightfall afflicts on the black people in Soweto.

"Open up! "He barks like a rabid dog"

The poet compares the white law-officers to mad dogs which have the propensity to cause fear, panic and harm. The literary effect of this simile is to foreground images of brutality and carnage that the whites meted out to the blacks. It also paints a picture of the atrocities Apartheid inflicted on the blacks in Soweto.

The poem highlights the deprivation and dehumanizing conditions under which the inhabitants were kept. They were constantly under strict surveillance and any slightest sign of disturbance, whether real or imagined is ruthlessly crushed.

8. Finally, you have to think about developing your personal response to the poem. The response should relate to any or all of the following: theme, diction, figurative imagery or use of imagery, sound devices and the structure of the poem. Do you think the poet has presented his message? Are the words used in the poem very simple, or difficult to understand?

Let us use diction to illustrate this. You have to remember that a poet chooses his words imposed on him/her by form and length. Diction is a poem's entire word choice, the selection taken from the poet's whole knowledge of language. It also broadly covers both grammatical and vocabulary features. The choice of words gives a poem its character, namely, serious, light-hearted, elevated and lofty, formal, conversational or colloquial.

The poet's diction carries a compressed weight of meaning and suggestion. This may be due to the fact that the poet does not have space as may be the case with the prose or drama. Again, the meaning of a word varies according to the context in which it is being used. The words used can allow the reader to understand the poem at two levels. The first is the superficial level which highlights the surface meaning of the poem. The deeper level is the second which tries to highlight the extended meaning the words express.

Let's go back to look at the poem "A Plea for Mercy" to illustrate this point. The surface meaning highlights the cry for help by individuals such as the animal tender, the farmer and the fisherman. They are facing hardships as a result of some cosmic influences. Beyond this superficial level lies a deeper meaning. The poem may be examining the plight of Africa where hope for political and economic independence has eluded the people due to corruption, mismanagement of our rich natural resources. This has created a situation of extreme poverty, disease, deprivation leading to under-development. The situation has also led to Africans becoming beggars, living on charity of former colonial masters. Looked at in this way, the poem has significance for the people of Africa.

The tone or mood the poet wants to create also influences his/her choice of words. The contribution made by individual words creates an intricate relationship between the whole poem and its constituent parts. How a poet feels about the people, incidents, situations and objects that he/she is writing about will determine his choice of each word and its placement in the poem.

Have you noticed that the tone and the mood in "An African Thunderstorm" is a sad one? The words used suggest insecurity, disorder, and havoc wrecked on the people's lives. The words make it possible for the reader to sympathize with the people. The varying line lengths capture the physical incident. Though some of the words are short, they have weight and force that enhance meaning of the havoc caused by the thunderstorm. Look at words such as "Toss", "turn", and "Dart". Can you identify other words that depict his sadness? List them for FTF discussion.

Remember that this poem also has a deeper level meaning. The thunderstorm stands for the invasion and colonization of the African continent by the Europeans. Africans were caught off guard by the sudden invasion which created the disorder.

Let's use another poem to illustrate the poet's choice of words. David Rubadiri's "An African Thunderstorm" is a good example. The poet portrays the ruthlessness, mayhem, disorder, havoc and carnage caused by an African thunderstorm. His choice of visual images, alliterations and onomatopoeia, aptly foregrounds his message. For example, words such as "plague", "whirling", "madman", "dark sinister", "jagged", and "pelting" help to foreground the message for the reader to digest. Can you list other words that aptly describe the situation? Do that for FTF discussion.

Look at the following words: "Hurrying", "Whirling", "Tossing", "Gathering", "Clinging". These words belong to the major word class. Can you tell which major word class these words belong? Did you say they are all verbs? Yes, these are also action verbs. Have you also noticed that they are all of the "-ing" form? The frequent use of this form is very suggestive. It may indicate that the havoc caused by the thunderstorm is frequent and they are endless. Have you also noticed the frequent use of the present tense form of the verbs in the poem? List the verbs in this category. These may also suggest the fact that the disorder and havoc caused by the thunderstorm have become part of the people.

Key Ideas

- The poetry of Africa was oral and mainly reflected the indigenous life of the traditional people.
- Studying poetry is a way of responding fully to the work of art through an understanding of literary language use.
- Poetry is to be enjoyed because it has a message that is communicated through a specific medium.
- It is important to identify the main ideas and techniques used by the poet to highlight them.

Reflections

- How beneficial is the study of poetry to me?
- How do I impress on my colleagues to enjoy African poetry?
- What steps will help me identify main ideas and techniques used by the poet?

Discussion

- What are some of the things you have to do when you encounter a poem?
- Why should the strategies you use in reading a poem be different?
- Why should you pay attention to the devices used by the poet?
- Read a selected poem and appreciate it.

SESSION 2: LITERARY APPRECIATION OF “OWUSU”; “FULANI CREATION STORY”; AND AN AFRICAN EPIC – “SUNDJATA”

In this session, we are going to try to do a literary appreciation of dirge, myth and epic poems. Before we do that, we will look at a few tips that will help you to enjoy reading dirge, myth, and epic and also analyse them.

Learning outcomes

By the end of the session, the participant will be able to:

1. Do a literary appreciation of “Owusu” as a dirge.
2. Discuss the significance of the creation myth story.
3. Do a literary analysis of the epic.

Poetry and Emotion

Poetry should be seen as the expression of human feelings and emotions of people when they are inspired. The words that the poet chooses and how he/she arranges them in the poem are done to draw

your attention to these things that usually you would have ignored or considered unimportant. These things are important to help you understand the poem. When you are reading a poem, ask questions about the words, descriptions, sounds and the structures of the poem and why the poet is using them. You do not have to allow these things to intimidate you.

You have to do away with the idea that poetry is a difficult genre. You should remember that because the poet does not have the luxury of space, he/she has put the ideas, feelings and emotions in a condensed and complex form. This means you have to read the poem several times to unravel the meaning. You have to read it silently and loudly to help you understand it. Never give up if you do not get the meaning after a few readings. You have to read on because the language of poetry is very intense and concentrated.

Before you do any meaningful reading of any poem, ask yourself the following questions:

1. What is the poet saying in the poem?
2. How is the poet presenting the message?
3. Why is the poet trying to share a particular experience with the reader or listener?
4. What is your response to what the poet is saying? (your response should be related to any or all of the following: theme, diction, imagery, sound devices, structure, etc.)
5. Did you enjoy reading the poem?

Your interpretation of a poem should highlight what a poem means or suggests. You should be able to observe, connect, infer and conclude. You should observe the details of the description and action of the language and form of the poem. You should also look for connections among the details and begin to establish a sense of the poem's coherence. Based on these connections, you should make inferences or interpretive guesses about their significance. Finally, you can then draw provisional conclusions about the poem's meaning based on your observations, connections and inferences.

Remember that your interpretation of any poem never really ends. Your mission is not to find a single right way of understanding the poem but rather arriving at a satisfactory explanation. The different interpretations you may make of poems depend largely on what matters to you and what you consider vital.

In your evaluation of a poem, assess its literary quality and make a judgement about how good it is and how successfully it realizes or achieves its poetic intentions. Examine its language and structure and also consider how well these works together to enhance meaning and convey feeling. Again, you should consider how much significance the poem has for you personally and what it may have for other readers or listeners.

Appreciation of "Owusu"

Now, let us do a literary appreciation of a dirge.

OWUSU

Valiant Owusu,
The stranger on whom the citizen of the town depends,
Father, allow my children and me to depend on you
So that we may all of us get something to eat
5 Father on whom I wholly depend
When father sees me now, he will hardly recognize me
He will meet me carrying an old torn mat and a horde of flies
Father with whom I confer
My children and I will look to you
10 Father on whom I wholly depend
Killer of hunger
My savior
Father the slender arm full of kindness
Father the rover whose footprints are on all paths

This poem is a dirge, that is, a song of mourning for the dead. Can you find out the meaning of a dirge? How do the people of your area call it? Is it possible the dirge may have some characteristics that are common to the different tribes in Ghana? Compare your answers with that of your friends.

A dirge is a song that features in all aspects of African life. It is an expression of personal mood or thoughts, sung with or without the accompaniment of musical instruments like bottles, rattles, drums or the knocking of sticks. It is the cry of bereavement and very popular among the Akans in Ghana. Remember that through the dirge, people are able to highlight their plight or sentiments without fear or favour. Do you find the speaker in “Owusu” expressing or highlight her plight? What is she talking about? As a therapy to emotional problems, the dirge affords the mourners the license to share their ingenious dexterity. It is used for the expression of love, hatred and sadness on the demise of a person in a community. Now, in the dirge “Owusu”, is the speaker expressing love, hatred or sadness?

Death is mourned with varied activities including the singing of the dirge. Among Africans, death is not separated from the living and the belief is that there is active life after death. The people believe that death causes pain but it is not expressed as a gloomy, frightful and ghoulish event. In most cases, the word death is rarely mentioned in the dirge. Does the speaker mention death in “Owusu”? Did you say no? Indeed, death is not mentioned directly in the dirge and it is an objective way of expressing emotions. The people’s attitude to death reflects a view among the people about the universe and their belief in an abiding bond between the two worlds of the living and of the departed ancestors. The speaker says, “Father with whom I confer” and this is very suggestive of the link between the two worlds. Do you get a sense of this in “Owusu”?

In this dirge, the speaker recalls and celebrates the ancestors and the achievements of the dead person. The dead person is Owusu, a popular Akan name. The speaker is mourning the death of someone

who has been her support. She conveys her deep loss by stating that Owusu was someone everyone in the town depended on. He was like a father, provided her, her children and many others food, shelter and clothing. Such is the loss that today she is homeless, hungry and unkempt; therefore, she is followed by flies. She says, “He will meet me carrying an old torn mat and a horde of flies”. Owusu is a “killer of hunger”.

The speaker indicates that Owusu is a stranger who has adopted her and her children. Although she is not able to speak of Owusu’s lineage, she strings together praise names extolling the personal qualities of Owusu. She calls him “valiant Owusu”, “Father”, “Killer of hunger”, and “My saviour”. Can you find other words and expressions the speaker uses to praise the dead person? She is making the point that it is not only a relative of yours who should help you. To qualify to be ancestor, one must be good to people and not necessary that he or she should come from your lineage. The speaker believes that the dead are not separated from the living. This can be found in “When father sees me now, he will hardly recognize me”, and “Father with whom I confer”. Can you find others that indicate the connection between the dead and the living?

Look at the tense of the verbs in lines 2, 5, 8, 10, and 14. Did you identify “depends”, “depend”, “confer”, “depend”, and “care”? Did you say they are in the present tense? You are right. These verbs used in this dirge are very suggestive. They imply an ongoing or continuous process of consultation through prayers offered by the living and fulfilled by the dead.

How is the speaker able to communicate her message to the reader? How many sections is the poem divided? Did you say three? Yes, you are right. The first two sections tell us generally what Owusu has been doing not only for the speaker and her children but also every citizen of the town. The last section then provides the specific things Owusu does for everyone. He is a “killer of hunger”, and a “saviour”. List other attributes of Owusu.

She believes and very confident the ancestors of the invisible world will continue to maintain familial ties with the world of the living. Her confidence and belief hinge on the statement, “Father with whom I confer” and “Father on whom I wholly depend”.

Another important factor to note is that certain elements influence human response to grief inducement. There is the issue of the significance of the mode of death. The person should have died a natural death. Again, the people give a social meaning of death. It is a transition from one world to another. There is a relationship between the deceased and the survivors. Finally, there is a support network available to the bereaved. These inform the speaker’s worldview.

Theme

The theme is the central idea of any literary work revealed and developed in the course of the story or explored through argument. It is the main thought expressed by the work. Now, this dirge’s theme helps the reader in understanding its significance, that is, what it says, what it implies and what it

means. What is the speaker preoccupied with? Did you say death? Yes, that is true. So the theme of this dirge is death and its effects on the living.

Structure

“Owusu” follows a formula in which the dead man’s name is mentioned. He is referred to as “Valiant Owusu”, “The stranger”, “Father”, “Killer of Hunger” and “My savior”. These attributes are rendered in figurative language. This dirge is an improvisation because it is short, made up of three stanzas. It is sung by a woman to a dead man who adopted her and her children. She devises praise names extolling the person qualities of the dead man but does not make references to the dead man’s ancestors.

Repetition

The speaker uses repetition to highlight the aesthetic features of the dirge. The constant repetition of the words “depend” emphasizes the reality that although she wishes Owusu to answer back, he is dead and will never respond. By repeating words, the speaker is repeating the sounds that make up the words. Lexical repetition, therefore, adds to the musical quality of the dirge. One of the essential elements in all music is repetition. Again, emphasis is given to the words that are repeated. The literary significance of the dirge is manifested in the elegance of the words used by the speaker.

Metaphor

The speaker compares Owusu to a warrior in line 1, “Valiant Owusu” and this is foregrounded by line 11 which states “Killer of hunger”. Another metaphor is seen in line 14, where Owusu is referred to as “the rover”.

