



Language, Style and Meaning in Wole Soyinka's Poetry

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Wole Soyinka's lyricism along the axis of language, style and meaning and arrives at the significant conclusion that, through his exploitation of various linguistic and rhetorical devices and strategies, he gives voice, range and scope to his poetic art. Much as Soyinka's themes are eclectic and diverse -- including racial discrimination, man's inhumanity to man, political corruption, social justice, and death -- so also are his stylistic and linguistic modes which encompass the employment of elaborate imagery, satire, antithesis, dramatic dialogue, and biblical allusions. Soyinka is a major poet who employs his lyricism to enlighten, entertain and celebrate several topical issues, which passionately affect his sensibility and his audience.

INTRODUCTION

Wole Soyinka is fundamentally a lyric poet whose employment of the resources of language, especially the lyric modes, has generally not attracted the attention of critics. The failure to explore the full range of Soyinka's poetic art is probably attributable to the fact that he is generally regarded as a difficult and complex poet. For example, K.E. Senanu and T. Vincent write that "Soyinka's writings are sophisticated,"¹ while D.I. Nwoga says that Soyinka's poetry is characterized by "obscure allusions," "turgidity," and an "abstract and esoteric language"².

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Soyinka's Poetic Art

Wole Soyinka's employment of the various lyric modes -- especially the dramatic, the narrative, the descriptive, and the didactic -- expand the frontiers of his lyricism. A discussion of these poetic and linguistic variables is important not only because they illuminate and elucidate the range and scope of his lyricism, but because they provide a stylistic context for the development of his poetic art.

Soyinka's most popular single poem, "Telephone Conversation," strikes the keynote of lyric poetry, for its brevity and technical intensity, and for its emotional and racial appeal. The lyric, a dramatic monologue, opens with three dramatis personae, all engaged in a kind of shadow boxing, and with each side careful not to hurt the opportunity which the occasion offers: first, is the poet-persona, an African, looking for an apartment to rent in England; second, is the landlady, with her urbanity, sophistication, and classiness ("Lipstick coated, long gold-rolled/cigarette-holder piped.") Second, she is a rare human specie ("she lived/off premises"); third, is the audience in the background, trying to assess the situation and perhaps pass some judgment.

As for the poet-persona, he is eager and anxious to get a living accommodation, yet deeply conscious of his place in society. As one who knows the pernicious effect of racial discrimination, he must submit himself to self-confession: ("Madam, I warned," "I hate a wasted journey -- I am African.") As for the landlady, she is ambitious and anxious to get a tenant for her vacant apartment, but yet careful not to get the wrong one. The exchange of language that follows between them is one of confrontation, conflict, and confusion:

.....
Considerate she was, varying the emphasis --
"ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT?" Revelation came.
"You mean -- like plain or milk chocolate?"
Her assent was clinical, crushing in its light
Impersonality. Rapidly, wave-length adjusted,
I chose. "West African sepia" -- and as afterthought,
"Down in my passport." Silence for spectroscopic
Flight of fancy, till truthfulness changed her accent
Hard on the mouthpiece. "WHAT'S THAT?" conceding
"DON'T KNOW WHAT THAT IS." "Like brunette."
"THAT'S DARK, ISN'T IT?" "Not altogether.
Facially, I am brunette, but madam, you should see
The rest of me. Palm of my hand, soles of my feet are a
Peroxide blond. Friction, caused --
My bottom raven black -- one moment madam" -- sensing
Her receiver rearing on the thunderclap
About my ears -- "Madam," I pleaded, "wouldn't you rather

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See for yourself?"³

We, the audience, must now like to pass some judgment, but it is a negative one for the two parties: they are both rude and arrogant. Furthermore, the two parties are deeply suspicious of each other. For the landlady, she is racially very self-conscious and also conceited, with a sophisticated outlook and an overarching personality. She would not like to rent to a colored individual, certainly not a dark person. Her language, which is uncouth, sends shivers through our nerves: "ARE YOU LIGHT OR VERY DARK?/ ... ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT?" This kind of language is completely devoid of morality and good taste. Moreover, she ends the conversation abruptly, banging the telephone against the poet-persona ("Her receiver rearing on the thunderclap/About my ears").

