

The Ironic Aesthetic in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*

Romanus Egudu

Godfrey Okoye University, Enugu

According to Robert B. Sharpe (42), 'all ironic feeling is the result of a perception of two or more contrasting or contradictory levels of truth....' He also observes with reference specifically to the 'irony of fate' that in it 'higher powers reverse man's intentions and cause his purposeful actions to swap back like a boomerang at his own head'. Similarly M.H. Abrams (92) states that irony involves 'a negation of any secure standpoint, or even of any rationale, in the human situation'; that it sometimes manifests in 'false hopes' that are "ultimately... frustrated" and 'mocked' (94); and that it is employed in literary works not 'in order to deceive, but to achieve special rhetorical or artistic effects' (91).

Sharpe (4) also makes another important point about irony by observing the link existing between being a great novelist and being a great ironist. And he cites Henry Fielding and Jonathan Swift as being among the best examples. This is perhaps, because irony is usually related to 'suspense' which is a feature that sustains the story in the novel by fostering the reader's curiosity and empowering his desire to continue reading. Irony in this regard therefore helps to validate the great criterion of E. M. Forster's for judging a successful story. Forster (43) says: 'A story' can only have one merit: that of making the audience want to know what happens next. And conversely it can only have one fault: that of making the audience not want to know what happens next.'

Thus while irony may not be the sole factor accounting for the greatness of a novel, it drives the plot through surprise and, at times, fantasy to the end that generates shock. And Forster (106) incidentally, while agreeing with most people that fantasy is god/myth – based, says it is also associated with ‘divings into and dividings of personality.’ And with regard to our subject of study here, Achebe’s *Arrow of God*, it is the personality of Ezeulu that casts the necessary spell on the reader with its ironic mirages. (All references to the novel are to 2003 edition).

Francis E. Ngwaba (368) rightly observes with regard to Achebe’s novels in general that ‘as we close one novel after the other we are left with the conviction that the only constant truth in life is that things will never be what they seem; that irony is the only truth of existence’. Although Ngwaba has made this point in respect of irony, his essay which is entitled ‘Complementary Duality as a Principle of Characterisation in Achebe’s Novels’ and which contains the passage quoted above, says nothing about the presence or significance of irony in *Arrow of God* or indeed in any other of Achebe’s novels.

The irony in this novel can be looked at from the broad angles of negation of expectation, deflation of inflation, recantation of laudation, and contradictory transformation. The dramatic event of Ezeulu’s drastic decision to send Oduche, his son, to the Christian church and school ‘to learn the ways of the white man’s ‘deity’, ‘to learn the new ritual’ and learn the white man’s wisdom’ (42) involves a serious expectation. He says to Oduche:

I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eye there. If there is nothing in it, you will come back. But if there is something there, you will bring home my share. The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well, you do not stand in one place. My spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the white man today will be saying had we known tomorrow (45-46).

Ironically, as will be seen shortly, it is Ezeulu, who befriended the white man that will be saying 'had I known'.

The first fruit of knowledge and wisdom Oduche brings home to Ezeulu as his 'share' from the white man's church and school is the 'Python' which is sacred to the deity, Idemili, and which Oduche imprisoned in his school box. This incident which is regarded as an abomination has brought much disgrace and humiliation to Ezeulu and his family. And Ezeulu vents his anger and frustration on Oduche on the occasion of his failure to inform him (Ezeulu) that the Christians had decided to take their harvest to the church and not to the deity, Ulu (more on this later). He says to Oduche: 'I called you as a father calls his son and told you to go and be my eye and ear among these people.... I sent you to see and hear for me. I did not know at that time that I was sending a goat's skull. And in an ironical and sarcastic tone, he orders Oduche: 'Go away and rejoice that your father cannot count on you' (220 – 221).