Epic Poetry

The epic is another type of literary composition. It is a long narrative poem in prose or verse that tells a story about the adventures of a popular hero. It is based on oral traditions of history and legends. It sings the praises of the hero and shows the effects of his adventures on the community. The epic usually has a historical or mythical background. It is about great men who lived long ago and whose history the people can remember. It is also about great men whose exploits are recalled in the myths of the people.

In the case of the African epic, griots or court praise singers have preserved and recited it and has been handed over from generation to generation in the family. It is supposed to present extraordinary events revolving around a heroic and a figure of super human stature. It chronicles his achievements especially his conquest over his rivals. There are non-African epic poems written by ancient poets. *The Aeneid* was written by Virgil, a Roman and it tells the story of Aeneas and how the city of Rome

was founded. Homer, a Greek, also wrote *The Illiad*. This poem is about the deeds and the suffering of Achilles after the Trojan War. These two are classical examples. John Milton, an Englishman also wrote *Paradise Lost*.

This epic poem is about the birth and ascendancy of Sundjata. The extract that you are going to read is one version of the epic of ancient Mali Empire of the thirteenth century kingdom in West Africa. This kingdom was founded by Sundjata. This epic has survived because the griots or praise singers attached to the court of Sundjata preserved the memory of his achievements, interpreting them and keeping them unadulterated. Legend has it that Sundjata was born by a buffalo mother who was an ugly hunchback called Sogolon. She had carried the pregnancy for fourteen years. For seven years after his birth, Sundjata could not walk, however, one day he uprooted a huge baobab tree and raised himself up from the ground by lifting and bringing the trunk of the tree, its root and leaves to Sogolon's door. This epic, just like other famous ones, teaches other rulers of the kingdom the art of governing according to the principles of their ancestors.

Characteristic of the Epic

The world of the epic is characterized by the following:

- i. There is a correspondence between the different levels of life, namely, the natural and the supernatural and the human and the animal. In "Sundjata, the leader of the Jaanes (divine priest) consults God. He says, "But since I began serving God...That is what God has revealed to me". This is evident of the interaction between the two worlds mediated by the Jaanes. Again, there is interaction between humans and animals. Here, Sumanguru Baamangana "fashioned pure silver/ And attached it to the leg of the one named after himself..."
- ii. Again, there is orderliness, emanating from the power and the control of the gods and invisible forces, manifested through prophecies and oracles that are eventually fulfilled. Sumanguru goes to the leader of the Jaanes and narrates what has happened between the two rams. Can you find out what happened between the two rams? Write down your answer for FTF discussion. The leader of the Jaanes responds, "He has ordained this kingship and it cannot be altered". Each and everyone know about the power of God and no one can stampede the events as they unfold
- iii. There is a clear distinction between good and evil, between those who are wicked, greedy, arrogant, ambitious, treacherous and those who are just, kind, generous, loyal and sympathetic. The fight between the ram with gold fashioned to its leg and the other which had silver attached to its leg. It is evident from the narrative that good triumphed over evil. Again, Sumanguru wanted to change the course of events God has ordained especially the kingship but the leader of the Jaanes retorts, "He has ordained this kingship and that cannot be altered".

- iv. There is great passions of courage, determination, endurance and even sorrow move the extraordinary human figures of the epic world. In the epic, we see white ram fashion with gold and named after Sundjata showing determination and endurance to defeat the other ram. “Sundjata went back a little/ Then came crashing into the other ram,/ Which fell to the ground.”
- v. The world of the epic poem is not remote from our everyday experience. The powerful emotions that are experienced and aroused by those who inhabit the epic world are so stark, naked and striking. They are able to show us what basically human beings are like.

Men have guardian spirits or jinns and totem animals because of the relationship and correspondence between the various levels of existence in the epic world. They protected them from the vulnerable powers embodied in certain objects.

Analysis of “Sundjata

The opening or introduction to this epic poem, also known as the proposition announces the serious subject the poem is going to talk about. The opening gives the impression that an important subject related to fate is going to be discussed. It tells of the defeat of Sumanguru and the advent of Sundjata. “The leader of the Jaanes/ Prescribed these two white rams”. What does the leader of the Jaanes do to the two rams? Write your answer for FTF discussion. The two rams are engaged in a natural fight over a ewe, which on the surface levels seems like a desire for procreation and survival. On another level it is about the birth of Sundjata and his rise to fame.

The narrator tells us that the ram named after Sundjata “...went back a little way/ Then came crashing into the other ram,/Which fell into the ground. Sumanguru is surprised and goes to consult the leader of the Jaanes about what had happened to the other ram. He is told that God has ordained another person to the kingship and this cannot be altered.

Now, let’s find out how the narrator has been successful in foretelling the defeat of Susu Sumanguru Baamangana. Since this is a narrative, the diction is simple and conversational. The narrator gives a chronological account of how Sundjata was born. The narrator uses a lot of rhetorical questions. These lay emphasis on the point being made by Sumanguru and to provide food for thought on the issue.

The person whom God is to create,
Is he not yet born?
Is he in this town?
Is he in his mother’s womb?
Is he a spirit?

This also highlights Sumanguru's fear and frustration of what is likely to happen to him. He does not know who the Gods have ordained and his visit to the leader of the Jaanes to find out does not yield any good result for him. The rhetorical questions also show Sumanguru's lack of understanding, bewilderment and his refusal to accept the reality of the ascendancy of Sundjata. The questions reinforce the power of the supernatural. This is confirmed by the leader of the Jaanes when he says, "He declares that he is God and that no-one can know him." The main grammatical feature is the use of the past tense form of the verb because this is the preferred mode of telling about past events.

The epic begins abruptly: "The leader of the Jaanes/ prescribed these two white rams". It can be compared with a photographic shot and the effect of this is to focus attention sharply on the events unfolding in the poem. It seems the whole epic gives the impression that the reader or the listener is witnessing first-hand the events that the poem is describing, which is the birth of Sundjata and the defeat of Sumanguru. The reader or listener seems to be part of the unfolding drama.

The narrator also uses repetition to highlight the intensity of the fight between the two rams. This is at the climax of the narrative.

They butted each other

And they butted each other

And they butted each other.

This is an example of linguistic parallelism which is the use of pattern repetition in a literary text for a particular stylistic effect. It sets up a relationship of equivalence between linguistic items and strongly urges a connection between them. Parallelism operates at all three levels of linguistic organization. They follow the same grammatical pattern, that is they have **NP + VP + NP** (Noun Phrase + Verb Phrase + Noun Phrase) or a simple sentence structure (**SVO**). The structures are syntactic equivalents since they have similar patterns. At the phonological level, pattern congruity may take the form of chiming. It is important to note that one cannot repeat words without repeating the sounds that make up the words. One can hear the sound of their weapons as they battle for supremacy. At the semantic level, the lexical items ("butted", "each" and "other") that occur in the same paradigm or belong to the same grammatical category are related synonymously. The structures are also equivalent by virtue of the fact that they express the same proposition. Can you tell the proposition they express? Write down your answer for discussion.

The narrator wrestles with words and meaning in order to convey his unique vision which is the defeat of Sumanguru by Sundjata. The repetition represents the narrator's search for a precise expression which can capture the intensity of the spiritual battle between the two rams. The repetition of the verb phrase, 'butted', serves the same rhetorical purpose of hammering home the narrator's message of the spiritual battle. The attempt to define the spiritual battle produces pattern repetition in the narrative. Linguistic parallelism then is compelled into use by the narrator's experience of the battle.

The lines of the poem are not even in length though all of them begin with capital letters. This may be suggestive of the fact that the two beings, Sumanguru and Sundjata are not evenly matched. Again, the uneven length of the lines has the effect of drawing attention away from secondary issues such as rhyme to focus sharply on the message of the poem, which is about the rise of Sundjata. Can you identify any other devices used by the narrator to foreground his message? Write them down for FTF discussion.

Key Ideas

- A dirge is an African poetry that is sung to mourn the dead.
- A dirge is a song that features in all aspects of African life.
- “The Fulani creation story” is an example of the creation myth.
- Linguistic parallelism is the use of pattern repetition in a literary text for a particular stylistic effect.
- Parallelism sets up a relationship of equivalence between linguistic items and strongly urges a connection between them.
- Epic is a long narrative poem in prose or verse that tells a story about the adventures of a popular hero.

Reflections

- How has this session equipped me to analyse appreciate African poetry?
- What experiences have the study of dirge, myth and epic taught me so far?
- How do I explain to a colleague the term “parallelism” as it applies in poetry appreciation?

Discussion

- Discuss the instances in “Owusu” that highlight the belief that the dead are not entirely separated from the living.
- What makes the poem “Fulani Creation Story” interesting?
- How does the narrator convey a sense of the supernatural in “Sundjata”?

UNIT 3: COLONIAL AFRICAN POETRY

In this session, we shall look at the poetry composed to address the African on the coming of the European and its effect on the African. The discussion begins with the factors that triggered such compositions. We shall also introduce and examine how David Rubadiri, Mbella Sonne Dipoko and Ama Ata Aidoo present their views on the advent colonial elements and its effect in “An African Thunderstorm”, “Our History to Precolonial Africa” and “Where the Bead Speaks” respectively. This canon of literary texts is selected across Africa to reflect continental concern. The issue of gender is also addressed. The discussion will look at these African poetry as reflecting African origin, experiences, linguistic flavor, artistry and thematic considerations. The ultimate aim is to equip you with the needed skills to do meaningful literary analysis of any given poem. You are being prepared to see the study of poetry as a means of developing literacy to adequately reflect varied situations in life.

Learning outcome(s)

By the end of the unit, the participant will be able to:

- Identify and explain the major concerns expressed in colonial African Poetry.
- Describe the linguistic creativity in such poems.
- Discuss thematic pre-occupation of the selected poems.
- Identify and discuss the literary devices used in the selected poems.
- Appreciate other poetry to evince such thematic concerns.

SESSION 1: PREOCCUPATION OF COLONIAL AFRICAN POETRY?

In this session, we are discussing the concerns of colonial African poetry. The inhumane exigencies of Africa’s contact with Europe are presented in poetic art form. David Rubadiri’s “An African Thunderstorm”, Mbella Sonne Dipoko’s “Our History to Pre-colonial Africa” and Ama Ata Aidoo’s “Where the Bead Speak” reflect some of the conflicts identified and other issues of continental relevance.

Learning outcomes

By the end of the session, the participant will be able to:

1. Identify and discuss conditions that necessitated the composition of such poems.
2. Link background information to the meaning of Rubadiri’s “An African Thunderstorm

Major conditions that necessitated creative response

Historically, the arrival of Europeans to the shores of Africa in the fifteenth century was given official seal in the nineteenth century. Following the partition of Africa in 1885 at Berlin, most African people had signed agreement to give rulership of the land to the Europeans. Today's Ghana, then Gold Coast had signed a Bond with the British on 6th March, 1844 to give it the status of colony; losing its independence, sovereignty and handing its subjects over to the queen. This arrangement affected a several aspects of the African's life. Do you think the arrival of the Europeans did not have any positive effect on Africans? I propose that the class debates on this. Have you read any poem that recounts the good of the encounter?

Let us admit that they have influenced us positively but as a people, the consequences far outweigh the positive. The negative effects affect the core values of Africans, depriving them of their unique identities and creating both intra and inter conflicts as a result of the introductions that the Europeans made into the mainstream African life. Mention and explain the areas of conflict that affected the African.

In what has been recognized as “one of the key features of the continent's literary history” (Gikandi, 2005, p.xii), writing set in and about colonialism tend to raise questions to oppose colonialism. Attacks are directed towards the political, cultural, and social agendas and practices of colonialism. The fundamental basis upon which colonial rule was given credence are also probed in these writings.

- i. Cultural Conflict is seen when the arrival of the European disturbed the cultural elements of the society. Naming, festivals,
- ii. Religious Conflict has to do with the introduction of Christianity and its opposition to the traditional religious practice of Africa. Awoonor's “The Cathedral” is a good example
- iii. Social Conflict shows in social choices as in number of wives a man could have, choices one makes in the social life etc. Aig-Imoukhuede's “One Man for One Wife” and Okara's “Piano and Drums” evince this.
- iv. Institutional Conflict reflects the traditional legal systems as against the European structure of legal system as seen in Aig-Imoukhuede's “One Man for One Wife”
- v. Break in African nationhood and personal identity and dignity of the African; Msthal's “Nightfall in Soweto

I will urge you to find time to read these poems. You can find them in Vincent and Senanu's *A Selection of African Poetry*.

The inhumane exigencies of Africa's contact with Europe are presented in poetic art form. David Rubadiri's “An African Thunderstorm”, Mbella Sonne Dipoko's “Our History to Precolonial Africa” and Ama Ata Aidoo's “Where the Bead Speak” reflect some of the conflicts identified and other issues of continental relevance.

