

1979

A Connection of Images: the structure of symbols in The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born

Terry Goldie

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Goldie, Terry, A Connection of Images: the structure of symbols in The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, *Kunapipi*, 1(1), 1979.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol1/iss1/12>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

A Connection of Images: the structure of symbols in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*

Abstract

Ayi Kwei Armah's first novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, has presented problems for most readers. There has been a general admission that it is a work which deserves high praise but most have been decidedly uncomfortable with Armah's obsession with filth and decay. Yet it is precisely this obsession which shows Armah's technical abilities and which helps to define the full meaning of the novel.

A Connection of Images: the structure of symbols in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*

Ayi Kwei Armah's first novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, has presented problems for most readers. There has been a general admission that it is a work which deserves high praise but most have been decidedly uncomfortable with Armah's obsession with filth and decay. Yet it is precisely this obsession which shows Armah's technical abilities and which helps to define the full meaning of the novel. There is a depth to the work which can only be plumbed by an extended analysis of the novel's imagistic structure. Such an analysis can demonstrate it to be a subtle creation which reveals a multitude of ideas, finally brought together in a meaningful whole in the last pages of the novel. On the surface, the work is an examination of one man's attempt to remain honest in the face of the mass corruption which Armah sees in Ghana today. The novel begins in the third person in a highly descriptive section. The narration then changes to a mixture of third person and first person in which the thoughts of the hero are revealed. The final part, again in the third person, shows the action which results from the situation described in the earlier passages. Whether in the first or third person, the point of view is always that of the hero, 'the man.' He is given no name and his actions or inactions and those around him complement this lack of identity. He seems an existential everyman, much like a Camus hero. He is in a state of abandonment and anguish and is utterly alone. He is

searching for some way to identify who he is and what he should be. With the exception of those who have made a god of money the other characters are in much the same state. A clerk says, 'There was nobody. Me alone.'¹ A caesarean birth is described as the child 'dragged out of its mother's womb.' (p. 97) At a later point, (p. 117) the man sweeps a mouse's home into the rubbish in the same arbitrary manner as his own life is being swept away.

The point of view is therefore essentially one of despair. Hope seems futile: 'When all hopes had grown into disappointment there would be no great unwillingness about the final going.' (p. 152) The man has a need for love, for some kind of human connection, but it is unfulfilled. In terms of sex, there is a constant image of impotence, both figuratively and actually. The futility of life leads the hero to be alone in despair but 'inside himself the man felt a vague but intense desire, something that seemed to be pushing him into contact, any kind of contact, with anything that could give it.' (p. 93)

There are therefore a multitude of communication images in the novel. The man works on the telegraph at the railway office but it is almost impossible to make meaningful connections with other operators. He attempts to find meaning in the many lines showing the movement of trains but this also proves inconclusive. A disembodied hand at the other end of the telegraph says, 'Why do we agree to go on like this?' (p. 26) Later, the man sees a number of poles connected together by electrical lines. This positive image is quickly dismissed on the human level when he notices by the pole a young girl, unable to find her personal connection.

These attempts at communication are continued by the journeying images. Each of these journeys seem to hold some hope of meaningful quest but that hope inevitably proves fruitless. The novel opens with the bus journey which only leads to the man being thrown off the bus. The man walks down the tracks again attempting a connection without success. On another trip by train, when he arrives at the station 'he saw the mess of some

traveller's vomit.' (p. 102). He then sees two men from the south who have come to the metropolis to make their fortune: 'It is possible that far away somewhere, young men sigh in the night and dream of following these, but they certainly do not know the end of the journey.' (p. 102) The end of the journey is that vomit.

