

Research Article

Specific Artistic and Literary Values in Ngwaba¹'s Poetry with Reference to "Ode on Spirits", "If We Must Live", "I Know I'll be Chas'd, too" and "Ode on Poetic Justice"

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Abstract: In literature, writers make points through invented stories that unfold truth and teach wisdom. Those stories express high principles of life, and as Gilbert and Diana (2016:12) notes: "the values of literary works are intrinsic to the canon of literature". There is a great range of values in the four poems at hand. Ngwaba writes beautiful stories that are interesting and captivating enough to touch the audience's soul. In his preface to *Why I Write Poetry*, Ngwaba writes: "Poets are artists and art in all its forms plays an important role in shaping how we see and make sense of the world" (Ngwaba, 2017:1). Actually Ngwaba sees poetry as an art which, as he argues is an aesthetic expression of an ideal that an artist has in mind, and would like to express. He defines an ideal as a belief in high principles or in perfect standards, such as education and learning, immortality, order and justice, love as opposed to hatred, beauty as opposed to dirt/ugliness, tolerance, freedom, sensitivity, creativity, honesty, commonsense, hard work, determination, self-discipline, patience, etc. And talking about his craft as poet, he says: "I write poetry to raise those universal issues of all the time, to help stimulate imagination, and to refresh the understanding of our own existence (Ngwaba, 2017:9).

Keywords: Poetry, artistic and literary values, unfold truth.

1. Presentation of the four poems

Poem 1: "Ode on Spirits"

Some sell spirit,
And so write: "we sell spirit here":
For the body in trances?
And the soul, in ruin?

A story to retell:
When the breath says adieu,
The body falls
For the soul to say adieu, too:
For a rest, or for slavery?

¹Ngwaba Bimbala Ferdinand is a Congolese poet. He has been a poet laureate since 1996, and since 2006, he is a professor of literature and English studies at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences at the University of Kinshasa, the capital city of The Democratic Republic of Congo. He has published three collections of poems: *Why I Write Poetry* (2009), *Poems for Souls* (2017) and *The Souls at God's Time* (2020). He also wrote *Exercises in Poetic Discourse Analysis: from Theory to Practice* (2013). He published several poems in four different literary anthologies in the United States of America. He sees poetry as an art, and art itself as an aesthetic expression of an ideal that an artist has in mind, and would like to express.

The soul, your double, is
Spirit, and so immortal to die:
Spirit never dies.

When the breath says adieu,
After selling, or enjoying spirit, or the like,
Dark dirty souls unwhash'd and unclean'd
Turn into evil spirits, and
Quickly enchain'd for slavery!
To be overused
In harming and ruining lives
In the dark.

There's room, in the dark, for millions and millions
Of those in the kingdom of darkness.
Along with the prince of the dark?
And for whom Hell?

Poem 2: "If We Must Live"

If we must live, let's not live as men:
Live now, die tomorrow, leave all, and
Crash into a stuffy box,
Or be cremated
And then_ ashes! What a shame!
"We're gods!"
And life's sweet and eternal.

If we must live, let's live for the soul:
Live clean, smell sweet than scent.
"Gods we are!" And, life's sweet,
And the soul's eternal.

Let's not serve the body and the heart:
To rejoice now, die tomorrow with shame,
And be chased as criminals
While the landing was soft;
The flesh in pieces, and the soul into the fire!
"Gods we are"! And life's sweet,
And the soul needs peace.

Innocent soul!
Meant to inherit and sojourn
In peace, or into the fire?

Innocent soul_ heir!
Do you know where you'll go?
To hell, or under the alter of His Majesty?

Poem 3: "I Know I'll be Chas'd, too"

I know I'll be chas'd, too, some day:
Monday or Tuesday_ I don't know yet:
Decree since Eden's concealed in the Book:
Younger than the rebellion;

Ancient_ extremely old decree in force!
The Royal Charter reads,
And irreversible? No scientist or else?

You, too, will be chas'd too, some day.
Wednesday or Sunday _ I can't tell:
To be burnt or saved _ who knows?
Whether foolish, or wise;
Decree's been promulgated:
Ancient decree_ extremely old decree in force!
I read in the Royal charter.

Now I know we'll all be kicked out,
But as to where I shall be _ Me,
I think I know now;
My name in gold's written for _ life
That deep dwells in the word,
And my soul is all at rest,
That my life shall be restored.
With peace restored?