Introduction to David Rubadiri's "An African Thunderstorm"

The poet, David Rubadiri, born in Malawi in 1930, was trained as a modern African literary scholar in Makerere University and King's College, Cambridge. He is considered as one of the earlier creative writers in East Africa. He is not only known for his poems but he has a novel, *No Bride Price* to his credit. As a politician and literary creator, Rubadiri shows his disgust towards the colonial elements who raided Africa through his use of extended metaphors and natural phenomena. Let's pause and read the poem silently.

"AN AFRICAN THUNDERSTORM"

From the west
Clouds come hurrying with the wind
Turning sharply
Here and there
Like a plague of locusts
Whirling,
Tossing up things on its tail
Like a madman chasing nothing.

Pregnant clouds
Ride stately on its back,
Gathering to perch on hills
Like sinister dark wings;
The wind whistles by
And trees bend to let it pass.

In the village
Screams of delighted children,
Toss and turn
In the din of the whirling wind,
Women -
Babies clinging on their backs
Dart about
In and out
Madly;
The wind whistles by
Whilst trees bend to let it pass.

Clothes wave like tattered flags
Flying off

To expose dangling breasts
As jagged blinding flashes
Rumble, tremble and crack
Amidst the smell of fired smoke
And the pelting march of the storm.

Let us attempt to paraphrase the poem. One major approach to effective study of poetry is the ability to paraphrase the poem.

The poem describes the upsurge of the thunderstorm as it rushes in “from the west”. The uncertainty of what the clouds holds comes out since the rain bearing cloud carries windstorm, thunder, lightning and rainstorm, a possible constituent of the “thunderstorm”. We read that the wind was rushing in from every angle and, in to occupy every space. In the process, the wind and its content dislocate entities to make room for itself

Turning sharply
Here and there
Like a plague of locusts
Whirling,
Tossing up things on its tail

The strength and nature of the wind “Like sinister dark wings” makes it difficult for anyone to oppose it. As it approaches, both human and nature bend to give it way. Those who are unaware of its effects like children attempt to play along as in

In the village
Screams of delighted children,
Toss and turn
In the din of the whirling wind,

On the other hand, those who resisted the wind – Women - were subjected to inhuman treatment

Clothes wave like tattered flags
Flying off
To expose dangling breasts

At the end the wind storm finally pours out its contents of thunder, rainstorm, lightning, firestorm and the rain. Do you think the persona is just talking about the natural phenomena?

In other words, the poem recounts how the colonial elements rushed to Africa from Europe through the Atlantic ocean. Our forebears received them unaware of what the colonialists had (rain cloud). They arrived only to destroy the cultural fiber of African society unmindful of its effects “Like a madman chasing nothing”. Do mention some of the consequences that came with the arrival of the colonialists.

- i. Partitioning of Africa to create artificial boundaries among Africans,
- ii. Destruction of African culture and introduction of European ones i.e. Christianity, Monogamy, Nuclear family system,
- iii. Breaking the moral codes of the African etc.

Those who didn't want to confront the colonial masters looked on unconcerned, others Africans (like children) teamed up with to plunder Africa while the few who resisted (represented here as Women) suffered the anger of the colonialists. The colonialists then had a free way to exploit Africa the way they wanted (And the pelting march of the storm).

Subject matters/Themes

I hope you understand the two terms above. If you are in doubt, you use your phone to search for the meanings and the distinction between them. Now, in groups, identify some thematic concerns that the poem discusses.

- i. The arrival of the colonial elements and its effects on Africa and Africans
In the earlier session,
- ii. The various roles played by various Africans in the exploitation
The tree comes in to symbolize those who did not want to incur the displeasure of the colonial elements and thus stayed away from the colonialists to give them space to exploit Africa. The children reflect those collaborated with the Europeans to plunder Africa. This is an indication that the exploitation of Africa cannot be solely blamed on the colonialist; some Africans contributed and benefitted from it.
- iii. The effect of disaster on the vulnerable
The major character here is the woman. It is evident that the woman represents those resisted the colonialist. Mention any nationalist who helped to fight for the independence of any African country. The suffered series of intimidation and in some case, exiled, banished or imprisoned.

The interesting aspect of literature is the fact the poet has been able to weave the historical narratives of Africa in a short poem but has succeeded in communicating the entire narration. I hope will also find time to craft beautiful poems that reflect events of life.

Literary Analysis of “An African Thunderstorm”

In the earlier session, we explained the poem and discussed the thematic issues raised. We also linked the issues to colonial context and showed the roles played by various Africans. In this session, we are going to examine the artistic use of language in the poem.

Let's keep going

The structure of the poem

The poem is crafted in four stanzas with each stanza bringing out an aspect of the content. Stanza one announces the coming of the wind and describes the nature of the wind and its efforts in displacing entities to “perch” itself. The next stanza focuses on the building of the cloud/wind into fearsome entity of the “pregnant cloud”. It also describes the characteristic of the cloud as a “dark sinister wing”. The third, shifts focus the pastoral/rustic setting where the effects of the wind through to the thunderstorm are felt. The ignorant/naïve children who are oblivious of the effect of the colonialists seem happy while women display panic and attempt to put things right in the face of threatening danger. The climax is reached in the last stanza where the thunderstorm hits and echoes in sound effects.

The form echoes the rhythm in the varied length of the lines. Some of the lines are very short (one word line) as against complete sentences of seven words

In all these, it must be realized that the stanzas connect and sequence the message. Discuss in your group how this is achieved in the poem.

USE OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Metaphor: The poem is an extended metaphor. This means that the event described in the poem is used to compare with a real event. Beside this, there are specific entities that have reflection on their meanings. Thunderstorm, wind, cloud etc reflect specific nature of the advent of the colonial elements. Can you map them? Once again, the effect is that it creates vivid sensory perceptions in the poem.

Symbolism: There are several nouns used in the poem that do not represent themselves. We have had mention of some of them. Can you recall them?

Women, children and trees are only used to represent broader entities. Visit the previous session to remind yourself of them.

Simile is a comparison that employs overt elements of contrast such as: as, like, than, prefer to etc. The poem abounds in these. Identify them. What do you think are their effects in the poem? The similes you have identified help create vivid images as the abstract entities are compared with immediate entity that makes the abstract real.

Sound devices

Enjambment: The lines are mostly unpunctuated; creating continuous sense flow into succeeding lines. It also creates space for the short lines to be read swiftly to reflect the movement of the windstorm.

Onomatopoeia: This is where the sound reflects its maker or suggests the entity that makes the sound. The sounds made by the lightning, thunder and rain are echoed in

As jagged blinding flashes
Rumble, tremble and crack

Alliterations are evident in the poem to foreground the enormity of the thunderstorm. At least the end syllables of “Rumble, tremble” echoes the phenomena.

The dashes in “Women - /Babies clinging on their back -” induces a hold back to deepen their vulnerability and creates sympathy for the vulnerable.

Diction: Diction refers to the choice of words of the poets in the poem and its arrangements to achieve an effect. There is a sense of chaos, disaster, destruction, havoc and confusion in the poem and this is evident in the choice of words and the imagery. All the similes identified point to this. The major nominals such as plagues of locust, whirling, tossing, madman, dark sinister wings tattered flags etc create a gloomy atmosphere and pathetic tone for Africa.

The participles in the poem also give a hint of continuity. The “ing” participles suggest that that phenomenon has not ended but it is an ongoing process. Underline all the “ing” participles and discuss their effects on the poem.

Perspective of Presentation In this poem, the persona adopts the descriptive narrative approach to present the message. In the narration, the persona creates vivid pictures of the phenomenon he is presenting through similes and metaphors such that readers can associate with the description. The tone is that of someone in a hurry to escape an incident.

Key Ideas

- Historically, the arrival of Europeans to the shores of Africa in the fifteenth century was given official seal in the nineteenth century.
- Attacks are directed towards the political, cultural, and social agendas and practices of colonialism.
- The inhumane exigencies of Africa’s contact with Europe are presented in poetic art form.
- “An African Thunderstorm” is an extended metaphor the event described in the poem is used to compare with a real event.
- The persona adopts the descriptive narrative approach to present the message.

Reflections

- How will you explain the historical events influencing colonial poetry?
- How do colonial experiences influence an African poet’s composition of poetry?
- What new knowledge have I gained from colonial poetry studied in this session?

Discussion

- Identify one character in the poem and explain its symbolic role.
- Discuss any of the themes with your colleague participants.
- Identify **three** images and discuss their relevance in the poem.
- What is the literary importance of diction in this poem?
- Describe the tone of the persona in the poem.

SESSION 2: LITERARY ANALYSIS OF AIDOO’S “WHERE THE BEAD SPEAKS” AND DIPOKO’S “OUR HISTORY TO PRE-COLONIAL AFRICA”

In this session, we shall read and discuss Ama Ata Aidoo’s poem “Where the Bead Speaks” and Dipoko’s “Our History to Pre-colonial Africa”. We shall discuss the backgrounds and literariness of the two poems as well.

Learning outcomes

By the end of the session, the participant will be able to:

1. Discuss the backgrounds of the two poems studied in the session.
2. Identify the literary elements the poets employ in the poems.
3. Discuss the literary effects of the elements on the poems.
4. Explain one’s likeness or otherwise for the poems.

AIDOO’S “WHERE THE BEAD SPEAKS”

Background information

Ama Ata Aidoo is a Ghanaian literary writer who is famous for her dramatic texts such as *Dilemma of a Ghost*, *Anowa* and short stories like *Changes: A Love Story*, *No Sweetness Here* and others. List the other literary texts written by Ama Ata Aidoo. Aidoo is a dramatist, novelist and poet. She is very much interested in writing to reflect the experiences of her people. As a feminist writer, she is sensitive to the African cultural contexts which provide information for her creativity. Unlike other radical feminist, she tries to create an objective balance between roles played by males and females. Aidoo is a Mfantse, from Ajumako; she schooled at Wesley Girls’ High School, Cape Coast and continued to University of Ghana for her undergraduate studies. Her literary prowess was unearthed when she was a student at Wesley Girls and wrote her first play when she was an undergraduate student at University of Ghana. It must be mentioned that her poetry is not as well read as the other two genres. Use your phones to find the meaning of ‘feminist’ and ‘genre’.

On the poem, Aidoo’s she has composed over 25 poems for beads. ‘Give me bead that’s wrapped in joy / Find me a bead to carry my grief / We sing of beads and sing with beads / Just see how well

they show on us.’ In celebrating the bead Ama Ata acts as the Chorus in the drama in the beads. Highlighting the significance of the role of beads she appears in a variety of moods: whimsical and playful ‘And there are beads around my waist / For my own and my dot-dot’s eyes’. Angry and indignant at the role chevron beads played in the barter of human life she burst out with words echoing a quarrel: ‘So don’t talk to me of the chevron / Don’t break my ears!!!’ These are some of the titles such poems and with each poem Ama Ata Aidoo affirms the attitude of near-reverence with which beads are held in our culture.

The poem, “Where the Bead Speaks” is multi-perspectival poem which recounts and discusses the nature, make and importance of the “bead” in the life of the African. Brainstorm on these: What are the uses of beads in your culture? Describe to us how beads are made. Share with the class what beads are made of. Do you know of any foreign material to which the bead is compared? Answers to these are what Aidoo discusses in the poem. Let’s read the poem:

AMA ATA AIDOO “WHERE THE BEAD SPEAKS”

My uncle was the prophetic one,
throwing his beads this way and that,
divining, foretelling,
warnings galore, sweet promising.
One eye on the past, four to the future,
half a dozen or more for now.
He was good if the news was good;
for evil news we blamed the beads.

Made from bones
or fashioned glass,
cut out from stones
or beaten brass

It’s the many human hours, Sister,
it’s the sweat and blood, Brother,
which makes the bead a thing apart
from precious diamonds, opals, and gold.

Turn them this way, shake them that way,
see how they shine incandescent,
see how they glow
in a million hues.

Elegant and enchanting bead,
flowered flawed, folded, or fielded,

you are the true frame of our feasts,
your festivals, fetes, and fiestas.

Give me a bead that's wrapped in joy;
find me a bead to carry my grief.
We sing of beads, and sing with beads;
just see how well they show on us.

Beads are the zeze of our joyous trails,
the ziz of life when all else fails.
Beads are zany, zesty, zingy,
the greatest zaiku, a grief zapper.

Speak to me of beads, Grandma,
speak to me.
Talk to me of beads, Nana,
talk to me.

She brightened up immediately,
she looked at me with a welcome smile.
Grandma pulled up a stool and sat,
she listened well to me and asked:

“You want a tale on beads, do you?
You want a tale or two?
I'll tell a tale or two to you.
But to speak to you of every bead,

in words that sing and dance like them,
you and I shall surely need
more than my life in hours and days,
more than your life in weeks and years.

A million lifetimes is not much
if beads are the theme, the thought, the thing.
We dive for beads, we swim, we float,
we mine for beads, we comb the woods.

Koli beads for the infant
on his wrist and on her waist,
cascades of white beads for the mother,

a very fitting celebrant.

