

**Mourning the Bards:
Interrogating the Contemporaneity of John Milton's Lycidas
and Pius Adebola Adesanmi.**

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This paper is dedicated to the sad memories of Pius
Adesanmi, the quintessential scholar and poet who died on
March 10, 2019 in an Ethiopian Airline crash.

Prof. Pius Adesanmi posted this message on his Facebook
page before his death: "If I take the wings of the morning,
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall
thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me-Psalm
139:9-10.

Abstract

This paper examines John Milton's 'Lycidas' in line with the traditional conventions for analyzing pastoral elegies which include the invocation of the muses, the presence of nature in the mourning process, the charging of the guardian spirits by the mourners of negligence, the mourning procession, the questions of justice, elaborate passage and the final consolation. The paper further interrogates the African concept of death and the mourning of the dead. It further discusses the semiotic codes of death and mourning in Africa. It also critically examines the contemporaneity 'Lycidas' and its place in the contemporary society by juxtaposing the mourning of the death of King Edward and Prof. Pius Adebola Adesanmi. The paper, which is dedicated to the sad memory of late Prof. Pius Adesanmi, quarries the similarities and the coincidences between the death and the

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mourning of King Edward and Prof. Pius Adesanmi who were both young and dynamic poets and scholars but who died prematurely while travelling. The paper shows that their death symbolizes the universality and the inevitability of death.

Keywords: Lycidas, King Edward, Pius Adesanmi, Poetry, Criticism, Semiotics.

Introduction

Death is one of the indisputable universal verities accepted as the lot of humanity. To the Christian and Islamic theologians, death is a passage to eternity. Even the traditionalists believe that humans came from Olódùmarè and surely, we will return to him someday. Death, no doubt, is a debt that every human must pay. Death is no respecter of persons irrespective of status, gender, class or colour. To illustrate the inevitability of death, a Yoruba proverb says “Ikú o tii de laa saja mórùn, bíkú bá dé, aa fi aja sile, aa malaja lo.”(The charm around the neck cannot ward off death. This is because when death strikes, it will consume the wearer and spare the charm). Another Yoruba proverb also says ikú ló pa agílítí aláwọ, ánbèlèté ẹni tó fi awo rẹ se òògùn gbékúdè (Death that killed the alligator whose skin is used to make the charm for longevity, will also kill the user) (Oladimeji, 2011). This is the stark reality that stares at everybody on daily basis without any remedy.

Mourning the dead has been a longstanding tradition that is globally observed especially the untimely death of a very special person like a bread winner in the family, the only child in the family, a childless wife or husband, a darling wife or husband leaving young children behind, accident victims, those who die without fulfilling their dreams and so on. Even though the adults are mourned when they die, their death, at least in African culture is seen as a transformation into the world beyond. That such adults leave solid children behind them calls for celebration. That is why the deaths of such old people are lavishly celebrated with pomp and pageantry.

When the young ones die untimely, there is mourning in the land. This is because it denies the dead from enjoying the fruits of his labour. It also deprives the bereaved family from enjoying the benefits of the departed. That is why a Yoruba proverb says, ‘ikú ò jé ká gbá dùn obì tó gbó (Death deprives us of enjoying the pleasure of the virtuous). To further buttress this fact, another Yoruba proverb says, “ikú dágilégbò, igi ò dúró jọlá ewé.”(Death visited the forest; the tree could not wait to enjoy the pleasure of its trees). The beauty of the tree is seen when the leaves come up. The

leaves also give protection to the tree. When the tree dies, the purpose of the leaves is defeated just as when a young man dies in his prime, his children who ought to be his gains are wasted. They are thus exposed to the storms of life. That is why again the elders say, “*ikú ní yowó ẹ́dà láwó.*” (It is death that terminates a man’s pleasure in life.) (Sotunde, 2016). In other words, death is the determinant of man in life.

Untimely death may be natural or metaphysical. Such causes include auto accident, air crash, assassination, sudden illness, armed robbery attack, fire incident and unknown causes.