To a great extent, the response to this dilemma is simply numbness, often sleep. In the opening bus sequence, the conductor fears the man is watching him count his money but he soon learns 'the watcher was no watcher after all, only a sleeper.' (p. 5) When the man tries to make love to his wife, he cannot break through her sleep. (p. 97) Then he turns to sleep himself and dreams of his school years: 'In the examination hall he finds all movement impossible, so that he cannot even tell if he knows any answers.' (p. 98) Yet even in this sleep there seems some hope. The man says of the Teacher, 'once he asked whether it was true that we were asleep, and not just dead, never to aspire any more.' (p. 90)

Even if this numbness is only a dormancy, something is needed to break it. The usual definition of the existential position is that existence precedes essence. For things other than man, the concept or the ideal, the essence can precede existence. The idea of a chair can precede the existence of a chair. For the individual man, however, the situation is reversed. Not having been given his essence before existence he must find it himself. Some men posit a God which gives them an essence which does precede existence. Others seem to find a worldly ideal, like the money-god which serves the majority of the Ghanaians. The man has neither of these and must find his own.

He first turns to the idyllic past. He says, 'the listening mind is disturbed by memories of the past.' (p. 66) He remembers a youth of clean water and clear sunlight: 'Th ere was something there which I know we have lost these days.' (p. 77) In that era, there was the oppressive power of the white men with their white bungalows and their black servants but he still felt 'without the belittling power of things like these we would all continue to sit underneath old trees and weave palm wine dreams of beauty and happi-

ness in our amazed heads.' (p. 93)

Yet is this primitivism only a dream? The representative of this primitive ideal seems to be the naked man, the Teacher, who looks to the past. He sees life in terms of Plato's cave metaphor: 'I saw men tear down the veils behind which the truth had been hidden. But then the same men, when they had power in their hands at last, began to find the veils useful.' (p. 91) It is not that man cannot see the naked truth but that he finds it expedient to ignore it: 'men would laugh with hate at the bringer of unwanted light if what they knew they needed was the dark.' (p. 78)

If the Teacher does perceive the ideal, however, it does not give him happiness: 'in spite of all the outer calm he too was in pain.' (p. 83) He says of himself, 'I have tried to be free but I am not free.' (p. 54) Even if he has the ideal, he is in despair because it leaves him without connections to the outside world; he is 'living my half-life of loneliness.' (p. 55) He also is beyond hope: 'it is not a choice between life and death but what kind of death we can bear in the end. Have you not seen there is no salvation anywhere?' (p. 55) If there is any salvation it is only 'within the cycle of our damnation itself.' (p. 55) His position is in the end little better than the zombies around him: 'I also am one of the dead people, the walking dead.' (p. 60)

There are a number of other characters who seem close to some kind of ideal. Kofi Billy joins the man in following Maanan but the former's search only ends in suicide, feeling 'in the very long lines of people I am only one.' (p. 73) Maanan herself, as the name suggests, brings a manna of sorts in the wee, the drug. The man says the drug enables them 'to see beyond the pain of the moment.' (p. 69), to see 'the deep, dangerous kind of truth.' (p. 69)

If this drug does seem an aid to a true perception, the imagery surrounding it should provide some clues to the pattern which Armah is creating. The wee is usually smoked when near the sea. After taking the drug (p. 70), they immediately get a strong smell of 'shit' and then they turn to the clear water. The clear water of

the sea has already been noted as an idyllic reference. The 'shit' usually seems to signify the filth of society, although, as shall be seen below, it eventually assumes a number of ambiguous dimensions.

Therefore, the drug, taken by the sea, reveals the filth, that dangerous truth. Then, after the wee, the man sees the water come alive. It comes towards him and he sees 'the land answering the movement.' (p. 71) In tune with the novel's concern for connection, this seems to be a connection in nature, a representation of a possibility not found with the trains or the telegraph. The drug provides an opportunity for this relationship which is so difficult to achieve.

Thus in the past there seems to have been an achievement of some ideal by Maanan but this ideal is not sufficient. She transfers her faith to a young lawyer and gets 'a happy light in her eyes' (p. 83) This light cannot last either, however, and the man sees her at the end of the novel in the depths of madness.