Also Ezeulu expected his people to sympathize with him when he was summoned to Okperi by Winterbottom, but instead of sympathy he was treated with apathy. The speech of Ogbuefi Nwaka summed up the feeling of most of the people:

Ezeulu has told us that the white ruler has asked him to go to Okperi. Now it is not clear to me whether it is wrong for a man to ask his friend to visit him. When we have a feast, do we not send for our friends in other clans to come and share it with us, and do they not also ask us to their own celebrations? The white man is Ezeulu's friend and has sent for him. What is so strange about that? He did not send for me. He did not send for Udeozo.... Did not our elders tell us that as soon as we shake hands with a leper he will want an embrace? It seems to me that Ezeulu has shaken hands with a man of white bodyWhat I say is this...a man who brings ant-ridden faggots into his hut should expect the visit of lizards (143-144).

The fact that Ezeulu was taken to Okperi to be arrested and detained and not invited to a feast by Winterbottom compounded the ironic situation.

Furthermore, Mr. Clarke's expectation that Ezeulu would express gratitude for the offer of the Warrant Chief position being made to him is emphatically negated by 'scorn.' Ezeulu says to the interpreter: 'Tell the white man that Ezeulu will not be anybody's chief except Ulu' (175). And ironically Clarke, who thinks that sane Ezeulu is mad for refusing the offer, is himself literally maddened by Ezeulu's treatment of the offer. We are told that Clarke who was 'confronted with the proud inattention of this fetish priest whom they were about to do a great favour by elevating him above his fellows and who instead of gratitude, returned scorn...did not know what else to say' (174). He was struck dumb!

Finally with regard to negated expectation, the people of Umuro expected that Ezeulu would be persuaded to eat the three crucial yams standing between them and the harvesting of their crops. The height of their expectation is reflected by the fact that men of the highest title came to appeal to Ezeulu when it became known that he was not prepared to eat those yams, and by the fact that the controversial high-title-holder, Nwaka, was deliberately excluded from the delegation. We are informed that 'his absence from this delegation showed how desperate they [people] were to appease Ezeulu' (205). To the delegates' greatest astonishment, Ezeulu said to them: 'I only call a new festival when there is only one yam left from the last. Today I have three yams and so, I know that the time has not come.' And he clinched this argument by adding: 'Those yams are not food and a man does not eat them because he is hungry. You are asking me to eat death' (207).

But Ezeulu's refusal to be appeased by his people has another twist to it: Ezeulu planned it as revenge, as Ogbuefi Ofoka stated. According to him, Ezeulu refused to grant the people's request 'because the six villages allowed the white man to take him away....

He has been trying to see how he could punish Umuaro and now he has the chance. The house he has been planning to pull down has caught fire and saved him the labour' (213). Ezeulu had earlier foreshadowed this struggle between him and his people when he said to John Nwodika that before he would have a final battle with the white man, 'I want to wrestle with my own people whose hand I know and who know my hand. I am going home to challenge all those who have been poking their fingers into my face to come outside their gate and meet me in combat...' (179). Ezeulu's anticipation of victory over his people, which he expected would lead them to submission, only led to their desertion of Ezeulu and Ulu, and to their ironic embracement of the Christian Harvest and Christianity. Thus, Mr. Goodcountry said to his Christian followers that people 'must be told that if they made their thanks-offering to God, they could harvest their crops without fear of Ulu' (215). According to the Christian leaders, 'If Ulu who is a false god can eat one yam, the living God who owns the whole world should be entitled to eat more than one' (216).

John Povey (385) had noted this irony in Ezeulu's determination to punish his people by his refusing to declare the date for the new year festival, when he said: "Distracted by the results of his determination by the paradox of retribution turning upon itself, Ezeulu goes mad.' And he added that 'Ezeulu out of pride and arrogance had destroyed the bow of the god on which his entire existence depended.' The bow-arrow relationship reflected in *Arrow of God* appears fashioned from the Biblical model satirically depicted in the Book of Isaiah, 10: 5: 'Shall the axe vaunt itself over the one who wields it, or the saw magnify itself against the one who handles it? As if the rod should raise the one who lifts it up....'"

Another aspect of irony in *Arrow of God* is the deflation of narcissistic inflation. The major flaw which Ezeulu has, that is, if one wants to see him in the light of a tragic hero, is what can be termed potentiomania. He sees himself mostly in terms of the

power/ authority he feels he possesses. But ironically the size of power into which he inflates himself is mercilessly deflated. Very early in the novel, we are told that “whenever Ezeulu considered the immensity of his power over the year and the crops, and therefore, over the people, he wondered if it was real’ (3). Expatriating on that point of power, he mused: ‘If he should refuse to name the day, there would be no festival--no planting and no reaping. But could he refuse?’ And reflecting further on whether he could not ‘dare,” he concluded: ‘No man in all Umuaro can stand up and say that I dare not. The woman who will bear the man, who will say it, has not been born yet.’

