

Structures and Meanings: Chukwuma Ibezute's *Prison Memoires of Gerald Williams and Tempters and Traitors*

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Abstract

This article is a structuralist reading of Ibezute's *Prison Memoires of Gerald Williams* (2007) and his *Tempters and Traitors* (2013). It begins with Saussure's perception of language as an art concerned with the relations of structures. Saussure had pointed out that though language is made up of two elements which are thought and language, human thought, apart from its expression in words, is shapeless and indistinct. He emphasized that human thoughts are shaped by words only because they participate in "a system of conventions". However, these words help other structures of internal relations in a narrative to yield its meaning. Using Ibezute's *Prison Memoires of Gerald Williams* (2007) and *Tempters and Traitors* (2013) how the structures relate in a narrative is demonstrated. While the structures of internal relations that make *Prison Memoires of Gerald Williams* to 'mean' are analyzed, the structures of internal relations that make-up *Tempters and Traitors* are also interpreted.

Keywords: Relations (of Structures), (main and minor) Structures, Binary, Opposition, Chukwuma Ibezute

Introduction:

In his "Course in General Linguistics," Ferdinand de Saussure (2001) proposes a theory of language where he conceived language as an art concerned with the relations of structures. He points out that though language is made up of two elements which include: thought and language, "psychologically, our thought—apart from its expression in words—is only shapeless and indistinct mass" (34). This art of expressing our thought in words is what Gerard Genette describes as "narratology". In order that the theory of "narratology" may sway, Genette further contemplates "signs" and how they come together to form meaning—though with reference to Saussure's concept of "the signifier and the signified". However, the "sign" or "the signifier" and what is "signified" are arbitrary and have meaning only

because they participate in “a system of conventions.” This “system of conventions” may be codes, words, lines, phrases, sentences, stanzas, paragraphs, chapters and the entire narrative. Barthes (1967) is also one of scholars who are of the view that meaning can only be achieved through the interpretations of this so-called “system of conventions” and what they signified. This he captured through a repetitive use of the word “binary”. Like Barthes, Rice and Waugh (2001: 46) explain further that the meaning the binary generates is “dependent upon differential relations among elements within a system”. By “differential,” they meant that the binary (the signifier and the signified) relate diacritically and not referentially. Eagleton (1987: 94) also made a very important revelation, especially when he notes that each system do not have meaning except “by virtue of” its relation to another system. The relations between one system to another could be “ones of parallelism, opposition, inversion, equivalence and so on” (94). These concepts help the structure of internal relations in a narrative to yield its meaning. Though the study, or the principle itself, is not particularly interested in meaning, its interest is to describe the conventions and modes of signification which makes it possible for a narrative to “mean”. It does not concern itself with the face value of the text but displaces it into a quite different kind of object.

Since this principle has rarely been used to analyze the works of African writers, we will use Chukwuma Ibezute’s *Prison Memoirs of Gerald Williams* (2007) and *Tempters and Traitors*(2013) as illustrative text. As contemporary Nigerian fictions of “the third generation” (Awuzie, 2015) *Prison Memoirs of Gerald Williams* tells an intriguing story of the place of child bearing in Africa. *Tempters and Traitors* which is a sequel to *Prison Memoirs of Gerald Williams* reiterates the recurring motif in Ibezute’s fictions that all hope is not lost. As a contemporary Nigerian writer of “the third generation”, Chukwuma Ibezute’s fictions are about contemporary Nigerian people. According to Awuzie (2015), Ibezute’s fictions are didactic and are reflective of the contemporary African society. Awuzie (2016) posits that some of Ibezute’s fictions have “masculinist” orientation. Even though studies have been conducted in other fictions written by Chukwuma Ibezute, this study is the first of its kind and one of the major works on *Prison Memoirs of Gerald Williams* and *Tempters and Traitors*.

1. Structures, Conflicts and Meanings in Ibezute’s *Prison Memoirs of Gerald Williams*

Like every narrative that has a “main structure” and other structures, *Prison Memoirs of Gerald Williams* is made up of one “main structure” and many other structures which can be referred to as “minor structures”. The “main structure”, of its own, is a combination of many “minor structures”.

One can say that the “main structure” exists because of the presence of other structures in the text. These other structures can take different forms such as codes, signs, words, sentences, paragraphs, chapters and the entire story. Each structure in the text yields its meaning by virtue of parallelism, opposition, inversion and equivalence.

