

Chapter 4

Themes

Serious fiction writing generally has a theme as well as a story. There is no generalisation that does not allow for exceptions. You may find that an adventure story like *Treasure Island* by Robert L. Stevenson or a funny story like *Hekaya za Abunuwasi na Hadithi Nyingine* is so absorbing that it need not be referred back to anything outside itself. Critics sometimes complicate our lives unnecessarily by alleging layers of meaning that the text cannot bear. This does not mean that having a gripping and complex story is not important or that detective stories and romances are to be written off as only what some call “popular,” not worth analysis. The great work of Graham Greene in the middle years of the 20th century was to demonstrate that a well-written thriller can attract an audience and at the same time, deal with the religious and ethical problems of the time. He divided his works into those called novels and those called entertainments, but all are written with the same skills and elegance. His effect on others may have been more important than any of his individual books, but readers in Kenya can still enjoy reading *The Power and the Glory* or *Brighton Rock*, which illustrates some of the ways in which England of the 1930s is like Kenya in the 2000s, where you can call still win a prize by

asking for a *Farmer's Choice* sausage. If Greene had never written, the novels of Albert Camus, John le Carre, Alex la Guma and Meja Mwangi might be different from those we know.

I do not personally think it matters very much, whether the story comes first and theme emerges or whether the theme presents itself and then one looks for a story to exemplify it. For instance, when I was writing *Coming to Birth*, the actual story of a Luo girl brought to the mission house by a white policeman had never left my mind. I characterised the girl under the name Paulina. What happened to her and her consciousness of public events parallels the growth of the Kenya nation. The incident came first, the theme of political awareness followed.

Homing In, was written to answer the question why old white ladies, who have had very little to do with African life for many years, identify themselves persistently with Kenya and refuse to leave when they are aged and alone. The first thing Ellen (one of the characters) learns from Kenya is to go back to work and send her children to boarding school. Not surprisingly, she loses Angela and is distanced from Nigel. Her way of life is shocking to her mother and sisters. How could she settle comfortably in England where the nurture of children is of supreme importance?

Theme and story are intimately connected in the mind, so it does not matter which comes first. The work of writing the book is to recognise and verbalise the connections. The greatest of recent Kenyan novels, *The Last Plague* by Meja Mwangi, is obsessed with the theme of AIDS and how to control its spread. The author rarely talks about the way he works, but it seems to me obvious that he looked about for a way to express this and came up with the marvellously economical scenario of a tea-room and a small business located at a cross-roads away from the main modern highway and basically five characters – one of whom is off-stage most of the time – revolutionising the situation in a way that is comic and tragic and socially effective all at once.

Having put these two elements together, Meja Mwangi then employs his magical verbal gift to give a distinct idiom to each speaker and to carry the reader along with the repetitive marker of the theme: “where there is one (grave) there will be two, where there are two there will be four, where there will be four there will be eight....” Because the book is so single-minded, the process can clearly be studied. My own book *Chira*, which I thought (mistakenly), would be my last novel, had to carry all the things I had left to say, and so it combines the AIDS theme with others, particularly with the religious thought-world of a young Luo man living in the city. How did it come about? Certainly, I knew there had to be a serious study of AIDS. But our failure to face squarely the medical and social facts of the pandemic arises from self-contradictory views of moral commitment, of cause and effect and of telling the truth. So, what story will contain these? The story of the relationship between a young man living in town and his rural family, between religious belief and *juok*, between power and pretence? Little by little, the characters impose their own logic on the scene.

Chancing to see two young men greeting one another on the City Square flyover helped me to actualise them. Some details – the visiting football team seeking assistance from a *mganga* (medicine man) for instance, – come from real life. When I had finished the story and was carrying a copy for the first time to the publisher for consideration, I passed a hair salon – maybe a little more sophisticated than the one I had pictured in Huruma – and there were three smartly dressed young men clustered round the door, just like the scene in the book. I do not know what they were doing there since I hurried on to catch my *matatu*. This is an example of the coincidences that give the writer confidence in having seen it right.