Poem 4: "Ode on Poetic Justice"

Long live the King for justice and retribution
Rewarding good and evil on time;
Good with good, and bad with woe,
The innocent freed, the guilty detained.

He films, records, and hears all silently
Until one's bottle filled.
Retribution! At an unexpected time!
We sow, we reap, right?

The foolish and the insane
Surprised! Say: "bad luck".
The wise informed says: "poetic justice":
We sow, we reap, right?

My soul is at rest within my heart
That justice is at work.
For retribution.
Good with good, and bad with bad,
And all_ poetic justice?
We sow, we reap, right?

Ngwaba's four poems are of such great artistic and literary values that they affect and shape the audience's mind and soul. The study of the context of each of the poems will contribute to the understanding of those values.

2. Context of the four poems

The context of Ngwaba's four poems is at the same time literary, religious, biblical, Christian, moral and scientific. In "Ode on Spirit", "Ode on Poetic Justice" and "If We Must Live", the context is literature because of the presence in the titles of the poems of *ode*, *poetic justice* and *If We Must Live*. An 'ode' is the name of the most formal, ceremonious, and complexly organized form of lyric poetry

(Bergam, 1989:446). It is one of the many types of poetry and briefly means ‘a word on...’. It is a poem addressed to someone/something or about someone/something. Example: *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (1819) by John Keats. The concept of *poetic justice* is one of the main devices of a plot in a literary work that Aristotle discussed. It is the fourth device of the plot. “Poetic justice is an acceptable coincidence, a kind of thing that we wish would happen; such as kind of revenge that is justified; an ideal justice with proper distribution of rewards and punishments, such as when a statue falls on its murderer” (Aristotle, in Ngwaba, 2019). Likewise, the context of “If We Must Live” is also literary because the title of the poem is closer to the Jamaican-American poet, Claude McKay’s *If We Must Die* (1919)² from which Ngwaba got probably inspired because the titles of both poems are alike; Ngwaba uses the verb “live” instead of *die* to take another orientation.

The biblical, religious and Christian context that contributes to the understanding of “Ode on Spirits” is perceived in the following stanza:

*There’s room, in the dark, for millions and millions
Of those in the kingdom of darkness.
Along with the prince of the dark?
And for whom Hell? (Ode on Spirits, vv 21-24)*

This stanza meets the Holy Scripture: ‘Enter by the narrow gate, since the road that leads to destruction is wide and spacious, and many take it’ (Matthew, 7:13).

The context of this poem “If We Must Live” that contributes to its understanding is mostly biblical and moral. The biblical context is the presence of some biblical words in the poem like “Gods we are!” (v10), and the use of variation which appears in the oppositions: ‘in peace, or into the fire?’ (v21); ‘To hell, or under the alter of His Majesty?’ (v24). The moral context is clear from the first verse that suggests a code of behavior to any people, Christian or not who want their souls to be saved on the day of the doom.

In “If We Must Live”, the biblical, religious and Christian influence that contributes to the understanding of the poem is the presence of the exclamation “*Gods we are!*” in verse 10 and it is found in the Old Testament and the New Testament:

*I had thought, “Are you gods,
Are all of you sons of the Most High?” (Psalm, 82:6).*

Furthermore in the New Testament, Lord Jesus quoting from Psalm 82 explains the above passage saying that the Law uses the word ‘gods’ to point out those people to whom the word of God was addressed:

*Jesus answered:
Is it not written in your Law:
I said, you are gods? (John, 10:34-35a)*

Straight from verse one, the poem seems to teach a moral dimension to the reader on how to behave in front of life’s sweetness. The poet invites the reader to live cautiously, carefully in order to avoid getting lost into the desires of the flesh, but rather take care of the soul that is meant to live eternally. The entire poem is like a code of conduct to the reader.

The context that contributes to the understanding of the poem “I Know I’ll be Chas’d, too” is essentially biblical or Christian and scientific. It is biblical because of the presence in the poem of

² Literary production by Claude McKay in (<https://www.litcharts.com>) of 12/04/2022.

Decree since Eden's concealed in the Book, verse three. The word *Eden* helps the reader to say that the word *Book* with a capital letter "B" means the Bible. "Eden or the Garden of Eden in the Bible, especially in Genesis points out the garden where the first human beings, Adam and Eve, lived in perfect happiness before they disobeyed God and were ordered by Him to leave (Deuter, 2015:489). And the phrase *no scientist or else* in verse seven comes to add to the context of the poem persuading the readers that the reality of man's pilgrimage onto this earth is irreversible, no one, not even scientists can change the situation.