The first structure in the text is the code “1”. The code signifies the very first chapter of the novel. The code though does not make meaning on its own except when we rely on the body of conventions that makes it possible for it to “mean”. The sign “A” is also the first sign that begins the text. Ordinarily, as an independent sign, it has no meaning but in differential relation with other signs in the text, especially the signs before it, it yields its meaning. After the sign, many structures follow. The first set of structures that follow the sign are words and then sentence structures, thus: “A poet once said that thin liberty is better than fat slavery” (1). The fascinating thing about these is that even the “words” are formed with “signs” and the sentence is formed with words. What this means is that in the narrative there are millions of “minor structures”. However, these “minor structures” have other elements that help the text to yield its meaning in the “main structure”. These structures can only be properly analyzed if we study them using elements such as binary, irony, parallelism, opposition, inversion and equilibrium.

Through setting most of the “minor structures” in binaries, one makes a lot of discoveries. For instance, with the contrast of some “minor structures” of the text, such pairing opposing ideas as “wealth and children”, “imprisonment against freedom,” “good characters against bad characters,” “poor characters against rich characters,” “men against women” come to the fore. But central in these lists of pairing opposite ideas is ‘wealth against children’. Very early in the text, this particular idea forms the message of most structures. We are able to come by it as a result of our ability to contrast the gamut of signs, words and structures that are used in reconciling the protagonist, Gerald Williams’ poverty with Uyamadus’ wealth – in line with Terry Eagleton’s (1987: 103) assertion that “whatever we perceive in the text is perceived only by contrast and difference: an element which had no differential relation to any other would remain invisible”.

The meanings of most structures of the text are built around contrasting structures that are always finding outlets to reconcile themselves. In the text, when there are two contrasting or opposing signs, words, or structures, meaning is achieved. With the reconciliation of the gamut of contrasting words, sentences and structures in the text, the motif of the text comes to the fore. The motif of the text is the desire of most of the characters to be the ones to gain. This motif comes to be as a result of another motif that precedes it—the survival motif. The gain motif comes to be because the

survival motif is represented in opposites. While the first group of survivalist characters wanted wealth through any means, the second group of survivalist characters needed children through any means. While in the first group we have characters like poor Gerald Williams, Benji and many others, in the second group we have rich Dan Uyamadu and his wife, Dorathy Uyamadu. The first group of characters survived hard times though differently. While Gerald became wealthy through his affair with Dorathy Uyamadu, Benji became wealthy through involving in illegal businesses and armed robbery. Dan Uyamadu and his wife, Dorathy Uyamadu, in the second group got the children they wanted in order that the family name may survive the times but had problems with Gerald who produced them.

Each half of the opposite structure may as well remain loose in the body of the story if there is no linking element. In the story, the linking element that ties one half of the opposite structure to another is irony. As micro as it is, the irony is also represented in opposites. While for instance, we are confronted with the character, Dan Uyamadu, a wealthy man who is impotent, we are also presented with another character, Gerald, a poor “wheelbarrow pusher” who can reproduce. The irony in the text reconciles itself when Gerald through Dan’s wife, Dorathy Uyamadu reproduced children for Dan and when Dan through his wife, Dorathy Uyamadu also made Gerald wealthy. The relations between the two groups of characters collapsed when Gerald became unable to impregnate his own wife. Gerald’s inability to impregnate his own wife becomes a breakdown in the structures that are building up properly and that resulted in a terrible conflict. The structures would have been successfully mended and the conflict taken care of if Gerald had allowed his own wife to find a man that could help her bear children as Dorathy Uyamadu did. His refusal to allow his own wife go to another man brought the conflict to its climax and resolved in an adjoining catastrophic structure where Gerald’s attempted to kill Dorathy.

However, in this complication, Ibezute creates another set of structures which are deep in their relations with one another. For the purpose of our understanding of the relationship between these sets of structures, we will refer to one group as “deep structure” and to the other as “surface structure”. At the “surface structure”, for instance, characters can be classified into two groups. While the first group is positive, the second group is negative. Characters like Dan Uyamadu and his wife, Dorathy Uyamadu belong to the positive group while characters like Gerald Williams, Benji, the medicine men and their murderous body guards belong to the negative group. Characters like Dan Uyamadu and his wife Dorathy display their positivity in every bit during Dorathy’s affair with Gerald Williams. When Dorathy invited Gerald to their house, Dan would have chosen to pretend, but he did not. He owned up to Gerald Williams and told him that he is

aware of everything that is going on between him and his wife. This also proved Dorathy a good wife. Gerald Williams and his friend Benji, on the other hand, proved themselves negative from the beginning, especially as we were confronted with their many activities to “get rich quick”. At the “deep structure”, we are confronted with a reverse situation. For instance, while the first group is perceived as being negative, the second group is perceived as positive. Dan Uyamadu and his wife Dorathy Uyamadu are seen as opportunists. They capitalized on Gerald’s poverty. Dorathy, on the other hand, assumes a bad woman who has a way of getting what she wanted from anyone she targeted. This is also in agreement with Terry Eagleton (1987: 103) “the meaning of the text is not just an internal matter: it also inheres in the text’s relation to wider systems of meaning [...]”.

