

African Research Review

An International Multi-Disciplinary Journal, Ethiopia

Vol. 4 (3b) July, 2010

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print)

ISSN 2070-0083 (Online)

A Semiological Irony in the Life of Man: an Assessment of Lawrence's the *Colossus of Rhodes* (Pp 145- 154)

Chukwu, Ephraim - Dept of English Language & Literature, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria
GSM: +2348025276366
E-mail: chukwuephraim@yahoo.com

Abstract

Language is a channel for expressing literary imagination; without language there will be no literature. Caraline Lawrence's text, The Colossus of Rhodes, demonstrates this reality via language elements. Making use of linguistic signs – words and sentences -, she gives a picturesque parallel contest between minors, and a gangster kingpin selling kidnapped children into slavery. This kingpin likened with gigantic human material artifact, the Colossus of Rhodes, considers himself invincible past as the erectors of the colossus consider it impregnable. Nevertheless, the kingpin meets his waterloo at the hands of these minors just as the material colossus succumbs to earthquake, a natural disaster. This situational irony forwarded in readable language is laced with some other literary techniques – parallelism, symbolism, paradoxism, reversal of situation, and mode of narration - made possible by words and sentences to elicit pleasing disposition of man. This piece of writing therefore strives to point out that words and sentences (semiotics) encapsulate the associative use of language impossible to be projected without obedience to the linguistic levels of word formation (morphology), of arranging words sequentially (syntax) and of using words meaningfully (semantics); levels fully realized whenever any of these grammatical units – morpheme, word, phrase, clause, sentence - is distributed contextually.

Key Words: Semiological Irony, Dramatic Irony, Situational Irony, Literary Techniques, Literary Genres, Parallelism

Introduction

Semiology or semiotics studies signs in general used in communication. However, the sign considered here is the linguistic sign completely made use of in composing this novel whose inspiration is determined by the material artifact of the remains of the real Colossus of Rhodes. Sign in linguistic sense refers to “when linguistic expressions (words, sentences, etc) are said to be signs” of the entities, states of affairs, etc., which they stand for (or, often, of the concepts involved, Crystal (417/18). The linguistic expression, irony, is an associative use of language which characterizes literary works. “Literature... is essentially an imaginative act, that is, an act of the writer’s imagination in selecting, ordering and interpreting life-experience”, (1). In composing literary work, Taylor clarifies, “... words are the medium of expression...” (1). He further says “... style or level of language is one of the most important elements in the composition of literature and accounts for a number of its peculiar characteristics. Language – that is, words as they are spoken or written – is the artistic medium or material of all literature, and because words follow one another in sequence, the effect is progressive or cumulative, not immediate...”, (7/8).

It is this cumulative or progressive recognition of human foibles enunciated in linguistic signs as inspired by the dilapidating historical monument imaginatively forwarded that will expressly be used to depict how words (signs) encode and project entities or states of affairs involving man as the key player. The major linguistic signs foregrounded are irony, parallelism, symbolism, paradoxism, reversal of situation (intention) and mode of narration. These literary techniques used to put across ideas arising from universal experience of man’s passionate or dispassionate disposition to vice or virtue cannot be successfully facilitated without their being ferried to audience with the linguistic signs.

Irony Defined

Irony, a literary technique, features in three constructions or choices of language according to the intention of an author. These are situational irony, dramatic irony; verbal irony.

Situational irony, according to Braiman (4 of 8), features “where an event occurs which is unexpected, in the sense that it is somehow in absurd or mocking opposition to what would be expected or appropriate”, i.e. when the

expectation of supposed knowledge or related knowledge about something proves the contrary. Dramatic irony, Braiman explains, features “where the audience or reader is aware of something important, of which the characters in the story are not aware”. Adding to dramatic irony, Perkins (99) says that it is a situation “in which the words spoken on the stage have more significance for the audience than the characters involved in the play”. Both definitions suggest ignorance of certain event by the character in a play and knowledge of such event by the audience (readers or viewers). On the other hand, Braiman explains verbal irony as featuring “where the meaning of a specific expression is, or is intended to be, the exact opposite of what the words literally mean”. Given credence to Braiman’s, Perkins (101) elaborates (verbal) irony thus: “words are used but the idea intended to be gathered is different from the literal meaning”. Instantiating this aspect of irony, Perkins uses this expression: “to say to a dull student, ‘You are a clever boy!’” Even though these ironies embody contrast, for the purpose of this paper, situational irony is chosen as the type directly relating to the first part of the title: *The Colossus of Rhodes*.