The concept of poetic justice is also biblical and refers to God's retribution as stated in Matthew (25:31-46) and in 2 Corinthians (5:10).

3. Artistic and Literary values of the four poems

"A value is the importance or worth of something for someone" (Bottomley, 2003:1409). "Values in literature refer to those qualities of poems, stories, novels, etc. that make them worthwhile to read and they are: entertainment, political, cultural, artistic, ethical, philosophical, historical..."³. Every artistic and literary text is a special story that carries out some values that the producer wants to communicate to the audience.

Artistic and literary values are quite difficult to separate because they go hand in hand. It is through the use of language and its expressive power, or the ways in which words are manipulated to create a beautiful work of art, or the manners in which the writers invent stories that gives it a new direction and contributes to its success.

3.1. Artistic values of the four poems

Artistic values are the ideals or high principles which are expressed into a literary work (Ngwaba, 2013:15) that contribute to its value and beauty (Gilbert and Diana, 2016:340). They help us contemplate the nature of beauty and human creativity⁴.

Beauty is the quality of being pleasing, especially to look at, or someone or something that gives great pleasure, especially by being looked at (Bottomley, 2003: 99). And one of the synonyms for pleasant is good (Bottomley, 2003:949) and "a literary work having the following qualities is known to be called good literary work:

1. demonstrates craft and artistry,
2. has the ability to raise questions,
3. provide fresh points of views,
4. expand understanding of self and the world,
5. stimulate imagination, and
6. renew the spirit"⁵
7. Civilize not just the lower classes but, also the aristocrats and the middle classes (Culler, 1997:37).

To quote the World Book Encyclopedia (2003:748) "one way of demonstrating craft and artistry is by raising high emotions, capturing and holding our fullest and most concentrated attention, uplifting and refreshing, sharpening and refining our understanding of moral values and our insight into other persons".

³What are the values of literature in (<http://english2112horton.blogspot.com/2010/08/values-of-literature.html>) of 18/05/2023.

⁴What's the distinction between literary and artistic values in (<http://english2112horton.blogspot.com/2010/08/values-of-literature.html>) of 18/05/2023.

⁵"Benchmarks of Literature" in www.csd509j.net/district_information/benchmarks/literature.pdf(2004:1).

The four poems at the center of this article show craft and artistry. The poet's craft is remarkable in the skillful way of selecting words and poetic devices and rearranging them meaningfully well to generate feelings and effects into the reader's mind. For instance, in "Ode on Spirits" the first two verses of the first stanza are striking:

Some sell spirit,
And so write: "we sell spirit here"

The two verses above are at the same time ambiguous and allusive. It is allusive because "spirit" used here is not the immaterial part of a man but the poet uses it to allude "strong wine and strong wine sellers" to mean that strong liquor is also called "spirit". Some liquor stores are called "Liquor store" or "Cave de vins spiritueux" or again "We Sell Spirit here". This is a serious concern on alcohol by the poet. Biblically speaking, wine is a gift from God to men:

"For cattle you make the grass grow,
And for people the plants they need,
To bring forth food from the earth,
And wine to cheer people's hearts,
Oil to make their face glow,
Food to make them sturdy of heart." (Psalm 104: 14-15)

For producers, sellers as well as for drinkers of wine as the extract suggests, drinking wine is not prohibited as such, but some people abuse of alcohol, and lose control of themselves and harm themselves and others, and eventually do evil things as the entire poem "Ode on Spirits" tackles. By writing such poem, the poet exhorts people not to drink much alcohol to get drunk, but to use it just as to cheer themselves.

Another instance of the poet's craft in this poem at hand is found in the verses below when he writes:

When the breath says adieu,
After selling, or enjoying spirit, or the like,
Dark dirty souls unwash'd and unclean'd
Turn into evil spirits (*Ode on Spirits* lines 13-16)

The poet implies that repentance and confession are necessary for the soul to be cleansed before death, otherwise it turns into evil spirit. Such words arouse feelings and create such effects as: happiness or pleasure, fear, sadness and uncertainty. The effects are pleasure, fear, wisdom, respect, and care. The poet uses sense devices such as repetition, variation, substitution, kenning, ellipsis, image, symbol, personification, alliteration, ambiguity, rhetorical question, allusion and euphemism.

