

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*: A Comparative Analysis

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Introduction

Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* constantly appears to its critics as the most locally produced work of an immature artist which cannot transcend the boundary of its literary provincialism.¹ According to Adeagbo Akinjogbin, if the book is at all accepted outside the country of its author, it is probably because like some other books of the author, it "contains some of the unbelievable things in our folklores calculated to temper his European readers as they seem to confirm their concept of Africa."²

Many censorious critics have seen the book as the most wasteful creative exercise in the canon of the literary world.³ What this study therefore proposes to do is to demonstrate that a non-cursory reading and analysis of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* show that the novel has literary qualities that favourably put it on the same aesthetic merit with any other highly acclaimed work of art.

Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is a tale of a superstitious sailor on an ill-fated voyage. In the story, the sailor commits a crime against the principle of life by killing an innocent bird of good omen – an Albatross. The story, which being retold to a wedding guest, accounts for the physical and mental torments which the protagonist, the Mariner, suffers as a result of his heartlessness in killing the innocent bird. The sailor is one of the crew of the ill-fated ship and he is the only one left alive back from the sea to his home-land. The Old Mariner attributes the misfortune of the voyage to the supernatural agencies working in retribution for his wanton killing of the harmless, friendly bird.

Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is the story of a Drinkard's search for his dead tapster and also an account of the labours, trials and revelations which the Drinkard experienced during the search. The journey, which the Drinkard makes into an African bush, carries him to the realms of imagination, subconsciousness and even to the world of spirits. In the world of spirits he binds and even wrestles with death, being part of the tasks put before him for trying to know the whereabouts of his tapster.

Looking through these brief accounts of the two stories, it could be observed that they are both stories of adventure, the heroes in the two stories being the adamant adventurers. Similarly too, it could be observed that the stories take the reader from the concrete world

to an imaginary world. In Tutuola's story, for example, the reader is carried to the worlds of spirits where strange events occur. The reader sees "The Complete Gentleman"⁴ return his borrowed parts to their owners at the end of the market day. It is a case of a "full bodied gentleman reduced to head" (p. 21). The father of the gods is also introduced with his wife and so also are "The Red People of the Red Town". (p. 72) By the end of the story, the reader is driven to the town and place of the dead, where the Drinkard finally meets his tapster.

Coleridge's work also contains elements of the supernatural that carry the reader outside this concrete world. The sight of the "Skeleton ship" (p. 408) "Death" (p. 418), "Life in Death" (p. 408) and the sudden death of the Mariner's crew, are at once frightening experience that the reader is exposed to. A comparative observation of exposure to supernatural actions and characters can be quoted from these two stories thus: The theme of the love of God for all creatures, as well as that of the danger in doing evil is central to Coleridge's story. By killing the bird that hovered near the ship, not having the fear of the violation of kindness and gentleness in his eyes, the Mariner is seen to have destroyed one of the links in the flow of natural cycle. He is subsequently given a picture of disunity in nature, where things begin their source in an interchange of harmonies. It seems that every Spirit of the Universe is touched by the Mariner's wanton cruelty. The earth, the sky and the sea stay stagnant. The Mariner is made to see the effect of his evil act. by the end of the story, he passes the message over to the wedding guest, that mercifulness is better than hostility:

In *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, Tutuola deals with the theme of man's struggle to understand and resolve conflicts within his universe in order to achieve peace and harmony within his environment. With the dead of the Drinkard's tapster, he finds his own existence very hard because he cannot do without palmwine and cannot find a substitute. This is intrapersonal conflict – conflict within himself. On the interpersonal level, the Drinkard loses his friends because there was no palmwine for them to drink again. The need to resolve these intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts sends him on the journey. He is seen to have resolved the conflicts when he returns with a "golden egg" (p. 101). The supernatural power of the egg to supply whatever is requested of it brings the people back to the Drinkard which is an affirmation of the resolved conflict.