There are beads that are tame
like what welcomed baby here;
there are beads that are wild,
lion's teeth, lightning struck.
And there are beads around my waist,
For only my and my dot-dot's eyes!!

Have you seen my love tonight?
Asked the ardent warrior youth.
Light of step, curved like a bow,
her eyes were wonders to behold.

She was oiled and very clean,
she was powdered like a queen,
she wore a sarong of the purest silk,
her toes were nestled in their thongs.

Have you seen my love tonight?
She who wore gold beads in her hair?
Then the pretty maiden asked,
who has seen my love tonight?

Who has seen my warrior brave?
he had said no more to war,
he had buried his arrowhead.
His girdle was free of blood and sweat.

He was adorned in his very best,
he was oiled like a king,
with beads of silver in his hair.
Who has seen my love tonight?

They welcome us here in the palest white
and bid us farewell in black,
sometimes blue, and brown, and red,
metallic green, or indigo.

There are beads, by far the most,
that are polished, tarred, and feathered.

There are beads, worked over and under,
elegant hued, thin and narrow.

Beads are the zaffered, the zingiest,
the zenith of all great times.

Cool, calm, and forever collected,
clawed, clayed, or colored,
constantly changing, bead
you are the best, you are the greatest.

So don't talk to me of the chevron.
Don't ever talk of it.
Don't break my ears on the chevron.
Don't break my ears!!!

As barter for my life and yours,
no gem on earth could fit the bill.
Not gold, and if not even gold,
then what on earth is chevron?

I dread the chevron.
It was a weapon
of oppression,
and not at all . . . a bead.

Seven whole humans for one bead?
And what kind of trade was that?
A layer each of sand and mud
for the lives of our kinsmen?

So what if it was one and not seven?
One soul for a shiny piece of bead?
This sounds like the greatest greed,
this sounds like utter foolishness!

Don't talk to me of the chevron,
don't even mention it.
Don't break my ears on the chevron,
don't break my ears.

They say that cheap beads prattle,
rattle, and tattle,
but great beads never talk.

Yet if a string of beads is fine,
it sings,
it dances,
it jumps,
and sizzles.

If a string of beads is truly fine,
it can speak in a million tongues.
It will have something for all,
and say the most amazing things.

And every now and every then
every bead laughs out aloud.
There are beads that are smaller
than the hopes of a mean mind.

Though called bodom, as in a dog,
poochy pug, puggy pooch,
bodom beads, they are so big,
they are the elephants of the pack.
They lead the way
and announce the day.

The nature of beads is a mystery,
the how of it, the feel, the glow
of earthly gems: the least and most,
our first and true try to create, to beautify our human selves.

The best of doors to human hearts,
our spirit's window to the world,
beads clothe our woes in vivid color.
Beads like angels plead for us.

Beads can lift the heaviest heart.
And like tea and precious brews,
beads can warm us when we are cold,
and cool us when we are hot.

Blessed are the beads
that bring us peace.
Spare us, O Lord, in this lifetime,
beads of war, chaos, and strife.

No beaded strings of calamities,
earthquakes, floods, and famine.
No veritable tsunamis of woe.
Keep us cool and keep us warm.

For each color in the rainbow,
there is a bead, somewhere on earth:
a million years old, if a day,
or shy in its newsness, and done this dawn.

Blue beads, green beads,
yellow beads and grey,
black beads, white beads,
red beads and brown.

Your rise from heaps of your own ash
with more of you than ever were.
You, bead, are an awesome one,
you are the phoenix of the years.

Their making uses endless hours,
the how, the when, the what of it.
The wearing is by a billion souls
whichever way, however much, and everywhere . . .

Mined and molten
man-made wonder,
raw organic, or cooked, and dried,
forever treasured, forever prized.

Bettered and bartered,
broken and beaten,
burnt or badgered,
bruised and bloodied

you are the never-left-behind,
oldest, ordered, owned invention.
Pure and precious, polished pearl,
still safe, sacred, scraped, or scratched;

Traded, treated, tough in trouble,
unique, unmatched, unbreakable.
Verdant velvet, virginal as rain,
beads are virile, vestal, vain.

Gilded and golden,
there can be no palanquin.
If you are not sitting with the king,
you are the queen,
the soul, and spirit within.

Beads are deserving,
beads are worthy,
wash me some beads to warm my skin,
a token of love, a gift for my kin.

Hollowed and hallowed,
jingled, jangled, juggled,
you are our life's companion,
the closest friend until the end.

Don't tell me if there were no beads
something else could meet our needs.
Something what? Something where?
Please keep it there, even if it's rare.

The poem opens with the persona identifying with the bead in the sense that a relative is a known diviner who uses the bead to recall the past and predict the future. The narrator adds that the bead is made from bones, glasses, stones, brass, diamond or gold in its making. The process is described as hectic and difficult.

It's the many human hours, Sister,
it's the sweat and blood, Brother,
which makes the bead a thing apart
from precious diamonds, opals, and gold.

The bead reflects occasions of life such that there are beads that are worn on specific moments of celebration, festivals, rite of passage and social occasions. The infant narrator who sees herself incompetent to tell of the beads, turns to the grandmother and pleads with the grandmother to throw more light on the beads. In Nana's readiness,

She brightened up immediately,
she looked at me with a welcome smile.
Grandma pulled up a stool and sat,
she listened well to me and asked:

The drama engages Nana and the persona with Nana elaborating the characteristics of the beads in relation to its make, uses and process. For instance, Nana indicates that from cradle to grave the bead plays roles thus:

They welcome us here in the palest white
and bid us farewell in black,
sometimes blue, and brown, and red,
metallic green, or indigo.

Hence, specific beads are made for newly born babies, new mothers, lovers, warriors, queens, kings etc. the one who wears the bead, the occasion and the purpose match with the material used in making it, its colour as well as the labour and time that get invested in it. In all, both narrators stress that the importance of the bead in African setting makes indispensable and irreplaceable in the African context. Nana strongly argues that

Don't tell me if there were no beads
something else could meet our needs.
Something what? Something where?
Please keep it there, even if it's rare.

She draws attention to the "chevron" which she claims "is a weapon of oppression". The narration links the chevron with all consequences that the arrival of the whites evokes. Her apprehension is foregrounded in the exclamations

I dread the chevron.
It was a weapon
of oppression,

The symbolic essence of the bead then comes forth as the chevron is used as a symbol. She draws attention to the barter trade system of the slave trade period where seven human beings were exchanged for a chevron. She sees the trade as a sign of greed, foolishness and inhuman. She detest chevron and all that it stands for.

Grandmother's excitement about the beads is seen in how she weaves songs with the sounds the beads make; making the poem musical. Nana shifts from addressing the persona to address the bead thus:

Cool, calm, and forever collected,
clawed, clayed, or colored,
constantly changing, bead
you are the best, you are the greatest.

The title of the poem then finds expression here. The popular statement thus

They say that cheap beads prattle,
rattle, and tattle,
but great beads never talk.

“Where the Bead Speaks” finds expression that

Yet if a string of beads is fine,
it sings,
it dances,
it jumps,
and sizzles.

If a string of beads is truly fine,
it can speak in a million tongues.

Beside the above, the persona indicates that the bead speaks loudly in its quietness through its makes, use, colour and occasion of use. The bead is described as mystery holds onto the circumstances within which it communicates. The bead expresses the inexpressible sentiments of humanity

The best of doors to human hearts,
our spirit's window to the world,
beads clothe our woes in vivid color.
Beads like angels plead for us.

Let us read the poem silently and identify the manner the bead speaks to and on our behalf. When this is done, then we would have explained and understood the title of the poem. As people who are familiar with the bead, share with us how the bead speaks in our culture and to us. Or do we use the bead to communicate? Share with us.

Subject matter/Themes

So, from the reading of the poem and the explanation, what do think is/are the message(s) the poet intends sharing with us? Let us share some of the issues raised in the poem.

- i. Every culture has its elements that communicates its concerns i.e. joy, sorrows, aspirations, hopes, challenges, successes, failures, romance, tragedies, festive feelings, moments of loss etc. in a manner that is best understood by its people. The bead then is a

symbol of communication. Aidoo in all her writings places value on cultural elements that serve the best interest of the people.

- ii. People should be smart enough to identify elements that work against their interest and disassociate with it. The obvious disgust for the chevron as it represents the foreign element that dragged Africans into slavery should be rejected at all cost. This foregrounds the quest to uphold the good virtues/elements that define us as a unique people. Identify some subject matters/themes and discuss with your colleagues.

Figurative use of Language

The poem draws its inspiration from a popular Akan adage that “great beads never talk”. This is illustrated in a subtle irony that though “great beads never talk” all beads “speaks” in the Ghanaian context. Proverbs used in the poem to trigger examination of the bead. The setting of the poem Ghana (the title of the anthology suggests) is a place where the bead speaks (as against other contexts of the bead.

Symbolism is seen in the use of “bead” and “chevron” where each represents a people and their cultural heritage. Whereas the chevron represents colonial elements and all that they stand for (especially, its oppressive, exploitative, slavery, barter system), the bead symbolizes cultural artifact of value that communicates in varied to and on behalf of the people.

Grandma is the representation of the link between present and the past, and can predict into the future. She is not involved here as the old woman figure but a repository of knowledge, wisdom, tradition, and cultural values. Thus her acceptance of an entity makes is wholesome for all.

Sound devices

Alliterations are extensively used in the poem. The portions narrated by “Grandma” mostly reflected her excitement through the rhythmic quality she places in the poem. Again, she renders the sounds the beads make musically thus

Beads are the zeze of our joyous trails,
the ziz of life when all else fails.
Beads are zany, zesty, zingy,
the greatest zaiku, a grief zapper.

The successive use of each of these /z/, /f/, /t/, /s/ etc sounds in specific stanza make the poem musical. There are instances of attempted rhyme such as “bones”, “glass”, “stones” and “brass” foregrounds the music in the poem. Ideas are repeated in semantic parallels structures for echoic effect as in

Give me a bead that’s wrapped in joy;
find me a bead to carry my grief.

In fact, there are several examples of these that you should identify and discuss with your colleagues.

Onomatopoeia is evident in the poem. The type of bead one wears evokes its unique sounds such that the bead is identified with the sound. Identify and connect the alliterative sounds in the poem to the types of beads.

Structure of the poem

Aidoo's poem is relatively longer, compared to others studied in this course. It is about fifty stanzas with a majority of the stanzas in four lines. Most of the stanzas are run-on-lines (enjambment), creating complete meaning within the stanza. Though each stanza dilates on an aspect of the bead, it all the stanzas connect to create a unit whole. The four line per stanza makes the poem a ballad, a poetic structure that is apt for discussing issues that border on the traditional/ cultural dynamics of a people. In ballad also situates the sense of musicality in the poem. The simple language structure, common place expressions, and language akin to its people makes the poem receptive to its readers; though it is relative long, these features make the poem reader friendly.

Diction

The persona uses simple, everyday conversational (colloquial) language in structures that reflect informality. The items mentioned in the poem are drawn from the environment, with the exception of "chevron". The simple sentences are augmented with simple rhythmic parallel structure such as

It's the many human hours, Sister,
it's the sweat and blood, Brother,

The simplicity of the language aids in its reception and participation.

Punctuations are effectively used. Mention some of the punctuations used for effect. The poem is full of rhetorical questions. Among other things, this draws and sustains the attention of the readers. Identify them and examine their rules in the poem. There are instances where the lines run into the succeeding ones. This calls for swiftness in the reading, imbuing the poem with musical quality.

The diction of the poem renders it a narration suitable for children. Do you see it this way? Justify your answer.

Perspective of Presentation

The poem is presented on the traditional folktale storytelling pattern and uses a number of approaches to share the message. The poem opens with the young narrator telling us of how the uncle used the bead as an instrument of divination. This is rendered in the past tense. She addresses "sister" and "brother" on the time people spend in making, fashioning, molding a bead and the energy invested. In this dramatic monologue, she engages the attention and involvement of the addressed who become participants in the narration. The use of present tense here transposes the context into present hence, the relevance of the bead today. It is a common feature of Aidoo to present a "Nana" in her writings to symbolize wisdom, intelligence and omnipresent. "Grandma" is drawn into the drama to play her

role. She opens her role by asking questions to ascertain the readiness to listen to her; a call for attention in story telling session. Nana intersperses her narration with rhetorical questions. She also moves between the past and present, an indication of the timelessness of the bead. The poem as a folktale, thus employs all the methods of story-telling to make it effective and exciting.

Self-Assessment

“OUR HISTORY TO PRE-COLONIAL AFRICA”

Background to the poem

“Our History to Pre-colonial Africa” was composed by a Cameroonian writer, Mbella Sonne Dipoko. Dipoko was Anglophone novelist, poet, and painter and he represents the first generation of Anglophone Cameroonian novelists and is still considered, along with Kenjo Jumbam as one of the foremost writers of Anglophone Cameroonian literature.