In "If We Must Live" the poet's craft is remarkable in the skillful way of selecting words and poetic devices and rearranging them meaningfully well to bring the reader into his inner mind on the way people should behave while on earth. The poet seems to give a line of conduct to his audience, when he writes:

If we must live, let's not live as men: (v1)
Live now, die tomorrow, leave all, and (v2)
If we must live, let's live for the soul: (v8)
Live clean, smell sweet than scent. (v9)
"Gods we are"! And, life's sweet, (v10)
Let's not serve the body and the heart: (v12)
To rejoice now, die tomorrow with shame, (v13)
Innocent soul_heir! (v19)

Do you know where you'll go? (v20)
To hell, or under the alter of His Majesty? (v21)

Those words and verses help arouse feelings and created effects into the reader such as holiness, eternal life, eternal death, death, soul's fate, birth, joy, ephemeralness of life, sweetness of life, the innocence of the soul, God's life, man's life and creation, gratefulness, hatred for sins, pity, sadness and fear of God, concern of one's soul, the gratefulness to His Majesty, and hope.

The poet's craft is seen through the use of fifteen sense devices such as repetition, variation, substitution, kenning, ellipsis, image, symbol, metaphor, ambiguity, simile, inversion, refrain, apostrophe, allusion, and euphemism.

In "I Know I'll be Chas'd, too" that turns around death, the poet addresses every human being using the personal pronouns *you* (v 8) and *all* (v 15), so as to remind people to die as *wise* (v11) in order to enjoy eternal life.

The allusion made to *Eden* (v3) contributes to the understanding of *decree* and *the Book* (v3), *the rebellion* (v4) to point out God's decision over Adam and Eve. The adjective *irreversible* is actually for emphasis and persuasion. Such words help find the themes, subject matters of the poem, arouse feelings and created effects in the reader such as eternal life, death after death for the foolish, certainty for death, sin, the power of God's word, powerlessness of science, promulgation of God's decision.

The other feelings are reassurance and peace, and the Book of life for eternal peace, fear, sadness, uncertainty and hope, pity and happiness. The effects are fear for death and for God, repentance, pity and joy. The poet uses eighteen sense devices namely repetition, variation, substitution, kenning, ellipsis, image, symbol, metaphor, analogy, inversion, paradox, rhetorical question, allusion, and euphemism in this captivating experience.

In "Ode on Poetic Justice", the poet's craft could be seen in the choice of words such as "poetic justice"; "the King for justice and retribution"; "good with good, and bad with woe"; "the innocent freed, the guilty detained"; "He films, records, and hear all silently"; "retribution! – At an unexpected time!"; "we sow, we reap"; "the foolish and the insane"; "surprised! Say: "bad luck"; "the wise informed says: "poetic justice".

Also those words helped the reader to find out the themes; aroused feelings and created effects in the reader such as: God's fairness, poetic justice, eternal life, eternal death, God's supremacy, sin, human actions, and surprise, fear of God, hatred for evil, salvation, loss, pity toward foolish people, hope for eternal life and surprise, fear, concern with one's life and soul, repentance, gratefulness to God, and hope. The poet uses fifteen sense devices: repetition, variation, substitution, kenning, ellipsis, image, symbol, personification, metaphor, analogy, paradox, refrain, rhetorical question, allusion, and apostrophe.

The poet's artistry is seen through the poet's ability to create and tell his experiences based on well-known biblical stories and scientific knowledge in a captivating way that held the reader's attention using sense devices to help the reader grasp the meaning behind the stories told.

In "Ode on Spirits", for example, the poet's artistry is revealed also through his ability to use rhetorical questions for emphasis, as seen below:

"For the body in trances? (v3)
And the soul, in ruin? (v4)
For a rest, or for slavery? (v9)

Along with the prince of the dark? (v23)
And for whom Hell?" (v24)

Each question carries a specific message that can be a possible outcome of the human body and soul after death. Each rhetorical question emphasizes spiritual concern and creates effects into the readers to see the possible outcome of their own bodies and souls after death. Each question shows the dangers that get those people who die without repentance whom souls turn into evil spirits and end into be burnt and destroyed eternally in Hell as says the Bible: "Enter by the narrow gate, since the road that leads to destruction is wide and spacious and many take it" (Matthew, 7:13).