The themes of these two stories derive their similarities from the sense that they are both concerned with man in relation to his environment. While Coleridge impacts the sense of good as against evil in his story, Tutuola projects the need for man to maintain peace and harmony within his environment. The moral message of the works is an amplification of their themes. After narrating the story to the wedding guest, the guest becomes a changed man. Despite his initial reluctance to listen to the story, he finally realises that he has even gained enough experience to make it unnecessary for him to attend the wedding after the Mariner has left him:

The Mariner, whose eye is bright,
Whose beard with age is hoar, Is gone: and now
the wedding-guest turned from the bridegroom's door.

He went like one that hath been stunned,
And is of sense forlorn: A sadder and wiser-man,
He rose to the narrow morn. (p. 413)

The wedding guest looks about the best person to which such stories could be told. Like the Mariner, he was setting on a voyage too – to attend the wedding. The wedding itself is a materialistic occasion. The wedding guest is able to detach himself from this materialistic instinct of life after hearing the Mariner's tale. The story then assumes a religious tone or dimension.

Before meeting the wedding guest, the ancient Mariner has undergone a moral change of life through the experience on the voyage and like the Biblical Cain, he remains a wanderer physically and he is psychologically dead until he recounts his story:

Since then, at an uncertain hour
That agony returns: And till my ghastly tale
is told, This heart within me burns
I pass, like right, from land to land;
I have strange power of speech; That
moment that his face I see, I know the
man must hear me: To him my tale I teach (p. 413).

The result of the Drinkard's journey in Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* leaves some moral imprints which are in consonance with the theme of the novel as earlier discussed. The stories told within the mainstream of the novel have a moralistic import. The story itself is that of discoveries, and discoveries are meant to give lessons. The hero is exposed to metaphysical world. As it is usual in all picaresque stories, interest is not in the journey, but moral, emotional and psychological development. The Drinkard becomes a changed man whose past life is dead, having undergone an education of the soul. The two stories are thus the great moral importance.

It is importance to draw attention to the picaresque nature of the two works under comparison since this highlights the concept of heroic monomyth,⁶ a characteristic feature of the picaresque tradition. Both the Ancient Mariner and the Drinkard undergo this monomythic process in the patterns of the 'initiation' 'journey' and 'return'. In Tutuola's novel, the death of the tapster initiates him into the 'journey' while his final return marks the last process of heroic monomyth – return. Similarly, in Coleridge's story, the Mariner's journey is the initiation; his experiences mark the 'journey' and his homeward marks the 'return' in the concept of the heroic monomyth. The importance of this heroic monomyth lies in the fact that the heroes, having passed through the stages, are seen to be morally transformed. Significantly too, a rule of mythology is portrayed after the heroes' return to

their homes. This rule emphasises the fact that the society in which the hero lives has to be under one form of distress or the other so that the hero's adventure will be of importance, to his society. Related to Tutuola's novel, one finds the society in distress; suffering under great famine, lawlessness and disorder prevail by the time the hero returns. The result of his adventure, with the golden egg, provides some kind of resolution. Similarly, the Mariner's listener, the wedding guest, on his way to the wedding ceremony is made to reason with life. Subsequently, he dissociates himself from the material-based society. He becomes morally transformed too. The adventure of the two protagonists is seen to be of great importance of their societies. This is another elements of similarity observed in the comparison of these two works.

The sources of information spurring these two writers to compose their works is of importance to a comparative study of their works. Coleridge's story is said to be based on a dream retold by a friend:

The Ancient Mariner was found on a strange dream, which a friend of Coleridge had, who fancied he saw a skeleton ship with figures in it (p. 404).

Tutuola's source is different from Coleridge's. The story is based on traditional lores, the indigenous customs and oral traditions of his people. It is an extension of African tradition embedded in Yoruba mythical imagination. The source is that of a Yoruba rural agricultural community in the pre-industrial times where palmwine tapping was a major industry. Also, credit facilities could be based on a system of domestic or agricultural service – (pawn). The cause of the famine was as well as the story of the complete gentleman are generally traditional stories in Yoruba folklore. Furthermore, part of Tutuola's material strikes one as greatly influenced by Fagunwa's *Cgboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmole*. Tutuola's "Half Bodied Boy" in the said story could be paralleled to Fagunwa's "Ajantala" in the said story. It would appear that the influence of borrowing coupled with the author's personal knowledge of traditional African Folklore, guides him through the production of the story.