Paul Scott, who will, I believe, in time come to be seen as one of the finest twentieth century novelists, gives an extraordinarily detailed account of the process of writing a novel called *The Birds*

of *Paradise* in a talk given in 1961 and called “Imagination in the Novel” (Scott, *My Appointment with the Muse*). The starting-off point is a picture that came to his mind of a mature woman appearing in a doorway and leaving the impression that something had come to an end. He tried to fit this into a novel he had planned to write about Spain, but it did not work out. In due course, however, the woman’s name becomes Dora who is associated with a man called Bill and with something that glitters. The glittering resolves itself into beautiful birds of paradise. These are found in the islands off New Guinea, but their exotic plumes were used in the headgear of Indian princes, who may also have kept stuffed specimens for display. Scott now conceives the doorway as the door of a cage in which the dead birds were housed, where the man and woman were revisiting a scene of their youth. The cage is also an image of the diminishment of the princes in the new Dominion of India. From that time on, Scott’s work was to concentrate on interconnected novels portraying the last years of the British Raj (empire) in India.

Having reached that point in constructing the novel, Scott says (ibid. 19f):

Imagination is not enough. Knowledge is necessary. And experience of the oddity of life. The imagination, the knowing and the experience finally cohere into a pattern... And in one sense, the work of the larger imagination is finished. ... producing characters who are needed but who tend, through the imagination, to change the totality of the book by their own strong demands.

That puts it in a nutshell; so the opening words of the story are not the beginning of the invention but the beginning of the transmission to the reader of the concept the writer has already rounded out, disregarding false starts in Spain or elsewhere.

In an even more detailed account of the writing of his more complex book *The Jewel in the Crown*, Scott quotes the first paragraph of the novel and says, “It was not the first paragraph

written. Between the originating image and the pinning it down on the page, there is often a terrible gap of time and changing circumstance. If it is a good hard image, it will stand. Nothing will erode it. But it is extremely difficult to co-ordinate it with all the succession of images it gives birth to” (*My Appointment with the Muse*, 60).

Paul Scott is a master of his craft whom I greatly revere. I cannot doubt that he is telling the truth about how he works and how some other great novelists work. But, in literature as in our daily human relationship, we must avoid the temptation to generalise or to twist words into a meaning they do not have for everybody. It is good to start cautiously and admit that not all of us co-ordinate all the images all the time.

In an article on the Chilean poet and Nobel Prize winner, Pablo Neruda, Charles Simic, the fine American poet, says that in magical realism, there is a rejection of any distinction between the magical and the real.

It is true that the two elements are mixed or alternated in a story or poem using this mode, but the very fact we recognise and name them shows that they are not identical. This is not to deny that the author may accord them equal weight; the sizing up of major and minor elements will be different in every work. But the writer knows what he is doing. We may be dazzled by the interplay among the children born at the moment of India's independence in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* but we are not really fooled. If we were, we should not appreciate the artistry of the invention. *Invention* is coming upon, finding something that has not been known before and putting it in use. It is one of the oldest terms in literary criticism. Invention follows *discovery*. People *discovered* electricity, which is a natural force, and then went on to *invent* the power generator.

So, a writer discovers, opens up, for example, an old hidden path through the forest. She is inspired – gets a fresh breath of air – by

the notion that this has historical significance, and goes on to invent a story in which a group of people used this path to get from one historical situation to another. The result may be a novel. Think of how many children's stories, in particular, are associated with secret pathways, escape routes and underground passages. It is the readers who will collectively decide whether it works, whether it is believable. If it does not command belief, at least for the duration of the reading, it does not work as a novel, however fine its craftsmanship may be. R.L. Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, a book about dual personality, famous as it is, never convinces me. The same author's *Treasure Island*, perhaps because it is written for young readers, holds most of us spellbound. *Spellbound* is the operative word. The writer's magic kit is his gift with words, and at best, he can use it like the spider spinning a web to catch the fly, to keep the reader enmeshed exactly where he wishes. This is linked yet again to rhetoric, the quality of persuasive speech and persuasive writing.

We can all think of magical moments in real life – a child takes his first steps, a visit reconciles you with an old friend, a tree that seemed dried up bursts into flower – just as many of us can recollect miracles. I am not here to preach to you, but the image fits the case. Every flower opening, every chick emerging from the egg, is a magical moment that may be unobserved and so does not work its spell on anyone. So are we conscious of a miracle when passers-by appear in a lonely road where we think we are going to be mugged, when a sick person makes an amazing recovery or a cheque for arrears turns up at a moment when we are desperate because someone else has failed to pay us. We say “Thank God” and feel renewed. But there are other miracles we do not see and recognise. Accidents are averted, bad intentions are thwarted and temptations are overcome. We may not be aware of it. A person of faith lives among miracles, but in giving a testimony, we have to refer to specific cases. Likewise, fictional stories are made up of specific cases in which the ordinary and the extraordinary are mixed. If nothing is extraordinary, there is no story. If nothing is

