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ENG 263: LIT-IN ENGLISH

ANALYSIS OF POEMS

FIRST SEMESTER 2017/2018

ORDER OF PRESENTATION

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1. BUILDING THE NATION- ***HENRY BARLOW***
2. THE FLEA- ***JOHN DONNE***
3. MIRRORS- ***SYLVIA PLATH***
4. CONFESSIONS- ***KOFI KINATA***
5. HEAVEN- ***KWAKWUI AZASU***

HENRY BARLOW

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BUILDING THE
NATION

MEANING OF POEM

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- “BUILDING THE NATION” is a poem by a Ugandan poet, Henry Muwanga Barlow, that principally explores the lifestyle of the African bourgeoisies who come into power after colonialism and, ideally, simply replace the colonizer.
- There is a need for African leaders to create hope for those they lead, but they are caught up in the same evil lifestyle of their predecessors.
- What they promised at the end of colonialism is nowhere in sight, and aspects of the nation building which were supposed to dominate public and political policies have been thrust to periphery of human thought.
- This essay critically analyze the poem in relation to the theme of disillusionment.
- The kind of disillusionment that is portrayed in the poem is that which the Africans have towards their leaders who have adopted the very tenets of the colonisers from whom they got power.

MEANING OF POEM

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- Yet still, on the other hand, it may be proper to assert that the poem explores the persona's hope that something can be done to realign African state affairs in relation to nation building.
- Essentially, the idea of nation building merely turns out to be a more complicated phenomenon where those who are central to the process have their efforts wasted by leaders who can implement policies.

EXPLANATION OF POEM

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● LINES 1-5

Today I did my share

In building the nation

I drove the Permanent Secretary

To an important and urgent function

In fact to a luncheon at the Vic.

- The poem begins with an ironic twist as the persona drives the Permanent Secretary to what is just a luncheon, not necessarily any significant meeting that could help build the nation.
- What was publicized to be a meeting where delegates would meet and discuss issues to do with nation building simply turns out to be a feast function.

EXPLANATION OF POEM

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• LINES 6-11

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 Permanent Secretary awake on return journey.

- The persona continues showing his disillusionment.
- All this (LINES 6-11) reflects the triviality of the meeting where, in essence, serious issues were supposed to be discussed.

EXPLANATION OF POEM

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● LINES 12-21

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 concern
That I had not, but was slimming!
Upon which he said with a seriousness
That amused more than annoyed me
‘Muananchi, I too had none!

EXPLANATION OF POEM

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- A deeper exploration of these lines (**LINES 12-21**) further bears the irony of state and political affairs where leaders have nothing for the people they lead except to satisfy their own desires at the expense of the poor.
- The Permanent Secretary lies to his driver that he did not have any meal just as the driver, yet he treated himself to a lot of feasting.
- It is rather sad the PS did not ask whether the driver has eaten something because he is concerned about his welfare; it is simply to keep himself awake through the journey.
- Such type of abuses are typical of the African bourgeoisies that use their subordinates to further their own causes.

EXPLANATION OF POEM

11

• LINES 22-23

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

- The fact that the PS lies that he himself did not eat anything because he was attending to matters of the state tells us that such a person can do anything even if it means seeing his subordinates dying with hunger when he himself has plenty.
- His conscience has been corrupted by money and power.

EXPLANATION OF POEM

12

● LINES 23-30

And friend, it goes against my grains

Cause me stomach ulcers and wind

'Ah,' he continues, 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

Not sumptuous lunches!

EXPLANATION OF POEM

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- Here we see the two parties represent the two strands of nation builders that are in most African states. On one side we have the local masses, represented by the driver; while on the other hand, we have politicians, represented by the PS, who are busy squandering public funds which can be used to rebuild their nations.
- The masses are the hard-working people whose benevolence is easily taken for granted by those in power. There are those who eat extravagantly and those eat nothing at all.
- The eating might represent not only food, but the use of other materials as well. Nevertheless, the persona seems to find some hope in the fact that both the African bourgeoisie and the proletariat have their points of vulnerability.
- They both suffer in one way or another because of their own roles. For instance, the driver becomes sick because of lack of food whiles the PS becomes sick because of eating too much.

EXPLANATION OF POEM

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● LINES 31-35

So two nation builders
Arrived home this evening
With terrible pains
The result of building the nation-
Different ways.

- These lines thoroughly depicts two classes in one society. There is the middle class and the lower class; but both of them are supposed to mutually benefit from the national wealth.
- Yet, the middle class that is represented by the PS exploits the lower class that more often than not comprises those who are involved in the mode of production.
- For instance, the driver drives the PS to a place where there is feasting whiles the driver doesn't take part in the feasting.