The lawyer to whom she turns is another failed ideal. His speech seems to hold great possibilities in terms of Armah's beliefs: 'We do not serve ourselves if we remain like insects, fascinated by the white people's power . . . We are our own enslavers first. Only we can free ourselves.' (p. 85) He seems to overcome his isolation when he says 'I am nothing. I have nothing' (p. 85) and puts his faith in the group, the people at large. But now, years later, he acts with the same unfeeling superiority as the other rulers. The man asks, 'How could this have grown rotten with such obscene haste?' (p. 86) The answer seems to be inherent in the glory of the lawyer's own ideal: 'It was his own youth that destroyed him with the powerful ghost of its promise.' (p. 86)

It is perhaps in one of the shortest characterizations that Armah shows the essence of the failure of the ideal. A young man rejected the evils of society and assumed an eastern faith and called himself Rama Krishna. He made a 'long and tortured flight from everything close and everything known since all around him showed him the horrible threat of decay.' (p. 47) He quotes

Gioran, the Prophet, that man would 'like an air plant be sustained by the light.' (p. 47) But man must kill to eat: 'Let it then be an act of worship.' (p. 47) However, Rama Krishna is unable to rise above the evil acts that life requires and in his avoidance of outward decay, the inside of his body decays before its time.

Rama Krishna's death and the failure of the other idealists seem to show an inadequacy in the absolute acceptance of any ideal. The most absolute, Rama Krishna, leads only to the greatest inward decay. The ideal found by Maanan, in the connection to the sea, that found by the Teacher in his perception of the light, and that of the lawyer, in the collective will, all seem to have possibilities but they too prove insufficient.

This multitude of ambiguous ideals is reflected in the many light images. At times the light seems to represent a true ideal and at others a false glitter. In the first line of the novel, 'THE LIGHT from the bus moved uncertainly . . .' (p. 1) Then the bus driver has difficulty lighting a match. As the man walks down the road, bright headlights blind and immobilize him. In the office the light is dull. (p. 14) Another light image, 'the gleam,' is used to represent the money lust which drives the majority of the people. Even at home, the man finds no escape: 'home, the land of the loved ones, and there it was only the heroes of the gleam who did not feel they were strangers.' (p. 35) The gleam seems to be a comment on the man's own inadequacy: 'That has always been the way the gleam is approached, in one bold, corrupt leap that gives the leaper the power to laugh with contempt at those of us who still plod on the daily road, stupid, honest, dull, poor, despised, afraid.' (p. 95)

The references above to the light of the bus, the car and the match suggest that the light does not signify one simple meaning. Life in general seems to be a series of unsteady lights which are inadequate to clear perception but the bright light associated with the worldly successful doesn't seem to be an improvement. At one point, when the man is walking, he finds that the bright headlights only make the night darker. (p. 48) This paradox continues

in the image of the gleam. The man speaks of the 'the ambiguous disturbing tumult within awakened by the gleam.' (p. 23) 'It was getting harder to tell whether the gleam repelled more than it attracted, attracted more than it repelled, or just did both at once in one disgustingly confused feeling all the time.' (. 10)

At one point, near the centre of the novel, the man has a dream which revolves around these light and dark images and at the same time deepens and explains them. The scene opens with the man and a companion. They are struck with 'blinding lights, wild and uncontrolled, succeeded by pure darkness, from which the recognized self emerges.' (p. 99) They are moving away from the dark, low hovels towards white towers. They are 'happy in the image of the future in the present'. (p. 99) Then the brutal lights confuse him and he is immobilized but his companion goes on, her own eyes shining. The man is unable either to return to the hovel of the past, the low, the dark, or to reach the tower of the future, the high, the white. 'All he can feel now is the cold, and a loneliness that corrodes his heart with its despair, with the knowledge that he has lost his happy companion forever, and he cannot ever live alone.' (p. 100)

The man is without companions and yet he is unable to be content with loneliness. Whether the light is the false god of money or the true ideal it is too powerful for the man to confront. Around him he knows others are able to follow it. He is left in limbo, neither dark nor light, neither happily social nor happily alone, a part of neither the idyllic primitive past nor the progressive future.