Historical Source

The Colossus of Rhodes, historically, “was on the list of monuments any rich Roman tourist had to see... [It is a] gigantic statue of the sun god Helios made by Chares of Lindos in the third century BC; in Roman times it was admired as one of the Seven Wonders of the world even though an earthquake toppled it 66 years after it was first dedicated”, Lawrence (199). Rhodes, according to Lawrence, was “a large and famous island in the Aegean Sea, [and] was the capital of the Roman province of Asia” in A.D. 80. She further supplies other six ‘must-see’ sights wealthy travelers must visit in their life-time: the statue of Zeus at Olympia, the temple of Diana at Ephesus, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus, the Pyramids of Egypt and the Pharo (lighthouse) of Alexandria. Lawrence relates that “at Roman dinner parties, returning travellers could impress their friends and rivals with tales of these Seven Wonders”.

The Colossus of Rhodes as a literary genre is a novel whose story-line or plot parallels three independent but related ideas. One, a youngster, regaining his freedom from a slave master, sails with his friends to search for and reunite with his mother. Two, a group of children, angered by the hideous kidnapping of freeborn children, sails in search of the kidnapped children, the criminal mastermind and ways for liberating them and shattering the brain behind the mind-boggling slave network. Three, a group of men and

youngsters board a ship to visit one of the seven-sights of the ancient world. These wayfarers or sea-farers seemingly have differing objectives, but a common interest is uppermost in their minds: The crushing of the central point of the slave network.

The Colossus of Rhodes: Man or Material Object?

Rhodes is the home of the gigantic human material erection. Rhodes is also the home of the criminal mastermind. Incidentally, this kingpin assumes the sobriquets: the Colossus of Rhodes and Magnus: names associated with “bigness”. Magnus, the Colossus of Rhodes, uses these pseudonyms to present himself as a giant and an omnipotent super being who can never be rivalled or overwhelmed. However, subsequent revelation shows that this seeming man-mountain is merely a dwarf. This dwarf has a giant as a thug on whose shoulders he always nestles whenever he is transacting business with clients. This posturing, Magnus emphasizes, makes people consider him a giant since he, on the shoulders of his thug giant, stands behind a curtain and only his head is seen. So, Magnus, to people’s conception, assumes what he is not: omniscience, omnipotent, omnipresent. Magnus, the Colossus of Rhodes, is surprisingly defeated by a boy of nine years. Through the intelligence of this boy, Magnus is put to flight, the children kidnapped are released, his central operating base abandoned and his paid agents crushed or paralyzed.

Does Magnus succeed in his hideous engagement?

Temporarily yes! He organizes a network of spies, dreadful secret slave agents, and deadly hitmen. These agents penetrate every nook and cranny of human activities from Rome to Greece. This makes him laugh to scorn the wile and power of men to crush him. This assurance of invincibility is summed up by a spy of Magnus:

Don’t try to fight Magnus... He is very clever. He speaks five languages and

He always outwits his enemies....

Nobody has ever succeeded [in stopping him].

He is very dangerous and his spies are everywhere. 140/141

Corroborating this character, another paid agent, cornered by the sea-faring party bound for the crushing of Magnus and his slave ring, sneers at the impossibility of their mission.

Nobody has ever outwitted him, because he knows his enemies better than they know themselves. Information is his main weapon.

Indeed, Magnus uses information gained about his enemies to sustain his unconscionable slave-ring before he meets his waterloo in the hand of an incapacitated boy.