Adonai by Percy Bysshe Shelley is a pastoral elegy written to mourn the death of John Keats his contemporary. Spencer’s “Astrophel” was a lamentation on the death of Sir Philip Sidney. A pastoral elegy according to Shaw (1976) is a ‘mournful poem’ or a melancholy artistic composition usually a funeral song or a lament on the death of a poet-shepherd (94). Abrams (1981) opines that a pastoral elegy is a representation of ‘the mourner’ and the one he mourns who is usually a poet-priest. The most popular English pastoral elegies according to him are Milton’s “Lycidas”, Shelley’s ‘Adonis’, and Arnold’s ‘Thythis’ (47). Generally, pastoral elegies are expected to conform to certain conventions that were developed and practised right from the classical period and through the Elizabethan age. ‘Lycidas’ will be analysed based on these conventions.

The Semiotics of Death and Funeral in Africa

In Africa particularly in Yoruba culture in Nigeria, the following, among others, have been identified as the semiotic symbols of death and mourning:

1. Funeral Clothes: The spouses and the children of the deceased who dies untimely are compelled to wear black clothes throughout the period of mourning as will be specified by the family. The mourning period can be extended up to forty days in which the spouse in particular the wife will put on black clothes including black scarf until the mourning period is over. Black colour, in many cultures of the world, has a lot of negative connotations such as death, misfortune and mourning. Yu (2014) opines that black colour is the personification death, fear and the unknown. That is why expressions like ‘Black market’, ‘Black Friday’, ‘Blackmail’ have negative meanings. When black clothes are worn by the spouse or children of the deceased, it is a symbol of mourning and also to show the dark moments of their lives. Similarly, Michilsen (2018) also says that “over the years, the color black has ended up becoming inexorably connected to themes of death, darkness and mourning, not only in

the form of mourning attire, but also in terms of mourning cards, ribbons, caskets and the like” (19).

2. Shaving Hair: Shaving of hair by women and the family members of the deceased is another semiotic symbol of mourning in African culture. According to Tshoba (2014), shaving of hair is a common practice among the Ndebele culture in South Africa where the family members of the dead are to be shorn as a symbol of mourning and a public display of bereavement. This ritual practice, which is common among the black people, is to humble the mourners and strip them, temporarily, of their moments of comfort so that they can mourn the dead.
3. Palm fronds: The tender palm frond is another semiotic symbol of death in African culture. According to Olumati (2015), palm fronds

Can communicate and reveal strict sacredness. When death occurs in a compound very close to a major road, the road users are symbolically notified that death has occurred and that area has become sacred. In this capacity, the road users especially vehicle drivers are to drive with caution. A car or lorry that is conveying the dead is hung with the Omu (palm fronds)... One of our informants elaborated very much on this. He told us that “any vehicle conveying the dead must bear the Omu (palm fronds) otherwise the spirit of the dead and other spirits would become violent and this could cause much disaster” (227).

In other words, palm fronds are used to announce the death of someone either by hanging the palm fronds on the vehicle conveying the corpse or by placing it at the entrance of the house of the deceased. Apart from announcing the death, it notifies the public of the sacredness of the environment and the need for the public to be careful because of the backlash of the rituals that may be performed before and after the burial.

4. Masculinity: In African culture, the burial ceremonies are essentially the duty of men while women are excluded from the ritual processes. The grave diggers, undertakers, pallbearers, masquerades are exclusively men. This is supported by Gordon (2014) who opines that funerals are overseen by men such as clergymen and undertakers. This may be due to the fact that grave digging and pall bearing require the masculine strength. Besides, in African

culture, it is believed that masquerading, which is cultic, is traditionally and mythically the function of men who are the initiates of the masquerade cult. According to Michilsen (2018), the overseeing of funeral rites solely by the male authority is a reflection of the patriarchal structure of society.