ordinary, we have no way to latch on to the story. We may not interpret correctly. The children in Richard Hughes' novel *High Wind in Jamaica* are more excited by the hurricane, a morally neutral natural event, than by their encounter with the pirates. But, it is this encounter which exposes all kinds of moral implications which the younger children fail to understand. In our own lives, we may not pinpoint, for our children, or ourselves the exact moment which will later come to look decisive, to lead to a certain course of study, a certain marriage, a change of house or job. But in writing the story, the author has to be more sensitive than his characters and to emphasise the irrevocable points of which they may not yet be conscious.

In one way, there are endless stories, more than one for every person born. In another way, there are only a few themes – the hunt, the fight in a narrow place, marriage and procreation, rise and fall. We ring the changes on these endlessly – as bell-ringers do with their few notes. The first time a thing is done perfectly it bowls us over and sets a standard for all attempts that follow.

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* was something new and staggering of its kind. So was Raja Rao's *Kathnapoori*, the story of the prelude to independence in an Indian village. George Moore's novel *Esther Waters* of 1894 gave a new insight into the condition of women cutting across class and lifestyle. Fresh beginnings like this cannot be expected in every decade or even generation, yet they do often inspire imitators to try new themes or methods, sometimes with success.

Imitation is a good exercise and a tribute to the model. We all seized on Okot P'Bitek's breathless line structure. We all saw Graham Greene's uplifting of the thriller. There is nothing wrong with this so long as there is no actual plagiarism. But, if someone builds on existing work, or quotes many actual lines of poetry, acknowledgement must be made.

Perhaps, it is time to re-examine that word creativity. Everybody who writes at all writes prose, even if it is only an invitation card or a thank you letter. So, there is a continuum of different kinds of prose writing, not all of which are imaginative. Poetry is virtually all creative and even if verse is used in non-poetic ways like advertising, it still has a creative component. But in prose, you have to be aware of the point where you move from the literal to the artistic mode.

Creativity means adding something new to the material out of which you are making your artwork. Once the something new is there, it is part of the whole and can be examined but not removed. The cookery examiner does not take the cake you have baked to the laboratory to determine whether you have used blue band or butter. The cake has to be judged as a cake. When you sit down to write a story, you do not say, “I want to write a first person narrative using reflective paraphrase for the minor characters and reflecting the idiom of Form Two girls in Western Kenya”. You say, “I want to write a story about a young man who paid his dowry with stolen cattle and what happened to him and his bride”. The technical choices will depend on the nature of the story told, not the other way round. Always remember that without the artist, there would be no work for the critic; without writers there are no publishers.

What has this got to do with themes and images? It shows that even though schools of psychology, theology and political science provide us with ways of looking at events, the artist has to fix his attention on a particular case. John Wain, himself a considerable novelist, quotes Boris Pasternak, the Russian Nobel Prize winner, as saying that art is a statement about life so all embracing that it cannot be split up and that it is the seed of ferment, transfiguring the whole if it is present even in a particle (*Word in the Desert*, 117). I want to stress that statement “*it can't be split up.*” Of course, life can be split up in the sense that we go through different stages as Prof. Eriksson analyses them or our age-sets crystallise

them. But our personal memory preserves details which the collective memory or record passes over. Thus, we cannot doubt personal continuity not being split up. And although the statement made by art cannot be split up, a *particle* of it can ferment within a larger whole. That appears to me to mean that while our imperfect attempts may be patchy, the finally achieved work – like the fermented pot of what was originally plain *uji* (porridge) – is assimilated by the art, the fermenting agent. When we look back at the recipe, we may separate the elements – theme, plot, image, background – but when we are actually reading, *absorbed* in the book, we say *soaked* in it, (and this is itself an image), we are at one with it – the separation is not apparent to us.

Song of Lawino burst upon us. Since then, what major ferment have we had? The winner of the Jomo Kenyatta prize does not make the front page of the newspaper or fill the windows of bookshops. AIDS organisations are not urging people to read *The Last Plague* or *Chira*. The search for Dedan Kimathi's grave does not inspire people to re-read Sam Kahiga's novel. Demolitions and security checks go on without drawing on Akare's record in *The Slums*.