The action of the poet-persona in the poetic debate is perhaps more annoying and vexatious: He introduces what Abiola Irele aptly describes as the "white-black dialectic"⁴ by interjecting "Madam," I warned, "I hate a wasted journey -- I am African." His subsequent statements -- e.g., "West African sepia."/ "Down in my passport," "Foolishly madam -- by sitting down, has turned/My bottom raven black" -- do not serve his interest. Moreover, his pride and arrogance, symbolized by "I warned/...I hate...I am African...I had not misheard/...I chose/...I am brunette," portray him as one who does not deserve any consideration for a living apartment.

In addition to the character of the *dramatis personae*, there is something to be added about the poem's language. The employment of capitalization (perhaps for emphasis), the frequent use of pauses, and the constant interruptions of the characters against each other -- all enhance the poem's stylistic range. Finally, the language of the poem not only conveys intrigue, distrust, and dramatic confrontation, but it also has all the hallmarks and characteristics of the "formal verse satire" which, as Mary Claire Randolph tells us, consist of:

miniature dramas, sententious proverbs and quotable maxims, compressed beast fables...brief sermons, sharp debates, series of vignettes, swiftly sketched but painstakingly built up satiric "characters" or portraits, figure-processions, little fictions and apologues, visions, apostrophes and invocation to abstractions -- anything and everything to push his argument forward to its philosophical and psychological conclusions in much the same manner as events might push action forward to a denouement in drama or fiction. In addition to these structural devices, an innumerable variety of purely rhetorical devices is employed to give point, compactness, speed, climax, contrast, surprise, and a score more of the special effects so necessary to good satire.⁵

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The poem, "Civilian and Soldier," is a dramatic lyric which brings into our consciousness the chance-encounter between a soldier and a civilian during the Nigerian Civil War. The civilian, virtually stupefied and somewhat confused, is the first to engage in self-confession ("I'm a civilian"), apparently to make the soldier realize the fact that he is not an enemy and, therefore, should not be killed.

The soldier, equally frightened and gripped by stupendous fear, "Stood still/For both eternities," apparently thinking of what to do next. The civilian, who is the narrator in the poem, believes that the soldier is probably re-visiting in his inner consciousness some of the military codes which enjoin a soldier to shoot-to-kill if, for any reason, he is doubtful or undecided about what line of action to take in any military-cum-dramatic confrontation:

...and oh I heard the lesson
Of your training session, cautioning --
Scorch earth behind you, do not leave
A dubious neutral to the rear.⁶

The poem's language is charged with a high degree of rhythmical and emotional intensity, to conform to the dramatic lyric mode. Furthermore, the events and the development of the poem's action quickly challenge our visual imagination: the interplay between action and inaction, life and death, pity and fear is brought vividly before our eyes. Finally we, the audience, are enamored by the dramatic change in mood, tone, and setting, as suggested by the last stanza of the poem:

I hope some day
Intent upon my trade of living, to be checked
In stride by your apparition in a trench,
Signaling, I am a soldier. No hesitation then
But I shall shoot you clean and fair
With meat and bread, a gourd of wine
A bunch of breasts from either arm, and that
Long question -- do you friend, even now, know
What it is all about? (p. 148)

There is no doubt about the efficacy of the above stanza as a dramatic piece. First, the change in voice, mood, and direction in the last stanza, is itself a vital aspect of the dramatic lyric mode. Furthermore, the line, "I am a soldier," easily recalls the refrain "I am a civilian," which is highlighted earlier in the first stanza. Thus, in this poem, we find several stylistic combinations: passion, spontaneity, repetition, and rhetorical questioning, all of which not only add glamour but enhance and fortify the poem's lyric structure.

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Soyinka's successful exploration of the narrative lyric mode is evident in such lyrics as "Joseph," "I Anoint My Flesh (Tenth Day of Fast)," and "Abiku." A remarkable feature of these poems is not only the fact that the emotion and passion of their respective characters are fundamentally profound, but that, in content and form, the poems' themes center on the interplay between individual predicament vis-à-vis social responsibility.