5. Secret Isolation: Another semiotic code of mourning is secret isolation of the widows of the dead for some days. Sometimes, such widows are kept in dark rooms where there will be no light. They may not allow them to take their bath for days. Such practice in traditional society is a punishment for such widows for being responsible for the death of their husbands. However, in modern society, such practice is seen as barbaric.

Textual Discussion

'Lycidas' is an elegy written by John Milton on the death of his 'learned friend', King Edward who was mysteriously drowned in the Irish Sea in 1637. The poem also touches the corrupt state of the church. Barber (1983) observes that the poem draws heavily on the European tradition. It has a parallel in ancient or Renaissance pastoral; it has features that resemble the Greek pastoral poetry (209). The poem, therefore according to Daiches (1957) "stands out at once for its gravity of utterance, its artfully modulated verse, and its formal use of the conventions of the pastoral elegy, as development in Greek, Latin and Italian poetry" (75).

One of these conventions is that a pastoral elegy must begin with an expression of grief or "with a statement of the occasion which prompted it." Milton's cause of grief is expressed in the first fourteen lines of "Lycidas" beginning with

Yet once more, O ye laurels, and once more... (1)

For 'Lycidas' is dead, dead, dead ere his prime...(8).

The young ambitious poet is dead before he could fulfill his vision in life. His death is a premature one, hence the lament. Similarly, the death of Pius Adebola Adesanmi was a premature one. He was a cerebral and an intellectual of repute who only lived for 47 years leaving behind a daughter Tise, and wife Muiwa. His death is as tragic as the death of Lycidas. The lyric speaker begins by gathering materials to prepare the wreath for him. There are images in this first paragraph to show "Lycidas' premature death. For instance, the "berries' are plucked before they are ripe (1-5). The

images of “myrtles” and “laurels” and “ivy” are usually associated with excellent art work. Since “Lycidas has been cut off before he could make his contributions to humanity, there is a need therefore for a lamentation for him just as Pius Adesanmi could not leave to make his contributions to humanity:

He must not first float upon his watery bier
Unwept, and water to the parching wind
Without the need of some melodious tear (12-14)

Milton’s emotional and psychological involvement in mourning the death of Edward King becomes stronger when he informs his audience in lines 10 and 11 that “Lycidas” was also a poet like himself because “he knew himself to sing”, he therefore deserves a lamentation. The poet creates a note of suspense and anticipation at the end of the first fourteen lines of the poem. The reader is thus drawn closer into the poem.

Next, the lyric speaker is expected to invoke the muses. The muses are to aid the poet in expressing his grief and suffering. This is effectively done through the frequent references to mythical figures in classical mythology. Milton conforms to this convention. In fact, the actual elegy begins with the second paragraph when the muses are invited beginning in the following lines:

Begin then, sisters of the sacred well
That from beneath the seat of Jove doth spring
Begin, and somewhat loudly sweep the string
Hence with denial vain, and coy excuse.
So may some gentle Muse (15-19).

The poet seems to be saying, let the lamentation now begin. The “sisters of the sacred well” are invited to join in the lamentation. These are mythical figures. The poet explains why he is shedding tears for ‘Lycidas’ because he wants someone to do the same for him. Here, Daiches (1957) opines that the death of ‘Lycidas’ is now linked to the inevitable death of all men, however gifted or talented, however influential or great their promise or contributions, even the present “celebrator will one day become the celebrated”.

Pius Adesanmi was intellectually endowed and creatively gifted. His death, like the death of Lycidas, further shows the inevitability of death that every mortal must experience irrespective of

status, influence, affluence, endowments and qualifications. A note of self-pity is presented here. In lines 21 and 22:

And as he passes turn, (21)

And bid fair peace be to my sable shroud (22).

The poet invokes peace on the corpse of Lycidas. In lines 23 and 24, Milton draws one's attention to the fact that both of them, Milton and Lycidas had many things in common in terms of educational background, experiences as priests and poets just as Pius Adesanmi and Lycidas were both poets. That is what he means when he says 'for we were nursed upon the self-same hill, fed the same flock...' This also continues up till line 36. From line 25 beginning with "together both ... and old Damaetas loved to hear our song", the poet is providing sufficient information about his intimacy with Lycidas in order to establish credibility for his lamentation. Both the poet and his dead friend were very close before death parted them.