It did not take long in the story of the novel when Nwaka revealed the ironic ‘weak’ origin of the priesthood of U|lu - the fact that ‘when the six villages first came together they offered the priesthood of Ulu to the weakest among them to ensure that none in the alliance became too powerful’ (15). And indeed, as noted above, the power of Ezeulu had been challenged and undermined by not just one man but by a whole clan, as Akuebue, Ezeulu’s closest friend, warned him: ‘...no man however great can win judgment against a clan. You may think you did in that land dispute but you are wrong’ (131) (more on this later).

Even before this incident the white man, Mr. Wright, who was of course born of a woman, had undermined Ezeulu’s power when he whipped his son, Obika. Ezeulu’s infatuation with power would not allow him to imagine how the white man could whip his own son: ‘But the white man would not whip a grown man *who is also my son* ...’ (87–88; my emphasis). And still gloating over his priestly importance, ‘Ezeulu came finally to the conclusion that unless his son was at fault, he would go in person to Okperi and report the white man to his master’ (ie to Winterbottom, Ezeulu’s friend, 89). This is a double-sided anticipatory irony in which the reporter’s expectation is negated; for not the person to be reported would be

punished, but the reporter; and in which the reporter's assumed power would be deflated by imprisonment.

There is also this other dimension of irony in *Arrow of God*, which consists in recantation of laudation. Ezeulu has been over enchanted by the hyper-active life of his second son, Obika, especially whenever he compared him with Edogo, his eldest son (p.53). For instance, when Edogo told Ezeulu that he was being maligned all over the community because of the 'abomination' committed by Oduche, Ezeulu asked him what he did when he heard that. Upon Edogo's replying that he did nothing, Ezeulu said: 'When I was your age, I would have come out and broken that man's head...' (53). And he 'thought', 'I blame Obika for his fiery temper...but how much better is a fiery temper than this cold ash' (meaning Edogo). This is clearly praising Obika's fiery temper, which Ezeulu had condemned before this incident.

Ezeulu had indeed earlier roundly decried Obika's tempestuous character when he went to the house of his sister's husband, beat him up, tied him to a bed and with the help of a friend carried him and put him down 'under the ukwa tree...to be crushed by the fruit...as big as water pots'. The reason for Obika's irrationally violent action was that the husband of Akueke, his sister, had beaten her many times. Ezeulu, reversing his admiration for Obika, said: 'It is praiseworthy to be brave and fearless, my son, but sometimes it is better to be a coward. We often stand in the compound of a coward to point at the ruins where a brave man used to live. The man who never submitted to anything will soon submit to the burial mat' (11). This is an unequivocal recantation of the laudation of Obika.

Another instance of Ezeulu's condemnation of 'rashness' ironically relates to Edogo, who has not been associated with that vice. It was Edogo, the rejected stone, who became the cornerstone of the inquiry into what happened to Obika and why he was whipped by the white man. Edogo, despite his being relegated by

father, volunteered to go and look for Obika: 'I think I shall go to Nkwo where they are meeting....I cannot find meaning in this story' (88). When he took his machete and stepped out, Ezeulu advised him 'not to be rash'; and in another ironic twist he said, 'From what I know of your brother he is likely to have struck the first blow', unknown to him that Obika had no chance at all to strike either the first or any blow. Thus, Ezeulu appeared to have been converted from his faith in bellicosity to appreciation of pacifism.

The last aspect of irony to be looked at in this study is contradictory transformation. It was Phanael Egejuru (402) who observed that Ezeulu's violation of the 'sacred bond of Kinship solidarity' with his people by 'sending his son to join the people's enemies', is an act of 'negligence of his duty and misplacement of his loyalties.'" This same act is ironically interpreted by Ezeulu as 'an act of a father who is protecting the interest of his family'. In this context, subversion transforms into protection.