In "Joseph," Soyinka employs the famous biblical portraits of Joseph and Mrs. Potiphar to illustrate the perpetual antagonism between good and evil in our mundane world:

...your principles
which I would not embrace you swore
I tried to violate; I see you wave a trophy
Tattered pieces of your masquerade
Of virtue, and call them mine.⁷

The poet, while pointing to his innocence and moral probity, goes on to highlight Potiphar's moral failures and decadence. In the poetic narrative, the Nigerian federal government, which accused Soyinka of various crimes, including treasonable felony, is Mrs. Potiphar. The imagery, "I see you wave a trophy/Tattered pieces of your masquerade," effectively demonstrates the hypocrisy and the insensitivity of the Federal government which Soyinka satirizes.

In "I Anoint My Flesh (Tenth Day of Fast)"⁸, Soyinka undergoes the ritual of spiritual anointment in order to cleanse himself of the impurities of body and soul. The poem's language, which is exhortative and ceremonial, is organized into three stanzas: stanza one focuses on the poet's body, which, because of his prolonged incarceration and loneliness, has apparently made him gaunt and lean; stanza two focuses on his "voice" which, he prays, should not be silenced: it is the source of his freedom of free speech, for which he is being persecuted by the federal authorities; while stanza three, which focuses on his "heart," symbolizes his indomitable fighting spirit.

The "oil," which is used for the ritual ceremony, is important on several counts: for the atonement and expiation of his apparent-cum-perceived "sins;" for the purification of his "flesh," "voice," and "heart;" and for his moral, physical and spiritual empowerment and self-transformation. Consequently, as a result of the ritual ceremony, the poet's word now gains momentum and the power of prophecy and authority. He commands: "Let the dark/Withdraw, "Voices new/shall rouse the echoes...", "Let evil die."

There is a strong but subtle rejection and repudiation of the poet's enemies (that is, those who oppress the poor, the weak and the innocent -- with whom he identifies, and for whom he has fought numerous battles all his life). These elements are characterized variously in the poem as the

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“dark” (in stanza one), the “Evil” (in stanza two), and the “hate” (stanza three). The repetitive employment of the first person pronoun “I” (“I anoint my flesh.../I anoint my voice.../I anoint my heart”) not only suggests a maligned soul perpetually seeking truth and justice, but it highlights the temperament of an indomitable spirit intensely striving to conquer self-doubt, uncertainties and the vagaries of this world in order to obtain ultimate spiritual salvation.

In the lyric, “Abiku,” Soyinka treats a mythical-cum-mysterious figure by the name, Abiku. Depending upon where one hails from, especially in the Southern part of Nigeria, the word “Abiku” connotes different things to different people: a reality, a phenomenon, or an evil spirit-child. Soyinka’s “Abiku,” set in Yorubaland, is an evil spirit-child who -- through the irony of fate -- dies young and is reborn in successive cycles of birth and death matrix in order, allegedly, to perpetually torment the mother.

Soyinka’s craftsmanship enables him to devise a poetics with a defiant, implacable persona, who boasts of his ability to thwart every entreaty or sacrifice offered to placate him. There is a kind of countercurrent going through the Abiku’s inner consciousness: he acquires a cosmic relevance and freedom to do and undo as it pleases him, as the mother gets tormented almost to the point of death. Soyinka’s language -- arranged into quatrains -- is highly technical and tortuous, sometimes making his verse rather obscure and incomprehensible:

Night, and Abiku sucks the oil
From lamps. Mother! I'll be the
Suppliant snake coiled on the doorstep
Yours the killing cry

The ripest fruit was saddest;
Where I crept, the warmth was cloying
In the silence of webs, Abiku moans, shaping
Mounds from the yolk.⁹

If we turn now to Soyinka’s descriptive lyric (or what he makes of that genre), we shall discover that it encompasses the characteristic elements generally associated with that aesthetic mode. The descriptive lyric, by its very nature, not only illustrates the way and manner in which the poetic narrative affects the poem’s persona, but generally it highlights the details of that experience. We shall examine Soyinka’s exploitation of this lyric mode by discussion three of his most descriptive lyrics, namely “Procession 1: Hanging Day,” “Massacre, October ’66,” and “Post Mortem.”