The convention also demands that after the muses have been invoked, all nature is expected to join in mourning the Shepherd's death and in musing on the 'unkindness of death'. This begins in 'Lycidas' with line 37 through line 49. "But o the heavy change, now thou art gone", the poet suddenly becomes conscious that in spite of their intimacy, one of them is gone. Despite their poetic future achievements, their immortality cannot be guaranteed. The joyful and productive intimate relationships of these days are gone. The images of nature such as 'woods', 'desert caves' 'wild thyme', 'vine overgrown', 'leaves' suggest decay and death. For all these also mourn 'through their echoes. The caves are become deserts, the vine has become overgrown; the rose has been infected by a canker. This is an indication that nature is joining to mourn the death of Lycidas just as the academe and in particular, the Carleton University, Canada, stood still for Pius Adesanmi when he died.

The poet concludes this by demonstrating further that the death of Lycidas is a great loss to the shepherds just as the death of Pius Adesanmi is a great loss to the academic world as well as to the Carleton University, in Ottawa, Canada where he was a Professor of literature and the Director of University's Institute of African Studies. Amankwah-Sarfo (2019) in his tribute describes Pius Adesanmi as "a restless intellectual who always loved cerebral exercises in form of banters and criticisms of literary works. He is a contemporary satirist, a die-hard African with award-winning books such as "The Wayfarer and Other Poems" which won the Association of Nigerian Authors'

Poetry Prize and “You’re Not a Country, Africa which won Penguin Prize for African Writing in the non-fiction category. In fact, it brings a great tragedy to them: “such, Lycidas, thy loss to shepherd’s ear”. The wickedness of death is thus exposed. The convention, according to Abrams (1981), “is a survival from primitive laments for the death of Thammuz, Adonis, or other vegetation deities who died in the autumn to be reborn in the spring” (47). ‘Lycidas,’ perfectly adheres to this convention.

The next feature of a pastoral elegy which ‘Lycidas’ observes is that “the mourner charges with negligence the Nymphs or other guardians of the dead shepherd”. This is contained in lines 50 to 63 as the poet begins with a question:

Where were ye, Nymphs, when the remorseless deep (50)
Closed o’er the head of your loved Lycidas? (51)

Both the muses and the water Nymphs could not save Lycidas nor could the “tutelary spirits of that region” where his ship got drowned rescue him. The helplessness of the Nymphs is further reinforced when one is told about the terrible death of Orpheus the son of Calliope, one of the muses who is an “embodiment of poetic genius.” He too could not be saved just like Lycidas and Pius Adesanmi could not be rescued by the Nymphs. The poet admits the inevitability of death. That one is a poet or a renowned scholar is no guarantee against sudden death. Death, therefore, has a universal applicability.

The poet, in lines 64 to 87, poses many questions about the ‘justice of divine providence’. “Milton contrasts the images of self-dedication with images of self-indulgence.” Milton wonders whether one should bother oneself with a total dedication to a life of readiness for great poetry when suddenly one’s life will be cut off. Instead of writing great poetry which is very demanding, it is better “to sport with Amaryllis in the shade or with the tangles of Neaera’s hair”. In other words, it is better to write love poetry. The poet is very superstitious and realistic here. There is an expression of depression and frustration as the poet has not got any satisfactory answer to the question he raises about who is responsible for the disaster that happens to Lycidas.

Between lines 130 and 131, the poet attacks the Anglican clergy. This passage is often seen as a digression but it helps a lot in generating the poet’s thought about Lycidas who was once a spiritual leader, a dedicated poet and a singer but who was not given a preferential treatment by destiny over those who were not as dedicated as he was. Milton believes in retribution. Those who abuse their offices, shall not go scot-free, hence he says: “but that two-handed engine at the door stands ready

to smite once, and smite no more” (lines 130 & 131). The shepherds who fail to feed their sheep and allow wolves to devour them will be punished on the judgment day.

