

Investigating Meaning and Message Variations in Poetic Interpretations of Osundare's "Not My Business"

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Abstract

Students and teachers of Literature have argued that poetic analysis can yield different meanings depending on the analysts' perspectives, perhaps because poetry is capable of generating meanings as a result of its quality of suggestion or indirection. This article argues that poems have specific and inherent meanings and, these cannot be left to the whims and caprices of the analysts and, to accept that poetic interpretations can be as varied as the number of the analysts is to reduce poetry from a lofty intellectual engagement to a mere game of chance. This paper, therefore, investigates the possibility of variation of meanings and messages and, the possible dimensions of meaning/message in poetry. Data consists of Osundare's "Not my Business" presented as an unseen poem to two groups of undergraduate students of English to determine its subject matter and themes. Subject matter and thematic analyses show similarities in meanings and messages, with only a few poor analyses as evidence of wrong reading of the poem. Findings reveal that the poem has specific meanings and messages and, possibly, shades of meanings which are closely related to the specific meanings. The paper concludes that proper literary analyses of any poem by scholars will yield similar meanings and, similar dimensions of meanings rather than varied and unrelated meanings and interpretations. The paper rejects the opinion that poetic analysis can yield different meanings depending on the analysts' perspectives.

Key words: Poetry, poetic interpretation, message variation, themes, Osundare, "Not my Business"

Introduction

From the classroom teaching experience of about two decades in institutions of higher education, it has been observed in a number of Literature classes that students have raised the argument that interpretation of a given poem by different analysts may vary. They argue that different analysts may arrive at different meanings, messages and interpretations of the same poetic text. When prodded further, they claim that analysing a given poem by a class of students may yield different interpretations depending on the individual analysts and their perceptions. In fact, some of these undergraduate students of English have claimed that some teachers and lecturers maintain the position that different analysts can arrive at different interpretations of a given poem. This seemingly innocent submission I perceive at best as spurious and unhealthy to the intellectual enterprise of poetic analysis, reductive and damaging to poetry itself, unfair to the growing students of literature, since it attempts to mislead the unwary students.

If the submission that poetic interpretation can be as varied as the number of the analysts should hold, one wonders then if Wole Soyinka's "Telephone Conversation" can yield itself to such thematic interpretations as love, family relations or war rather than racism, prejudice and complexity of identity. One wonders if an analyst can claim that John Keat's "Ode to a

Nightingale” thematises earthly love, marriage and human virtue rather than illusion vis-à-vis reality, the power of imagination, escapism, and eternity vis-à-vis transience. Several scholarly analyses have shown that Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 12” discusses such themes as mortality, bachelorhood/spinsterhood as sterile and, marriage and procreation as an antidote to immortality and loss of time. Critics and analysts therefore seem to be in agreement as regards the interpretations (subject matter and themes) of the above works and others like them. Even if some other analysts have made attempts to confer different subject matter and themes on some of these poems (and others), the fact that such different analyses are not popular among scholars is a tacit indication of unacceptable analyses.

Classroom attempts at countering the argument that poetic interpretation can be as varied as the number of the analysts have seen this researcher using a few simple poems for illustration. In such cases, the students are made to read the poems and determine their subject matter and themes. Students are then told to provide evidence for their choice subject matter and themes. This way, a number of students soon find out that their choice subject matter and themes have no evidential support from the text of the poem. Some soon realise that they have actually read the poem wrongly, for instance, by considering only a part of the poem, by a lack of understanding of some words or phrases, by not situating the words in proper context of use, or by not decoding images, tropes and figures correctly, etc. On the other hand, those students who have convincing evidence to support their intuitions/opinions are bold to take the class through their perspectives. These are seen making meanings out of the words, phrases and the interplay among words, structures and tropes as strung together as a unit by the poet.

Interactions with the students reveal that certain teachers of poetry assume the position of The All-knowing in the classrooms such that they only hand down meanings of poems to their students. This is rather counter-productive as students will simply see poetry as an insurmountable task beyond their reach. On the other hand, a rewarding teaching approach for poetry is when the teacher ‘helps them discuss their thoughts with other students, communicate ideas effectively and work productively with others’ (Chambers & Gregory, 2006: 136). This way, both the correct, faulty and unacceptable interpretations will jointly be worked out, and supportive arguments, reasons and evidence from the text will be laid bare for all the students to see. This will bring about opportunities for deep learning among the students, will enhance greater understanding and make poetry classes more enjoyable for them just as it will increase their confidence to approach new poetic texts. In fact, they will become ‘capable of taking what was learned in one situation and applying it to new situations’ (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012: 5).