EXPLANATION OF POEM

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- The role of both classes is to build their nation, but the middle class Africans simply become parasites who feed on the national resources at the expense of the masses. They are not building the nation at all; rather they are busy building their own stomach.
- Even at the end of the poem itself seems to induce a kind of anger that should lead to vengeance. The persona is implicitly appealing to the oppressed to rise to the occasion and deal with the ruling class.
- The fact that the “two nation builders/Arrived home this evening/ With terrible stomach pains/ The result of building the nation-/ Different ways” is more an appeal to the emotions where the persona seeks action from the masses.

POETIC TECHNIQUES

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- **IRONY**- 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.
 - ✓ The whole poem is ironic, this tells us that the persona is mocking his fellow countrymen who are involved in the mode of production only to feed the ruling class. Such an aspect is a deliberate intention to inspire a spirit of revolt in the masses. This is more evident in the number of stanzas.
 - ✓ The stanza that is exploring the merriment of the PS and the pain of the driver (**Stanza 3**) is the largest. This emphasizes the pain and suffering of the masses while their leaders are enjoying themselves. Additionally, it enhances the theme of disillusionment.
- **DICTION**- The choice of words of the writer is called the diction.
 - ✓ The poem is in a simple language, this implies that it is mostly directed to country men who are being exploited by the ruling class. In straight forward terms, the poet **lays bare** the contradictions that are there in the process of nation building-a process

POETIC TECHNIQUES

17

- Metaphor
- Imagery
- Euphemism
- 1st person narration

TONE

18

- ✓ Angry tone
- ✓ Tone of disillusionment

JOHN DONNE

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THE FLEA

WHAT IS THE POEM ABOUT?

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- In John Donne's "**The Flea**", he uses the idea of a flea to persuade a woman to have intercourse with him (the speaker) and shows that it is not a sin as the flea already mingled their blood.
- The poem is witty, romantic, fascinating since he uses unusual metaphors to convey the love between a man and woman.
- He uses metaphysical poetry to touch upon the themes of sex and religion.

WHAT DOES THE TITLE MEAN?

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- The title plays against our expectations in the subtlest of ways.
- We think that the insect will be the main focus of the poem but its not. Its just an excuse for the speaker to “woo” his lady-friend.
- So in this way the title is not that relevant to the poem.

EXPLANATION OF POEM

22

• LINES 1-2

Mark but this flea, and mark in this,
How little that which thou deniest me is,

- The flea is a metaphor for the women he loves.
- We don't know if he loves her or not. She has denied him something either physical, emotional or both but we don't know what that is yet.

LINES 3-4

It suck'd me first, and now sucks thee
And in this flea our two bloods mingle be.

- The flea is sucking the blood of the speaker and his lady-friend.
- The flea is now mixing “mingling” the bloods together.

EXPLANATION OF POEM

23

● LINES 5-6

Thou know'st that this cannot be said
A sin, nor shame, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead

- Many of Donne's poems take the form of a long, complex argument, and we can see him starting to weave such an argument here.

● LINES 7-9

Yet this enjoy before it woo,
And pamper'd swells width one blood made of two
And this, alas, is more than we should do.

- The speaker almost sounds jealous of the flea, as if it were a romantic rival.
- And, of course, Donne doesn't fail to give us the nausea-inducing image of the flea swelling up with blood as it continues to suck. We imagine the flea gradually expanding with a glazed look of satisfaction in its eyes.

EXPLANATION OF POEM

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EXPLANATION OF POEM

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● LINES 10-11

Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare
Where we almost, yea, more than married are

- As the woman raises her hand to kill the flea that is sucking her blood, the speaker begs her to hold off.
- The flea he says contains three lives: his, hers and the newly developed baby flea.

LINES 12-13

This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is;

- The speaker's absurd argument continues on, as if he has dug himself in too deep of a hole to try climbing out now.
- The speaker pushes the religious envelope further by describing the flea's body as a "Temple" in which their marriage is consecrated.

EXPLANATION OF POEM

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• LINES 14-15

Though parents grudge, and you, we're met
And this cloister'd in these living walls of jet.

- The order of the words in these lines is confusing, but the meaning is clear enough.
- We get more back-story about their relationship: her parents do not approve of their union. Or maybe they just don't want the speaker getting all friendly with their daughter.

