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### African Childhood “Reawakened”: Using Cultural Studies Theory in Understanding the Use of Symbolism in Camara Laye’s *The African Child*.

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**Keywords:**  
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This paper reports the findings of a pragmatic study that uses follow-up interviews as a method to investigate how participants read the language in the novel by a renowned African novelist Camara Laye. The study builds on antecedent work that has identified patterns of language presentation as techniques of characterisation in the novel “The African Child”. The article offers a spotlight on the critical use of symbolism in the novel ‘The African child’ (Laye, 1953). This article is set in a research context that brings together surveillance from cultural studies theory on the use of symbols in the novel. The results show that symbols are read significantly faster than the overall clusters which are stored as units in the brain. This pronouncement is complemented by the results of the follow-up questions which indicate that readers do not seem to refer to symbols when talking about character information, although they are able to refer to symbols when prompts are used to elicit information. Beyond the specific results of the study, this article makes a contribution to the development of complementary methods in children’s literature from Africa and it points to directions for further sub-classifications of the use of symbolism in children’s literature that could not be achieved on the basis of this data alone.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Cultural theories have offered critical examinations of different forces in society and how these forces influence linguistic appreciation in children's literature. Essentially, *symbolism* is the use of words, characters, locations, or abstract ideas to represent something beyond their literal *meaning* (Christine et al., 2017). Recent work in literary stylistics has helped to focus attention on the linguistic patterns that are of literary relevance. At the same time, stylistic findings raise questions about the extent to which readers are actually aware of textual patterns that are interpreted in terms of their literary functions. The way in which real readers approach a text receives particular attention in cultural studies, where textual meaning is seen as being created in the course of the reading process. We want to argue that employing cultural studies methods can add a valuable dimension to the interpretation of literary stylistic findings, especially in children's literature. Such methods can be used to look empirically at the processing of linguistic units. Hence, they can help to link findings on linguistic patterns as identified by corpus methods and claims about the creation of meaning in the mind of the reader. This article uses data from the novel by Camara Laye, "*The African Child*". This is because we build on earlier work in literary stylistics specifically (Mahlberg, 2013), but also because Laye's characters are thought to have noticeable effects on readers, as reflected by the continuing popularity of this writer in African literature. Additionally, the novel has certain unique aspects which must be related to Africa and the African heritage to the extent that it is possible in a work of this length to separate purely African elements from the more universal ones and evaluate the place of each type in the whole body of works considered.

The article focuses on patterns of symbolic presentation. Our aim is to investigate relationships between repeatedly occurring symbols presentation

and the way such symbols are read. The link that we make between linguistic findings and literary reading has not been systematically studied in genres of children's literature in Africa, so our second aim is to develop an approach for further studies in this area using "*The African Child*" by Camara Laye to represent many modern African novelists— both in scope and in potential value as a source of study to a serious student of children's literature from outside Africa.

With cultural theories grounded in the introduction, I now structure the rest of the paper as follows. The first section gives a brief background to the novel "*The African Child*" (Laye, 1953). The second part situates the novel within the cultural theoretical framework. The third section highlights the link between symbolism and cultural studies generally because it is claimed to promote cultural ideology. The fourth section raises a critical analysis of some of the symbols in the novel, arguing that it is a portrayal that promotes cultural underpinnings in African children literature. The fifth part moves beyond the barrage of criticisms against the symbols used in the novels. It argues that the use of symbolism demonstrated the urgency of African children literature who were traditionally marginalised in this genre of literature. The section deconstructs the dominant opinion that children's literature attempts to create an illusion of what life is like for those who lived in the African continent. And the last part offers concluding remarks.

**Background to the Novel**

*The African Child* is an autobiographical novel published in 1953. It is largely fictitious work of art that centres on the Malinke tribe of French Guinea beyond Liberia and Serra Leone which is characterised by superstitions that influence the way of life of that community. The Malinke fuse their traditional culture with Islam and they are famous blacksmiths which is why Camara's father owns a forge.

Camara pens about his academic journey from the local Koranic school and French elementary school to Paris where he goes on scholarship to study mechanics. While in France, he feels nostalgic, lonely and alienated as a result of exposure to Whiteman's culture and he gets inspired to write about the Malinke culture, his childhood experiences, challenges and achievements hence "*The African Child*" (1953). In chapter 5, he laments of the loss of these rich African values, he says, "*I too, had my totem, but I no longer remember what it was.*" He further asserts by saying, "*The secret, do we still have secrets?*"

He concludes that what became of him later had its genesis in the tribal education system and this is why he calls himself "*The African child*".

In Chapter I as a young boy in Kouroussa, Laye is exposed to the mysteries of his tribe like the *guiding spirit in the form of a snake which guides his father to prophesy and make trinkets out of gold*. The guiding spirit appears before the father at night and it reveals to him what is to happen the following day and whenever he smelts gold, it is always there to guide him. The mother also has magical powers given the fact that she follows twins and according to the Malinke culture, a child who follows twins is believed to have magical powers. She is capable of performing magic as a way of helping those who may be in trouble. For instance, she commands a horse to rise up when its owners tell her that it is unable to get up and walk. Her *totem is a crocodile* implying that crocodiles do not harm her and that is why she is able to draw water from River Niger at a time when there are many crocodiles ready to attack whoever comes into their vicinity.