This researcher is of the position that a poetic piece has got its intended meanings and messages the moment it is written by the poet. All a reader or analyst does by reading the poem is to attempt to decipher the meanings of the poem, to attempt to enter the mind of the poet by embarking on a literary journey to unravel the intricacies of meaning strung together in a creative labyrinth. Such a literary voyage will demand that the analysts arm themselves with useful literary tools. Aside unravelling the poet’s intended meaning, careful reading of a poem can unearth the writer’s unintended meaning, or meanings generated by socio-cultural or contextual indicators, etc. In all, even when the poem is analysed by different scholars, analyses ought to show evidence of meaning-connection in the various readings. Therefore, to maintain that analysts or readers can arrive at different interpretations of a given poem depending on the

individual analysts' perceptions is unfair to, and reductive of, the rigorous enterprise of poetry and, unhealthy and a means of short-changing the students.

The focus of this paper therefore is to establish the fact that meaning and message generation in a poetic text cannot be left at the whims and caprices of individual analysts and that different analysts cannot arrive at different unrelated interpretations of the same poem. The paper argues that proper analyses of a given poem by different scholars will only yield the same or similar results in meaning and messages. It is in the light of the above that the paper investigates meaning and message variations in Niyi Osundare's "Not my Business" by first analysing the poem to determine its subject matter and themes and, then presenting the poem as an unseen poem to two groups of undergraduate students of English and Literature with the instruction that they discuss the subject matter and the observed themes in the poem.

Poetry, Poetic Interpretation and Meaning Generation

Scholars from the classical era till the present have made attempts to come up with an all-encompassing definition of poetry to no avail. Even when the available definitions are similar in that they touch on the salient behaviours of poetry, each has proven inadequate to capture the whole essence of poetry. For example, Shelley (2002) perceives poetry as 'the record of the best and happiest moments of the best and happiest minds' and Wordsworth (1800) perceives poetry as 'the imaginative expression of strong feeling, usually rhythmical...the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquility', while Matthew Arnold (1958) sees poetry as 'a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by laws of poetic truth and beauty'. Further Edgar Allan Poe (1999) maintains that the 'poetry of words is the rhythmical creation of beauty. Its sole arbiter is taste unless incidentally, it has no concern whatever either with duty or with truth' and Dylan Thomas (1994: 618) avers that poetry is 'the rhythmic, inevitably narrative, movement from an overclothed blindness to a naked vision'. The above differing notions of poetry point to the scholars' inability to agree on the essence of poetry. Despite this however, the definitions have illuminated the enterprise of poetry since they have touched on such concerns of poetry as emotions, imaginations, rhythm and form, beauty/aesthetic, etc.

Poetry is considered as the loftiest form of literature for reasons of its language as explained by Riffaterre (1978). Riffaterre (1978) attributes the difference of the language of poetry from other linguistic usage to the fact that poetry employs words excluded from common usage and, that poetry has its own grammar which is often invalid. Further poetry expresses and means by indirection or suggestiveness. For the reasons of its special language, grammar and indirection, poetry usually has connotative meanings which require interpretation by critical readers. Perhaps, this is why Riffaterre (1978: 1) maintains that 'the literary phenomenon is a dialectic between text and reader'. Unlike with some other writings, a reader of a poem is adequately prepared to engage in the analysis of the poem. A reader is prepared to explain what a work of literature means, and how it means it, a reader embarks on an articulation of and a defense of an interpretation which shows how the resources of literature are used to create the meanings in the text.