• LINES 16-18

Though use make you apt to kill me,
Let not to that, self-murder added be,
And sacrilege, three sins in killing three

- She is really not pleased with the speaker. Even he will admit that her experience and habits would naturally lead her to want to "kill" him!
- But he says that if she kills the flea she will be committing murder. It's murder because his blood is in the flea.

EXPLANATION OF POEM

27

• LINES 19-20

Cruel and sudden, hast thou since
Purpled thy nail in blood of innocence?

- Oh no! She killed it!
- Nonetheless, the speaker is crestfallen. He calls her action cruel and hasty.
- Still, though he sounds shocked, we know that nothing too terrible has really happened.

• LINES 21-22

Wherein could this flea guilty be,
Except in that drop it sucked from thee?

- He asks how the flea could have been guilty of anything except taking small, teensy drop of her blood.
- He expands on his notion of the flea's innocence.

EXPLANATION OF POEM

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● LINES 23-24

Yet thou triumph'st, and say'st that thou
Find'st not thyself nor me the weaker now;

- The woman has triumphed over the flea, and she believes she has also triumphed over the speaker's argument.

EXPLANATION OF POEM

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● LINES 25-27

'Tis true; then learn how false, fears be;
Just so much honour, when thou yield'st to me,
Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee

- In this case, he readily admits that his earlier argument has fallen apart. He brushes aside her objection by simply conceding. “'Tis true”
- Just as she felt no less power after killing flea, she will be no less of a maiden after she has had intercourse with the speaker.

POETIC TECHNIQUES

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- **IMAGERY**-Language which describes something in detail, using words to substitute for and create sensory stimulation, including visual imagery and sound imagery.
 - ✓ One of the main strong images in this poem is the flea but the flea is just an excuse for the poet to impress his lady friend.
 - ✓ Another strong image is the poet and how he cares so much for a tiny insect. When his lady-friend kills it, he becomes ashamed.
- **METAPHOR**- A direct relationship where one thing or idea substitutes for another.

● LINES 1-2

Mark but this flea, and mark in this,

- ✓ The flea is a metaphor for the women he loves.

POETIC TECHNIQUES

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- **SIMILE**-An indirect relationship where one thing or idea is described as being similar to another. Similes usually contain the words “like” or “as,” but not always

- LINES 12-13

This flea is you and I, and this

Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is;

- ✓ The speaker describes the flea as their “marriage bed” thus their matrimonial bed and “marriage temple”, where their marriage took place.

- LINE 15

And this cloister'd in these living walls of jet.

- ✓ He the speaker compares the flea to a “jet”.

POETIC TECHNIQUES

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- **ALLITERATION**-The repetition of consonant sounds within close proximity, usually in consecutive words within the same sentence or line.

- LINE 6

Thou know'st that this cannot be said

A sin, nor shame, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead

- **PERSONIFICATION**- Where human thoughts, actions, perceptions and emotions are directly attributed to inanimate objects or abstract ideas

STRUCTURE

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- The poem is a marvel of form and rhythm.
- The **rhyme scheme** :AABBCCDDD (These couplets, thus; AA,BB,CC and one triplet; DDD at the end of the stanza). Each new rhyme introduces a new idea. The rhyme is very simple, usually limited to one syllable: this/is, thou/nou, met/jet. The most commonly used rhyme words are “thee” and “be”.
- The clever pairing of “me”, “thee”, and “be” at the end of the poem unites the couple in the rhyme, if not in real life.
- The main rhythmic unit in the poem is iamb: a short, unaccented syllable followed by a long, accented syllable.

❖ Example :LINES 12-13

This flea is you and I, and this
Our mar-riage bed, and mar-riage tem-ple

THEMES IN THE POEM

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● GUILT AND BLAME

This theme is shown when the poet is saying there is no shame in losing maidenhead but guilty's the woman. As a result the poet tries again to seduce her by making her think twice about killing the flea and saying it would be a great crime. However the woman is not fooled by this and smacks down the flea.

● SEX AND RELIGION

This theme is also seen when the idea of the flea is used to persuade a woman to have sex with him. In the first two stanzas, he uses metaphysical poetry to touch upon the theme of sex and religion. In the first stanza Donne opens up with "Mark but this flea, and mark in this,/

SYLVIA PLATH

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MIRRORS

ABOUT THE POEM

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- ✓ *Mirrors* is a short, two stanza poem, written in 1961.
- ✓ The poem is an exploration of Her uncertain self and was probably influenced by the earlier poem of poet James Merrill, likewise titled Mirror.
- ✓ Sylvia Plath's poem has her hallmark stamp of powerful language, sharp imagery and dark undertones. Together with unusual syntax, no obvious rhyme or meter and an astute use of enjambment.
- ✓ Mirror is a **personification** poem of great depth.
- ✓ It has two stanzas that reflect each other, mirror images you could say, that contain no obvious end rhymes or steady beat to the lines. From this we can suggest that there is no closure, or certainty or order.