Laye further describes an incident with a snake in which he holds a straw for the snake to swallow, gradually allowing the snake's teeth to approach his hand. When he is rebuked for this game, he learns to kill all snakes except one special one—the snake which was his father's '*guiding spirit*' Chapter 1 p.6. As a child, Laye was always dumbfounded at the gaze of this snake; he says

*'He was moving gracefully, very sure of himself, and almost as if conscious of his immunity, his body, black and brilliant, glistened in the harsh light of the sun ... the snake disappeared through this hole'* (p. 6).

Clearly, the belief in magic and supernatural forces is deeply rooted among the Malinke people just like in many African societies, regardless of education, religion, and social class of the people concerned.

According to many Africans, its incidence is even increasing due to social stress and strain caused (among others) by the process of modernisation. Most often, magic and witchcraft accusations work to the disadvantage of the poor and deprived, but under particular circumstances, they become a means of the poor in the struggle against oppression by establishing "*cults of counter-violence*" (Awolalu 1984, 2020, cf. Marwick 1975), argues that magic and witchcraft beliefs have increasingly been instrumentalised for political purposes. (Awolalu 1984, cf. Marwick 1975). Apparently, they lend itself to support any kind of political system, whether despotic or democratic. The belief in occult forces has serious implications for the development of children's literature in Africa too. Firstly, because projects, constituting arenas of strategic groups in their struggle for power and control over resources, are likely to add further social stress to an already endangered precarious balance of power, which makes witchcraft the most problematic aspect of belief. Most renowned African scientists and leaders of Christian churches are convinced that witchcraft constitutes a real threat to society in Africa, Drucker-Brown (1993):539; Kohnert, (1983).

In Chapter II, Laye's discovery continues as a minor, he looks around the father's forge workshop. His father was very resourceful he did different kinds of work and all these fascinates the narrator, especially the skill at smelting gold, aluminium, general sculptor and woodwork curving. He says on page 13, "*This sort of work was always a festival.*"

Clearly, the presence of the praise singers to recite praise songs of Laye's father in order to persuade him to work on a customer's gold and also preserve the rich traditions of his people to keep the memory of the past. He is nostalgic about the revelations of his ancestor's beautiful past! He says;

*"During the gold smelting there were a number of religious rituals to be observed. For example, one had to enter the workshop in a state of complete purity, had to abstain from sex, to wash*

*clean and smear his body with magical substances”* (p. 20).

In the narrator's words, both the praise singer and his father observed these strict rules. They all had to sit with crossed legs, no one was allowed to utter a word. As for Laye's father, his lips kept working perhaps calling upon the spirits to favour the process-magical incantations page 17 he says;

*“The operation that was going on before my eyes was simple, the smelting of gold, but it was something more than that! A magical operation that the guiding spirits could look upon with favour or disfavour.”*

Laye is highlighting that gold smelting was actually a ceremony that broke the monotony of other working days. In the traditional African society, work was done in the form of leisure-enjoyment from which people derived happiness. At the end of the operation, they would celebrate with praise singer tuning Douga- Laye's father would raise and utter a cry in which happiness and triumph were equally mingled.

Reflected in the rhetoric of the narrator, superstition and natural forces are highly infused in the Malinke tribal way of life. The symbols associated with the gold smelting process infused with how his father invoked his lips during and after the gold smelting process have offered critical examinations of different forces in society and how these forces influence societal expectations, norms and values. Certainly, the connotations or meanings associated with his father's work is meant to make us appreciate the value attached to work amongst the traditional African society generally.

In Chapter III, Laye describes his experience at Tindican, a small village to the west of Kouroussa. This is the home of his maternal relatives where his mother was born; wherever he goes there, he is always warmly received by his uncles, he says;

*“I was always delighted to be going there, for they were fond of me...and for my part loved her with all my heart”* (p. 24).

This clearly shows how Africans believed in the extended family system. His grandmother extends personal responsibility of caring for his health and

wellbeing and she would feed him to see if he was something of skin and bones; he says, *“My grandmother would shout, folks here is my little man just arrived”* (p. 28).

Chapter IV Laye takes us back to Tindican, he recalls by saying, *“December always found me at Tindican, this is our dry season, when we have fine weather and harvest our rice”* (p. 37). Here Laye uses the idea of rice harvesting to demonstrate how work was communally done in traditional African society; everyone would participate, he laments; *‘the men would line up at the edge....’*

Work was a form of festival, as they went to harvest rice, the young men would dance, rejoice and sing along the sound of Tom-Tom. People were happy as they worked; he adds that; *“besides each man made it a point of honour to reap as accurately and as swiftly as possible....”* (p. 39).

Work was done in harmony and for the community. Work brought people of all walks of life together in total satisfaction and happiness. Work also had elements of rituals, he says; *“they took great care not to whistle, or pick-up dry wood in the fields, such things brought misfortune to the fields”* (p. 46).