To decipher appropriate meanings from a poem, a reader must first read the poem to understand the title, and some major indicators of meaning such as the setting, voice or topic

that seem to dominate or direct the reading. A reader must pay attention to the tone, progressive organisation of the poem, and the ending of the poem (Lye, 2000). A critical reader therefore pays attention to the genre, the speaking voice, the subject, the structure, setting, imagery, key statements, the sound of the poem, language use, intertextuality, the way the reader is informed by the poem, the poem's historical placement, and ideology or 'world-view' of the poet. (Lye, 2000). In other words, a critical reader must be actively engaged in the reading of the poem. No wonder Beach et al. (2006: 170) argue that the 'key to active, involved reading of literature is engagement with a text'. In addition, Millum (2008: 22) maintains that there should be 'an involvement with poems... A creative involvement in which we are not just looking at poems and making notes on them but getting into them'. This helps students to 'develop a lifelong passion for poetry' (Millum, 2008: 23). Such creative involvement with the poem will bring about 'enjoyment and understanding' since to 'understand a poem comes to the same thing as to enjoy it for the right reasons' (Eliot, 1956: 540).

Subject Matter, Theme and Niyi Osundare's "Not my Business"

Although a number of students and scholars tend to assume that both the theme and subject matter of a work of art are the same or roughly the same, these two are definitely not the same. The subject matter 'is the content-summary that gives a clue to the central idea (theme)' and it 'makes the theme deducible' (Dasylyva & Jegede, 2005: 18). Subject matter is 'a summary which brings out the major highlights of a story, or a poem' (Dasylyva & Jegede, 2005: 19). Subject matter is what the work of art is all about. It can be one or more expressions meant to convey the holistic message of the work of art. Concise Oxford English Dictionary (2004) defines subject matter as 'the topic dealt with or the subject represented in a debate, exposition or work of art'.

Dasylyva and Jegede (2005: 18) aver that the theme is 'the key or central meaning or message or idea in a literary work'. 'The core message...is the same thing as the theme' (Dasylyva & Jegede, 2005: 19). The theme 'expresses an author or poet's intention' (Dasylyva & Jegede, 2005: 19). Some poets state the themes directly while others suggest the themes through such devices as imagery, allegory, satire, symbols, irony or conflict. Since the theme is a product of the reality of the author's world, an analyst must put themselves in the author's world. Lukens (1999: 135) perceives theme as the 'idea that holds the story together, such as a comment about society, human nature, or the human condition'. It is the 'main idea or central meaning of a piece of writing' (Lukens, 1999: 135). Concise Oxford English Dictionary (2004) defines theme as 'a recurring or pervading idea in a work of art or literature'. Manoliu (2015: 52) citing Richard (1960) maintains that 'themes are only hidden relations which reveal themselves while analysing expressions, symbols, images, which appear in the text at certain intervals'.

The above implies that a subject matter is a sort of summary of the text which captures the message in brief, while a theme is not a summary but the core message or idea in the text. While the subject matter is the topic on which an author has chosen to write, the theme makes some statements, comments or opinions on that topic. Further, while the subject matter is specific to the text as it summarises the actions and events in the text, a theme statement is a broad idea that is applicable to life even outside of the text. A text can have only one subject

matter but can have a number of themes. This is why Stanton says that a ‘theme illuminates or comments upon some aspects of life, and thus has value outside the story’ (1965: 19). Themes can be explicit when the ideas are clearly and openly stated by the author and, implicit when the author only suggests such statements to create the readers’ interpretation about the story and define the themes by themselves (Lukens, 1999: 137 - 139). Themes can be central/major when its ideas run through the text and, can be minor when the ideas only reflect in some parts of the text.

Although Osundare’s “Not my Business” has enjoyed wide popularity among teachers and students of English language and Literature as well as lovers of the literary art, perhaps as a result of its appeal to folk experience, scholarly research investigation on the work still remains scarce. Available readings of the work appear in the form of bloggers’ comments and discussions, youtube presentations (renditions and video performances), power point presentations and comments. Majority of these are flowery and they lack scientific rigour in their presentations. In some cases, the analysis and findings are far away from the messages in the poem. As a result, it becomes important to examine the subject matter and theme of the poem as a means of investigating meaning and message variations in poetic interpretations.