To discuss images in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* must lead one eventually to the omnipresent 'shit.' From the beginnings of the novel the reader is met by visions of excrement, vomit, spit and rot. The clean-up campaign in the town is shown to be totally ineffectual. Everywhere the man runs into 'the unconquerable filth.' (p. 23) At the same time as this filth is piling up, however, the filth inside seems to be blocked up. When Estella goes to the lavatory to answer 'Nature's call,' she is confronted by a man's

constipation. (p. 133)

There seems to be an almost constant picture of this rot and decay. The organic decay of the wood of the banister is unstoppable. (p. 12) The timberan worries that this wood will rot. (p. 29) The sea salt is eating the walls. (p. 20) The man recalls 'the rot of the promise' of independence. (p. 88)

The man must deal with this universal decay and the filth on the streets. 'Sometimes it is understandable that people spit so much, when all around decaying things push inward and mix all the body's juices with the taste of rot.' (p. 40) As in the case of Rama Krishna, the decay is within and must be met or else it will eat out everything.

The meaning of this confrontation is found in a short passage in which the man recalls seeing the picture of the old manchild. It seems unnatural 'but of course, it, too, had a nature of its own, so that only those who have found some solid ground they can call the natural will feel free to call it unnatural.' (p. 62) For the man such clean distinctions do not exist. He must learn to accept the unnatural natural, the natural which at first glance seems unnatural. This process is continued with the 'shit' and the rot: to avoid decay is 'an unnatural flight.' (p. 48) One is reminded of Norman O. Brown's comments on Swift in which he suggests that Swift's purpose is to make the reader realize that the physical processes are as much a part of man as his intellectual or spiritual elements.² Armah also pushes the reader to see the natural for what it is. When Oyo doesn't want her husband to see her naked she is 'avoiding the natural. She wants a wig like Estella has but elsewhere the man says wigs are 'human hair scraped from which decayed white woman's corpse?' (p. 88)

The wig is the truly unnatural, a turn to death and a evil decay. Instead, the man must learn how to deal with the natural decay: when his blockage ceases and he can get release in the latrine, he no longer keeps his hand off the rotting banister but 'lets it slide greasily down.' (p. 110) As the Teacher says, 'out of decay and the dung there is always a new flowering.' (p. 84)

This is the real meaning of the 'vision of shit' in the novel. If one recalls the uses of light imagery, the following could be revealing: 'occasionally the naked bulbs of street lamps shed a little light on holes in the backwalls of bathrooms.' (p. 93) It is perhaps in the latrine that a real insight may come. In this use of Plato's cave metaphor, the Teacher asserts 'The naked body is a covering for a soul once almost destroyed, now full of fear for itself . . . This naked body has an outward calmness about it, but inside it how much power is lying hidden from the watching eye . . .' (p. 77) The body seem to be a barrier around the ideal that is the soul. At one time the Teacher 'parted everything so clearly into the light and shadow' but now he speaks in 'words that mix the beauty with the ugliness.' (p. 78)

The only hope today seems to be not in despairing about this need to mix but to explore it. It is no longer possible to follow an ideal which avoids the physical reality. The two are joined, like the naked body and the soul. They may be inhospitable toward each other but they cannot be separated. Those, like Estella, who follow the false ideal of the gleam of money and who reject the natural processes are in error. Instead, one must go both ways, combining a true ideal, a true light, and the awareness of and the acceptance of the natural decay that is a part of life.

A final major image to be examined is that of the sea. Above, the sea has been linked to an idyllic past. The man sees in the sea 'this clearness, this beautiful freedom from dirt. Somehow there seemed to be a purity and a peace here which the gleam could never bring.' (p. 23) He feels 'the breeze blowing in from the sea, fresh in a special organic way that has traces of living things from their beginnings to their endings.' (p. 77) The sea becomes an image of a clear, organic ideal, part of the natural process, as in that one positive connection where the land and the sea seem to meet one another. (p. 71) Yet even here there is an ambiguity. Part of this natural process is as evil in appearance as the natural process is as evil in appearance as the decay on land. The man sees a dead fish 'dancing quite violently up and down with the little waves.