Symbolism as lauded by Hall (1997a), are expressed through the works of representational systems that in diverse forms are depicted through objects, events, words, and human bodies. For the context of this paper, Laye's words are suggestive of a culturally acceptable understanding that Africans depended on their labour efforts to survive; there was no laziness (More especially in the context of the novel).

Chapter V the events in this chapter are unfolded to us at Kouroussa Laye's birthplace the home place of his nuclear family. Also, the home to his paternal family where his father was born. It is at this very place where Laye grows up and it enabled him to have a special relationship to his parents, especially his mother. It is here in Kouroussa where he shares a hut with his mother. Actually, he is the only child who shares a hut with his mother while the others slept in their grandmother's hut. Laye tells us that his mother was kind to everybody; he says: *“I was certainly my mother's chief concern, though she did not show it”* (p. 49).

On the one hand, Laye has great respect and love for his mother and as a child, he avoids annoying her; he says: “*so we would stop our chattering.*”

Laye reveals to us that his mother commanded respect from everyone, partly due to her impressive character but mainly due to the strange powers she possessed. His mother, just like his father, possessed magical powers and believed in supernatural forces. Laye discovers several mysteries performed by the mother: “*I do not wish to say more and I have told you what I saw with my own eyes....*” (p. 56).

Although the first mystery the mother performs is on p. 53, ‘*from my birth I had knowledge of no man until the day of my marriage; and if it be true that from that date...and follow his master quietly*’. Where does all this power come from? She was called Sayon, born immediately after twins and therefore a great magician.

Amongst the Malinke society, culture is made possible by the existence of a communal set of values, customs, mysteries and a shared system for interpreting and communicating diverse lived experiences. This postulation feeds into discourses that ostensibly mirror the African belief in supernatural power dynamics.

In chapter VI Laye goes to school to attend the Whiteman’s education. His father fulfils his responsibility of taking him to school to acquire Whiteman’s knowledge. Laye is still young; this is reflected in his relationship with his friends, they play like children do on their way to school. Laye is friendly and social to his schoolmates; he makes friends and plays with them just as the case was with his little playmates at Tindican, Pg 57 she says, “*why did you pull my hair? She asked.*”

At school, children are taught very interesting and attractive things and they express a thirst for Whiteman’s education he says:

*“Everything we learned was strange and unexpected, it was as if we are learning about life on another planet and we never grew tired of listening.”*

Clearly, from Laye, we note that the children were thirsty for Whiteman’s education. It was a well-organised system of learning; we see children sitting

behind a trained teacher. Children were required to be totally committed to their studies; any mistake attracted a particular punishment. This kind of education ended up with getting a proficiency certificate.

In Chapter VII, the writer describes the mystery of Konden Diara which is a communal circumcision ritual used to initiate boys into men. The African tradition in which Laye grew up had many of these mysteries which were discovered gradually as a person grows up, he laments; “I was growing up, the time had come for me to join the society of the uninitiated” (p. 74).

It involves isolating the initiates in bushy areas for some time where the bigger boys pretend to be lions that roar at night. It is a very challenging experience because he discovers through his own participation after he has gone through it, unlike other mysteries which were taught to him by his father and mother, Laye acknowledges, “*yes, the time had come for me*” (p. 74).

It helps to drive fear out of the boys as they prepare for adult responsibilities. The basic message of Laye as a black writer was that the blacks should re-evaluate their heritage and celebrate rather than hide its African aspects. The primary motivational force of this novel was a reassertion of cultural identity-Nostalgia for a lost past combined with anger at oppression and colonisation. The novelist seeks to return symbolically to the source of his identity and to capture thereby a lost reality.

After the mystery of Koden Diara, Laye now faces the ordeal of circumcision Chapter VIII. It is basically a transition from childhood to manhood. This ordeal causes more physical pain because it involves the cutting of the foreskin of one’s penis, the flow of blood and the healing process. Like Koden Diara, circumcision was a tribal ceremony or custom of the Malinke people. It involved boys who had reached the age of manhood. It too was a public ceremony that involved the participation of the whole community in sharing joy and suffering Laye says (p. 89):

*“I was then in my final scholarship year; I too was among the big boys...but it wasn’t enough simply to be in the big boys class: we had to be big in every sense of the world.”*

Upon receiving the good news of bravery, relatives and friends would gather in the compound and dance the ‘fady-fady’ in his honour which is a dance of manhood and this would be followed by a banquet in honour of the circumcised boy.

Jahnheinz Jahn (1966:553-556) captures this when he says of him that ‘*he did not consider his African childhood as something remote, primitive, something to be ashamed of*’. In this respect, Laye reflects the new affirmations of the négritude movement. He treats Africa with tremendous affection. He does not mock his outgrown superstitions.

Cultural Studies believes that we cannot “read” cultural literature only within the aesthetic realm, rather they must be studied within the social and material perspectives; i.e., a novel must be read not only within the generic conventions and history of the novel but also in terms of its academic field of criticism, language issues related to class, power and ideology situated within the context of “discourse”, Hoggart (1997). Cultural Studies researches often focus on how a particular phenomenon relates to matters of ideology, nationality, ethnicity, social class and gender.