For instance, Chiedu and Onovwiona attempt an x-ray of Niyi Osudare’s “Not my Business” and erroneously consider the work as discussing ethnic conflicts among groups in Nigeria resulting in killings, kidnappings and carnage ‘carried out by Fulani herdsmen in their agitation for cattle colonies in all the states of the federation’ (2018: 56). Although, the paper maintains correctly that the three names mentioned in the poem represent the major ethnic groups in the country, it claims erroneously that:

Due to ethnic sentiments, the victims in the poem suffered abuses because they could not come together as one to fight a common cause. Everyone is living for himself alone and unperturbed about the ill-treatment meted to his fellow man because of ethnic sentiments. (60)

Although, the victims suffer abuses and people could not come together, there is however no indication from the text of the poem, either directly stated or hinted at, to the effect that the reason for their suffering is as a result of ethnic sentiments. Again, there is no indication from the text, either directly stated or hinted at, to the effect that the poem makes ethnic conflict its subject. It is observed, as shown in the rest of the paper, that Chiedu and Onovwiona (2018) deliberately imbued the poem with ethnic colouration, thereby forcing a subjective interpretation on the poem. The paper is at best a poor attempt at forcing a subjective, biased and ethno-centric interpretation on the poem.

Another work, Onipede and Adesanmi (2020) attempts a multimodal stylistic analysis of Osundare’s “Not My Business”, relying on Norgaard’s multimodal stylistic approach. The paper is concerned with the roles of visual semiotics in digital poetry; the multimodal strategies used by the poet to allow audience make meaning out of the poem and; the appropriateness of the multimodal resources. Using Seventeen virtual images of the poem (including their texts), the paper found out that the texts of the visual poem are boldly foregrounded, the images make use of underlining, multiple colours in the background, rhetorical question as refrain, and

figurative expressions all used to achieve stylistic, linguistic and literary effect. Findings reveal that colours, images, graphology, and other linguistic and literary elements found in the selected digital poem are preponderant for meaningful interpretations. The scholars conclude that Osundare applied rich multimodal stylistic resources and graphological devices in his digital poem to portray meaning-making.

Due to the variations in the meaning and messages generated by the works discussed above, this researcher attempted the analysis of Osundare's "Not my Business" in order to determine its subject matter and theme. Analysis of the subject matter reveals that the poem discusses the government-sponsored maltreatment and violation of the rights of the citizens of Nigeria by uniformed men and, the indifferent/selfish attitude of others to these unjust treatments of fellow citizens. These people refuse to take actions because they are not the ones directly oppressed. Then the oppressors come for them in the same manner and, terrified, they find themselves alone without a helper.

Our thematic analysis of the poem reveals such themes as: (1) institutional oppression; (2) wanton destruction of lives and property; (3) nonchalant and selfish attitude of the people; (4) military dictatorship and; (5) silence in the face of injustice is destructive. Evidence for these abound in the poem. For instance, the actions of brazenly beating up Akanni and forcing him into the Jeep as well as abducting Danladi in the presence of all are acts of oppression commanded by those in government. In the process of abducting the two characters, properties were vandalised and those abducted were never seen. The evidence that the oppression occurs during the military era is contained in the lines: Booted the whole house awake / And dragged Danlandi out. The words 'Booted' and 'dragged' echo the force often deployed by the military and suggest the actions of soldiers. In addition, the two lexical items that suggest force, 'Booted' and 'dragged' contain at least six plosives: sounds that forcefully explode when pronounced. These sounds represent the explosive force associated with the military in carrying out orders. While the various forms of the oppression was being perpetrated, the poetic voice/poet personae remains nonchalant, selfish and unconcerned in as much as he/she is not disturbed. He/she chooses to remain silent since his/her personal peace is what matters to him/her. What finally becomes his/her fate and the absence of anyone to his/her rescue proves that silence in the face of injustice is destructive.

Having described the subject-matter and thematic analysis of the poem, we present the analysis of the students' data and its discussion in the next sub-section. This presentation and discussion will help determine, from the students' data, what thematic and subject matter analysis are correct, faulty or completely wrong.

Data Presentation, Discussion and Findings

Data consists of Niyi Osundare's poem, "Not my Business" presented as an unseen poem (the title of the poem was removed before it was presented to the students) to two different groups of students. Group One consists of 51 students in 400 Level and Group Two consists of 35 students in 200 Level in the Department of English, Federal College of Education, Abeokuta. These are undergraduate degree students in the Centre for Undergraduate Programme (CUDEP), an affiliate of the University of Ibadan. The 400 Level students have taken a number of courses on poetry and poetic analysis while the 200 Level students have just ended their

lectures on Forms of Literature II: Poetry. The poem is presented to the two groups separately as part of their continuous assessment and, the students are expected to simply discuss the subject matter and to mention at least three observed themes of the poem. Results of the assessments are presented in the tables below and discussed in this subsection.