John Wain says that *Dr. Zhivago* is a symbolic novel and has the theme of resurrection. That is debatable. All I want to assert here is that when a story is written, subject and theme coalesce – not always perfectly, any more than in human conception, (but most of us believe that human conception is an advance on the amoeba splitting itself into two). Images and symbols attach themselves with various degrees of appropriateness to that coalescence as they do to the upbringing of a human family.

This is in contrast to the Mills and Boon formula which reproduces an identical love story over and over again using different names. Even major writers have to guard against the temptation to repeat and even publishers encourage them to do so.

Let us assume you have now discovered your theme – say the variation in university entrance standards between 1970 and 2000 and you have found the story to fit it: perhaps the son of a 1973 graduate being derided by his father for the things he does not know, not having been through sixth form, when he finishes form IV in 1998. No one has taught him to compile a report from notes as the General Paper used to do. He uses a calculator for what used to be mental arithmetic in standard five. He has not read Ngugi's novels or Angira's poetry. He does not understand all the words used by his grandfather in the ancestral language. He has never looked after cows. On the other hand, he complains that his father has not taken him to the home village often enough to become familiar with life there. His father does not own a computer and has a rather vague idea of how the secretary uses a word processor. He has stayed in the same teaching job for many years. On this thread, it is possible to weave in a varied cast of characters to observe the way different generations and area groups speak, and to say a lot about changes in the country from this narrow base. Think of other examples for yourself.

As well as the actual subject and the theme, there is the sequence of images. This is not easy to talk about. Just as not all poems contain similes and metaphors, not all novels have very obvious images. Therefore, you may not start with a conscious image, but as you constantly rework and recopy your story, you are likely to become aware of the symbols and emblems that can be reapplied in various situations.

I tried to sort out the elements by looking at my own novel *Chira*. AIDS is one of the two *themes* of the book. It is also part of the *subject*, providing the story of victims and how people interact with them. It is also used as an *image* or metaphor of the rot in the political and economic system. These three ways of using the syndrome are all intertwined.

If you look at Dorothy Sayers' excellent suspense and character novel, *The Nine Tailors*, the title refers to a peal of bells housed in

an ancient village church. In Kenya, we only hear such peals on record, but in Ethiopia, bells are highly significant. The bells are central to the story because it is the team of ringers and their families, who are among the main characters and, unknown to themselves, precipitate the action. The tolling of one bell also announces a death in the community and occurs several times in the story. They are both subject and image: the theme may be mortality in a place, which through crime has lost its peace.

Writing in 1934, Sayers, herself a clergyman's daughter, could not have known that during the Second World War, the church bells would cease to ring in England, as they were only to be used as a signal of enemy invasion. She may have sensed, all the same, that the village way of life, centering on the church and the gentleman's house, was coming to an end. In this way, *The Nine Tailors* parallels many African novels of social change.

Images may easily be over-worked: think of the dolls' house in V.S. Naipaul's generally fine novel *A house for Mr. Biswas*. In Meja Mwangi's stories of Nairobi, there are frequent descriptions of cockroaches and human waste to indicate the conditions under which people are living. This works when we read them at a distance but in Mathare and Korogocho slum areas, they can be taken for granted. Mwangi's novel *Shaka Zulu*, set in America, is almost like a catalogue of Greyhound Bus Stations, as though to emphasise the impermanence of the scene where people are constantly moving from place to place. Fog, mist, cigarette smoke often appears to signify mystery, deception, and lack of clear vision. Charles Dickens' novels of London keep referring to the fog which characterised any big smoky city before the days of pollution control. The last really bad one in London occurred the day I did my oral interview for MA and from the tower of the Senate House; you could not see the ground below. Dickens also uses the swampy and smelly parts of the city, the docksides and garbage heaps, to give an atmosphere. In *Great Expectations*, with a theme of deception and self-deception, the wasteland and

marshes of the Thames estuary where Pip first meets the convict reappears at the end where he desperately tries to save his old friend. It also symbolises the dreary waste of Miss Havisham's life.

I have to be honest and say that when I tried to make a mental review of novels in the African Writers Series only a few came to mind in terms of images as distinct from incidents and characters. For instance, in West Africa, fabrics, related as they are to wealth and social class, are often mentioned. The seasonal migration and the round of the agricultural and industrial year everywhere mark the passage of time.