When he looked closer he saw a whole lot of little fishes eating the torn white body, breaking the water's surface at dozens of small points.' (p. 123)³ The sea suggests an ideal but also the impurity of that ideal. For the man 'the thoughts rising from the sea all have a painful hopelessness.' (p. 111)

Following these image patterns, one perceives certain thematic concerns. The man is seeking connections and communication, often symbolized in journeys and various modes of transportation. He has turned to a number of ideal characters but all have in the end somehow failed him. The images of light suggest both the true ideal and 'the gleam', the money-lust that drives his fellow countrymen. In either case, the light for him is uncertain but he is unable to deal with a bright light. He has a need to accept the natural processes around him, the decay and the rot, and learn how to function while including them. Finally he looks to the sea as the hope for an ideal but even there all in the end seems 'a painful hopelessness.'

This thematic pattern may now be applied to the ending of the novel, to see what Armah's seemingly despairing conclusions really mean. First, however, it is necessary to examine the one other central character of this section, Koomson.

Koomson seems a representative of the evil seekers of the gleam who have taken on the old white ways and a new corruption to further their own wealth. Koomson is an ex-fisherman and is associated with the wharves, which seem the most evil element connected to the sea: 'The wharves turned men into gulls and vultures, sharp waiters for weird foreign appetites to satisfy, pilots of the hungry alien seeking human flesh.' (p. 89)

The man sees at this point that there are truly 'no saviors. Only the hungry and the fed.' (p. 89) The Teacher, Maanan and the others cannot act as saviors. Yet, the man says, 'And then Koomson comes, and the family sees Jesus Christ in him.' (p. 92) To accept such a character as an ideal appears ludicrous. One should recall, however, the ambiguity of all the seemingly positive characters and images. Koomson's name could imply 'come

soon,' a Christian phrase of salvation. At best, of course, this is a limited salvation but the suggestion cannot be easily dismissed, as a close analysis of the final action will reveal.

After the coup, Koomson becomes the scapegoat, the sacrifice. When the man finds Koomson in his home, it is Koomson that is now most attacked by the light. His white shirt, the reminder of his colonial pretensions, also attacks him with light. Koomson is in dire fear of the brightness. He is in a state of constipation like the man in the latrine, unable to answer 'nature's call.' He gives off a smell of 'corrosive gas.' (p. 153) Now, to escape, they must go through the latrine, through the hole. They are figuratively going through the process of expelling the inner decay and of dealing with the natural man. Then they go to the converted lavatory by the sea.

The boat in which they will escape has been called the 'Ahead.' As a corrupt fishing boat belonging to Koomson, it has symbolized the 'leap of the gleam,' but it now takes on a new meaning. The name suggests hope at the same time it recalls the 'head,' the sea-going toilet. The natural process continues, only now on that source of the ideal and the connections, the sea:

The sea became something more visible as the spume began to rise in the wake of the boat, and the receding town, with its weak lights, now seemed to be something apart, something entirely separate, from the existence of the man. Further out the wake began to shine briefly with the phosphorescence of the sea, and the man leaned over and for a while was able to forget everything as he looked at the strange, soft, watery light.

Then the smell of shit which had never really left him, became even stronger, and when he turned he saw Koomson next to him. (p. 174)

The man seems to have reached the organic ideal of the sea. He feels that the evil town is receding. The gleam seems to be weakening but at the same time he discovers a gentle, 'soft, watery light.' In the end, however, even here he cannot escape that 'smell of shit,' the decay that is a part of life. Koomson is not a true saviour but an agent of 'the salvation within the cycle of damna-

tion' (p. 55) for the man. He brings the man out to the sea, the ideal, the soul, and at the same time provides a reminder that the man cannot leave the physical self.