The plot in Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is that of an adventure narrative of Woe to an impatient wedding guest. It is divided into seven parts, one part neatly dovetails into the other as the story progresses. With Tutuola, however, it is that of a series of short plays tied together to form a whole in the straightforward narration of the Drinkard's journey. The narrator-hero personae is similar to both books.

The literary styles of Coleridge and Tutuola are important areas for a comparative study of these two works. Coleridge uses the informal mode of poetry. He uses the style of lyrical ballads in the rhythmic, personal descriptive and free flowing meditative conversational address to a wedding guest. For example, consider this:

He holds him with his glittering eye –
The Wedding-Guest stood still,
And listens like a three years' child
The Mariner hath his will.

(Lines 15-18)

Unlike Coleridge, Tutuola uses the narrative technique where the protagonist addresses his reader. The events are classified under different topics, each describing different events as they link each other in a cinematic pattern from the beginning to the end. The prose narrative technique emotionally draws on all forms of life-emotion, sensation and human psyche that are constantly arrested as the reader reads on. This passage is a typical example of what we mean here:

I said that, rather than leave my wife with him, I would die with him, so I began to fight him, but as he was not a human-being he swallowed me too and he was still crying "hungry" and going away with us. As I was in his stomach, I commanded my juju which changed the wooden-doll back to my wife, gun, egg, cutlass and loads at once. Then I loaded the gun and fired into his stomach, but he walked for a few yards before he fell down, and I loaded the gun for the second time and shot him again. (p. 110)

The adventure stories cause the reader fear, excitement, suspense, anxiety and surprise in the two works. The reader feels for the heroes in their different supernatural experiences. Their style, particularly in Tutuola's novel is effective in its totality because it mirrors Africans' concept of supernatural existence. It carries the reader to different worlds in a lined pattern.

Diction, an aspects of language, is an important area through which one can compare these two works under consideration. To any students of romantic poetry, Coleridge's poetic metrics are clear. Witness the following:

The Sun's rim dips; the stars rush out:
At one stride comes the dark;
With far-heard whisper, O'er the sea,

Off shot-the Spectre-bark.
We listened and looked sideways up!
Fear at my heart, as at a cup,
My life blood seemed to slip!
The stars were dim, and thick the night,

The steerman's face by his lamp gleaned white; (p. 408)

If Coleridge is too formal in his use of elastic poetic metrics, Tutuola is too simple. Most critics often accuse him of this simple and unstylistic language.⁸ In any case, Tutuola inherits powerful linguistic influences in thought from his mother tongue – Yoruba.⁹ Often, Tutuola's wordy and repetitive style, arises from the translation of Yoruba idioms and proverbs into English. Consider this:

Then he was telling my wife to take him along with him, to wait and take him with us, he then commanded that our eyes be blinded and we became blinded

at the same moment as he said it. (p. 13)

Often times, Tutuola is ill advisedly crucified for freaking with the English Language. Yet, his descriptive power merits praise.¹⁰ He vividly gives a description of death's house that one is readily convinced that such a place should truly be death's abode:

He took me around his house and his yam garden too, he showed me the skeleton bones of human beings which he had killed since a century ago and showed me many other things also, but there I saw that he was using skeleton bones of human-beings as fuel woods and skull heads of human-beings as his basins. Plates and tumblers (p. 13).

The use of imagery is another important level of comparing the works of Coleridge and Tutuola. A comparative study of the two works will be incomplete without reference to imagery, especially since the two stories deal in part, with supernatural experiences.