Responses to Subject Matter of Osundare's "Not my Business"

The responses from the two groups on the discussion of the subject matter of the poem are presented below. The major/key concepts used by the students to describe the subject matter are collated to prepare the table and similar concepts have been grouped together for ease of discussion. The frequency of the concepts is represented by the number of responses. Each table is then followed by the discussion of the students' responses.

Table 1.1: Group One's Responses to the Subject Matter of Osundare's "Not my Business"

S/N	Subject Matter	No of Responses	% Responses
1	Victimisation/maltreatment	12	15.2
2	Injustice/oppression	23	29.1
3	Brutality/class dominance	05	6.3
4	Indifference/self-centredness/unconcerned attitude	37	46.8
5	Calamities	02	2.5
	Total	79	100

Table 1.1 shows that 12 (15.2 %) of the responses from the 51 students in 400 Level consider the issue of victimisation and maltreatment of the people as part of the subject matter of the poem. Injustice and oppression are identified as part of subject matter by 23 (29.1 %) responses while only 5 (6.3 %) of the students' responses identify brutality and class dominance as parts of the subject matter. This implies that a total number of 40 responses totalling 50.6 % agree that the people are maltreated, victimised and brutalised by the oppressive, unjust and forcefully domineering leadership of the country. Further, 37 (46.8 %) responses discuss indifference, self-centredness and unconcerned attitude of the people as parts of the subject matter of the poem. Only two responses discuss calamities as part of the subject matter of the poem, and this forms only 2.5 %.

According to the above, the students' analyses of the subject matter of the poem show that the citizens of Nigeria are victimised and maltreated, are unjustly oppressed by their rulers (50.6 %) and, while the maltreatment, victimisation and oppression go on, other people who are not touched yet by the oppression maintain indifference, unconcerned attitude and they remain self-centred (46.8 %). The two respondents (2.5%) who discuss calamities as part of the subject matter apparently read the poem wrongly, perhaps due to a number of reasons. Although there are calamitous events in the poem such as the beating of Akanni and abduction of Danladi, these only point to specific instances of victimisation, maltreatment and oppression.

Table 1.2: Group Two's Responses to the Subject Matter of Osundare's "Not my Business"

S/N	Subject Matter	No of Responses	% Responses
1	Oppression of the people (by the powerful)	17	29.8
2	Indifference/self-centredness/unconcerned attitude	26	45.6
3	Violence and wickedness	08	14.0
4	Corruption	03	5.3
5	Struggle for survival	01	1.8
6	Futility of human existence	02	3.5
	Total	57	100

Table 1.2 presents the analysis of the 200 Level students' responses. From the data, 17 responses (29.8 %) claim that oppression of the people by the powerful constitutes a part of the subject matter while 26 (45.6 %) responses claim that indifference, self-centredness and unconcerned attitude of the people constitutes a part of the subject matter. Violence and wickedness are considered parts of the subject matter by 8 (14 %) respondents while corruption is considered a part of the subject matter by 3 (5.3 %) respondents. Two (3.5 %) respondents see identify futility of human existence as subject matter while only one (1.8 %) respondent identify struggle for survival as subject matter.

The above shows that half (17) of the 35 students in this group agree that the powerful class of leaders/rulers are oppressing the citizens while 26 students agree that those citizens who are yet to be touched directly by the on-going oppression remain indifferent, self-centred and put up unconcerned attitude. These two groups, in our opinion read the poem appropriately. The third and fourth categories of students who mention violence/wickedness (14 %) and corruption (5.3 %) apparently have a fair idea of the messages in the poem. However, they have only identify some of the forms of oppression -- violence, wickedness and corruption -- in the poem. In other words, these concepts or ideas are not to be categorised as inclusive in the subject matter nut they are possible themes emanating from the subject matter. The last two responses -- struggle for survival and futility of human existence -- are borne out of inadequate or faulty reading of the poem by the respondents as there are no evidence in the poem that points in that direction.

The above implies that of the 57 responses by the students, 43 (75.4%) responses appropriately identify the subject matter of the poem, 11 (19.3%) responses have a fair idea of the messages in the poem but do not identify the subject matter appropriately while 3 (5.3%) responses fail to determine the subject matter of the poem.