As Paul Theroux intimated, African writers were supposed to write "about solid tribal wisdom, ghoulish rituals and the inscrutable cruelty of colonialism - not to mention the inclusion of semi-profound proverbs and the utterances of very old men with dry skin and wizened faces," though Dipoko was interested in writing about sex and romance, he found space to discuss colonialism and its effect on African. Let us read the ensuing poem

“OUR HISTORY TO PRECOLONIAL AFRICA”

And the waves arrived
Swimming in like hump-backed divers
With their finds from far-away seas.

Their lustre gave the illusion of pearls
As shorewards they shoved up mighty canoes
And looked like the carcass of drifting whales.

And our sight misled us
When the sun's glint on the spear's blade
Passed for lightning
And the gun-fir of conquest
The thunderbolt that razed the forest.

So did our days change their garb
From hides of leopard skin
To prints of false lions

That fall in tatters
Like the wings of whipped butterflies.

The title of the poem suggests a link between the history of Africa on the arrival of the colonialists and the period before the colonialists arrived. He starts on a conjunction “and” an indication that something had preceded it. The “wave” of the sea has been personified as an entity that embarked on a research and arrived with its findings. The appearance of the findings appeared as pearls that threatened canoes as it appeared as huge as dead bodies of whales. The persona admits his kind mistook the sight for a good thing until that which came from the sea destroyed the very existence of the people

And the gun-fir of conquest
The thunderbolt that razed the forest.

The encounter with the findings changed its form and subsequently, its nature and attitude towards the people. The zeal of the people in fighting the findings was too difficult for the strangers so much that they had shed of the tortuous nature to feigned image of their original as in

From hides of leopard skin
To prints of false lions
That fall in tatters
Like the wings of whipped butterflies.

The persona ends by comparing the stranger to butterflies that have had their wings pulled off and left to wander with no prospect to fight back. The poem invariably is heightening the resilience of Africans to withstand and resist any foreign entity that threatened the existence of African. Can you mention any African who fought hard to resist the efforts of the colonialists? Can you compare this poem to Rubadiri’s “An African Thunderstorm”?

Subject matter/Themes

In groups, identify some of the issues the poem brings up. One major issue that comes up is the resilience of the African to fight invasions. The “waves” suggests the Europeans who came to Africa through the Atlantic Ocean. History has it that they came with the intention to exploit Africa and rob the continent of its mineral wealth. Read Senghor’s “I will pronounce your name” in the eulogized character is presented as resisting the colonial elements. The strength of the African is portrayed.

Again, there is the view that though how an entity appears may be different from its real nature. In such a situation watchfulness could reveal the hidden character. It calls for vigilance on the part people as foreign elements can easily infiltrate.

LITERARINESS OF DIPOKO'S "OUR HISTORY TO PRECOLONIAL AFRICA"

Figurative use of Language

What is the most striking feature of this poem? To me it is the use of language that is why we need to discuss the language.

The first literary element is personification used in "And the waves arrived ..." In personify the wave makes it easy for one to identify with the content and at the same time conceal the object of discussion. There is no mention of colonial elements in the poem but the mention of the wave suggests that. This is made meaningful by the associations that readers can make with the subject through the personification.

Simile is used in three instances in the poem. Can you identify them? Good. What is its effect? Well done. It concretizes the abstract as its comparison to the concrete make it real. For example, we all know "hump-backed divers" "whipped butterflies" and hence it is easy to associate "the waves" and "false lions" with respectively. This makes visualization possible and meaningful. Metaphor is the undercurrent of the poem as the entire poem can be seen as an extended metaphor. The entities "canoes", "carcass of whales", "false lion", "illusion of pearls" and "thunderbolt that razed the forest" are not metaphors. The poem is couched in a coded language that one reflects in others for the meaning. This metaphor is that which gives the poem its artistic quality.

Structure of the Poem

This is a four-stanza poem with the first two stanzas being three lines each, three and four being five lines each; each stanza constitutes a sentence. Can you share with the class what each stanza says? Stanza one announces how the foreigners arrived while stanza two gave the false impression the foreigners created on their arrival. In stanza three, the persona tells us how they also fell for the misrepresentation of the foreigner. Stanza four then spells out the how the people resisted the foreigners to change their nature. The narrative though captured in separate stanzas, the all link to tell a story so that at the end, one gets the complete picture out of which the message can be gleaned.

Key Ideas

- The poem, "Where the Bead Speaks" is multi perspectival poem which recounts and discusses the nature, make and importance of the "bead" in the life of the African.
- The bead is a reflection of occasions of life such that there are beads that are worn on specific moments of celebration, festivals, rite of passage and social occasions.
- The poem draws its inspiration from a popular Akan adage that "great beads never talk".
- The poem draws its inspiration from a popular Akan adage that "great beads never talk".

- Dipoko's discusses colonialism and its effect on African in "Our History to Pre-colonial Africa".
- The title of the poem suggests a link between the history of Africa on the arrival of the colonialists and the period before the colonialists arrived.

Reflections

- How do I connect Ama Ata Aidoo's background to her poem, "Where the Bead Speaks"?
- How have my experiences in this training prepared me to be better classroom practitioner?

Discussion

- Discuss "Where the Bead Speaks" as an extended metaphor.
- Explain how grandma makes the poem musical.
- From the poem, identify and discuss three uses of the bead.
- Identify and explain a major message the poet is sharing with readers.
- Discuss the effect(s) of the simile in "Our History to Pre-colonial Africa".

UNIT 4: POST-COLONIAL AFRICAN POETRY

In this Unit, we will be looking at the poetry composed to examine the aftermath of the European incursion in Africa. We shall examine Christopher Barlow's "Building the Nation", B.S. Tibenderana's "The Bastard" and Abena Busia's "Liberation" in post-colonial contexts of Africa. This canon of literary texts is selected across Africa to reflect post-colonial African concerns. The selected poems reflect gender concerns of the period and the people. The discussion will look at these African poetry as reflecting African origin, experiences, linguistic flavour, artistry and thematic considerations.

Learning outcome(s)

By the end of the unit, the participant will be able to:

- Identify and explain the major concerns expressed in post-colonial African Poetry.
- Describe the linguistic creativity in such poems.
- Discuss thematic pre-occupation of the selected poems.
- Identify and discuss the literary devices used in the selected poems.

SESSION 1: POETRY APPRECIATION I: "BUILDING THE NATION" AND "THE BASTARD"

In this session, we are going to try to do a literary appreciation of a given poem. Some of the things we will be looking at are meaning, theme and style as depicted in the poem, "Building the Nation" and "The Bastard".

Learning outcomes

By the end of the session, the participant will be able to:

1. Explain the meaning of the poem, "Building the Nation".
2. Identify and explain the poetic devices used in the poem.
3. Explain the meaning of the poem, "The Bastard".
4. State the theme(s) of the poem.

"BUILDING THE NATION"

Background to Barlow's "Building the Nation"

Christopher Henry Muwanga Barlow was born on 1st May, 1929. He was a Uganda poet and one of the recipients of the Ugandan Golden Jubilee medals in 2013. He was a civil servant and a poet. He is noted for his poem, "Building the Nation." It is possible his work as a civil servant enabled him to have an insight into what happened at the civil service. He died on 20th August, 2006.

“Building the Nation” is a poem that raises issues about the lifestyle of the African elite or bourgeoisie who assumed power after the majority of African countries became independent. The people had high hopes in their new leaders but they were disappointed as these leaders were caught up in the same lifestyle of the colonial masters. The discourse of nation building that should dominate political policies and public discussions were shelved. The poem highlights the hypocrisy of the elite in their attempt to portray themselves as the real nation builders.

Now, reflect on the following questions: Where did post-independence Africa go wrong in charting a new direction for her people? Can African countries ever reclaim their lost glory? Are the political and other leaders in Africa interested and committed in addressing the rot on the continent? Were these vices imported, nurtured, developed or entrenched in Africa? Remember that whatever the poet highlights in this poem could relate to any Africa country today. Does it speak to any situation in your country? Let’s read the poem and try to find out its meaning.

BUILDING THE NATION – CHRISTOPHER H. M. BARLOW

Today I did my share
In building the nation.
I drove the permanent secretary
To an important urgent function
In fact to a luncheon at the Vic.

The menu reflected its importance
Cold Bell beer with small talk,
Then fried chicken with niceties
Wine to fill the hollowness of the laughs
Ice-cream to cover the stereotype jokes
Coffee to keep the PS awake on return journey.

I drove the permanent secretary back.
He yawned many times in the back of the car
Then to keep awake, he suddenly asked,
Did you have any lunch friend?
I replied looking straight ahead
And secretly smiling at his belated concern
That I had not, but was sliming!
Upon which he said with a seriousness
That amused more than annoyed me,
Mwananchi, I too had none!

I attended to matters of state.
Highly delicate diplomatic duties you know,

And friend, it goes against my grain,
Causes me stomach ulcers and wind.
Ah, he continued, yawning again,
The pains we suffer in building the nation!
So the PS had ulcers too!
My ulcers I think are equally painful
Only they are caused by hunger,
No sumptuous lunches!

So two nation builders
Arrived home this evening
With terrible stomach pains
The result of building the nation – different ways.

The following analysis deals with the meaning of the poem. In discussing the meaning, the primary (denotative) and the secondary (connotative) meaning of words and expressions are taken into account. The driver symbolizes the working class in Africa. Does he have a name? Write down your answer and discuss it with your friends. The Permanent Secretary (PS) is a representative of the ideal elite class charged with managing the affairs of African nations after independence. Why do you think he is not given a proper name? The poem is a lyrical poem because it expresses the feelings, musings or emotions of the driver. It focuses on the inward reactions, insights or responses of the driver in relation to the attitude of the PS. It is also a narrative because it tells a story and presents a significant series of episodes in the life of the driver. Does the poem stress action? Does it suggest a conflict? Does it focus on a moral choice or difficult decision?

The poem is about the tragedy of African countries when they got the opportunity to rule themselves. Many countries, after independence, have been struggling to deal with the myriad of problems such as corruption, poverty and mismanagement. African leaders that took over power aped their colonial masters by plundering and feeding fat on the resources of the continent. It is a narrative as well as a dialogue between a PS and his driver that exposes the irony in building the nation. We encounter two major groups in the society: the masses represented by the driver, who are the real nation builders and the elite or bourgeoisie or compradors who had replaced the colonial masters immediately after independence. This group dabbled in the same evils the colonizers had been accused of.

We meet the driver of the PS telling us about what he does as a nation builder. He drives the PS to attend a meeting. This meeting is labeled “an important, urgent function” that turns out to be a “luncheon at the Vic.” There, the PS meets others of his class to have lunch. The persona, rather sarcastically, itemizes in detail the agenda for the “important, urgent function”:

The menu reflected its importance
Cold bell beer with small talk,
Then fried chicken with niceties

Wine to fill the hollowness of the laughs

Ice cream to cover the stereotype jokes

Coffee to keep the PS awake on the return journey

Indeed, the description is very apt and foregrounds the message of the poet. It is instructive to note that the poet has succeeded making the reader to salivate. The actions of the PS and his colleagues are so artificial. Because they are aping their colonial master, their laughs are hollow and the jokes looked stale. What word is used in the poem to signify the staleness of the jokes? Write down your response and discuss with your mates. It was a meeting to attend to matters of the stomach and at the expense of the tax payer. With his tongue in his cheek, the driver sarcastically highlights the routine of such “important, urgent function”. This is how some African politicians label such conferences, workshops, symposia or congresses. Issues about the plight of the masses are left unattended to.

The needs of the driver do not cross the mind of the PS. He does not even package some food for the driver who drives him around. This is very symbolic of the African leaders who do not care whether the working class gets what they deserve as nation builders. The PS takes coffee to stay awake on the return journey by engaging in a conversation with his driver. The interaction is very instructive and symbolic. It highlights how important the masses are to the elite as even in their impoverished state they still support the elite despite their overfeeding.

The PS rather annoyingly and sarcastically asks the driver if he has eaten anything. This is the highest form of mockery and hypocrisy. The two dichotomous groups of the African society are further highlighted: While the driver’s ulcers are caused by hunger, those of the PS are caused by sumptuous lunches. This is the prize we pay for building the nation differently. Indeed, the national cake is not evenly distributed. The driver sarcastically retorts:

So the PS had ulcers too!

My ulcers I think are equally painful

Only they are caused by hunger

Not sumptuous lunches!

It is important to note that you hear African leaders asking the masses to tighten their belts as a result of austerity measures to stabilize their economies while they loosen their belts. Why did the poet use exclamation marks in two instances? Who is Mwanachi in the poem? Write down your answer. Is there a hint of the driver urging his fellow men and women to rise up against the people they voted into office? Discuss these your mates.