Another instance of this is Ezeulu-Winterbottom friendship which transformed into hostility as a result of Ezeulu's rejection of the warrant- chief position. Since the day Ezeulu gave evidence in favour of Okperi people in their land dispute with Umuaro, his own people, Winterbottom had made up his mind to reward Ezeulu with that position. After noting that most of the people who gave evidence in the case had told lies ('like children they are great liars'), he said that 'only one man – a kind of priest-king in Umuaro – witnessed against his own people" and that 'he was a most impressive figure of a man' (38). And later, Winterbottom reminded Mr. Clarke of 'the fetish priest who impressed me most favourably by speaking the truth in the land case between these people here [Okperi] and Umuaro,' and then said: 'I have now decided to appoint him Paramount Chief for Umuaro' (107). When his relationship with Winterbottom grew sour consequent on his turning down the offer, Ezeulu transformed his friend's "good will' into something that "brought him to shame and indignity" through the actions of

Winterbottom's 'messengers' for which 'Wintabota must answer' (175–176).

Next is the case of 'truth' which transforms into vice. The truth here is that for which, as noted earlier, Winterbottom admired and praised Ezeulu and for which he decided to make him Paramount Chief of Umuaro. And this truth which Ezeulu told his people against their will is that "when our village first came here to live, the land belonged to Okperi. It was Okperi who gave us a piece of their land to live in' (15). He then warned them: 'If you choose to fight a man for a piece of farmland that belongs to him, I shall have no hand in it'. Eventually, the white man, Winterbottom, 'sat in judgment over Umuaro and Okperi and gave the disputed land to Okperi' (29), and that was the consequence of the "truth' Ezeulu told. But Ezeulu's "truth" was transformed by his people into a vice of betrayal, for according to Akuebue, 'Umuaro will always say that you betrayed them before the white man' (131).

Thus, like those who, according to the Bible, "cast justice to the ground... and abhor him who speaks the truth' (Amos, 5:10), Umuaro abhorred Ezeulu for speaking the truth. But contrary to the Biblical assertions to the effect that "the truth will set you free' (John, 8:32) and that 'truthful lips endure forever' (Proverbs, 2:19), Ezeulu's truth alienated him from his community, 'imprisoned' him in his own house, and sealed the lips with which he told the truth. And contrary to the Igbo saying that 'truth is life' (eziokwu bu ndu), in the case of Ezeulu truth became synonymous with "destruction' and social death. The summary transformation of Ezeulu is therefore from the status of 'priest-king,' as Winterbottom described him, into that of a 'demented high priest' (he became demented upon the death of his beloved son, Obika), who had been 'chastised' and 'abandoned' by his own god 'before his enemies' (230).

If according to the English poet and mystic, William Blake (91), 'this Life's a Fiction/And is made up of Contradiction', Ezeulu's life

in *Arrow of God* is a luminous, consummate demonstration of that vision of life. And the ironic nature of Ezeulu's life is summed up by Ogbuefi Ofoka, who said that 'a priest like Ezeulu leads a god to ruin himself' and that 'perhaps a god like Ulu leads a priest to ruin himself' (213). Indeed both god and priest had been ruined in the end: the god became priestless and the priest godless.

Works Cited

- Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Fort Worth: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, INC., 1980.
- Achebe, Chinua. *Arrow of God*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 2003.
- Blake, William. *The Essential Blake*. Ed. Stanley Kunitz. Hopewell, New Jersey: The Ecco Press, 1987.
- Egejuru, Phaniel. 'Orethory Okwu Oka: A Neglected Technique in Achebe's Literary Artistry.' *Eagle on Iroko*. Ed. Edith Ihekweazu. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1996. 394-410.
- Forster, E. M. *Aspects of the Novel*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974.
- Holy Bible. New Revised Standard Version. Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2007.
- Ngwaba, Francis E. 'Complementary Duality as a Principle of Characterization in Achebe's Novels.' *Eagle on Iroko*, 367-379.
- Povey, John. 'Beginnings and Conclusions: The Novels of Chinua Achebe.' *Eagle on Iroko*, 380-393.
- Sharpe, Robert B. *Irony in the Drama*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959.