Another feature of a pastoral elegy is the funeral procession of ‘appropriate mourners’ when flowers are brought to “deck the hearse.” ‘Lycidas’ exhibits this feature. This is contained in lines 132 to 164. Milton returns to lamentation and calls for all kinds of flowers “green turf”, “purple”, “vernal flowers”, “white pink”, “pansie freakt with jet”, the glowing violet” ... “And every flower that had embroidery wears...” Milton becomes aware of the fact that the best and greatest respect that can be paid to Lycidas is not to continue to raise questions about the cause of his death. Those who are alive should abandon sorrow and smother Lycidas’ body with flowers as he says in line 142.

Bring the rathe ... and in line 151

To strew the laureate hearse where Lycid lies.

In lines 153 and 154, the poet says “let our frail thoughts dally with false surmise. Ay me! Whilst thee the shores, and sounding.” This is an indication that there were many friends and mourners during the procession with all kinds of flowers. Lines 155 to 163 can be regarded as an apostrophe. The dead Lycidas is now being directly addressed. He is bidden a farewell and safe journey. The dolphins are charged with the responsibility of taking care of the dead. Lycidas is thus committed into their hands. With this, Daiches (1957) remarks that “Lycidas can now be disposed of conventionally.” The problem has moved beyond him. So, Milton can let himself picture his reception in heaven with all the triumphant resources of Christian imagery” (91). Similarly, many people paid tributes to the late Pius Adesanmi. According to Amankwah-Sarfo (2019)

Professor Pius Adesanmi! Everything that needs to be said about your remarkable life has not only been said but those things have been said so eloquently by the numerous lives that you touched in your approximately 50 eventful years of life. Today as we celebrate the life of an African icon and scholar, it is our chance to say thank you Prof. for the way you have impacted our lives, even though God granted you but half a life. We will all feel cheated always that you were taken from us so young and yet we must learn to be grateful that you came along at all.

We pray much for your soul, rest in peace with God, we are very sad but God will give us the strength to cope in the best way, we will remember you with great joy, although you should have never left. We know that the void created by your demise will be difficult to find someone like you again, so happy, so motivating, always drawing a smile and there to support us, we will always remember you. We now know that you have just departed to another life, we will remember you at every moment as you were an exceptional person, however we say fare thee well.

Akinkuotu (2019) also posted these other tributes from those who were deeply touched by the tragic death of Pius Adesanmi:

In his tribute, Fidelis Chimokwu noted that “The verses of peaceful silence echoed the rise of a glorious star into the Heavens of faith as he rests in the divine temple!”

David J Hornsby said “The ancestors are welcoming him home.”

Ngozi Theodora Nwobu on her part said it is “an acknowledgement from heaven that he is finally and safely home,” while Lookman Sanusi said, “Pius has gone to a beautiful home to rest.”

A pastoral elegy usually ends with a ‘closing consolation.’ According to The New Encyclopedia Britannica (1943), a pastoral elegy “ends with acceptance often with a very affirmative justification of nature’s law” (440). The reason behind this closing consolation is given by Abrams (1981). According to him,

In Christian elegies, the lyric reversal from grief
And despair to joy and assurance occurs when the
Elegist suddenly realizes that death in this world
Is the entry to a higher life (48).

‘Lycidas’ again conforms to this pattern. The closing consolation begins from lines 165-172) with:

Weep no more, woful Shepherds weep no more,
For Lycidas your sorrow is not dead,
Sunk though he be beneath the watry floar,

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So sinks the day-star in the Ocean bed,
And yet anon repairs his drooping head,
And tricks his beams, and with new spangled Ore,
Flames in the forehead of the morning sky:
So Lycidas sunk low, but mounted high.