The driver ends his narrative on a sarcastic note stating about the toils of two people eager to build their nation:

So two nation builders

Arrived home this evening

With terrible stomach pains

The result of building the nation-in different ways

Indeed, the poet has in a sarcastic tone, succeeded in unmasking the ills of the ruling class that have been hidden from the masses. He has exposed the rot in the society and he is asking his compatriots to remain focused. What do you make of the driver's composure and attitude during the trip with the PS? Why didn't he abandon the PS at the Vic? What lessons can you draw from his action? The lesson to be drawn is that no matter one's station in society, one must continue to perform one's role. If you are a teacher, you must not say that because the head of your school is not working, you will also not work. The driver is telling all of us that we have different roles and must work to build the nation.

Subject matter/Themes

Hypocrisy/Insincerity of Leaders

This theme is highly illustrated in the poem. The driver, from the beginning of the poem highlights it. The "important, urgent function" turns out to be a luncheon. The PS and his cohorts wine and dine using state resources. This reveals the hypocrisy of many African leaders who always play on the intelligence of the masses, pontificating that they are doing their best to change the fortunes of the country. The vivid description of the menu foregrounds the hypocrisy of the elite. List the items on the menu for the "important, urgent function". When the PS says "Did you have any lunch, friend?" we discern his insincerity. Why does he refer to the driver as "friend"? Is the driver really his friend? The PS goes on to say, "Mwanachi, I too had none/ I attended to matters of state". This statement rather "amused more than annoyed" the driver. By referring to the driver as "friend", the PS was echoing his insincerity, pretending to say that they share the same ideology and were both together in the struggle to build the nation. Indeed, this is a case of "Monkey dey work, baboon dey chop", a popular saying that demonstrates the inequalities in the society. The poem shows how some African leaders have turned themselves into leeches feeding on the blood and toil of the masses. This is their way of "building the nation" based on hypocrisy and insincerity.

Disillusionment/Disappointment

The masses are disillusioned and also disappointed in their leaders. The call to build the nation is interpreted differently by the PS and the driver. People who are committed to the process are disillusioned and disappointed by those who are to implement the policies. The driver is disappointed and disillusioned because the "important, urgent function" turns out to be "a luncheon at the Vic." This is a reflection of the trivial nature of the meeting. There is abuse of power, corruption and therefore, the driver is disappointed and disillusioned. The PS uses him to keep awake on their return journey after the luncheon. The disappointment and disillusionment are heightened in the following lines:

I attended to matters of state
Highly delicate diplomatic duties you know,
And friend, it goes against my grain,
Causes me stomach ulcers and wind.
Ah, he continued, yawning again,
The pains we suffer in building the nation!

The real nation builders work under very harsh economic conditions causing them stomach ulcers and wind, while their leaders wine and dine claiming they are also building the nation. This is the highest form of disappointment and disillusionment.

There are other themes such as marginalization, corruption, exploitation, misuse of state resources. Explain these themes. There is the view that indeed, there are no nation builders in the poem considering what the two characters tell us from the poem.

The message from the poem has been clearly stated. Nation building is the duty of all and not the preserve of the masses. The poem is relevant to any African country. The attitude of the PS is that which we can find exhibited by most politicians in Africa. Issues of exploitation, hypocrisy and marginalization are major concerns in many African countries.

In this session, we have tried to explain the meaning and the themes in the poem, “Building the Nation”. We found out that there are different ways of building the nation. While some go through pain to do this, others rather see it as merry making.

STYLE IN “BUILDING A NATION”

The use of Figurative Language

Irony

Indeed, the whole poem is an irony. Throughout the poem, there is a sense of building a nation but in the end, we are shocked to find out that what is said to be nation building is nothing but a hoax. What have the two characters, the driver and the PS contributed to nation building? The driver waits upon the PS to attend to “attended to matters of state/Highly delicate diplomatic duties you know.” Probably, the driver sat in the official vehicle sleeping or just whiling away the time with some other drivers. Another irony is that “an important, urgent function” is a “luncheon”. In fact, the agenda is a menu, instead issues of national interest:

The menu reflected its importance
Cold bell beer with small talk,
Then fried chicken with niceties

Wine to fill the hollowness of the laughs

Again, the PS informs us that his ulcers are caused by eating and drinking and not hunger. The title of the poem, “Building the Nation”, is ironic because we learn that what we witnessed in the poem is not nation building but rather building the stomach.

Use of contrast

The poem uses contrast to convey its message. There are instances of contrast in words and ideas. There is a contrast in building the nation either through sacrifice or through over feeding. There is also the idea that ulcers can be caused by hunger and also overeating. The driver ends the poem saying:

So two nation builders
Arrived home this evening
With terrible stomach pains
The result of building the nation-in different ways

The contrast reinforces the idea of building the nation in the eyes of the PS and his driver.

Sarcasm

This permeates the poem especially, when the PS refers to the luncheon as “important urgent function” and “Highly delicate diplomatic duties”. The exclamation, “So the PS has ulcers too!” is very sarcastic. The driver retorts when asked if he had had lunch:

I replied looking straight ahead
And secretly smiling at his belated concern
That I had not, but was slimming!

The PS’ response “amused more than annoyed” the driver also serves as sarcasm.

Satire

The driver tells us, “I drove a Permanent Secretary to an/ important, urgent function” and the PS tells us that, “I attended to matters of state. / Highly delicate diplomatic duties you know”. These are all references to lunch and they are very satirical. These are high sounding words meant to show that the PS is very hard working and interested in the welfare of the nation.

a. Sound devices

Alliteration

The instances of alliteration in the poem are the following:

Cold bell beer

Secretly smiling

Highly delicate diplomatic duties

The alliteration used emphasizes the tone of the poem and since these words are high sounding words, they tend to reinforce the ‘hollowness’ of the laughs and the staleness of the stereotype jokes of the PS and his cohorts.

Onomatopoeia

This is the effect created by words that imitate sounds. The following extract has onomatopoeic effect: “AH, he continued, **yawning** again”. The sound of yawning helps the reader to hear and also see the PS sitting lazily in his chauffeur-driven vehicle.

Perspective of Presentation

Dramatic presentation

The poem begins abruptly: “Today I did my share in building the nation”. This can be compared with a photographic shot. The effect is to focus attention sharply on the event being described in the poem. This also gives the impression that as the reader one is witnessing first- hand the event that is unfolding in the poem and that somehow one is part and parcel of the unfolding drama.

Diction

There are various patterns of words in the poem to indicate that the poem is very direct, simple and conversational. Words such as “share”, building, “drove”, “important”, and “suffer” are very simple and easy to understand. These are some of the words used by the driver. Can you find words that indicate the conversational nature of the poem? There are other words that are high sounding words such as “Highly”, “delicate” and “diplomatic”. These words underscore the hypocrisy of the PS. The significance of these words lies in the way in which they seem to contrast two opposing ideologies which is the widening gap between the two characters. Perhaps the poet wishes to imply that we cannot build the nation on empty talk. It may be suggested that the words have been carefully selected to alert the masses about the deceit of their leaders. It is also a way giving the reader the opportunity to assess the contribution of the PS and the driver since we are the ones the driver is reporting to. The choice of the words is based on the emotional association the words generate in him and mean to him and possibly in the reader.

Grammatical structure

The use of the exclamatory structure in “That I had not, but was slimming!” “Mwanachi, I too had noon!”, “So the PS had ulcers too!”, “Not sumptuous lunches!” is an appropriate means of

questioning the role of the PS in building the nation. The structures also foreground issues of hypocrisy, disillusionment, misplaced priorities and wastage in the system.

Structure of poem

The poem has 34 unequal lines. There are shorter lines and this might be suggestive of the power play as there are more people in the lower bracket than there are politicians.

It must be noted that all these devices work together to create meaning and to foreground the message the poet wants to convey. Can you identify other devices the poet used to create meaning?

Dear student, in this session, we have looked at how various devices such as sarcasm, irony, diction and grammatical structure work together to create meaning. Every device the poet employs has a way of helping to create meaning.

“THE BASTARD”

Background information

Hello again, we are going to look at a very important issue that prevails in our society. Do you know about the oldest profession in the world? Not much can be said about the poet, B.S. Tibenderana. He discusses city life and its attendant social vices. It appears the setting is the post-colonial era in one of the cities in Africa. The cities have become the magnet that draws people from the periphery to the core of the country. Can you find out the meaning of the word, “bastard”? This issue is not one that people readily talk about. Most societies frown on the subject. People used to look down on children born out of wedlock. Society expects couples to be lawfully and legally married before bringing forth children. The idea behind this is that both parents can have time and the resources to bring up these children.

Modernity seems to have eroded a lot of the values and mores of our society. Urbanization has driven a lot of people to the cities where the traditional values have been thrown overboard. City life seems to encourage the production of children who do not have fathers.

THE BASTARD – B. S. TIBENDERANA

An unlucky creation,
His mother, a street walker;
His lying father,
A champion at producing bastards.

It's not his fault,
Poor innocent bastard,
That in slums he's brought up
By a mother that has no husband

Though many a husband he sees
Caressing his mother
On a stool or lumpy bed.

Poor bastard,
Dumped on the ground to make room
For his nocturnal fathers,
Or on the mat to spend his horrid nights
Among the steaming pots of food
And walking rats.

An unlucky creation,
This bastard,
Before birth heavily and mercilessly tormented
With a rope tied tight round the mother's waist
To strangle the foetus
Or his unformed head
Squeezed with hands rough and murderous.

Down latrines they are thrown,
These bastards,
For the ditch is the easiest way
And the mother's a girl again
Aye a virgin, and what a virgin!
Repaired and holy!
O crime! O murder of small flesh
That might have grown
To greatness and wisdom.

An unlucky creation,
This discharge of a street walker
All know his mother's a whore
His father a cheat;
Everyone knows
The bastard will beget bastards

Never will he know motherly love
Or feel soft hands,
Only the rough fist of old whores,
Dried breast and stinking spittle,
And when his mother's gone

To earn her shilling
In the hot sun he will lie
In his own excrement
Under crows.

To bars they are brought,
The bastards
Thrown at the father
Like rotten pawpaws,
And he, to escape abuse and shame,
Runs faster than the kite,
His beer undrunk.

O Sanya Babies' Home know their secrets,
At her gate children mew like cats early in the morning
They are wrapped in sacks and rags
Their mother nowhere to be seen—
The child is gone, the load released,
Sanya Babies' Home will bear, of course, the cost.

Where could they get the money, the whores,
To feed the brats, when their own meal
Is a cassava stick with salt? Great drunkards
Who vomit on their knees in every bar
And drain old seed
from men they do not know.

Now let's find out what the persona tells us in "The Bastard". The opening creates a sad situation where the persona shows his pity for the bastard. He is referred to as an "unlucky creation". The first stanza tells us about his parents. His mother is a "street walker", a refined term for a prostitute. The persona vents his anger on the father and his description is damning. He is a liar and "A champion at producing bastards". He is a factory engaging in mass production of bastards instead of goods. Simply put, his favourite past time is fathering children he does not claim ownership. This is irresponsibility!

Stanza two states why this bastard cannot be faulted or blamed for his status and suffering. He is a "poor innocent bastard" having not asked to be brought into the world. His mother never got married but jumped from one man to another. The bastard sleeps on a stool or "lumpy bed. In stanza three, we hear more of the pathetic and sad situation of the bastard. Anytime his mother gets a 'customer', he is "dumped on the ground" so his "nocturnal fathers" can release the 'liquid fire' in their guns. Sometimes, he has to endure the cold night among "the steaming pot of food/And walking rats". This description is disturbing especially as he sleeps among the hot pots of food. In fact, the bastard never asked his mother and "lying father" to bring him into this world.

In stanza four, we are told again about the miseries of the bastard. Indeed, his worries started long before his birth. His mother had wanted to terminate or abort him. The graphic description is frightening:

Before birth heavily and mercilessly tormented
With a rope tied tight round the mother's waist
To strangle the foetus
Or his unformed head
Squeezed with hands rough and murderous

Such crude way of trying to take the precious life of the bastard is barbaric and heartbreaking. It is possible that the mother does not have money to seek medical help for a legal abortion. There is also the possibility that abortion has not been legalized in that part of the world and therefore the option open to the mother is to engage in an illegality.

Stanza five gives a description of how the unwanted children are treated. The unlucky bastards are thrown into latrines. Once their mothers about them, they are ready to resume their street walk. They are girls again looking "Repaired and holy!" The persona is really angry and disgusted by the actions of the mothers. He thunders:

O crime! O murder of small flesh
That might have grown
To greatness and wisdom

A rather pathetic situation as the society losses a lot of its future leaders through this bastardy act. The persona feels the unfortunate foetus would have become very important people in the society. Their lives have been aborted by these criminals and murderers.