The event described in “Procession 1: Hanging Day” centers around the execution of five prisoners which the poet personally witnessed while in hiding within the prison premises. The poem’s title immediately establishes

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the lyric's descriptive structure. Furthermore, the poet employs vivid descriptive images which illuminate and elucidate the poem's meaning, including, for example: the "hollow earth" which suggests the grave where the prisoners are to be buried; the "grave procession," which suggests the movement of the prisoners to the graveyard; and "I who before them peered unseen," which highlights the poet's secret viewing of the prisoners as they are led away to be hanged.

Soyinka's direct involvement in the macabre scene of death is evidenced by his employment of the first person pronoun "I," which lends poignancy and authenticity to his language and the eerie emotion that he portrays:

... I know the heart
... What may I tell you?
... I should not return
... That I received them?
... What may I tell you of the five
 Bell-ringers on the ropes to chimes¹⁰

This gruesome scene of death and human degradation also provides the poet with the opportunity to comment on the Nigerian justice system. "Justice," Aristotle tells us in his *Rhetoric*, is the highest form of virtue. He explains: The forms of Virtue are justice, courage, temperance, magnificence, magnanimity, liberality, gentleness, prudence, wisdom. If virtue is a faculty of beneficence, the highest kinds of it must be those which are most useful to others, and for this reason men honour most the just and the courageous, since courage is useful to others in war, justice both in war and in peace.¹¹

For Soyinka, the Nigerian justice system is dead, especially since people are pronounced guilty even before they are tried: "Let no man speak of justice, guilt," he remonstrates. This statement effectively mirrors the hypocrisy, the criminality, and the abuse of power by the Nigerian judiciary. Both in tone and language, Soyinka's disappointment and his sense of revulsion at the Nigerian justice system is unmistakable, clear, and profound.

The account of death, horror, fear, and despair, which is described in "Procession I: Hanging Day," is vividly and painstakingly developed in the descriptive lyric, "Massacre, October '66 (Written in Tegel)"¹², where through a combination of the imagery of the wind, the weather, the season, and other natural phenomena, Soyinka effectively dramatizes man's inhumanity to man in the vortex of death.

The principal image of the poem's title, "massacre," sets the tone of fear, suspense, and eerie silence which dominate the piece. The occasion for the composition of this lyric was the military upheaval of 1966 in Nigeria when "thousands" of soldiers and civilians were killed. Soyinka wrote this poem in

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Tegel in Germany. The fact that Soyinka, in far away Germany, is able to recapitulate the events of the human killings so vividly not only illustrates the hideous nature of the atrocities of war, but it suggests the deep emotional impact which the human carnage had on him.

The poem's diction, although written in a seven-stanza metrical structure, all in quatrains, is interspersed with the religious-cum-vernacular language -- perhaps both to illustrate the interrelationship between all languages, as well as to highlight the fact that the human carnage, which he describes, has a universal overtone: "Whose desecration mocks the word of peace -- salaam aleiku -- not strangers all."

Of particular interest are the images of killings and death motifs which permeate the poem. They include: "Shredded in willows," "Fragment on the lake," "The gardener's labour flew in seasoned scrolls," the "shell's detonation," the "skull's uniqueness," the "arithmetic of death," "autumn the removal man," "Dust down rare canvases," and "without the lake's church windows." Others are: "A host of acorns fell silent," "As they are silenced all," "Brain of thousands pressed asleep to pig fodder" and "Strewn in sunlit shards." All of these images and motifs shed significant light on the poem's thematic and linguistic narrative.

In "Post Mortem,"¹³ a poem which, like the last two poems also focuses on the theme of death, Soyinka describes the procedures and processes for conducting a post mortem examination on a dead person. As it were, each of the deceased's vital organs, e.g., the "brain," the penis or "man-pike," are carefully examined through scientific surgery. Soyinka, on the one hand, is bemused by the state of degradation and shame to which the human body is subjected, and on the other he seems to suggest the fact that death is an inevitable reality that must be embraced warmly with equanimity. He concludes with a tone of finality and philosophic realism: "Let us learn all things of grey; grey slabs/grey scalpel, one grey sleep and form."