We have already looked at the management of absent characters in *Wuthering Heights*. The subject is the love between Cathy and Heathcliff. The theme may be irrational behaviour in small closed communities. The recurrent images are of snow and storm and rough landscape putting up barriers between neighbours. The behaviour of the dogs, mirroring the tempers of their masters, is also a significant image.

Landscape and indoor settings are very much part of imagery. In Patrick White's *The Tree of Man*, images of the food the women are cooking indoors or outdoors are used to picture the growing sophistication of settlement in Australia. In R.C. Hutchinson's *Recollections of a Journey*, a story of displacement and suffering during the Second World War, the women mark the stages of loss in terms of clothes and jewels they remember from more comfortable days as more and more of their personal luggage has to be left behind. An image works if it is naturally connected to the story. If it has to be dragged in to make a conscious pattern, it may put the reader off.

When I was typing out this chapter, I got up from my desk to close the curtains and caught sight of dozens of birds wheeling over the market, against the grey sky, preparing to nest for the night. I could not identify the birds, but they all resembled one another, slim, black, and circling repetitively. What an image that would be, I

thought, for the close of life, for failing sight, the compulsive patterns being repeated as the light fades. It has been overworked, of course, but still has immediacy for old people.

This image of the birds is almost universal. You can find it in any part of the world, in town and countryside. But many others, even the seaside or riverside, are hard to universalise. When Dickens pictures for us rooms and streets inhabited by his characters, we could find places in Nairobi or Mombasa that would suit the same people if they were reborn in East Africa. But, it is not obvious to me that the characters of Achebe or Sembene Ousmane or Charles Mungoshi or Ayi Kwei Armah could be realised in a Kenyan setting. So, we might have to be careful not to assume the thematic incidents intimate to the landscapes of these novels – the wrestling matches, the libations, the trade union meetings, the special foods – necessarily as symbols. They are a literal part of a way of life just as the bells are in *The Nine Tailors*. In Kenya, these bell ringers would be choir members or students of Theological Education by Extension. The West African masquerades could be guitar-players or football club supporters. In a Ujamaa village, they would be leaders of a hundred houses. There is a potential for symbolism but not all representation is symbolic. You may decide to kill a goat instead of baking a wedding-cake, but in either case, the item is supposed to be good to eat.

Religious ceremonies, of literal significance to many of us, need to be handled carefully even if seen by unbelievers as symptoms of social power structure. They are not only decorative but are also symbolic. The novel is not a currant cake from which you pick out elements of sweetness. It is a richly blended mixture which it takes an educated palate to appreciate as a whole. When a novel is made into a film, visual images gain in importance and precision, and sometimes, the author himself alters the balance to suit the medium. Graham Greene did this several times. The storyteller has to correct his readers' ideas of what is important. We may disagree about what is right or wrong to do, but we usually agree about

where a decision is required. When I look back to my childhood reading of the Christian classic *Pilgrim's Progress*, I remember it as dominated by the terrible burden Christian carried which fell off his back, in the basic evangelical image, at the foot of the cross. On revisiting the novel, we find that the burden is lifted quite early in the story and a series of other scriptural pictures, reinforced by folklore elements of giants and cruel landowners carry the narrative on to the gate of the celestial city. That is to say, the dominant image may not be the one that occurs most often, but the one that sets the reader's mind on the track prepared for it. In *The River Between*, the valley between two ridges stands for the meeting-point of two ways of life, rather more literally than people of the place and time actually saw it. But in Margaret Ogola's *The River and the Source*, the reference to the river is proverbial, although it also carries the idea of flow and continuity. So, let us say that the image may have less than symbolic value and yet hold a story together by reminding the reader of an earlier episode.

There is no way to make easy the distinction between theme, subject and image. In poetry, compression of form and common use of metaphor makes it easier to analyse the relation between parts. It is not usual for a whole long fictional work to be read as a metaphor, other than the allegories we have looked at. There are too many variables. Perhaps the novels of Kafka are closest to this and tend to have an airless feeling about them. We know we are not seeing the whole picture. This is typical of writing in societies that are subject to heavy censorship, and so need to offer an alternative explanation of what is being said. Perhaps it is significant that J.M. Coetzee from South Africa, who has twice won the Booker Prize and now the Nobel Prize for his exceedingly depressing stories, learned to write in that vein before the breakdown of apartheid in that country.