Chapter IX, Laye is now aged 15; he leaves home Kouroussa to Conakry to pursue a course in technical studies at the Ecole Georges Poiret Technical College. This reflects the growing influence of Whiteman’s culture on him as he grows. In as far as his mother is concerned, she extends her responsibility of looking after him even in the strange land she makes provision for Laye by collecting together couscous, meat, fish, yam, rice and potatoes. As for Laye, although he is eager to go for further studies, he nevertheless shares the pain of parting of ways due to a strong relationship and love with his parents. In as far as the father is concerned, he fulfils his responsibility towards his son by giving him a goat’s horn containing talisman, Laye says;

*“I was to wear this horn all the time as a protection against evil spirits”* (p. 114). Although his father was orphaned at the age of 12, he has a strong foresight, he looks deep into the future and encourages his son to go to school in order to seize what he describes as an opportunity, but Laye

himself says; “but I do not want to be a workman, why not? I do not want to be despised” (p. 117).

Chapter X, Laye goes back to Conakry to continue with his studies at the technical college. He finds the school reorganised just as his uncles had told him; this makes him develop a positive attitude about the kind of education he is receiving, he says;

*“I no longer envied the pupils of Camille-guy, I received the same education as they received and in addition a technical and practical training which they did not have”* (p. 130).

Laye is espousing that the graduates from technical education play a leading role in settling inter (within the village) and intra (between villages) community because their education is practical training which the pupils of Camille-guy are not getting.

In this chapter, as Laye grows, he begins to make friends with both boys and girls, but it was one Marie that became close to him, he laments; “*But I was at the age when the heart cannot rest until it has found some object to cherish*” (p. 130).

The point Laye is making here is that the unchallenged cultural construction and definition of women’s bodies by patriarchal politics disguised under Laye-Marie friendship presents negative implications on efforts to bridge gender gaps in African society. Chapter XI Laye introduces us to his friendship with Kouyate and Check Omar he says, “*and I used to complain about it to Kouyate and Check Omar, who at that time was my most intimate friends*” (p. 145).

Apart from love and friendship, we observe that the sense of humanness and care for others cannot go unnoticed. Laye also laments the painful parting with African values when he says, “*we had by now spent too many years at school to have complete faith in them.*”

His emphasis here is to clarify the loss of faith in African education. Chapter XII Laye has successfully completed his studies at the technical college in Conakry, where he is awarded a proficiency certificate. He emerges the best out of the seven candidates who passed. As such he is proud of his success; he says, “*I must confess, a little swollen-headed by my success.*”

To him, he has brought pride and honour to his parents which is why on his return, he receives a hero's welcome from his parents and an enthusiastic crowd that awaited on the road from the railway station to his father's compound.

To what extent did his parents fulfil their responsibility of bringing him up? The responsibility of the parents was to bring him up in the ways of the tribe-African tradition which included moral behaviour, religion and resourcefulness. Yes, his parents succeeded in shaping his moral character; he undergoes all tribal rites. On the other hand, the parents were unsuccessful because they failed to keep him within Africa, they failed to make him as superstitious as they were and they failed in making him a labourer at the forge although he liked menial labour.

### **Presentation of Symbolism from a Literary Stylistics View**

Recent approaches to the linguistic orientation of literary characters see characterisation as a process whereby impressions of fictional people are created in the mind of the reader (Culpeper, 2002). Both top-down and bottom-up processes play a role in characterisation. Top-down processing means that readers bring their knowledge of people in the real world to literary texts and model fictional characters to some extent on real-world examples (Stockwell, 2009). Real-world knowledge interacts with bottom-up processing, whereby text-driven meanings are created during the reading process. Hence, textual cues provide character information and at the same time trigger relevant real-world knowledge. This conceptualisation of characterisation can be seen as part of a more general approach to the understanding of the use of symbolism in texts: any configuration in a literary text that shows features of both literary and non-literary language (Carter, 2004). Even textual examples that are perceived as highly creative need to incorporate some degree of commonly occurring linguistic patterns in order to create meaning for a

reader. For the presentation of character information, this means there will be patterns that do not strike readers as unusual, as well as patterns that draw attention to unusual character features. However, it still seems to be useful to refer to character presentations that are part of the creation of fictional worlds. We use the term "symbolism" here to refer to the use of words, characters, locations, or abstract ideas to represent something beyond their literal meaning (Christine et al., 2017; Carter, 2004, p. 69). Such patterns that are used to create fictional people differ to some extent from patterns used to talk about people in the real world in texts such as newspaper articles or casual conversations.

The symbols we want to concentrate on in the present study are similar to the findings in Mahlberg (2013). For 'symbols' in Camara Laye's *The African Child* the use of words, characters, locations, or abstract ideas represent something beyond their literal meaning (Christine, et-al 2017). Some are not necessarily complete phrases, as illustrated by the word cluster of symbols in the dedication part of the novel: "*Black woman, woman of Africa, O my mother, I am thinking of you.*" Other terms that are used to refer to repeated symbols are, for instance, '*O daman, O my mother*'.

