Neocolonialism and Corruption

Perhaps more than anything else, Devil on the Cross is a biting satire directed against the powers of neocolonialism and the corruption that is bred by a faulty process of decolonization. As Ngũgĩ shows us through characters like Boss Kĩhara, the Rich Old Man from Ngorika, and the local tycoons present at the Devil's Feast, that even after Kenyan natives fought for their freedoms during Mau Mau and "expelled" the white man after earning their independence, many Black people are happy to work as their proxies behind the scenes, giving off the appearance of self-rule while actually exploiting local people in service of foreign lords. Such corruption of the people against their own countrymen is not just morally wrong, it is in fact cannibalistic, and this is why Ngũgĩ links stories of neocolonial exploitation to the stories told in the novel of man-eating ogres, monsters, and witches. Moreover, the link given in the novel between neocolonial cannibalism and the holy sacrament of the eucharist (as told by the Devil to Warĩĩnga on the Ilmorog golf course) reinforces Ngũgĩ's belief that Western religion has had great power in cementing the rule of neocolonialism over Kenya's people. Indeed, through such details as the Parable of the Talents, tycoon involvement in churches, and the Devil's claim to Warĩĩnga that religion fosters complacency among the peasants (since they believe they will be rewarded in the next life for humble servitude in this life), Ngũgĩ makes it clear that religion is not just tangentially involved in Kenyan neocolonialism, but rather plays a central role in upholding and maintaining it.

Marxism and the Power of the Collective

Ngũgĩ is unequivocal in voicing his Marxist sympathies in Devil on the Cross. In a broader/historical sense, Ngũgĩ's narratology is Hegelian in itself, as much of the story's progression results from the collision and synthesis of opposites (or a thesis and antithesis). There are always two of something being thrown into relief or tension so as to produce a picture of Ngũgĩ's reality. On a larger level, these include such binaries as good and evil and reality and fantasy, detailed below. On a smaller level, these include the two clans of thieves at the Devil's Feast, the two human hearts posited by Mũturi, the two journeys undertaken in the novel, and so on.

In terms of actual Marxist/Communist thought, then, Ngũgĩ is also unequivocal in his support and his belief in the restorative power of a worker's revolution. By showing us characters like Mũturi and Wangarĩ, and by comparing them with people like Mwaũra and Mwĩreri wa Mũkiraaĩ, Ngũgĩ invites our sympathy with the peasants and revolutionaries, who work hard for everything they have and do not prey on the property of others. He also does this by showing us the destructive effects of neocolonialism (such as sugar relationships, murders, firings), while also setting up comparisons between the ultra-rich and ultra-poor. Finally, his faith in the collective is also clear, even from the opening chapter, which suggests that the collective of people is as holy and powerful as God himself: "the voice of the people is the voice of God" (3). The collective is kept down only by the deception of those at the top: otherwise, they would easily free themselves and take revolutionary action as they turn from victim to hero (as Warĩĩnga does by the novel's end).

Women's Conditions in Post-Colonial Kenya

Ngũgĩ is also critical of gender inequalities in post-colonial Kenya. Through the central role of sugar girls in the text (including Warĩĩnga herself), Ngũgĩ shows us just how easy it is for girls to succumb to the temptation of wealth, as well as the harsh consequences of ruination and even death (take Warĩĩnga's attempted suicides, for example) that result from such a temptation. Moreover, this gendered power dynamic is not just limited to sugar relationships in the text: in Wangarĩ's tale of traveling to Nairobi for work, consider the ways in which she too is sexualized and told that she should sell her body rather than find real work. Note also in many cases that the exploitation of women in post-colonial Kenya is explicitly linked to imperialist and tourist aims—for example, the love hotel to be built on the land of the communal garage and Mwaũra's recollections of serving a foreigner as he picked up women with his matatũ.

Importantly, however, there is a gender disparity between the narrator and the subject of our tale, Warĩĩnga. We already know from his false start that he is not the most reliable of narrators, but how can we be sure that he accurately represents everything Warĩĩnga thinks, says, and does, especially in instances when she was alone (as with the Devil or the Rich Old Man)? Might his narrative, even if inspired divinely, be tinged with masculine inflections and moralizing, or is the story more or less correct?