In describing the process of post mortem examination, Soyinka employs various poetic and linguistic strategies, including: the three-line verse metrical structure; the pun suggested in "beer" and "biers" in line 2, the employment of paradox, whereby someone who was once vibrant and strong is now transformed at death into a mere "object" through the ravages of time, technology, and the scientific doctor; and through the use of repetition, as in the word "grey," which he repeats five times in the last stanza.

Soyinka's adroit description of the various human parts which are disfigured or transformed at death -- e.g., the "brain," and the "mouth," not only suggests his sensitivity and humanity, but also his keen awareness of the significance and the magnitude of his subject matter, no less than his disappointment at what might be characterized as death's sinister hands -- a subtle reminder of Donne's famous poem, "Death be Not Proud."¹⁴

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If we come finally to the last part of this essay, that is, Soyinka's exploitation of the didactic lyric mode -- which, by its very nature, focuses on the moral lesson to be gained or derived from such verse -- we find examples in such poems as "Death in the Dawn," "Prisoner," and "Season." All of these lyrics are remarkable for their intense focus on the familiar theme of death as a formidable and universal leveler to which all human beings must render the ultimate account.

In "Death in the Dawn," Soyinka is horrified at the crushing to death by a car of a "Traveler" in the early hours of the day. The language of the poem is full of ironies: firstly, despite the fact that the "White cock's" death should have served as a sacrifice for accident prevention, the "Traveler" is still killed by his car; secondly, it is ironical that the car, which is invented for man's comfort and security, now turns out to be the source of his death. The didacticism of the poem is clear enough: man's fate is controlled by ineluctable forces of which he himself has little or no control.

There is also the employment of antithesis, as suggested by the poem's title: For example, the word "dawn," which symbolizes the beginning of life and, by implication, hope, also turns out to produce "death," which is a negation of life. The interplay between "dawn" and "death" is interesting: it is a poignant and sad reminder of the complexities and mysteries of human life.

Finally, a note of didacticism is sounded in the middle portion of the poem, where the poet employs the imagery of the "grey byways," and the use of ellipsis, both to record the pitfalls and the vagaries of this world, as well as to highlight the fact that human life is full of hazards and the unknown:

.....
A naked day. Burdened hulks retracts,
Stoop to the mist in faceless throng
To wake the silent markets -- swift mute
Processions on grey byways...On this
Counterpane it was --
Sudden winter at the death
Of dawn's lone trumpeter. Cascades
Of white feather flakes...but it proved
A futile rite. Propitiation sped
Grimly on before
The right foot for joy, the left, dread¹⁵
.....

The poetic narrative of "Prisoner" centers on Soyinka's familiar theme of death. The lyric deals with man's place in the universe and arrives at the didacticism that humanity is perpetually a victim of time, place, and circumstance. Relying on the rhetorical motif of "grey," as a symbol of death,

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the poet goes on to illustrate the premise that, at every turn of human existence, man becomes a prisoner of himself.

The numerous references in the poem to the word "grey" -- at least four times in the poem -- suggest the degree to which man is trapped in the vortex of death. He elaborates: "Grey, to the low grass cropping" (line 1), "The grey hours" (line 5), "The wise grey temples we must build" (line 7), "Bound him helpless to each grey essence" (line 23, emphasis is mine).

The poem's language is imagistic: In addition to the word "grey," which is the poem's principal image, Soyinka continues to heap imagery upon imagery, almost to the point of reaching a crescendo, as in the following lines

In the desert wilderness, when, lone cactus
Cannibal was his love – even amidst the
Crag and gorge, the leap and night-tremors
Even as the potsherd stayed and the sandstorm
Fell-intimations came.