The choice of term is often motivated by the research context and can also entail specific requirements for frequency cut-offs. A detailed discussion of the various symbols is beyond the scope of the present article but can be found in Mahlberg (2013). Symbolism is of interest in literary linguistics because re-occurring sequences of words tend to be associated with linguistic functions in particular types of discourse. *Table 1* shows the frequency of occurrence of '*black woman, woman of Africa...*' across some of the sections in the novel (*The African Child*). The cluster's function of describing the body language of fictional characters is clearly reflected by its distribution across the different sections. Most hits are in '*Fiction and verse*'.

**Table 1: Distribution of black woman, woman of Africa, O my mother, I am thinking of you in children's literature from Africa (CLA)**

Text Type (discourse)	Hits	Frequency per one thousand words
<i>Fiction verse</i>	15	1.5
<i>Non-academic verse and biography</i>	1	0.045
<i>Academic prose</i>	0	0
<i>Spoken conversation</i>	0	0
<i>Newspapers</i>	0	0

In this article, we focus on symbols that are relevant to the presentation of the narrator's culture in the texts and their functions as textual cues for characterisation. Mahlberg (2013) argues that symbols are a body of language presentation functions as a *cliché* of contextualising and highlighting patterns. Patterns that are 'contextualising' present character information in an inconspicuous way as part of a larger textual picture, while patterns with 'highlighting' functions give prominence to character information. Such prominence can be achieved by describing language as habitual, commenting on its significance and/or associating a character with a specific cluster. An example is a symbol;

*"Black woman, woman of Africa, O my mother, let me thank you; thank you for all that you have done for me, your son who, though so far away is still so close to you!" (p. v).*

that is associated with Laye in *The African Child*. When this sequence of words is used for the first time in the opening dedication of the novel, it is part of a description of Laye in which the narrator emphasises features of the outward appearance of his mother and her habitual behaviour:

### (1) When Laye Reminisces,

*O you, Damn, O my mother, you who dried my tears, you who filled my heart with laughter, you who patiently bore me with all my many moods, how I should love to be beside you!*

A change took place in his face that was more remarkable than prepossessing. He went on to express his nostalgia by saying,

*"Woman of great simplicity, woman of great resignation, O my mother, I am thinking of you, in a very kind, innocent and sincere manner, thus*

*projecting the innocence of a child. (Camara Laye, The African Child, V): Black woman, woman of Africa, O my mother, I am thinking of you.*

The above is less text-specific. They occur in Laye's novel in reference to the African orientation and can serve to illustrate different degrees on the contextualising and highlighting cliché.

The symbol; *Black woman, woman of Africa, O my mother, I am thinking of you* illustrates the affectionate relationship between Laye and his mother in *The African child*. Example (2) shows how the symbols specifically refer to Laye. The description of him sitting: *black woman, woman of Africa, O my mother, I am thinking of you.*

It is an external reflection of his thought processes that make him forget the situation around him. In addition to the function of the symbol that is visible in the short example, the fact that the symbol just occurs once describe Laye's affectionate nature.

### (2) Laye reminisces

*O you, Damn, O my mother, you who dried my tears, you who filled my heart with laughter, you who patiently bore me with all my many moods, how I should love to be beside you!*

This shows that Laye is clearly immersed in thought that is far heavier than a child could make for rousing him (Camara Laye, *The African child*, p. v). (1) Thus, it had come about, that the black snake

*was moving gracefully, very sure of himself, and almost as if conscious of his immunity, his body, black and brilliant, glistened in the harsh light of the sun... the snake disappeared through this hole (p. 6).*

This symbol is enough to justify that the Malinke tribe is largely superstitious' – and belief in supernatural powers (Camara Laye, *The African child*, Chapter 1). In example (3), the symbol:

*He was moving gracefully, very sure of himself, and almost as if conscious of his immunity, his body, black and brilliant, glistened in the harsh light of the sun... the snake disappeared through this hole (p. 6).*

Concentrating on the two short extracts alone, examples (2) and (3) are similar in that both the symbols used are a reflection of an attempt to bridge a perceived dichotomy between present-day children's literature and cultural approaches to the literary text. In both examples 2 and 3, Laye is thinking about something. On the other hand, these symbols reflect the intensity of his thought process and Laye's naive nature of his thoughts. The same body language description repeatedly occurs in the symbol

*he was moving gracefully, very sure of himself, and almost as if conscious of his immunity, his body, black and brilliant, glistened in the harsh light of the sun. the snake disappeared through this hole p. 6 occurs 4 times in chapter 2 and 3 and each time refers to the same character. While he was moving gracefully, very sure of himself, and almost as if conscious of his immunity, his body, black and brilliant, glistened in the harsh light of the sun. ... the snake disappeared through this hole p. 6 is associated with the six-year-old Laye, his mother answers.... "my son this one must not be killed: he is not as other snakes and he will not harm you; you must never interfere with him" ...*

On the other hand, this symbol yields not only linguistic elements which are central to any understanding and practice of African culture as well as individuals in context.