Indigenity and Local Traditions

Ngũgĩ's text is also remarkable in its incorporation and prioritization of local Kenyan (and specifically Gĩkũyũ) traditions and culture. From the very beginning of the novel, for example, the Gĩcaandĩ Player informs us—by performing a traditional oral art no less—that Warĩĩnga's story is not one that is meant for foreign ears, and that the story (like the land itself) belongs to the people of Ilmorog. Despite this inauspicious opening, however, we do hear the story, and it is one that is jam-packed with local fables, songs, and other cultural allusions—from Gatuĩria's planned national composition and areas of study, to the stories he hears from the old man Bahati in Nakuru, to the Kamoongonye ballad, and so on. In prioritizing such sidebars and digressions from the main text, and in incorporating many different genres together in one text, Ngũgĩ lays the groundwork for a literature that rejects Western narratology and perhaps provides a potential answer to the perennial question of what African Literature truly is. Moreover, in placing such a heavy emphasis on the primacy of local life and traditions, Ngũgĩ also is telling us that the way forward from an exploitative globalism is a return towards more local ways of life, giving more care to the neighbors that one forms a community with.

The Battle between Good and Evil

As is clear even from its title, Devil on the Cross is a novel heavily invested in the conflict between good and evil, both on earth and in a theological context. In terms of material wrongs that are done on earth, the conflict between good and evil roughly maps for Ngũgĩ to the the conflict between capitalism/bourgeois life and communal (Communist)/peasant ways of life. Moreover, as Mũturi tells us in his stunning Chapter 3 speech, good is not just the abstract force which drives people to love, but also the material result of that love in the world, which in turn sustains a community. Evil on the other hand, is parsed as that which parasitically seeks to destroy what has been built by the forces of good. This emphasis on material consequences and realities is inherently Marxist, and it also translates to Ngũgĩ's theological positions on good and evil. As is clear in the text, it is important to Ngũgĩ that we accept the material reality and truth of an incarnate God and Devil. Doing so helps us to recognize that we ourselves are responsible in this life for either creating sadness or joy, and it allows us to recognize good and evil more easily in others. Finally, it allows us to see something like crucifying the devil as possible, which implies that we may have distinct and real paths towards saving ourselves from earthly pain.

The Tension between Reality and Fantasy

The tension between reality and fantasy is also a dominant dynamic in Ngũgĩ's text. A great deal of the novel's significant moments, such as the Devil's revelations to Warĩĩnga, her recurring nightmare about the Devil's crucifixion, and many of the events of the Devil's Feast either literally or figuratively seem to take place in a dream state. This is done by Ngũgĩ most likely to highlight the absurdity and depravity of the conditions created by neocolonialism and corruption in post-colonial Kenya. Moreover, the idea that dreams can be a site of real revelation (or that dreams are in any way contiguous with or connected to reality) invites us to even more generously interpret Ngũgĩ's Marxism. After all, if an individual can see the hidden truth of reality in dreams, it is equally within their power to act as a revolutionary and make sure that what is hidden is brought correctly to the surface for all to see.

Language as Power and Language as Tool

In Chapter 3, the narrator tells us Gatuĩria is aware "that the slavery of language is the slavery of the mind" (58). Though it seems rather contextual, this quote in fact expresses a central tenet of Ngũgĩ's text—that is, the language that we use and communicate in both shapes the world around us and defines our relationships with this world. In more succinct terms, language is a tool to build a world—to create culture, communicate and collaborate with others, and so on—but it is also a tool that allows us to define ourselves within these constructs. This is why, in Ngũgĩ's novel, it is so insidious when Kenyans refer to themselves first with their English names and later on with their Gĩkũyũ names: it reflects an erasure of culture and, as a result, an erasure of entire worlds and identities. This is also why Gatuĩria wants to find and construct the language for a truly national kind of music, and why he seeks inspiration in the local oral tales of tradition. Outside the world of the text, too, this is a powerful aesthetic claim that Ngũgĩ is well aware of, and this is a major reason that Ngũgĩ deploys local legends, allusions, and the like in service of telling his stories (see the points about indigeneity above)