In stanza six, the bastard is referred to as an "unlucky bastard" and a "discharge". He is an unwanted product from the factory of sexual intercourse. It is an open secret that his mother is a whore and the father a cheat. The persona avers that the cycle of producing bastards is never going to end soon because:

Everyone knows
The bastard will beget bastards

The next stanza states that the agony of the bastards continues: "he will never know motherly love/Or feel soft hands". He will never know and experience motherly love. He will grow up also being heartless. What he experiences is:

Only the rough fist of old whores,
Dried breast and stinking spittle,

And when his mother's gone
To earn her shilling
In the hot sun he will lie
In his own excrement
Under crows

Definitely, the bastard will look emaciated because he never enjoys his mother's breast milk. He is unkempt since his mother has no time to clean him up. This is because his mother's work schedule was really tight and has to work to earn a living. By lying in his own excrement, the bastard is doomed forever as crows keep him company.

In stanza eight, the bastards are taken by their mothers to look for their fathers. They are thrown "at the father/Like rotten pawpaws". Why are the bastards compared to pawpaws? Write down your answer for FTF discussion. The father shows a clean pair of heels:

And he, to escape abuse and shame,
Runs faster than the kite
His beer undrunk

What a spectacle to behold! The reader can see and hear the mother raining insults and curses on the father for being such an irresponsible producer of bastards. Meanwhile, there seems to be some ray of hope for the bastards as children's home, "Sanya Babies Home" provides shelter for the abandoned bastards who "mew like cats" "wrapped in sacks and rags". Why does the persona describe the bastards as being wrapped in "sacks and rags"? Write down your answer for FTF discussion. The Home bears the cost of bringing up these bastards who grow up knowing nothing about motherly love. Although the persona does not state it, it will not be a surprise if the Home treats them the same way their mothers treated them.

Finally, in stanza ten, the persona asks a rhetorical question that seems to justify the action of the mothers and the treatment meted out to the innocent bastards:

Where could they get money, the whores,
To feed the brats, when their own meal
Is a cassava slick with salt?

The mothers do not have enough to eat. Why is the persona comparing the meal to "a cassava stick with salt"? Put down your answer for class discussion. In their frustration, the mothers become "Great drunkards" who drink themselves to stupor and "vomit on their knees in every bar/And drain old seed/from men they do not know". Unfortunately, these bastards will grow up never knowing who their fathers are. It is instructive to note that in all this, it is the mother who bears the brunt of the pain

and struggle of taking care of the bastard while the producer of these bastards with little or no punishment as he shamelessly goes firing the liquid in his gun. **Subject matter/Theme(s)**

Now we have read about the message the poet has for us in the poem, “The Bastard”. Let’s try to find out the issues that come out as he narrates the woes of the bastard. The following issues come up in the poem:

- Irresponsible mothers and fathers;
- The dark side of city life;
- The woes of a bastard;
- Social vices in the city

Can you identify other themes in the poem? You should be able to explain these themes if you read the poem carefully.

STYLE IN “THE BASTARD”

The use of Figurative Language

We have explained the meaning of the poem and the themes identified in the poem. Can you explain the meaning of the poem in six sentences? What are the dominant themes in the poem? Put down your answers and discuss them with your mates.. Now, let’s begin with the poetic devices. Remember these are the tools the poet uses to create meaning. Poets use their themes as echoes to salvage various infractions found in a decaying cultural, social, political and economic landscape. Poetry uses powerful words to highlight deep thoughts about people, their actions and their societies. Poets explore the use of imagery to discuss important perceptions about people and their worldview. The voices in African poetry comprise history and reality. That is, what the poets write about is related to their history and what is happening today.

Metaphor

The message of the poem is as much conveyed by direct statement as by figurative language. The dominant figure of speech or poetic device is the metaphor. Indeed, the title itself is a metaphor. It is referring to all children who never know who their parents are and have sometimes been dumped at children’s homes. The following are other examples of metaphors:

- The bastards are compared to: “brats”, “foetus”, “the load” and “discharge”. This means that they are vulnerable, unwanted and pitiable. The metaphors are apt as they foreground the message of the poet and help create mental pictures of the bastards. With such comparison, the bastards win the reader’s sympathy. Find other examples for FTF discussion. Does the poet succeed in using these comparisons? Write down your answer and discuss it with your friends.

- The mother of the bastard is referred to as “a street walker”, “mother”, “a girl”, “virgin” “a whore”, criminal and murderer. The references depict her actions and the reader does not admire her for that. Try and identify other examples.
- The irresponsible father is compared to a factory producing babies instead of goods. Other descriptions are, “lying father”, “nocturnal father” and “a cheat”. The flight of the father from the mother of the bastard is compared to the flight of the kite. It is the speed of the father that is foregrounded here because it is very swift and fast. Look for other examples for FTF discussion.

Simile

- “The bastards/Thrown at the father/Like rotten pawpaws”: These lines are comparing how the bastards are handed over to their father to the way farmers or people dispose of rotten pawpaws. There is no human feeling in the mother as she throws the bastards at the father. They have become a nuisance just like the rotten pawpaw because of the putrifactory smell.
- “At her gate children mew like/cats early in the morning”: The cries of the bastards early in the morning are compared to those of cats. The comparison is in reference to the disturbing and cacophonous sound made by the bastards as they are left at the gates of the “Home” looking hungry and emaciated.

Pun

It is a play on words. In the expression, “His lying father”, there is a play on the word “lying”. It has two meanings. The father is a liar and also one who lies with women. The two meanings are applicable here because we are told that he is one whose favourite past time is lying and again, he is the one who is lying or sleeping with the women to produce the bastards.

Oxymoron

“Dried breast”: In this example, two semantically incompatible expressions have been brought together. This forces a non-literal interpretation. “Dried” has been paired with “breast” to foreground the imagery of a breast that has no milk in it. It highlights the health of both the mother and the bastard. The mother eats “cassava stick with salt”. This is not a nutritious meal and therefore, she cannot breastfeed the “unlucky bastard”.

Violation of selection restriction rule

The persona uses vivid imagery in his choice of words and poetic devices and these highlight the plight of the bastards. In the poem, the poet talks about “Dried breast and stinking/spittle”. In the extract, the persona talks about “Dried breast”. There is a violation of the selection restriction rule. In this vivid imagery, an adjective, “dried” has selected a noun with the features, /+human and

+liquid/. Selecting a noun with the features, /+human and +liquid/ to be pre-modified by the adjective, “dried”, is a breach or violation of the selection restriction rule. In the English language code, the adjective phrase “dried” modifies a lexical item with the semantic feature /-human and +solid/. Note that like human beings, words also select and keep habitual company. The breach of the selection restriction rule is acceptable. It serves the artistic purposes of foregrounding the message of the poet to the attention of the reader or listener. We get a picture of an emaciated mother and her bastard child.

Irony

This is a very important device in the poem. Some examples include, “virgin”, “mother” and “father”. These expressions are ironic because they actually mean the opposite of their surface meaning. The mother is not a “virgin” or a “mother”. The father is also not a “father”. The poet is also ridiculing mothers and fathers who shirk their responsibilities as parents. The poet ironically says the meaning of these words have been changed by the mothers and fathers in the poem.

Sarcasm

Aye a virgin, and what a

virgin!

Repaired and holy!

This is a highly sarcastic line and it sums up the attitude and feeling in the poem. It is a type of remark which makes one to weep. It makes one sad because what is considered a virgin is not what we understand the word to connote. Indeed, the action of the mother cannot be considered holy. It is blasphemous. The poet uses the action of the mother of the bastard to comment rather ironically on the condition of the bastard and what city life and modernity can do to people. It makes people criminals and murderers. The poet is mocking the mother for thinking that by aborting the foetus, she is a virgin. The poet seems to have adopted a detached attitude and he is able to conceal a great deal of his anger and hatred for the mother and the lying father.

Sound devices

Alliteration

The line, “With a rope tied tight round”, contains an alliterative sound /t/ in the words “tied” and “tight”. The alliterative sound, which is a solid, helps to establish the tone of the poem which is sadness. The repetition of the /t/ sound also echoes the sound made as the mother tries to strangle the foetus. The poet is able to foreground the message about the plight of the bastard in the poem.

Repetition

There are repetitions that are not alliterative but contribute to the meaning of the poem. The following words are repeated: “virgin”, “bastard”. The repetition of the word “virgin” is for the reader to condemn the mother for her actions while that of “bastard” is to court the sympathy of the reader for him. Can you find other examples of repetition in the poem? Write down your answer and discuss it with your mates.

Exclamation mark

How many exclamation marks did the poet use? Did you identify two? You are right. The reason for its use is to intensify the sarcasm to ridicule the mother of the bastard.

Perspective of Presentation

Dramatic presentation

The poem opens with the statement about a nameless creature who is said to be “unlucky”.. The effect is to focus attention sharply on the message of the poem. This also gives the impression that the reader or the listener should pay attention to what is going to be said. The persona appears to have adopted a detached attitude running a commentary on the event. His narrative also seems to suggest that he is an eye witness as well as an “ear witness”.

Diction

The words are apt and they describe the event very well. Some of the words are: “discharge”, “lying” “innocent”, virgin”. Can you identify other words that foreground this message? It appears the words are simple and everyday words that have been woven together to depict the plight of the bastard. The choice of the words is based on the emotional association the words generate in the persona and what they mean to him and possibly in the reader.

Grammatical structure

The main grammatical feature is the use of the present and past forms of the verb. The present tense is used to express a habitual occurrence, that is, what bastards go through every day. The past is the preferred mode for telling about past events. The event here is about the mothers tried frantically to terminate the lives of these bastards and the effort of these women to locate the fathers of these unlucky creatures. Examples of the present tense include “are”, “lie” and “knows” and the past tense are “thrown”, “released” and “wrapped”. Identify other examples.

Key Ideas

- “Building the Nation” is a poem that raises issues about the lifestyle of the African elite or bourgeoisie who assumed power after the majority of African countries became independent.
- The poet, in a sarcastic tone, succeeds in unmasking the ills of the ruling class that have been hidden from the masses.
- The message from the poem has been clearly stated. Nation building is the duty of all and not the preserve of the masses.
- Poetry uses powerful words to highlight deep thoughts about people, their actions and their societies.
- “The Bastard” reveals that some children are brought into this world without knowing their fathers.
- Some children never receive motherly love and are treated badly.
- Their mothers engage in prostitution and when they become pregnant, they try to abort the foetus and when that fails, they abandon the children.

Reflections

- How do I link the content of “Building the Nation” to current political climate in Africa?
- How has the poem, ‘The Bastard’ Influence my thoughts about street children in Ghana?

Discussion

- Explain why the poem, “Building the Nation” is a satire.
- Explain the tone and mood of the poem.
- What lessons have you learnt from the poem, “The Bastard”?
- What type of poem is “The Bastard”? Give **two** reasons for your answer.
- How is the poet able to discuss the theme of irresponsible parents?

SESSION 2: POETRY APPRECIATION II: “LIBERATION”

In this session, we are going to try to do a literary appreciation of “Liberation”. We are going to apply the techniques we were taught in the previous sessions. We are also going to try to look at the style used by the poet to foreground her message.

Learning outcomes

By the end of the session, the participant will be able to:

1. Explain the meaning of the poem.
2. State the theme(s) of the poem.
3. Identify and explain the poetic devices used in the poem; and
4. Explain the poet’s use of language.

“LIBERATION”

Background information

Abena Pokua Adompim Busia was born in 1953. She is a writer, poet, feminist and lecturer. She is known for two poetry collections: *Testimonies of Exile* (1990) and *Traces of Life* (2008). The poem we are going to look at is “Liberation”. Let us remember that the study of African poetry is one of the channels for educating students on issues of slavery, pre-colonial and post-colonial experiences. It is also to establish the identity of the African people as the poetry gives a voice to the people. African poets use their themes to salvage various infractions found in the decaying social, cultural, political and economic landscape.

“Liberation” is a poem about revolting against an oppressive system, especially about women’s liberation and empowerment. It speaks to the issue of equality and equity and encourages women to be strong in life. The poem also gives a new meaning to motherhood and encourages women to take the power inherent in them to overcome the violence against them. What other meaning is given to motherhood? Although the emphasis is on women, the poem could apply to any group of people who have been suppressed through no fault of theirs. It gives such minority groups hope and the opportunity to take their places in the society.

Now, reflect on the following questions: What are some of the atrocities perpetrated against women in the society? Apart from women, which other groups have not been treated fairly in the society? Why do such groups face such problems? Remember that whatever the poet highlights in this poem could relate to any Africa country today. Let’s read the poem and try to find out its meaning.

LIBERATION – ABENA BUSIA

We are all mothers,
and we have the fire within us,
of powerful women
whose spirits are so angry
we can laugh beauty into life
and still make you taste
the salt tears of our knowledge
For we are not tortured
anymore;
we have seen beyond your lies and disguises,
and we have mastered the language of words,
we have mastered speech.
And yes
we have also seen ourselves
We have stripped ourselves raw
and naked piece by piece until our flesh lies flayed
with blood on our hands.
What terrible thing can you do us

which we have not done to ourselves?
What can you tell us
which we did not deceive ourselves with
a long time ago?
You cannot know how long we cried
until we laughed
over the broken pieces of our dreams
ignorance shattered us into such fragments
we had to unearth ourselves piece by piece,
to recover with our own hands such unexpected relics
even we wondered
how we could hold such treasure
Yes, we have conceived
to forge our mutilated hopes
into the substance of visions
beyond our imaginings
to declare the pain of our deliverance:
So do not even ask,
do not even ask what it is we are labouring with this time;
Dreamers remember their dreams
when we are disturbed
And you shall not escape
what we *will* make
of the broken pieces of our lives.