With regard to literary stylistics, this is the type of analysis that focuses on literary texts in the broad sense, such a study may be linguistic or non-linguistic, but in the more specialised sense, it is essentially linguistic. The important point to note here is that corpus linguistic findings, as outlined in Mahlberg (2013), show that symbols can reveal patterns of literary stylistic representation that cover

both linguistic and non-linguistic functions. However, in literary criticism, it is typically the body of language patterns with highlighting functions that receive attention. Specifically, for Laye, critics see 'character tags' as a key technique of Laye's creation of characters (Brook, 1970; Paroissien, 2000). Mahlberg (2013) argues that a crucial contribution of the use of symbolism in a text is to bring contextualising patterns of body language to the attention of the analyst too and to stress that body language patterns function on a cliché of contextualising and highlighting functions. Although especially contextualising patterns may not have attracted much attention from the critics, they play an important role in the creation of fictional characters and provide the more general textual building blocks of narrative fiction. They are crucial to the 'literary competence' of the reader in the sense that readers are familiar with typical patterns of presenting body language and can draw on background knowledge of the way in which fictional characters are constructed. For this aspect of literary competence, it is important to take the distribution of contextualising patterns across different texts into account. If patterns are not restricted to a particular text but occur more widely, they are more likely to be encountered by readers and so contribute to building the readers' literary competence.

The use of symbolism in a text are in line with more general findings in literary linguistics. Literary stylistic methods focus on the analyst's attention on repeatedly occurring patterns and thus the functions associated with these patterns. Very frequent or commonly occurring patterns have often been overlooked in language descriptions because they seem to escape the language user's intuition. While the literary stylistic method can reveal patterns and raise questions about the extent to which readers might be aware of such patterns, cultural studies methods actually investigate how real readers perceive any understanding and practice of any culture as well as individuals in context. In this article, we aim to make suggestions towards a methodology for bringing literary stylistics and experimental research together. In the present study, we focus on patterns that occur in "*The African Child*" and that can fulfil an African cultural context.

### Situating “The African child” within the cultural studies perspectives

Cultural studies theory assumes that every work is a product of the historic moment that created it. Specifically, cultural studies is

*“...a practice that has developed out of contemporary theory, particularly the structuralist realisation that all human systems are symbolic and subject to the rules of language, and the deconstructive realisation that there is no way of positioning oneself as an observer outside the closed circle of textuality”* (Richter 1997).

A helpful way of considering cultural theory, Tyson explains, is to think about the retelling of history itself: “...questions asked by the culturalist’s are; ‘What happened?’ and ‘What does the event tell us about history?’, ‘How has the event been interpreted?’ and ‘What do the interpretations tell us about the interpreters?’” (278). So cultural theory resists the notion that “...history is a series of events that have a linear, causal relationship: event A caused event B; event B caused event C; and so on” (Tyson 278).

The cultural theory does not believe that we can look at history objectively, but rather that we interpret events as products of our time and culture and that “...we don’t have clear access to any but the most basic facts of history...our understanding of what such facts mean...is...strictly a matter of interpretation, not fact” (279). Moreover, the cultural theory holds the view that we are hopelessly subjective interpreters of what we observe.

Harold (1989: 14), introducing an anthology of essays, *Cultural Theory*, noted some key assumptions that continually reappear in cultural theory studies are such as;

- How are events’ interpretation and presentation a product of the culture of the author?
- Does the work’s presentation support or condemn the event?
- Can it be seen to do both?
- How does this portrayal criticise the leading political figures or movements of the day?
- How does the literary text function as part of a continuum with other historical/cultural texts from the same period?
- How can we use a literary work to “map” the interplay of both traditional and subversive discourses circulating in the culture in which that work emerged and/or the cultures in which the work has been interpreted?
- How does the work consider traditionally marginalised populations?

Cultural materialism shares many of the same theories as with what is often called New historicism, but cultural materialist critics are even more likely to put emphasis on the present implications of their study and to position themselves in disagreement to current power structures, working to give power to traditionally disadvantaged groups. Cultural critics also downplay the distinction between “high” and “low” culture and often focus predominantly on the productions of “popular culture” (Newton 1988). New historicists analyse text with an eye to history. With this in mind, new historicism is not “new”. Many of the critiques that existed between the 1920s and the 1950s also focused on literature’s historical content. These critics based their assumptions of literature on the connection between texts and their historical contexts.

Cultural studies are influenced by structuralist and post-structuralist theories, which seeks to reconnect a work with the time period in which it was produced and identify it with the cultural and political movements of the time (Michel Foucault’s concept of *épistème*). New Historicism assumes that every work is a product of the historic moment that created it. Specifically, New Historicism is “...a practice that has developed out of contemporary

theory, particularly the structuralist realisation that all human systems are symbolic and subject to the rules of language, and the deconstructive realisation that there is no way of positioning oneself as an observer outside the closed circle of textuality” (Richter 1997).