Even though Lycidas sinks like the stars sink, just as the stars rises again with a new light and life, Lycidas will rise again for he is not dead'. "So Lycidas sunk low, but mounted high." Milton believes that Lycidas is already in heaven as he expresses this in lines 176 to 181:

And hears the unexpressive nuptial Song,
In the blest Kingdoms meek of joy and love.
There entertain him all the Saints above,
In solemn troops, and sweet Societies
That sing, and singing in their glory move,
And wipe the tears for ever from his eyes.

Milton imagines the warm reception that Lycidas receives in heaven by the heavenly hosts. Therefore, the shepherds should weep no more. Even though, the body of Lycidas perished in the sea, his spirit is in heaven. Milton believes that there is a reward in heaven waiting for only those who maintained holiness, steadfastness in the faith in the Lord while on earth. There is no more grief over the death of Lycidas but joy because he is in Heaven. This is the consolation that Milton wants those who are still on earth to have.

The last paragraph beginning with "thus sang the uncouth ..." in line 186 is the epilogue. The poet is humble enough to admit that he had not reached the height of his poetic career. He now begins to play on the recorder in different tunes some of the songs he had composed. He has now recovered from grief and sorrow. He can now sing: "At last he rose..." (92). The last line: "Tomorrow to fresh

woods, and pastures new” expresses Milton’s determination to explore new avenues, that can launch him into greater poetic heights apart from writing pastoral elegies. “As an uncouth swain,” Milton will continue to sing “as a new dawn comes up and brings new work to do”. Milton’s ‘Lycidas’ is a perfect example of a pastoral elegy because of its conformity to the universal conventions developed by the classical pastoral elegists.

Conclusion

Milton’s ‘Lycidas,’ which was written in 1638, has continued to show its relevance after close to four hundred years of its existence. One is enthused by its contemporaneity in the 21st Century despite its agedness. Edward King, the focus of Milton’s poem, who Milton named Lycidas in order to memorialize his loved friend through the tradition of pastoral poetry according to Chisholm (1911) compares closely with Pius Adesanmi in a number of ways as exposed by this paper.

First, both King Edward and Pius Adesanmi were poets of monumental proportions who depended expectedly on the Muse for their inspirations. Both were reputed for their scholarly and intellectual contributions to the academia. While King Edward was a Tutor at Christ’s College, Cambridge, Pius Adesanmi, though not a king, was a Professor of literature as well as the Director, Institute of African Studies, Carleton University, in Ottawa, Canada.

Second, King Edward belonged to the Yorkshire family in the United Kingdom that migrated to Ireland in Northern Europe where he was born. Pius Adebola Adesanmi “was born in Isanlu in Kogi State of Nigeria who also migrated to Canada, North America just as the family of King Edward migrated to Ireland. The fame of King Edward and Pius Adesanmi became pronounced in Ireland and Canada respectively even though they were not natives of those places.

Third, King Edward was born in 1612 and died in 1637 at the age of twenty five years, while Pius Adesanmi was born in 1972 and died in 2019 at the age of forty seven years. Both of them died prematurely. That is why their deaths can be regarded as very tragic and catastrophic. Besides, King Edward died in 1637 on his way to visit his family in Ireland when his ship hit a rock near the Welch coach. Similarly, Pius Adesanmi died on March 10, 2019 on his way to attend a conference of the African Union in Kenya when the Ethiopian Airline Boeing 737 Max 8 jet with Flight number ET 302 that he boarded from Addis Ababa en route to Nairobi crashed shortly after takeoff killing all the 157 passengers and the crew members. King Edward was drowned, while Pius

Adesanmi died in a plane crash. None of them ever arrived at his destination. It is indeed tragic, and the death is horrifying and dreadful.

Conclusively, the death of King Edward compelled John Milton, a closest friend of King Edward to write 'Lycidas' to memorialize and immortalize him in the finest Pastoral tradition; the friends of Pius Adebola Adesanmi also produced Wreaths for a Wayfarer: A Poetry Anthology in his honour. All these coincidences confirm the contemporaneity and the timelessness of 'Lycidas' as well as the universality and the inevitability of death for which King Edward and Prof. Pius Adebola Adesanmi symbolise.

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