ABOUT THE POEM

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- ✓ Rhyme tends to secure the lines, anchor them in a familiar sound, but here the poet has chosen to end each line with a different word, virtually unrelated in sound or texture. It's free verse yet with so many periods (end stops, full stops) and limited

MIRRORS- FIRST STANZA

38

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.

Whatever I see I swallow immediately
Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.

I am not cruel, only truthful,
The eye of a little god, four-cornered.

Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.
It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long
I think it is part of my heart. But it flickers.
Faces and darkness separate us over and over

MIRRORS- SECOND STANZA

39

Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,
Searching my reaches for what she really is.
Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.
I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.
She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.
I am important to her. She comes and goes.
Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.
In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.

ANALYSIS

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FIRST STANZA

- ✓ This poem is all about appearances and the search for the self. The fact that the mirror is the voice and has the starring role is a little odd, but Sylvia Plath wanted to show just how powerful an object the mirror is in people's lives.
- ✓ In particular, she wanted to highlight the issue that some females have with their image and the inner turmoil that can be caused as the aging process gathers pace. The poet's own struggle for a stable identity only adds to the idea that the face in the mirror must stay young, pretty and perfect.

SECOND STANZA

- ✓ Whereas the first stanza concentrated on the exact truthfulness of the mirror, the ability to reflect precisely, the second stanza sees a transition - the mirror becomes a liquid, it gains depth and a different dimension.

EXPLANATION OF POEM

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LINES 1-3

- ✓ The opening lines introduce us to the passive rectangle of silver, the glass, the shiny surface which only tells the truth and has no other purpose. Mirrors have no prior knowledge of anything; they simply are.
- ✓ Note the use of the verb swallow which suggests that the mirror has a mouth and can digest images instantly, whole, like a creature. It's as if the mirror is saying - To me you are food which I need to satisfy my insatiable appetite. There are no blurry lines; love or judgement has nothing to do with it. I will swallow you. End of story.

LINES 4-6

- ✓ This objective theme continues as the mirror reinforces the idea of neutrality - it simply tells the story as it is, no fuss, no elaboration, no fabrication. And it is this quality - **truthfulness** - which allows the mirror to declare itself as the eye of a little god; an all seeing minor deity holding disproportionate power.

EXPLANATION OF POEM

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LINES 7-9

- ✓ The wall is pink, speckly, and is now an integral part of the mirror's heart, suggesting that this silver eyed god has gained a feminine side to its persona. Pink is associated with girlie things - but the connection isn't that clear - there are uncertain faces coming between it and the wall of pink.
- ✓ Is the mirror losing its grip on its own reality? Are the ripples of time starting to affect the smooth surface?

LINES 10-12

- ✓ With god-like medium-shifting power, the mirror becomes a lake, metaphorical water. In it is reflected the image of a woman - the poet, any woman? - and she is bending over as one would over the surface of a lake.
 - ✓ This woman is uncertain of herself and needs to find out who she really is. But can a person truly find out who they are merely by peering into a lake? Don't forget, this type of water can swallow any image it comes across.
- ✓ Didn't Narcissus look into a similar lake and was so overcome with his own beauty that he fell in and drowned?

EXPLANATION OF POEM

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INES 13-15

- ✓ The woman isn't interested in beauty it seems, perhaps she's more intent on learning about her emotional responses to her former self? Candlelight can't help her cause, it's a deceptively romantic way of looking at things, and the moon likewise, governs only madness and haunting of the blood. She can't dwell on the past.
- ✓ Nevertheless, the mirror sees her back which is what the eye of a little god would do, and holds the image, as always.
- ✓ The woman weeps, which pleases the mirror, perhaps because the tears replenish the water in the lake, or maybe the mirror is happy because it has done its job of faithful reflection and so feels rewarded.
- ✓ But the woman is clearly upset, because the past holds such powerful memories, not all positive. This part of the poem is crucial, for we discover the mirror's aim - to disturb the woman.

