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*The Sympathetic Undertaker*, a novel by Biyi Bandele-Thomas

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**Outline**

**Introductory Words**

**The Narrative Structure**

**The Devaluation of Language**

**The Setting of the Road**

**Introductory Words**

*The Sympathetic Undertaker* is a novel written by the Nigerian Writer Biyi Bandele-Thomas. Some of his publications include *The Street* (1999), *The Man Who Came in from the Back of Beyond* (1991), *Burma Boy* (2007), *The King’s Rifle* (2009).

*The Sympathetic Undertaker*, the novel under discussion, published in 1991 exposes the predicament faced by the fictitious state of Zowabia. Here, one is informed of a nation destroyed as a result of military rule, “an account of the deeds of the wild soldiery”, to quote from James Gibbs. No wonder characters degenerate as some end up in dementia in this difficult setting. In this regard, Rayo’s life, one important character, seems to be a good illustration.

Theory-based, the objective of this course is to help students read a novel by taking advantage of theoretical notions. Here, sociocriticism as understood by Pierre Zima, will be the main tool. The point is to see how the text reacts to socio-historical problems through language. Three aspects will be examined here:

1. The Narrative Structure
2. The Devaluation of Language
3. The Setting of the Road

**The Narrative Structure**

Narration is important as it is much more functional that anything else.The end objective is to draw a link between the narrative structure and the disaster the reader witnesses in the novel. In other words, the study of narration will shed light on the trials faced by the people of Zowabia. In order to reach such an objective, the following points will be considered:

* Dual narrative
* Digressions
* Narrative anachronies
* Dual Narrative

What is striking in *The Sympathetic Undertaker* is that the narrative lacks continuity as it is organized around two main narratives that can be read distinctly. The first narration is that of Kayo, the main narrator of the novel. The second is that of Rayo, the student leader who ends up in madness. In this regard, one can therefore assert that the text is heterogeneous just like the many ethnic tribes the state of Zowabia is made up of.

* Digressions

In the novel under consideration, digressions are all too numerous. A case in point is given thus:

Rayo loved stories like this. Wrong. Rayo loved all sorts of stories. All those books he had. He lived in a dream world.

But forgive me-*I digress*.

I was talking about suicide. And what they say about it (18).

Bearing in mind that the main point is Rayo’s madness, one can therefore understand that the episode on suicide is nothing but a digression from the narrator. The connotation is that these digressions not only slow the narration but above all they symbolize the predicament of the nation on the road to development.

* Narrative anachronies

The novel under discussion is full of narrative anachronies such as prolepses and analepses.

To start with prolepses, one can quote a good example here. The novel begins with Rayo’s madness:

My immediate reaction was to burst into laughter that Saturday morning when Mother came knocking on my door and announced that Rayo had gone insane.

She told me: Mama Titi and our neighbours in the backyard have just returned from the market. They saw him there. He was stark naked. Right in the middle of the market (3)

Here, the narrator deals with Rayo’s madness by beginning with the end, namely the signs of his dementia. One can say that the story begins with its conclusion. Through this proleptic device, attention must also be paid to the social disorder at stake.

The use of analepses is also another aspect of the narrative anachronies. On page 111 one can read:

I remembered Rayo when he came out of the hospital after its suicide bid. He has spent a week on the critical list before being discharged. For days afterwards he was down with a cold and sneezes with every breath he took. And Mother, always by his side with candlesticks and a dozen different prayer-books, would say, ‘Bless you, my son, that’s another one gone. Meaning another enemy. Another one in the league of evil-doers who had cast their spell on Rayo and beguiled him to near suicide (111).

This analepsis sheds light on the previous life of Rayo by insisting on his suicide attempt. Under these conditions, Rayo’s madness seems to the logic consequences of his trials. The use of this narrative device is meant to emphasize an appalling social environment.

**The Devaluation of Language**

The crisis affecting the field of language can help in understanding the trauma affecting the state of Zowabia. To achieve this, one can consider semantic dichotomies, the notion of reification and intertextual metaphors.

* Semantic dichotomies

The use of the oxymoron”sympathetic undertaker” is a case in point. How can an undertaker be sympathetic? This can be seen as a criticism of political leaders taking advantage of the misfortunes of their people.

Another area where semantic dichotomies are seen is through aphorisms.”Salutation is not love” (108), so warns the narrative. Words no longer have their meanings, thereby emphasizing the prevalence of hypocrisy at its peak. To describe this, Pierre Zima would have spoken of “semantic indifference”.

* Intertextual metaphors

The military leader is simply identified as Platini. “I love you, Platini”(142).Through this designation, Mamagee is alluding to her husband’s abilities to betray his counterparts. The text is drawing attention to the falsity of political leaders as they fail to keep their promises.

* Reification

There is a huge divorce between what people say and what they do. This also holds true n the religious sphere. Let us consider the case of Reverend Hosannah here:

Reverend Hosannah observed everything from his sanctuary at the pulpit. He was in a crisis of conscience. On the one hand he believed that indeed the madman’s decision to come into the church, on this Sunday of all Sundays, could be nothing less than a Lucifer-orchestrated prank. But on the other hand, his Christian mind asked him, would Our Lord have cast out a madman from the temple? Would he not have cast out the demon in him (182)

Reverend Hosannah is simply silent while his followers dismiss someone in need. This man of God preaches what he cannot do. The reification of language is everywhere as it affects would-be believers. This is known as desemantization by Pierre Zima.

**The Setting of the Road**

A reading of the setting of the road helps understand the trials of the collectivity. One can see it through the material aspect of the road, the “go slow’ and also by looking ar the “Molue.”

* The material aspect

In *The Sympathetic Undertaker*, the poor state of the road is self –evident through the following illustration:

Earlier in the evening there had been an horrendous downpour. But the ground is no longer flooded-except by the rail line. Here we find a sure surrogate of the sea. A brown, clayish sea that looks, in the pandemonium of the lights of nearby passing vehicles, like a time-battered bath tub filled with dirty, greasy water in a bathroom lit by a flickering fluorescence of serrated shadows (76).

The paddles on the road are metaphors of the difficulties eroding the society under discussion. Also, the fact that the road is not tarred is enough to grasp the social misery being revealed here.

* “Go-slow”

The road is also known for its regular “go-slow”, traffic jam which symbolizes a sort of inertia. This is how the me city of Lagos is presented:” this city of the twenty-four-hour traffic jams” (103)

The “go slow” is a good sign of the difficulties undergone on the road to development. It illustrates the economic and social sufferings faced by the state of Zowabia despites its many resources.

* “Molue”

The “Molue” is another specificity of the road that can be found in *The Sympathetic Undertaker.* The description of this means of transportation is another cause for concern:” The Tuberculous Molue-bus burps to form and leaps forward” (75). The Molue”” as a bus can be taken to represent the diseased society. From this logic, its poor state shows the many problems society is faced with.

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