In "If We Must Live" the poet's artistry is seen in the great imagination he uses to come up with such an alerting piece of work which is a kind of line of conduct exhorting people to leave a clean life and not please the body and the heart in order to escape hell.

In "I Know I'll be Chas'd, too", the poet demonstrates the ability to retell an old and well known story of death in a captivating way that holds the reader's attention to the point that the reader is amazed to hear about the speaker's certitude of eternal life as the poem reads:

But as to where I shall be _ me,
I think I know now;
My name in gold's written for _ life (vv16-18).

The poet awakens the reader's conscience about death and life after death; the way death surprises humans; and the two possible ways people can die: either foolish or wise. "The good leads to the road of beatitude but sin brings forth its own fruits in all kind of evil" (Häring, 1978:391).

In "Ode on Poetic Justice" the poet's artistry could be seen through his ability to retell an old and well known story of poetic justice on the Day of Judgment in a captivating way that holds the reader's attention, and refreshes his mind and spirit to the point of warning him. The reader is amazed to hear about the speaker's happiness of the fact that God's judgment is fair and operating on human beings at any time.

3.2. Literary values of the for poems

"Literary value is mandatory for any work of art like songs, poems, proverbs and novels, short stories, recorded and unrecorded plays. It means the quality of any work of literature which makes it distinguished from normal and daily writing. It includes the use of language and themes, originality, depth of characterization, gives readers a deeper insight into human character, carries an impact on the reader and society as a whole, and makes a significant contribution to the understanding of the human experience through its themes, etc."⁶

The literary values of the four poems are expressed in the use of language, themes, and their originality. They give readers a deeper insight into human character and carry an impact on the reader and society as a whole. They make a significant contribution to the understanding of the human experience through their themes, subject matters, feelings aroused and created by the poems. Those literary values are also perceived in the poet's craft and artistry, the ability of the poems to raise questions, provide fresh points of views, stimulate imagination, and renew the spirit.

In "Ode on Spirits" for instance, the poet departs from the word *spirits* from which he develops a captivating story to point out three things at once: strong wine or liquor, the human entity that never dies and bad spirits from the people who simply enjoyed life and forgot to repent. The poem runs as follows:

⁶ What does literary value mean in (<https://www.quora.com>) of 18/05/2023.

Some sell spirit,
And so write: “we sell spirit here”:

Probably the poet would have read the scripts on the entrance of a wine boutique somewhere *we sell spirits here* that means *we sell strong wine or liquor here*. Actually, the poet does not condemn the spirits sellers or the spirits drinkers at all. He appeals to the nature of evil and its various sources, as well as to repentance for salvation.

In “If We Must Live” the poet departs from Claude McKay’s sonnet “If We Must Die” (1919) and the Bible (Psalm 82 and John 10) to come up with something about eternal life of the soul. Created in the image of God, people are small gods and should care about their lives after death.

The captivating story told in “I Know I’ll be Chas’d, too” focuses on death that happens unexpectedly. From the well-known biblical story, the poet insists on the fact that everybody is concerned by this unexpected departure, as he writes: *Now I know we’ll all be kicked out*. This decree of departing is a very old irreversible decree promulgated in Eden since Adam and Eve sinned. The poet is exhorting people to care of the sudden departure that may find them either ready or not.

In “Ode on Poetic Justice” the story departs from the title itself. Poetic justice is an appropriate retribution of rewards and punishments. Retribution is a severe punishment for something bad someone did. Nothing is hidden to God and men shall reap what they sow at an unexpected time.

Conclusion

The four poems by Ngwaba (1954) deal about life after death or eternal life and the exhortations to repentance and conversion. They are rich in the language used, themes debated and in the subject matters discussed and they give the readers a deeper insight into human character and fate, and have an impact on the reader’s mind and soul.

Their artistic values lie on their potential impact on the readers’ mind and conversion and on the salvation of souls. They are capable of improving people’s view and understanding of the meaning of life and death in connection with the soul’s fate after death. They have the power to renew the spirit and refresh the reader’s understanding of what it is meant to be human, showing the outcome of one’s soul after death. Human’s life or fate after death is something to think twice before totally denying or rejecting. Human soul and spirit never die and need to be cared of.

These Ngwaba’s four poems under study teach wisdom just as poetry itself does, and they might be recommended to other readers for enjoyment, repentance, conversion and for improvement of spiritual life for eternal life. These four poems will remain relevant as they deal with significant universal issues of all eternities.

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