Analogy: Presentday Colossus of Rhodes

Again, Caroline Lawrence (211) unequivocally castigates many of us: “Today we look down on the ancient Romans because they enslaved other human beings, including children. But according to recent studies, there are over 27 million slaves - people who work for no pay against their will – in the world today”. The political leader who neglects the groaning of his subjects is a slave master. The scholar who knowingly or unknowingly torpedoes scholarship at any level of scholarly echelon is a slave master. A business person who denies his colleagues his rightful share of a heartwarming reward is a slave master. Anyone who looks down on his fellow man or considers him inferior to be associated with or a slight unmeritable person worthy of carrying out errands is a slave master.

The Irony in the Life of Man

The material object, the Colossus of Rhodes, considered unshakeable, as it is representing the sun god, crumbles via a natural force, the earthquake. The human Colossus of Rhodes, Magnus, whose concrete walls of seemingly impregnable network of operations caves in before a natural force, a boy of nine years, in other words, a super-intelligent and divinely-guided boy hamstringing him. He is fear personified. But, in the long run, he is a mere dwarf whose might is the might of his giant thug also demolished by this boy of nine. Similarly, the sonnet, “Ozimandias”, demonstrates the arrogance of an Egyptian Pharaoh to achieve immortality. Nevertheless, he dies and the monument bearing his epitaph is being covered gradually by desert sand. General a character in Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah* considers his friends a threat to his administration. He causes their death to ensure security, but he eventually disappears. Lastly, Cassius; a character in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, relates to Brutus another character about Julius Caesar’s rising profile and domineering influence vis-à-vis their powerlessness and helplessness before this figure looming large: “Caesar bestrides the narrow world like a Colossus, and we, petty men, peep under his huge legs to find ourselves dishonorable graves”. Cassius’ intention of ridding Rome of Caesar is however achieved. Even though Caesar dies as the material Colossus, Cassius equally dies without realizing his dream of riding on the shoulders of Brutus to become one of the imperators of Rome.

Other Perceptible Semiological Elements

Parallelism

This is the correspondent use of similar structures in semantics. Waldhon and Zeiger say that “parallelism signifies the grammatical balance of two or more logically related sentence elements”, (83). This ‘linguistic parallelism’ according to Yankson, “is meant the use of pattern repetition in a literary text for a particular stylistic effect”, (14). Waldhon and Zeiger illustrate this grammatical balance or pattern repetition; thus:

Socrates had ability, knowledge, honesty and courage - noun.
Socrates was intelligent, able, honest, and courageous – adjective.
Socrates analysed, discussed, questioned and generalised – verb
(83).

Admonishing mastery of parallelism, these scholars over: “to master parallelism is to control one of the principal techniques of English prose. No other single device helps more to clarify relationships between kindred ideas.”

Parallelism as a rhetorical device manifests palpably in couching this English text, *The Colossus of Rhodes*, which weaves plots and personality ideas together. Three plots parallelly presented show a search party of mainly youngsters making a voyage in search of the criminal mastermind surrounding the kidnapping of freeborn children; a mute boy determined to find the whereabouts of his mother via a ship, the *Delphina*, and a party of voyagers in the *Delphina* bent on touring the sight of the famous Colossus of Rhodes. These plots are developed simultaneously in the text. Similarly, personality parallelism is depicted in the role of a nine-year old leader of the search party and the role of the kidnapping kingpin, Magnus, whose sobriquet is *Colossus of Rhodes*. The contest of crushing between these two characters is juxtaposed in a scene of verbal exchanges and the ultimate throwing-in of the towel by Magnus. Another parallel idea is the treatment of the search party and the espionage party. The text shows how the espionage party infiltrates the search party and endeavours to paralyse its move to ferret out the criminal kingpin.

Symbolism

Symbol, Webster’s Dictionary says, is “something that stands for or suggests something else by reason of relationship, association, convention, or accidental resemblance;”, (1266). Symbolism suggests the artistic use of

symbols in writing. Again, this is an idea encoded in linguistic signs deduced from painstaking study of the literary texts.