Responses to Themes of Osundare's "Not my Business"

The responses from the two groups on the discussion of the themes of the poem are presented in the tables below. The themes are collated to prepare the table and similar concepts have been grouped together (such as we have in numbers 1 and 2) for ease of discussion. The frequency of the themes is represented by the number of responses. Each table is then followed by the discussion of the students' responses.

Table 2.1: Group One's Responses to Themes of Osundare's "Not my Business"

S/N	Themes	No of Responses	% Responses
1	Self-Centredness/Apathy/ Indifference	15	20
2	Violence/Wickedness	09	12
3	Oppression/Injustice/Human Rights Abuse/ Lack of Freedom	18	24
4	Socio-political Instability/Bad Governance	04	5.3
5	Nemesis	03	4
6	Fate	02	2.7
7	Social Solidarity/ Responsibility	01	1.3
8	Fear/Uncertainty/Evil Waiting to Befall Man	04	5.3
9	Perseverance/Contentment	02	2.7
10	Rogue	01	1.3
11	Encroachment	01	1.3
12	Death/Loss/Life is Transient	04	5.3
13	Hunger/Poverty	04	5.3
14	Helplessness	01	1.3
15	Life Challenges	01	1.3
16	Abduction/Kidnapping/Ambush	02	2.7
17	Unemployment	01	1.3
18	Pain	01	1.3
19	Bribery	01	1.3
	Total	75	100

Table 2.1 shows the themes in the poem, "Not my Business" as identified by the 400 Level students. In all, seventy-five themes are identified by the 51 students in this group. 15 (20 %) respondents identify self-centredness/apathy/indifference as themes of the poem, 9 (12 %) identify violence/wickedness as themes, while 18 (24%) respondents identify oppression /injustice/ human rights abuse/ lack of freedom as themes. Further, socio-political instability/bad governance are identified as themes by 4 (5.3 %) of the respondents. Other themes identified include nemesis by 3 (4 %) respondents, fate by 2 (2.7 %) respondents, social solidarity/responsibility by 1 (1.3 %) respondent, fear/uncertainty/evil waiting to befall man by 4 (5.3 %) respondents, perseverance/contentment by 2 (2.7 %) respondents, and abduction/kidnapping/ambush by 2 (2.7 %) of the respondents. Still, others include death/loss/life is transient 4: (5.3 %) respondents, hunger/poverty 4: (5.3 %) respondents, while such themes as rogue, encroachment, helplessness, life changes, unemployment, pain and bribery have 1(1.3 %) respondent each.

Observation from the above is that the first four responses above have a good understanding of the themes in the poem since the poem is concerned with oppression of the people, injustice and human rights abuse and lack of freedom by the people. The oppression of the people by their leadership necessarily comes with violence and wickedness against the

people and some of the symptoms of the oppressive regime are socio-political instability and bad governance. Evidence in support of these themes are in the text. Therefore, of the 75 total responses to themes, 46 (61.3 %) responses appropriately identify the themes in the poem. A few other identified themes such as fear/uncertainty (S/N 8), abduction/kidnapping/ambush (S/N 16) and unemployment (S/N 17) are not central to the poem but are symptoms of oppression and human rights abuse by the leadership of the people. Therefore, while they are related to the poem, they are not considered as central themes. The other themes identified (S/N 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18 and 19) which account for 29.1% of all the responses do not have any critical analytic evidence from the text. They are therefore, rejected as incorrect.

Table 2.2: Group Two's Responses to Themes of Osundare's "Not my Business"

S/N	Themes	No of Responses	% Responses
1	Oppression, Human right violation, Injustice	17	15.6
2	Indifference/Nonchalance/Insensitivity/ Selfish interest	26	23.9
3	Crime and Violence	20	18.3
4	Insecurity/Terror/Cruelty of life	14	12.8
5	The powerful versus the powerless	05	4.6
6	Corruption/Bad governance	05	4.6
7	Uncertainties and vanity of life	04	3.7
8	Obsession with food/Hunger/Greed	05	4.6
9	Helplessness	02	1.8
10	Struggle for survival	02	1.8
11	Loss/Inevitability of death	02	1.8
12	Suffering and punishment	01	0.9
13	Unemployment	01	0.9
14	Revenge	01	0.9
15	Timing	01	0.9
16	Dignity	01	0.9
17	Personal and collective responsibilities	02	1.8
	Total	109	100