Coleridge fully adhered to nature and its agencies-rain, lightening, river and even death. The Mariner's experiences after killing the innocent Albatross and the effect of these natural elements on him vividly evoke our sympathies. The symbols used modify the sense of colour of one's imagination that the Wedding Guest feared that a spirit was addressing him. The emotional appeal of the reader is arrested and we feel the actions are real. The albatross's arrival to the crew while icebound is a symbol of 'life' on the troubled sea. An image of the alienation could also be drawn from the voyage. The story could still be likened to that of a slave who escapes from the slave traders and returns home to narrate an account of his experience to his people. The Mariner is estranged from home during his voyage.

Still on imagery, if the Drinkard in Tutuola's novel acquires more magical powers than his counterpart in Coleridge's work, it is probably because of his own 'juju' – an aspects of African traditional belief, which abounds in the novel. The Drinkard himself is "father of gods", (p. 10) and a "juju man" (p. 10) too. With these self-acknowledged attributes, he is able to make fantastic accomplishments. He could transform himself to anything anytime and for any purpose. These different manifestations of the Drinkard and even his wife are very important when related to the concept of "juju" in African traditional beliefs.

Tutuola's physical descriptions are often detailed. He presents places, persons and appropriate names for his actions and characters e.g. "Faithful Mother" (p. 68). "Water People" (p. 61) "Red People of the Red Town" (p. 73). The two writers display, vividly, their ability to relate images and characters that arouse felt-insight in the reader. The reader develops haunting instincts of personal suffering, perplexity, loneliness, longing, horror and fear through the images employed.

Elements of realism and plausibility seem to be lacking in the two stories. Tutuola claims that the Drinkard has 5,600 palmtress and drinks 75 kegs in a day! The two stories

constantly demonstrate the reanimation of dead people. It is significant to note, however, that these writers are more concerned with giving vest to their creative imagination, rather than recreating realities. They both try to make credible the supernatural and wonderful.

To a great extent, literary success lies in universal truth and transformation of actions into moral messages. This is where the element of universal application of the stories under consideration in this text comes in.

Coleridge treats God as just Lord. God awards ruthless and prolonged punishment not to the Mariner alone but to his colleagues who were accessories to the crime committed. This is how God pronounces judgement according to universal belief. God also shows that His love for man extends to beasts, birds, and other creatures. The happiness in penance and prayer is also true to universal concept. Most importantly, guilty deed is seen as a prelude to spiritual knowledge and discovery. It is often universality opined that the result of wrong acts draws one closer to God. This however, is within the framework of metaphysical interpretation.

Tutuola's tale shares these attributes of the universal application as seen in Coleridge's. The Drinkard's and his wife's possession of such super-human power is not far-fetched from universal imagination and can be applied to life also.

Another universal truth is the display and effect of human greed in life. With the magic egg that could give anything so desired, the people of the Drinkard's town misuse the power. Universally, people often misuse such opportunities granted them in life. In the story too, one finds out that human beings desert their companions and friends in moments of trouble only to re-appear when there is abundance. This is shown in the conscious or subconscious attitude of the Drinkard's town's people who deserted him when there was no more palmwine, only to come back when it was later in abundance. The flight between heaven and earth and its consequent resolution through sacrifice to appease the gods is true to life. In fact, it is a universal phenomenon. Though the two works take their setting from two different cultural backgrounds, one still finds out that some universal truths run through them.

It is important to note that a comparison can be drawn on the heroes of these two stories under consideration. Tutuola's hero is a young man while Coleridge's hero is old – The Ancient Mariner. It is ironic, however, to note that though the hero in Tutuola's story is a young man, he is able to perform wonders. He is unlike the Old Mariner who is being controlled by nature. While the Mariner is observed as an impassive character, always under the control of supernatural impressions, the Drinkard is seen as being active through his experience in the bush. He binds death, kills spirits, and fights strange creatures, among other things.

Similarities of ideas, despite difference in setting, are significant level of comparison of the two works under review in this essay. Generally, one cannot easily account for a

case of borrowing from any of these two writers, especially when we consider the sources of their work earlier mentioned. However, it is often held that the mythology or experiences of certain traditions or individuals often correspond. When such individuals use such mythology or experiences to reflect and refract literary themes in writing, ideas may be found to be similar as we have seen in this comparative study. The heroic tradition as reflected in the heroic monomyth, justifies the cross-cultural validity of myths. There is also the issue of collective conscious imperative in dreams. Our appreciation of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*,¹ then, as a work of art, should lie in our understanding of its literary qualities which have been discovered from our comparing the novel with a trans-oceanic work of art that has received accolade from both renowned and amateur critics all over.