The sailing ship, *Delphina*, symbolises freedom. The unkidnapped children are not free at their homes; the kidnapped children are already not free. So, the search party, dominated by youngsters, considers itself free in this ship. Their school lessons, sacrifices intermittently offered and stories reeled off to register their dogged freedom denote calmness. Again, when after several vicissitudes, the kidnapped children are rescued, they find freedom and comfort in the ship, *Delphina*. Besides, the mute boy, Lupus, symbolises the triumph of virtue (good) over vice. The criminal mastermind, Magnus, killed his dad and cut off his tongue to forestall the small boy talking about what he has witnessed. In the long run, it is this seemingly incapacitated youth that caused the downfall of the seemingly invincible human *Colossus of Rhodes*.

In addition, Magnus' impregnable castle symbolises hell for the kidnapped children. These children, holed in a workshop house, work restlessly, and are only let out and dumped in a street when any becomes blind. Also, the sea for the voyage signifies judgment and justice. All obstacles ranging from sulphurous parts of the sea killing aquatic animals, sea-storms, and near-capsizing of the ship when Magnus' agent torpedoes her sail would have ended in wreck or doom for the seafarers had they not had justified cause for their voyage.

Paradoxism

A paradox is "something which seems absurd but is in reality true", Perkins (102). Paradoxism is the artistic use of this literary device in writing. Pope's *The Child is Father to the Man* aptly applies to the text. Both the literal and the literary meaning of this epigram suggest the will-power of these children. The literal sense suggests the children doing what adults should be doing. The literary sense suggests that all the qualities of adulthood are possessed by children. This implies they lack nothing except growing into adulthood and performing adults' tasks. These children are not adults. It is unthinkable for children whose age ranges from eight to nine, through ten to eleven to indulge in an adventure so deadly that even many lion-hearted men will quail at. But these children embark on it, and unexpectedly, vanquish the unvanquishable. Another of this device is obvious on the vow of Lupus' mother. She longs to be reunited with her only incapacitated child. On learning of the still-existence of her only child, rather than leaping up for joy, she withdraws from her son to become a priestess of *Apollo* forever.

Reversal of Situation/Intention

In *The Poetics of Aristotle*, translated by S.H. Butcher, “Reversal of situation is a change by which the action veers round to its opposite...” This technique features glaringly. Magnus, the human Colossus of Rhodes, plans to take possession of the *Delphina*, and to enslave the inmates along with the other kidnapped children being searched for. However, his plan misfires. He, the chaser, becomes the chased: his troops of thugs are overpowered, the children are snatched from their birth-pang and languid state, and Magnus’ empire crumbles. Similarly, the hero, Lupus, whose intent of reuniting with his mother proves the opposite. His mother sacrifices herself as a priestess of *Apollo* in joy of the survival of her only child, and in so doing, denies her child and herself of the joy of reunion. Added to these is the disintegration of the historical monument, *The Colossus of Rhodes* erected in 3 BC. It is erected to last forever, but an earthquake topples it 66 years after its dedication to the sun god, *Helios*.

Mode of Narrativism

Point of view or Mode of narration is another device used to tell or write a prose. *Omniscient narration* is the method used in constructing the prose narrative, *The Colossus of Rhodes*. Taylor explains that “the omniscient narrator is a god-like presence who stands aloof from the action but sees and knows everything there is to know about that fictional world. He knows of all past and present as well as future events, even those which happen at the same moment but in different places, and knows what goes on in the mind of every character”, (73). “The omniscient narrator”, Taylor explains, “uses the third person pronouns (he, she or they) in referring to characters...” (74). This method is fully used in this narrative prose. The narrator calls the characters by their names and replaces such names with those third person pronouns from the beginning, through the middle and to the end of the text.