New historicism has been a hugely influential approach to literature, especially in studies of literature of the Early Modern period and contemporary African literature in general. It began in earnest in 1980 and quickly supplanted new criticism as the new orthodoxy in early modern studies. Despite many attacks from feminists, cultural materialists, and traditional scholars, it dominated the study of early modern literature in the 1980s and 1990s. Arguably, since then, it has given way to a different, more materialist form of historicism that some call “new historicism.” There have also been variants of “new historicism” in other periods of the discipline, most notably the romantic period, but its stronghold has always remained in the Renaissance. At its core, new historicism insists—contra formalism—that literature must be understood in its historical context. This is because it views literary texts as cultural products that are rooted in their time and place, not works of individual genius that transcend them. New-historicist essays are thus often marked by making seemingly unlikely linkages between various cultural products and literary texts. Its “newness” is at once an echo of the New Criticism it replaced and a recognition of an “old” historicism, often exemplified by E. M. W. Tillyard, against which it defines itself. In its earliest iteration, new historicism was primarily a method of power analysis strongly influenced by the anthropological studies of Clifford Geertz, modes of torture and punishment described by Michel Foucault, and methods of ideological control outlined by Louis Althusser. This can be seen most visibly in the new-historicist work of the early 1980s. These works came to view the Tudor and early Stuart states as being almost insurmountable absolutist monarchies in which the scope of individual agency or political subversion appeared remote. This version of new historicism is frequently, and erroneously, taken to represent its entire enterprise. Stephen Greenblatt argued that power often produces its own subversive elements in order to contain it—and so what appears to be subversion is actually the final

victory of containment. This became known as the hard version of the containment thesis, and it was attacked and critiqued by many commentators as leaving too little room for the possibility of real change or agency. This was the major departure point of the cultural materialists, who sought a more dynamic model of culture that afforded greater opportunities for dissidence. Later new-historicist studies sought to complicate the hard version of the containment thesis to facilitate a more flexible, heterogeneous, and dynamic view of culture.

Owing to its success, there has been no shortage of textbooks and anthology entries on new historicism, but it has often had to share space with British cultural materialism, a school that, though related, has an entirely distinct theoretical and methodological genesis. The consequence of this dual treatment has resulted in a somewhat caricatured view of both approaches along the axis of subversion and containment, with new historicism representing the latter. While there is some truth to this shorthand account, any sustained engagement with new-historicist studies will reveal its limitations. Readers should be aware, therefore, that while accounts that contrast new historicism with cultural materialism, for example can be illuminating, they can also by the terms of that contrast tend to oversimplify (Dollimore, 1990). Be aware also that because new historicism has been a controversial development in the field, accounts are seldom entirely neutral. Mullaney 1996, for example, was written by a new historicist, while Parvini 2012, was written by an author who has been strongly critical of the approach.

We want to argue that the use of common phrases as well as the creation of patterns that are specific to a literary text play an important role in the reading experience and the kind of literary meanings created in the reader’s mind. There seem to be several possible explanations for the relevance of repeated phrases in the presentation of character information. One of the issues in the interpretation of textual cues is whether the information presented may add to a permanent feature of a character or relates to situational features that are of lesser importance to characterisation. Patterns may describe habitual behaviour because they repeatedly occur in a specific text to describe one and the same character, but there are also literary patterns of character

presentation that refer to more general features of fictional people. They are 'repeated' in the sense that they occur across a number of literary texts and thus are part of the reader's literary competence. Such patterns can also add to creating vivid fictional characters with recognisable habits. In corpus linguistic literature, the point has been made that language users are insufficiently aware of quantitative properties of the language, e.g. ((Biber et al., 2004:3). Thus, there is a question about whether readers are consciously, or even unconsciously, aware of repeated patterns. More specifically, there are questions about the extent to which repeated patterns lead to readers' impressions of a character and how these patterns work together with readers' knowledge of real people and fictional characters more generally.

New historicism and cultural materialism are engaged in the process of renewing our images of the past, of revisiting the past. They carry out this work to different ends: new historicism aims to show that each era or period has its own conceptual and ideological frameworks, that people of the past did not understand concepts like 'the individual', 'God', 'reality' or 'gender' in the same way that we do now; cultural materialism aims to show that our political and ideological systems manipulate images and texts of the past to serve their own interests and that these images and texts can be interpreted from alternative and radically different perspectives, often constructed by placing those images or texts in their historical contexts. I want to argue in this chapter that both new historicism and cultural materialism are concerned from the beginning with the concept of 'difference', both historical and cultural difference and that this concept becomes important in explaining how both critical practices have changed in recent years. In the 1980s, both were interested in stressing the extent to which the past differs from contemporary uses of the past, the extent to which the past is alien or 'other' to our own modern episteme, and, borrowing from Foucault and Geertz, new historicists and cultural materialists were at the same time aware of the structural similarities between this historical difference and the cultural differences being emphasised by postcolonial critics, feminists, gay theorists and race theorists. A shift can be detected in new historicist and cultural materialist work, then, which began by examining historical difference primarily and has

moved closer towards the examination of differences in race, class, sexuality, gender and nationality.

