## A Comparative Analysis of Formal and Stylistic Techniques in Ciaran Carson's “The Irish For No”, and Anesu Mtowa's “You Do Not Believe Me”

Northern Ireland has been the centre of literary expression, especially during the Troubles. Despite the social, political, and cultural challenges, writers from Northern Ireland have used their skills to reflect upon, respond to, and make sense of the complex realities of their society, particularly “the issue of identity, [which] in NI is difficult because the country is still trying to find its own” (Avila, 2022). This essay will undertake a comparative analysis of the formal and stylistic techniques employed by two Northern Irish poets, Ciaran Carson and Anesu Mtowa, in their poems “The Irish For No”(1987) and “You Do Not Believe Me”(2020). Through examining the literary devices utilised by these poets, this essay will show how they represent their subject matter and engage with the socio-political landscapes of their respective time periods. While both Carson and Mtowa hail from Northern Ireland and address issues significant to their life experiences, their poems diverge in terms of formal structure and stylistic approach.

“The Irish For No” employs a free verse form with varied line lengths and an irregular rhyme scheme, which reflects the turbulent socio-political landscape of Northern Ireland during the Troubles. The stanza structure is fragmented, with shifting perspectives and scenes depicted in each of four stanzas, which provides a framework within which Carson articulates his observations and reflections, offering a glimpse into the complexities of identity and belonging in a divided society. This is evidenced in the poem:

“I could see some Japanese-style wall-hangings, the

dangling

Quotation marks of a yin-yang mobile”

The line “dangling Quotation marks” evokes a sense of instability and precariousness. Quotation marks typically signify direct speech or the citation of someone else’s words. In this context, they symbolise the representation of cultural elements, such as the importance of Gaelic, by individuals or groups who do not understand or respect their significance. The fact that they are “dangling”, literally in the poem, suggests that these symbols are not integrated but are hanging loosely, susceptible to manipulation or distortion. The mention of a “yin-yang mobile” adds layers of meaning, a theme that is continuous throughout the poem. The yin-yang symbol is a concept from Chinese philosophy, representing the duality and interdependence of opposing forces of light and dark, masculine and feminine. By incorporating this symbol into a mobile the poem highlights the fluidity of cultural identity. It suggests that cultural symbols, like the pieces of a mobile, can be easily swayed or reinterpreted by external forces. In the context of The Troubles, it represents the dualities at play: Catholic vs. Protestant, Nationalist vs. Unionist, violence vs. peace. The mobile, with its movement, may symbolise the shifting nature of the conflict, where alliances, perspectives, and power dynamics were in constant instability. Thus, the term “dangling” serves as a powerful metaphor for the broader themes of uncertainty, instability, and the quest for identity and belonging that permeate Carson's exploration of Northern Irish life during the Troubles. Whereas “You Do Not Believe Me”, is composed of sixteen stanzas that vary in length and form. Some stanzas consist of single lines, while others span multiple lines, for example:

“I have grown tired.

Now I just want to rest.”

This variation in stanza length creates a dynamic flow of thought and emotion, drawing the reader into the speaker’s internal turmoil and anguish. The poem unfolds as a progression of interconnected ideas and reflections, where each stanza builds upon the previous one, adding layers of meaning and complexity to the speaker’s narrative. The progression is not strictly linear but rather moves fluidly between past experiences, present emotions, and future aspirations. Through the use of this structure Mtowa effectively conveys the urgency and emotional weight of the harsh realities of racism.