Commonality of Two Technical Language Use

The semiological or semiotic signs — the words and the sentences— encapsulate two technical uses of language: the associative (figurative, rhetorical, or literary devices) use of language and the plain (literal, dictionary, or denotative) use of language. These literary devices, irony, which runs through the course of the novel, and such deductions as parallelism, symbolism, paradoxism, reversal of situation, and mode of narration, are transmissible only via such structural units as words, phrases, clauses, and sentences. The possibility of literary expressions is predicated on obedience to these linguistic levels as word formations and the internal

structures of words (morphology), the arrangement of words guided by rules to form sentences (syntax), and the meanings of elements sequentially forwarded as words or sentences (semantics). Since, semiology or semiotics studies signs in general for communication, the prose narrative, *The Colossus of Rhodes*, is a collection of linguistic signs manipulated to furnish us with mankind's weaknesses and strengths yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Conclusion

"We are the world; we are the children", so intoned some musicians in the US in 1985. This affirms the philosophic statement: man is to live together; alone you are an animal. As we are not animals, let us like the children and the crew in the ship *Delphina* eschew selfishness and work toward a common goal of rooting out anything that makes us work against mankind because, according to John Donne in Hibbs et al, "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less... Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for you" (74).

Do we need to fear the Colossus of Rhodes of this world? Armless children, horrified by the ignoble kidnapping of their types, take the bull by the horn. They confront danger and discover that they are more dangerous than danger. Magnus, the human Colossus of Rhodes, recognizes the intrepidity of his opposing force. Commenting on one of the children who subsequently causes his downfall, he says;

... When I first heard that you killed one of my best agents, and you had somehow acquired his ship, I knew I had made a powerful new enemy. Others might underestimate you but I would not. And I was right. Nothing I did seemed to stop you from coming here to Rhodes. (178)

The children doggedly accomplish the counseling in the poetic prologue of not quailing before any stumbling block. And so, the sea, the sea waves, the sea storms and other sea beings do not deter their urge to make life better for others and afterwards for themselves just as the poet counsels:

Don't be afraid of Scylla and Charybdis.
The sirens and the Harpies
And even the Cyclops hold no danger for you.
You won't find such creatures on your journey if your

thoughts are high and you have a noble motive.
You won't find such monsters
unless you erect alters to them in your heart.

The members of this search party have no alters in their hearts for fear, for monsters, for devious human beings, for their self-centredness or for personal safety, and so, they succeed in their avowed purpose. Just as love is like the ascent up a high mountain, it comes ever close to you as you ever go up to it, and just as fortune is a woman whom one should not be dismayed at the difficulty encountered on possessing, so shall we not be dismayed by the nauseating façade of the Colossus of Rhodes.

Reference

- Butcher, S.H. (Trans) *The Poetics of Aristotle*, The Pennsylvania State University, 2000
- Crystal, David. *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* (5th ed), Blackwell Publishing, 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA, 2003
- Hibbs, Paul; Fessenden, Seth A; Larson, Merville P; Wagner, Joseph A. *Speech for Today*, Webster Division/McGraw-Hill Book Coy, St Louis, New York, San Francisco, Dallas, 1965
- Lawrence, Caroline. *The Colossus of Rhodes*; Orion Children's Book, Orion Publishing Ltd, Orion House, 5 upper St Martin's Lane London WC2H 9EA, 2005
- Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (11th ed), Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, Springfield, Massachusetts, USA, 2004
- Perkins, D. C. *Shakespeare's Macbeth. Model Answers* Spectrum Books Ltd, Ring Road, P.M.B 5612, Ibadan, Nigeria, 1978
- Taylor, Richard. *Understanding the Elements of Literature: Its Forms, Techniques and Cultural Conventions*, Macmillan Press Ltd, London and Basingstoke, 1981
- Yankson, Kofi E. *An Introduction to Literary Stylistics*, Pacific Publishers, A Division of Pacific Correspondence College and Press Ltd, Umuawulu-Obosi, Anambra State, Nigeria, 1987 rpt 2002
- Waldhorn, Arthur and Zeiger, Arthur. *English Made Simple*. W.H. Allen, London 44 Hill Street, London W1X 8LB, 1980
- english@mrbrainman.home.att.net/lit.htm