Table 2.2 presents the analysis of the themes in the poem as identified by the 200 Level students. A number of themes are observed from the students' scripts. Of the 35 students, 17 (15.6%) of them identified themes of oppression, human right violation and injustice, 26 (23.9%) identified themes of indifference, nonchalance, insensitivity and selfishness while 20 (18.3%) identified crime and violence as themes. Insecurity, terror, and cruelty of life are identified as themes by 14 (12.8%) of the respondents, while 5 (4.6%) respondents identified the theme of the powerful versus the powerless. Five (4.6%) respondents each identified the powerful versus the powerless; corruption and bad governance; and obsession with food, hunger and greed as themes while only 4 (3.7%) of the responses identified uncertainties and

vanity of life as themes. Further, two (1.8%) responses each identified helplessness; struggle for survival; loss/ inevitability of death; and personal and collective responsibilities. Other themes which are identified once (0.9%) by respondents are suffering and punishment; unemployment; revenge; timing; and dignity.

From the patterns identified by respondents, oppression/human right violation/ injustice; crime and violence; insecurity and terror are prevalent and are brought about by the activities of the ruling class and their thugs in uniform. The identified oppression and injustice, necessarily brings with it corruption and bad governance and, places the powerful against the powerless. In response to all of these, the people (who are not yet oppressed) maintain indifference, nonchalance, insensitivity and selfishness. We agree that the themes in S/N 1, 2, 3 and 4 are central themes in the poem while the themes in S/N 5 and 6 are related but less central to the poem.

Other identified themes which are not related to the poem could be as a result of students' lack of poetic analytic ability, inadequate knowledge of linguistic and figurative expressions, concentration on only a part of the poem, poor understanding of symbols and imagery, among others. For example, although there is a character who only cares about his food, and another who lost her job, a good reading of the poem will show that neither does the poem thematise obsession with food, hunger or greed (S/N 8) nor unemployment (S/N 13). Further, themes such as helplessness (S/N 9), struggle for survival (S/N 10), revenge (S/N 14), timing (S/N 15) and dignity (S/N 16) are wide off the mark. These and other themes such as uncertainties and vanity of life and, loss/inevitability of death are incorrect.

Conclusion

The paper has investigated meaning and message variations in poetic analysis and interpretation by examining meaning possibilities in Osundare's "Not my Business". Some students of Literature and teachers have claimed that meaning in poetry can be as varied as the number and perspectives of the analysts, a claim contrary to the position of this paper. Data for the study consists of Osundare's poem, "Not my Business" presented as an unseen poem to two groups of undergraduate students of English (CUDEP Programme), FCE, Abeokuta to determine its subject matter and themes. The subject matter and thematic analyses of responses from the two groups show similarities in meanings and messages among a large percentage of respondents; a few respondents also identify themes which are related to the central messages and; only few poor analyses which are evidence of wrong reading of the poem are observed. Findings reveal that the poem has specific meanings and messages and, shades of meanings which are closely related to the specific meaning(s). The paper concludes that proper literary analyses of any poem by scholars will only yield similar meanings and, similar dimensions of meanings rather than varied and unrelated meanings and interpretations. Where poetic interpretations are varied and unrelated, then some of the analysts have evidently read the poem wrongly.

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Appendix

Not my Business by Niyi Osundare

They picked Akanni up one morning
 Beat him soft like clay
 And stuffed him down the belly
 Of a waiting jeep.
 “What business of mine is it
 So long they don’t take the yam
 From my savouring mouth?”

They came one night
Booted the whole house awake
And dragged Danlandi out,
Then off to a lengthy absence.
“What business of mine is it
So long they don’t take the yam
From my savouring mouth?”

Chinwe went to work one day
Only to find her job was gone
No query, no warning, no probe
Just one neat sack for a stainless record.
“What business of mine is it
So long they don’t take the yam
From my savouring mouth?”

And then one evening
As I sat down to eat my yam
A knock on the door froze my hungry hand
A jeep was waiting on my bewildered lawn
Waiting, waiting in its usual silence