In conclusion, our examination of the theme, plot, characterization, style, diction and imagery in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* shows that *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* compares favourably with one of the world's great classics.

Notes

¹ For example Babasola Johnson in a letter to the editor of *West Africa* of April 10, 1954 says that *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* should not have been published at all. According to him the language of the book is "foreign to West Africans and English people of anybody for that matter ... Tutuola's language consists largely in translating Yoruba ideas into English" (p. 21). Another critic, Miss Mercedes Mackey, a West Indian writer wrote to the editor of *West Africa* about *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. She writes, "The translation of well known and rather horrific folk stories into ungrammatical and incomprehensible English is naturally shocking to an African (or European) who was laboured with his grammar and got prizes for his essay at school." May 8, 1954, (p. 21)

² Harrold R. Collins, ed. *Amos Tutuola* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc. 1969), pp. 20-21.

³ Ibid. Akinjogbin is again one of the people who will never see anything good in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. He feels that the book has no literary value and "show(s) no mark of possible future development". In essence then, the book has been regarded as a misfit in the literary world.

⁴ Amos Tutuola, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1952), p. 25. Unless otherwise noted, all other quotations in this edition shall be by page only.

⁵ David Perkins, ed. *English Romantic Writers* (U.S.A.: Harcourt Brace and World Inc; 1967), p. 413. Unless otherwise noted, all other quotations in this edition shall be by page only.

⁶ Joseph Cambell in his book *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*. U.S.A.: ABACUS, 1975), pp. 36 and 37. For example, discusses extensively the picaresque tradition. As the pattern of tradition, Cambell lists: (a) The road of trials (b) the meeting with goddess (c) Women as the Temptress (d) Attonement with the Father (e) The Ultimate Boon.

⁷ D.O. Fagunwa, *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmole* (Apapa Lagos: Nelson, 1950), see pp. 31 and 95 for example.

⁸ For example, despite all the credits that Bernth Lindfors gives to Tutuola, he still has this to say about his language: "As an undisciplined stylist whose imperfect grasp of English occasionally blocks effective communication he is at times extremely bad." See Amos Tutuola: Debts and Londofs in *Critical Perspectives*

on Amos, Tutuola ed., Bernth Lindfors (Washington D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1975), p. 304.

⁹Robert P. Armstrong is aware of this point when in his article, "The Narrative Intensive Continuity: *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* says "There can be no doubt that Amos Tutuola is closer to the traditional aesthetic of the Yoruba than are those of his contemporaries who have turned to the novel." In *Research in African Literature*, ed. Bernth Lindfors (U.S.A.: University of Texas Press, 1970), p. 33, Vol. 1, No. 1.

¹⁰Kofi Awoonor realises Tutuola's merit; thus he says of him: "Tutuola's achievement rests in his going into the roots of Yoruba folklore to rediscover the great common soil of literature ... "Kofi Awoonor, *The Breast of the Earth* (New York: NOK Publishers International, 1975), p. 250.

¹¹Bernth Lindfor broadens our appreciation of Tutuola's work when he says that "... Tutuola's greatest contribution to world literature may be his transcendent orality, his ability to translate the technique and materials of oral art into literary art". See Bernth O. Lindfors "Oral Tradition and the Individual Literary Talent" in *Studies in the Novel*. Jams W. Lee, ed. (U.S.A.: North Texas State University Press, 1972) Vol. IV, No. 2, p. 210. Bernth Lindfors also states about Tutuola's artistic contribution: "His (Tutuola's) originality set an excellent precedent for later writers who might otherwise have followed too parasitically the literary fashions of Europe". See Bernth Lindfors, "Amos Tutuolas; Debts and Assets" in *Critical Perspectives on Amos Tutuola*, (p. 306).

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