The man then leaves the boat to return to land. The connection to the sea is intensified therefore on his return and, to extend this relation even more, he swallows some of the water as he enters. He swims to the centre of an inner tube which has been thrown from the boat and makes for the beach. 'He had begun to feel much colder too. But at the same time, even the cold feeling gave him a vague freedom, like the untroubled loneliness he had come to like these days, and in his mind the world was so very far away from the welcoming sand of the beach beneath him.' (p. 176)

In the inner tube, where he gets to the centre of things, he is able to return from the sea to the shore. Now he is no longer in despair but has found an 'untroubled loneliness,' 'a vague freedom.' In a later novel, *Fragments*, Armah speaks of nexology⁴, a theory that the truth can be found in the centre where one accepts all sides and all movement. Here, from the centre of the inner tube, the man has reached a point where he is between and accepting all of the parts, all of the polarities: 'When he awoke he felt very cold in the back, though already the sun was up over the sea, its rays coming very clean and clear on the water, and the sky above all open and beautiful.' (p. 177)

Then he sees the madwoman, whom he perceives as Maanan. She says, 'They have mixed it all together! Everything! They have mixed everything. And how can I find it, when they have mixed it all with so many other things?' (p.177-178) She cannot find an absolute ideal because the answer is just such a mixture of all the polarities. Then the man looks at the inner tube: 'The rubber tube was floating away to the east with the current, rising coming forward every now and then and being sucked rapidly back, then lingering until another wave took it again forward and farther to the east.' (p. 178) Again there is the image of the centre, going back and forth within that organic image of the ideal but here the end result is a slow 'forward.' It is limited, but there seems some

hope for progression.

Back on land, the old bus and the bribery show that things have not changed. But on the bus there is an oval with a flower in the centre and a message, 'The beautiful ones are not yet born.' The man sees the printed words 'flowing up, down, and round again.' (p. 180) The oval seems an egg image and the movement of the words recalls the inner tube in the sea. The flower suggests the Teacher's belief that a flower will rise from the decay and the dung. With the addition of the words themselves, there seems to be an implication that the present evil state of affairs does not deny the possibility of a positive future.

The novel ends with again a latrine image and a bird happily flying off. One would assume that the bird is the chichidodo. Earlier in the novel, Oyo called the man a chichidodo, because, like the bird, he hates excrement but his favourite food is the maggots which feed on the excrement. (p. 44) It seems that by the end of the novel, the man is no longer the same as the bird. Or, perhaps, he still rejects the excrement and eats the maggots but now has confronted the filth on which the maggots must feed. The man ends with 'the never-ending knowledge that this aching emptiness would be all that the remainder of his own life could offer him.' (p.180) And yet, somehow, that aching emptiness seems a meaningful state, even an accomplishment.

This very limited hope is defined in a song quoted early in the novel, on the man's visit to the Teacher:

Those who are blessed with the power
And the soaring swiftness of the eagle
And have flown before,
Let them go.
I will travel slowly,
And I too will arrive.(0. 50)

As the man says, 'someone must have felt something very deeply to have cried out these long sounds of despair refusing to die.' (p. 51)

This seems to be the positive end of the novel. The man reaches the centre and makes the needed connection of polarities but even here he cannot discover an absolutely positive answer. Shortly after the above quotation, in speaking of the war, the man suggests that 'victory itself happens to be the identical twin of defeat.' (p. 63) If this is true, one would assume the opposite is also the case and defeat is the twin of victory. The man enters the sea and goes through a change but it is not from sadness to joy but from complete despair to that 'despair refusing to die.'

NOTES.

1. Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (New York: Collier, 1969), p. 15. All future references are to this edition and will be included in the text.
2. Norman C. Brown, 'The Excremental Vision,' *Life Against Death* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1959), pp. 179-201.
3. This short quotation could be interpreted in other ways. It might be seen as a natural reflection of the dog-eat-dog world of the seekers of the gleam. Another, more tenuous but more hopeful meaning could be that the torn white body of the colonial aftermath will be destroyed by the little fishes, the people of Ghana. These interpretations are not definitive, nor do they alter the above analysis but they are given here to suggest the depth that one can find in Armah's images.
4. Ayi Kwei Armah, *Fragments* (New York: Collier, 1971), p. 230.