This shift is, in one sense, more pronounced in new historicism than in cultural materialism, in that cultural materialism claimed from the beginning to have feminist, Marxist and anti-colonial politics on its critical agenda, whereas new historicism, although acknowledging Marxist 'roots', also steered a course between and away from overt political positions. In recent times, as I will argue later, new historicist critics seem to be working in fields of study more usually known as feminism, postcolonial studies and queer theory. Here, critics utilise the notion of cultural difference in order to critique the liberal humanist discourse which employs the rhetoric of sameness, universality and common sense to conceal the way in which discriminatory and oppressive power structures are perpetuated and maintained. Jean Howard allows us to see that the recent use of the cultural difference in this way is related to the earlier use of historical difference: By and large new historicists produce new readings of canonised texts, though in doing so they lay those texts beside a host of 'non-literary' texts to show how tightly what we call the literary is bound up with common ideologies and discourses of its historical moment of production. And one goal of this work is to make a certain kind of difference visible: i.e., historical difference, to take texts we have used to tell the story of an unchanging human nature and to suggest that the story is more complicated, that sexuality, the self, the polis may have meant something different then from what they mean now, though we can never grasp that difference in an unmediated 'objective' fashion. (Howard 1991, 153).

What is made clear in the Nietzschean and Foucauldian analyses undertaken by new historicist critics is that concepts like 'objectivity', 'universality' and 'common sense' are used to legitimate authority and power, that all claims to common truth are claims to power. Even the act of writing a book that explains, criticises and demonstrates a theory or critical practice is a claim to knowledge which in turn is a claim to power, a claim to have sufficient mastery of a subject to warrant a degree of authority and even the act of reading and learning.

## METHODS

This study adopted a descriptive design in an effort to ensure that the evidence obtained enables the empirical establishment of the ways in which child characteristics are represented in *'The African child'* fiction. The subject matter of each text is described, as well as the character traits of the protagonists, and the different narrative techniques each writer uses to portray particular issues that this paper explores, viz-a-viz, the construction of children's characters' identity; the power dynamics depicted work of Laye; and young people's vulnerability. In using this design, we were guided by the study objectives and the questions in order to give the details of what happens in the fictional works, not just in terms of the plotline but also the key issues relating to child identities that the authors are interested in exploring.

We used close reading as my major data collection method. I read and re-read the text deeply to understand what its words, sentences, and paragraphs mean in relation to the key issues that we are exploring in this article. We did this with the wider context within which each work is written – be it cultural, social, economic or political – in mind because there is a direct link between subject matter and context. We paid careful attention to the actions of the characters in the texts, be it verbal, non-verbal, emotional or mental, and the attributes or traits the narrator has. This is because writers use characters as the vehicles through which they convey their message. We also paid careful attention to the genre we are working in (fiction, mostly the novel form and a few short stories), and the narrative techniques the authors deploy in their work, and how they enable the text to generate its meanings and effects. Furthermore, we closely read secondary sources – both print and electronic – written on the works that we are focusing on, and on other subjects that are related to this study, for instance, identity, subjectivity, power, and sexuality in order to enrich the interpretation of the paper.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our findings indicate that there are language clusters that are read faster than other parts of the text, which suggests that these clusters are (part of) sequences that readers store as units in long-term memory. Against the background of research in

psycholinguistics and corpus linguistics, this suggests that such body language clusters are part of readers' literary competence that is built up through exposure to a number of literary texts. The results of the follow-up questions that used different degrees of biased prompts further suggest that the clusters receive less attention when reading because body language is not perceived as the most important information in the extract. Even if readers are able to remember body language when prompted, they rarely mention it in the description of characters, which is in line with the contextualising functions of the patterns. Part of the contextualising functions of the patterns is also that the meaning of the body language is mutually dependent on the context in which it occurs.

Together these findings make an important contribution to the discussion of the concept of literariness. Although narrative fiction creates fictional worlds that are different from the real world, there is a set of patterns that function as building blocks of fictional texts and that create a background against which the more specific characteristics of a fictional world are set. Although these characteristic features tend to receive the main conscious attention of readers, the less noticeable patterns can also be identified. So far, these patterns have mainly been discussed on the basis of corpus findings. By linking corpus findings with psycholinguistic data, there is further support for the patterns as relevant textual units.

In the present article, the focus is on patterns that can function as contextualising. To investigate the relationship between contextualising and highlighting, future work needs to look at the use of patterns across the same text. If a particular sequence of words repeatedly occurs in a text, these words should become associated with the reader's long-term memory. Thus, readers could represent very specific sequences of words, which occur several times in a single text, in long-term memory. We would expect to see evidence of this in reading times, such that over the course of reading a text, comprehending should become faster at reading the frequent sequences. Another point for future work is to investigate the effect of previous knowledge of the book or film. In the present study, there were only a few participants who actually had read the book/seen the film. When we analysed their results

separately, they did not pattern significantly, so we need to collect more data to be able to make any claims in this regard.

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