This is an interesting narrative poem that should help you understand what women and other groups go through in life. The poet is saying enough is enough and this is the time for these groups to take their destinies in their own hands and act. Today, women and other minority groups in every jurisdiction and geographical location are calling for equal rights in various ways. Interestingly, pre-colonial Ghanaian society was not anti-feminist or against women. The place of women in the Ghanaian society was not inferior as compared to other areas. European travellers, colonial administrators and scholars who came from anti-feminist societies were surprised to see the independence of West African women who built their own houses and held absolute title to properties (Aidoo, 1985). Sadly, the portrayal of women as inferior in West African and Ghanaian societies was a colonial rhetoric. Thus in post-colonial West Africa, there is evidence of European legacy pertaining to women's inferiority.

Abena Busia focuses on the role of African women in the development of the society. Many of her works talk about women within a repressed patriarchal or male-oriented society. Even though she was exiled to Britain, her writings are from the perspective of post-colonial Ghanaian society. The social and cultural brainwashing done by colonial influence on the inferiority of women is depicted

and refuted in the poem. The poem opens with an emphatic statement made on behalf of women: “We are all mothers,” and “we have the fire within us,/ of powerful women/whose spirits are so angry”. Indeed, this pronouncement is a warning to all those who oppress women and other disadvantaged groups. The poet makes reference to “powerful women”. Who are these powerful women? Why are the spirits of the “powerful women” so angry? What has been done to their kith and kin that makes them so angry? Have their daughters been defiled? Have they been denied their basic rights as human beings? Yes, they are no more treated as human beings. These are the reasons why their ancestors are so angry.

The persona then highlights the role of women in life: “we can laugh beauty into life/ and still make you taste/the salt tears of our knowledge”. Women have become educated, knowledgeable, strengthened, galvanized and buoyed by the spirits of their forebears. They have learnt their lesson the hard way. There is a new beginning for women; that is based on the truth. They are no more afraid of the humiliation, torture and pain: “For we are not tortured/anymore”. The oppressors know the truth about the contribution of women to the development of the society. Women have re-discovered their potential and they have followed it up with a fight to reclaim their rightful places lost to colonial brainwash and ignorance:

we have seen beyond your lies and disguises;
and we have mastered the language of words,
we have mastered speech.

Women have done a reassessment, re-examination and purged themselves of all the things that have made them servants and slaves in their own society. They have educated and trained themselves to take up the challenge. In a bid to regain their position as intelligent beings, they have learnt the art of writing and public speaking; as depicted in the lines above. They have decided to tell their own story in their own voices.

History tells us that there were a lot of great women who even led their communities to go to war. Can you mention the names of some gallant women? It is also true that in pre-colonial times, African woman had a voice in the society but this voice was muted as a result of colonial influence. In Ghana, when there is an important decision to be taken or where a second opinion is required, our elders say, ‘Let us go and ask the old woman’. Do you have such a situation in your community? What other roles did women play in your community? In traditional Ghanaian society, there is a reference to the wits of the old woman in matters of great importance. Moreover, in the traditional system, the queen mother plays a major role in the installation of chiefs and this explains the important place held by women in African societies.

When the persona states:

we have also seen ourselves
We have stripped ourselves raw
and naked piece by piece until our flesh lies flayed

with blood on our hands.

She is echoing what women have done to assert themselves and their determination to surge on in the society. It entailed a lot of sacrifice, self-denial and perseverance to obtain what is legitimately theirs. There is a defiant poke at those who oppress women when the persona rhetorically asks:

What terrible thing can you do us
which we have not done to ourselves?
What can you tell us
which we did not deceive ourselves with
a long time ago?

It is instructive to note that the person admits that women have partly contributed to their woes: “What terrible thing can you do us/which we have not done to ourselves?” The persona also emphasizes that the oppressors of women do not know what the women they oppress go through:

You cannot know how long we cried
until we laughed
over the broken pieces of our dreams

The dreams are broken because the women were not allowed to become the lawyers, teachers, doctors, engineers they had aspired to become. People had rationalized that the place of the woman was the kitchen. She adds that sometimes “ignorance shattered us into such fragments”. Women are interested in expanding and extending their frontiers and moving on to greater heights:

We had to unearth ourselves piece by piece
To recover with our own hands such unexpected relics
Even we wondered
How we could hold such treasure

There is a clarion for a lifetime of rejection of the notion of suppression that afflicts women. This is because sometimes the women even wondered if it was possible to overcome the obstacles placed in their way. They are even surprised about the abundant talent that they are endowed with that enabled them to master “the language of words” and speech. Indeed, women are speaking in their own voices. The persona is very much interested in defiantly pursuing the agenda to rekindle the spirit of rebirth. She thunders:

Yes, we have conceived
to forge our mutilated hopes
into the substance of visions
beyond our imaginings
to declare the pain of our deliverance:

She acknowledges that the road to recovery is not going to be smooth. Though their hopes are mutilated, there is no turning back to reverse the situation. She avers that women’s action will raise questions and skepticism but she is quick to remind the detractors:

So do not even ask,
Do not even ask what it is we are labouring with
this time;

Dreamers remember their dreams

There is hope, no turning back as the persona ends with the message that though there are bound to be frustrations, intimidations, setbacks, victory belongs to women:

When we are disturbed
And you shall not escape
what we will make
of the broken pieces of our lives.

Certainly, the oppressors will not escape the wrath of women when they put together the broken pieces of their lives. Is it a case of revenge? Is it one of retributive justice?

Subject matters/Themes

In the discussions so far, the persona seems to be dealing with the following themes:

- Liberation of women or the oppressed;
- Women's liberation;
- Hope for the oppressed;
- A new Horizon for Women;
- The Storm is over.

“Liberation” highlights the themes that have been listed. The word choices and the persona's mood and tone of voice create the atmosphere of the group that has finally broken the ice and are ready to take their rightful place in the development of the society. Members of the group are asking for recognition, respect and encouragement. Can you find other themes in the poem?

In this session, we have tried to explain the meaning and the themes in the poem, “Liberation”. We found out that women have defied the colonial tag of being appendages. They have what it takes to be part of the rebuilding process and as such they must be recognized. The life of the African woman is summed up in the poem and the title aptly echoes the voices of women, LIBERATION.

STYLE IN “LIBERATION”

The use of Figurative Language

In the previous session, we explained the meaning of the poem and the themes identified in the poem. Can you explain the meaning of the poem in six sentences? What are the dominant themes in the poem? Now, let's begin with the poetic devices. Remember these are the tools the poet uses to create meaning. Poets use their themes as echoes to salvage various infractions found in a decaying cultural, social, political and economic landscape. Poetry uses powerful words to highlight deep thoughts about people and their societies. Poets explore the use of imagery to discuss important perceptions about people and their worldview. The voices in African poetry comprise history and reality. That is, what the poets write about is related to their history and what is happening today.

Metaphor

The message of the poem is as much conveyed by direct statement as by figurative language. The dominant figure of speech or poetic device is the metaphor. The following are examples of metaphors:

- “We are all mothers”: This is coming all women to mothers. This statement highlights the tenderness, caring nature of women. It is extending definition of mother beyond the ability to give birth to include one that sees a mother as someone who shows kindness and gives protection and hope.
- “Broken pieces of our dreams”: in this example, “dreams” has been compared to a solid material that has fallen down and is scattered into pieces.
- “mutilated hopes”: Hopes compared to a human body that has been severely disfigured.
- “broken pieces of our lives”: the lives of the women compared to solid materials that have been destroyed.

Hyperbole

“stripped ourselves raw/and naked piece by piece”: This is an exaggeration foregrounding the message of the poet. The women are saying that they have purged themselves of the negative placed on them. Such exaggeration highlights the extent to which these women have gone to change the narrative about their role in the society.

Rhetorical questions

- “What terrible thing can you do us/which we have not done to ourselves”
- “What can you tell us/which we did not deceive ourselves with/a long time ago?”

This device is effectively used in the poem to communicate to the reader the defiant nature of the women. The rhetorical questions show the bewilderment and a refusal to accept the situation the women find themselves. It is also meant to set the reader thinking about what these women are going through and for everyone to think about how their commission or omission has left women in such a state. It is these unanswered questions and other devices that give the poem its credibility.

Perspectives of presentation

Dramatic presentation

The poem opens with a sudden pronouncement to debunk a statement as to who is a mother. The effect is to focus attention sharply on the message of the poem. This also gives the impression that the reader or the listener should pay attention to what is going to be said.

Pattern repetition

In this poem, we can identify a few pattern repetitions or parallel structures:

“we have mastered the language of words”

“we have mastered speech”

“what terrible thing can you do us”

“what can you tell us”

“which we have not done to ourselves”

“which we did not deceive ourselves with”

These examples, which are clauses, follow the same grammatical pattern. Can you identify these grammatical patterns? The effect of this repetition of pattern is that it draws attention to itself and to the message of the poem which is women’s liberation.

Violation of selection restriction rule

The persona uses vivid imagery in her choice of words and poetic devices and these highlight the plight of women. In the poem, the poet talks about “Yes, we have conceived/to forge our mutilated hopes/into the substance of visions”. In the extract, the persona talks about “mutilated hopes”. There is a violation of the selection restriction rule. In this vivid imagery, a noun (abstract) with the features /-human/ has been given the features, /+human/. Conferring a human feature on “hopes” is a breach or violation of the selection restriction rule. In the English language code the adjective phrase “mutilated” modifies a lexical item with the semantic feature /+human/. Note that like human beings words also select and keep habitual company. The breach of the selection restriction rule is acceptable. It serves the artistic purposes of foregrounding the message of the poet to the attention of the reader or listener.

Structure of poem

The poet uses very few punctuation marks. This is to illustrate the nature of the issue at stake. The persona does not have time and the luxury to pause in delivering her message of liberation for women. She is eager to express the pain, torture that the women have to go through. The lines are not even in length and not all of them begin with capital letters. On the other hand, the poem still retains a rhythm of its own which is different from that of prose. We can say that this is free verse. Free verse has the literary effect of focusing attention on the message of the poem, which is about women’s liberation, instead of on secondary issues such as rhyme.

Diction

The words “tortured”, “lies”, “blood”, “shattered”, “mutilated”, “labouring”, “broken”, “flayed” and “disguised” underscore the pain, torture and humiliation women had to endure. They highlight the persona’s and women’s struggles to break through the physical and psychological boundaries imposed by their oppressors. Can you identify other words that foreground this message? It appears the words are simple and everyday words that have been woven into complex structures to depict the plight of women. It can be stated that this is a poem meant for an educated audience because of the

elevated language. The choice of the words is based on the emotional association the words generate in the persona and mean to her and possibly in the reader.

Grammatical structure

The main grammatical feature is the use of the present and past forms of the verb. The present tense is used to express a habitual occurrence, that is, what women go through every day. The past is the preferred mode for telling about past events. The event here is the pain that women went through in the past. Examples of the present tense include “are”, “have”, “know” and the past tense are “cried”, “did”.

Another important grammatical feature is sentence structure. In order to reflect spoken discourse, the poet uses a lot of compound sentences. Some of the lines are joined by the conjunction “and”. Examples are:

- “we can laugh beauty into life/and still make you taste”
- “we have seen beyond your lies and disguises, /and we have mastered the language of words,”
- “We have stripped ourselves raw/and naked piece by piece ...”

We can also identify some complex sentences which reflect the complexity of the issue being communicated. Indeed, the story of women is a very complex and complicated one. The literary effect of the complex sentences is to lend more credibility to the story of women. Examples are:

- “What terrible thing can you do us/which we have not done to ourselves?”
- “What can you tell us/which we did not deceive ourselves with/a long time ago?”
- “Yes, we have conceived/to forge our mutilated hopes/into the substance of visions”

Key Ideas

- “Liberation” is a poem about revolting against an oppressive system, especially about women’s liberation and empowerment.
- Abena Busia focuses on the role of African women in the development of the society.
- Women have done a reassessment, re-examination and purged themselves of all the things that have made them servants and slaves in their own society.
- The words “tortured”, “lies”, “blood”, “shattered”, “mutilated”, “labouring”, “broken”, “flayed” and “disguised” underscore the pain, torture and humiliation women had to endure.

Reflections

- What are some of the atrocities perpetrated against women in the society?
- How has the poem, “Liberation” change my perception about women?

Discussion

- What lessons have you learnt from the poem?
- Do you think the persona is confident about women's liberation? Quote from the poem to support your answer.
- How is the poet able to discuss the theme of liberation?
- Discuss how the poet's choice of words helps create meaning in the poem.
- Give **three** reasons why you like or dislike the poem.