EXPLANATION OF POEM

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Lines 16-18

- ✓ The deity has control of the human, which is how the traditional stories often pan out.
- ✓ So, we know the mirror believes that it is important to the woman, and so it appears - she looks at herself each morning, so reliant has she become. The revelation, hardly a shock, is that the woman's younger self is dead, drowned by her own hand. Replacing the girl on a daily basis is the face of an old woman, surfacing like a terrible fish.
- ✓ Imagine the horror of facing the mirror each morning and confronting an inner demon, which is what the poet intends to convey. The innocent, romantic, crazy girl floats in the water, all life gone. And out of her there rises from the (emotional) depths a haifish, a monstrosity

LITERARY DEVICES

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PERSONIFICATION

Mirror is a personification poem, that is, the poet has given the mirror a voice, a first person voice, so the first line:

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.

Is the mirror speaking. It is direct, objective and open. It has a personality. This device allows the mirror to address the reader (and any individual) at a personal level.

METAPHOR

In the first stanza the mirror declares

I am not cruel, only truthful
The eye of a little god, four cornered.

So the mirror becomes the eye of a little god, metaphorically speaking.

And at the start of the second stanza

Now I am a lake

is also a metaphor, as the mirror becomes deep water.

LITERARY DEVICES

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SIMILE

The final few words
“like a terrible fish”
constitute a simile.

STRUCTURE

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- ✓ "Mirror" is structured in two, nine-line stanzas. The stanzas are both symmetrical and suggestive of opposition.
- ✓ This poem is written in free verse, which means that it has no set pattern of rhythm or rhyme. Yet, Plath uses rhythm and rhyme deliberately. While her lines have no repeating pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, they read gracefully and naturally.
- ✓ While none of these lines rhymes blatantly, Plath uses slant rhymes, or words that sound similar, but don't quite rhyme. An example of this is the lines ending in "darkness" and "fish" – these two words sound similar, but the slant makes the rhyme surprising and fresh. Plath also uses repetitive phrases, like "over and over" and "day after day." These phrases, and Plath's attention to sound, help bring a little rhythm and rhyme into this poem's free verse.

KOFI KINATA

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CONFESSTIONS

ABOUT THE POEM

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- ✓ As many Christians do when they face a situation which seems beyond their control, they call on God to take control and that's exactly what Kofi Kinata intended with this poem "*Confessions*"
- ✓ The "Fante" language is very difficult for many to understand and the literal meaning of it.
- ✓ Kofi Kinata in the poem is not promoting alcoholism or any sort, but encouraging people to call on God when they face any difficulty in their lives.

CONFessions-FIRST AND SECOND STANZA'S

50

Oh lord come take the wheel
For I'm drunk, I can't see
I am about to lose control
Ei, I cant see, I am about to lose control, Lord

Sunday, from here I go to Sakumono
I get mad there when I am told omutuo is finished
Pastor can call and ask of my whereabouts
When it comes to church attendance, Mensah is my brother
I am a truant
But instead of being in church, I will be in Vienna city

CONFESsions-THIRD STANZA

51

My best friend has come from Equitorial Guinea

All the boys get drunk

We box up the alcoholic drinks; what we took was epitorial guiness

I am really drunk, I am in a real stupor

I go reverse without looking back

The road signs make no sense

The red light is an old currency, I jump it

POETIC TECHNIQUES

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- ✓ **REFRAIN**-the repetition of a line or lines in a verse or stanza, especially at the end of the stanza or between two stanzas.

-Oh lord come take the wheel-

-For I'm drunk, I can't see-

-I am about to lose control-

-Ei, I cant see, I am about to lose control, Lord-

- ✓ **CAESURA**- the pause in a line that is formed by the rhythms of natural speech rather than meter.

-Ei, I cant see, I am about to lose control, Lord-

- ✓ **ALLITERATION**-The repetition of consonant sounds within close proximity, usually in consecutive words within the same sentence or line.

-Pastor //can call //and ask of my whereabouts-

POETIC TECHNIQUES

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- ✓ **CONTRAST**-the rhetorical device through which writers identify differences between two subjects, places, persons, things or ideas.
 - But instead of being in //church//, I will be in //Vienna city// -
- ✓ **PUN**- A word or phrase which has a "double meaning" as intended by the writer; often these words sound the same (or nearly the same) but have different meanings.
 - Equitorial Guinea - and- epitorial guiness-
- ✓ **METAPHOR**-A direct relationship where one thing or idea substitutes for another. Normally without "like" and "as".
 - The red light is an old currency, I jump it-

STRUCTURE

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- ✓ The poem has 17 lines with 3 stanzas
- ✓ There is no regular rhyme, thus the poem is written in a free verse.