2. Structures, Conflicts and Meaning in Ibezute’s *Tempters and Traitors*

Unlike *Prison Memoirs of Gerald Williams*, *Tempters and Traitors* has two “main structures” and many “minor structures”. One of the “main structures” is the story of Gerald Williams while the second is the story of Ozoemena. These structures are brought together with the use of a character, Dorathy Uyamadu. In each of the “main structures” there are many “minor structures”. The smallest unit of the “minor structure” in the text is a sign and a code. The very first sign in the text is the “C” sign and signs such as “c-h-a-p-t-e-r” that form the very first structure in the text. The figure “1” is the first code in the text. Code “1” has meaning in the text because it is not “2” or “3”.

In the body of the text proper, we have another gamut of signs and millions of structures. Apart from the first word structure “chapter” that is at the top center of the text, the first structure that begins the text is the “word structure”, “one”. Like the “word structure”, the first “phrase structure” is: “One month” (1). After the “word structure” the first “sentence structure” is: “After spending one year and one month of my three-year jail sentence, I was released and asked to go home a free man” (1). The collection of “sentence-structures” later forms the “minor structures” which are in themselves the structures that formed one of the “main structures”. Like in Ibezute’s *Prison Memoirs of Gerald Williams* where the stories contained in the “minor structures” are interpreted with binaries and opposites, the stories contained in the “minor structures” in his *Tempters and Traitors* are not. Their meanings can be gotten through the use of inversion, parallelism and equivalence. For instance, one of the “main structures” in the text is inverted against the “main structure” of *Prison Memoirs of Gerald Williams*. While the “main structure” in *Prison Memoirs of Gerald Williams* depicts Gerald’s folly and his subsequent fall, one of the “main structures” of *Tempters and*

Traitors pertains to how Gerald managed to gather himself together after returning from prison and to established himself. Through this “main structure”, it is possible to note that the text reveals that a man who has been to prison can still make it through engaging in genuine business and through hard work. Also while in the “main structure” of *Prison Memoirs of Gerald Williams*, it was very easy for Gerald Williams to become rich because he accepted to produce children for Dorathy Uyamadu , in one of the main structures of *Tempters and Traitors* it was difficult for Gerald Williams to start a genuine business, to succeed and to eventually make it.

Meaning can also be achieved if we contrast the incident in one of the “minor structures” in *Tempters and Traitors* with another in *Prison Memoirs of Gerald Williams*. While in *Prison Memoirs of Gerald Williams*, Gerald Williams easily accepted to date rich Dorathy Uyamadu, in *Tempters and Traitors* rich Henrietta Nwoke tried all she could to make Gerald Williams have an affair with her but Gerald refused. At that “minor structure” of *Tempters and Traitors*, the new personality of Gerald Williams is inverted with his old personality.

When put in equilibrium or in opposition, each side of the “main structures” produce two meanings. One of the two structures would pertain to how best to work for success, the other would portray how not to work for success. The second main structure is about Ozoemena’s attempts at finding “the easy way out” to success. This is implied in his travel to Goldfield Republic, a country of perpetual enjoyment and no suffering, despite his father’s warning that he should not go.

3. Conclusion

Every narrative is made up systems that make it possible to mean. For the purpose of this study this systems are referred to as structures. As have been noted earlier, signs, words, sentences, etc produce message in a text only because they participate in “a system of conventions.” This “system of conventions” may be codes, words, lines, phrases, sentences, stanzas, paragraphs, chapters and the entire narrative. These concepts help the structure of internal relations in a narrative to yield its meaning. Though the study is not focused on meaning, it describes the conventions and modes that make it possible for a narrative to “mean” and this is done using Ibezute’s *Prison Memoirs of Gerald Williams* and *Tempters and Traitors*. However, *Prison Memoirs of Gerald Williams* and *Tempters and Traitors* are two different texts that are exclusively concerned with a single story. We can call that story that cuts across the two texts the “grand structure”. What this also means is that the “grand structure” is divided into two “main structures”. While one of the “main structures” belongs to *Prison Memoirs of Gerald Williams*, the other is that of *Tempters and Traitors*. Each of the “main

structures” is made up of many other structures. The structures would not have been successfully coordinated into a united whole without the relations of many other structures. For the purpose of clarity, we also refer to these many structures as “minor structures”. The meaning that is generated at the “grand structure” is that life is not rosy all the time and that the wealth one makes through one’s personal effort is more rewarding.

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