In the whorled centre of the storm, a threnody
But not from this. For that far companion
Made sudden stranger when the wind slacked
And the centre fell, grief. And the stricken
Potsherd lay, disconsolate-intimations then¹⁶

There is nothing in the above lines that shows any steady progression in thought. Rather, what we find is a series of disjointed and disconnected images which -- though not in sequential order -- yet portray a sense of chaos and confusion against a backdrop of a caged human existence or a life threatened by death.

In "Season,"¹⁷ Soyinka becomes both philosophical as well as didactic: Just as the "season" will undergo a systematic cyclical change, so also will humanity go through the process of youth and aging, life and death. In developing this didactic and philosophical premise, Soyinka employs the imagery of farming and harvesting (the "wilted corn plume/...where corn leaves/pierce like bamboo silvers").

The use of the word "rust" at three different stages of the poem's development (i.e., lines 1, 12, and 16) is significant: it not only unifies the poem's structure, but it also suggests the fact that "rust," that is, death, is ever-present at all stages of our human destiny. Furthermore, the use of the word "rust," to begin and end the opening line of the verse -- "Rust is ripeness, rust" -- not only serves as a refrain, but it highlights the didacticism that death begins and ends the human chapter.

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CONCLUSION

How shall we conclude this study? Firstly, we believe that the corpus of Soyinka's lyricism is wide and varied: it encompasses the dramatic, the narrative, the descriptive, and the didactic lyrical modes. Secondly, that his language, while carefully controlled, has a cutting edge that is sharp and scathing. And finally, that Soyinka is a profound human poet whose stylistic range includes the use of satire, personification, rhetorical questioning, a delicate handling of controversial issues and intricate subject matter, the use of ellipsis, the employment of oblique imagery, and a coarseness of tone that is reminiscent of metaphysical lyricism.

NOTES

1. See K.E. Senanu and T. Vincent, *A Selection of African Poetry* (Essex, England: Longman Group, 2005), p. 180.
2. D.I. Nwoga, "Perception, Style and Meaning in Soyinka's Poetry," *Nsukka Studies in African Literature, NSAL*, 1, 1, March 1978, 7,9-10.
3. Wole Soyinka, "Telephone Conversation," *Modern Poetry From Africa*, edited Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Book, 1976), pp. 114-145. Further references from this volume will be abbreviation as *Modern Poetry*, followed by the page number(s).
4. Abiola Irele, *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology* (London and Ibadan: Heinemann, 1981), p. 112.
5. Mary Claire Randolph, "The Structural Design of the Formal Verse Satire," in *Philological Quarterly*, XXI (1942), 368-369.
6. Wole Soyinka, "Joseph," *A Shuttle in the Crypt* London: Rex Collins/Eyre Methuen, 1977), p. 21.
7. Wole Soyinka, "Joseph," *A Shuttle in the crypt* London: Rex Collins/Eyre Methuen, 1977), p. 21.
8. Wole Soyinka, "I Anoint My Flesh," in *The Heritage of African Poetry*, ed. Isidore Okpewho (Essex, England: London Group, 1992), p. 96.
9. Wole Soyinka, "Abiku," *Modern Poetry*, p. 152.
10. Wole Soyinka, "Procession 1: Hanging Day," in *A Selection of African Poetry*, ed. K.E. Senanu and T. Vincent (Essex, England: Longman Group, 1976), p. 187. Further quotation from this volume will be abbreviated as *A Selection of African Poetry*, followed by the page number(s).
11. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts (New York: The Modern Library, 1954), p. 57.
12. Wole Soyinka, "Massacre, October '66 (Written in Tegel)," *Modern Poetry*, p. 146.
13. Wole Soyinka, "Post Mortem," *A Selection of African Poetry*, pp. 193 – 194.

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14. We can also compare it to Irving Layton's poem, "Cain," where Layton writes that "death makes us all look ridiculous." See Irving Layton, "Cain," in a *Laughter in the Mind* (New York: Jonathan Williams, 1958), p. 27.

15. Wole Soyinka, "Death in the Dawn," *Modern Poetry*, pp. 145-146.

16. Wole Soyinka, "Prisoner," *Modern Poetry*, pp. 149-150.

17. Wole Soyinka, "Season," *Modern Poetry*, pp. 150-151.