In “The Irish For No”, Carson employs a first person perspective to the speaker through the use of “I” and “me”. The speaker’s perspective is characterised by its nuanced observations and reflections on various aspects of life in Northern Ireland. Through fragmented moments and shifting scenes, the speaker navigates through the socio-political landscape, offering glimpses into political graffiti, “*Ulster Says No* scrawled on the side of the power-block”, cultural debates, “we were debating … the pards and me how to render *The Ulster Bank – the Bank That Likes to Say Yes* into Irish”, and personal encounters, “the Belfast business man who drilled thirteen holes in his head”. This multifaceted perspective provides insights into the complexities of Northern Irish identity and experience, Carson states that everything he includes in his poems happened (Brandes, 1990, p. 84). Similarly, in “You Do Not Believe Me”, Mtowa employs a first-person perspective to present the speaker’s struggle with identity. However, unlike Carson’s poem Mtowa’s explores themes of racism and identity, where the poem personalises the experiences of the speaker, offering a challenge to narratives that often overlook marginalised individuals and communities. The use of “I” emphasises individuality which illuminates the proactive role the speaker undertakes in advocating for change and challenging entrenched norms. The use of “I” not only emphasises individuality but also underscores agency and empowerment. In a societal context where marginalised individuals often feel voiceless and powerless in the face of systemic injustices, the assertion of the speaker’s identity through the use of “I” becomes an act of resistance and assertion of autonomy. It signifies the speaker’s refusal to be silenced, instead asserting their right to be heard and recognised as an equal member of society. Throughout the poem, the direct address to the reader, exemplified by phrases such as “but aren’t you listening?”, prompts a reflection on one's own capacity to actively participate in combating racism and making substantial contributions to social justice initiatives.

In “The Irish For No”, the yin-yang symbol emerges as a central motif, echoed through the recurring imagery of light and dark, exemplified in the lines:

“They opened the door into the dark:

… And now rub your eyes and get acquainted with the light”

These lines depict a transition from darkness to light, both literally and metaphorically. The act of opening “the door into the dark” suggests an entry into the unknown, symbolising the uncertainty and chaos of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. This darkness represents fear, confusion, or the obscured truth of the conflict. However, the subsequent instruction to “rub your eyes and get acquainted with the light” signals a shift towards clarity and understanding. Here, the light symbolises knowledge and resolution, contrasting with the darkness that preceded it. The act of rubbing one’s eyes implies a process of awakening or realisation, as if emerging from a state of blindness or ignorance. Through their repetition and variation, these images not only reinforce the motif of the yin-yang symbol but also deepen the poem's exploration of identity, conflict, and balance amidst societal upheaval. Thus, the juxtaposition of light and dark imagery serves to illuminate the complexities of the human experience within the context of Northern Ireland’s history.Top of Form In “The Irish For No” Carson alludes to Keats’ poem *Ode to a Nightingale.* For example, Keats’ line “*drink and leave the world unseen*” reflects a desire for escape and transcendence, where the speaker seeks comfort in the beauty of nature and art suggesting a longing to be free from the burdens and troubles of the world. In contrast, Carson’s depiction of the “Belfast businessman who drilled thirteen holes in his head with a Black & Decker” presents a starkly different reality. This image is gritty and raw, it serves as a reminder of the harshness and brutality of human existence, juxtaposed against the escapist ideals of Keats’ poetry. One critic supports this idea and states that “in Keats’s ode the speaker feels suspended between sleeping and walking, transported into temporary artistic rapture… [whereas] the speaker in Carson’s poem inhabits a nightmare world in which uncertainty is a way of life” (Fitzgerald-Holt, 1993, p. 77). However, one may interpret the juxtaposition in a different way, instead of the world of the poem being viewed as a “nightmare”, it can be viewed as a poem about navigating the complexities of identity and survival amidst a world at conflict. Similarly, Mtowa uses violent imagery and metaphorical language in her poem, such as the line “I have been bleeding trauma for centuries”. Which symbolises the enduring legacy of historical and contemporary racism in Northern Ireland. The image of “bleeding trauma” conveys the ongoing suffering and resilience of communities impacted by racism, highlighting the urgent need for societal change and reconciliation. By confronting the intergenerational effects of racism, the speaker engages with the complexities of identity and survival in a post-conflict Northern Ireland, where racial tensions and inequalities continue to shape experiences, “40% of those interviewed by the researchers said they had experienced racist hate” (Meredith, 2021). Through its poignant language and symbolism, the poem serves as a reflection on the enduring challenges of racism in Northern Ireland, urging readers to confront and address these issues with empathy and solidarity.

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In conclusion, both poets contribute to a rich tradition of Northern Irish literature that not only reflects upon the past but also speaks to the urgent imperatives of the present. In an era marked by ongoing social and political challenges, their works serve as powerful testaments to the enduring resilience and creative spirit of Northern Ireland’s literary landscape. Through their reflections and thematic explorations, Carson and Mtowa engage with the complexities of their society, fostering dialogue, empathy, and ultimately, the pursuit of justice and reconciliation.

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