Voicing Oppression: A Rhetorical Reading of Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s Devil on the Cross

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Abstract
This essay focuses on how taking a rhetorical approach to Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Devil on the Cross* facilitates both the understanding of its theme of oppression and its stylistic peculiarities. Content and form are intricately linked and in order to wholly understand the text, attention must be drawn to how it is written, why it was written and the effect of this composition. Lloyd Bitzer’s concept of the rhetorical situation is used as a framework for my discussion to further highlight the impact of rhetoric on the text and the fact that it is equally important that *Devil on the Cross* is read as a rhetorical as much as literary text. The rhetorical situation of the novel is the neo-colonial situation in the Kenyan society and the oppression of the marginalised masses at the hands of foreign multinational conglomerates and the Kenyan bourgeoisie. This paper shows that both the theme of oppression as well as the stylistical peculiarities in the novel is best understood in the light of a rhetorical reading. When examining the theme, one can detect how the situation of the poor is outlined according to a rhetorical model to invoke change and that the novel is directed both to listeners and readers. Stylistic features such as repetition, the creation of characters as types, and the use of the burlesque all make sense since the text operates on a level where memory support is crucial in order for a listener to collect the information given. At the same time, the text is directed towards a reading audience familiar with Western literary techniques. This paper further points to that in order to grasp the novel, emphasis must be placed on the importance of there being multiple audiences and that the best way to reach this comprehension and insight is through a rhetorical reading.
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Introduction
Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Devil on the Cross* (1982) features the forces of oppression in a corrupt, capitalist Kenyan society in the 1970s where independence is not the right to think freely but “the sound of money in one’s pocket” (Ngugi, *DC*, 37). Kenya gained its independence in 1963 and as depicted in the novel, the country continues to struggle under the yoke of neo-colonialism where profit has substituted moral values and where disillusionment reigns as a product of broken promises and where Kenya is still governed covertly by foreign interests where the national bourgeoisie function both as tormentors of the poor and as mere puppets to the former rulers of their country. Both the oppressed and the oppressors are targeted in this novel and the former are forced to face their own acquiescence to their suffering, in determining whether to act or perish.

Oppression as a concept might seem hard to characterise but at the same time it is easily recognisable. At the core, oppression deals with injustices of varying degrees and these might be suffered by individuals alone but more often by social groups. Ann E. Cudd characterises oppression as being systematically executed and group based (136). Thus, it is a long-term condition inherent in social institutions and practices. The upheaval of oppression cannot be a momentary event but must, just like the workings of oppression, become a long-term process initialised and maintained by many.

The theme of oppression is straightforwardly handled in the novel, and to a non-critical reader the novel might stand forth as mere pamphleteering and written propaganda. Sam A. Adewoye writes in his essay “The Strength of the Rhetoric of Oral Tradition in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Devil on the Cross*” that “more attention has been paid to what the African novelist says than to how he says it” (Booker, 387) and I disagree to some extent. To begin with, not much attention has been directed to the novel at all and the criticism directed focuses on *either* the way the novel is written *or* what is written. Thus, Adewoye does have a point when stating that *how* the African novelist says things must be regarded. However, I believe one needs to combine the outlook and examine *what* is written, *how* it is written and *why* it is written the way it is in order to understand the text properly and in this respect there is still much to be said about the novel.
Since Ngugi’s novel is an African novel it must be dealt with accordingly. M. Keith Booker discusses the problems a Western reader of an African novel might need to confront and since I am a Western reader I felt it necessary to discuss this briefly. According to Booker it is one thing to acknowledge that the African novel is a hybridised art form containing both African and European literary features and another to resist leaning too far in one direction or the other (7). I will make an earnest attempt not to stride more to one side than the other. I do not look upon Ngugi’s work as exotic and neither do I neglect the significant ways in which the African novel differs from the European. Before proceeding, I must pinpoint one important aspect concerning the hybridised form. Not only is it hybridised in the sense of containing both African and European literary features but also in the way it combines two distinct literary traditions, the oral and the written. In order to approach the novel efficiently and unbiased, knowledge about the African aesthetics needs to be gained in order to avoid thinking of them as “a flawed version of European aesthetics – or as no aesthetics at all” (Booker, 5). Thus, the African novel should not be judged according to European literary conventions.

Art does not function as mere decoration in the hands of Ngugi, nothing in his novel is composed from the outlook of conforming to some aesthetic conventions. The purpose of his writing is superior to the aesthetics of his work as I will discuss in greater detail below and as Achebe once suggested, “art for art’s sake is just another piece of deodorised dogshit” (Booker, 6). The form of the novel is complex and in order to understand why the novel is written the way it is, the rhetorical strategies in it must be considered. If the rhetorical features of the novel have been dealt with by some critics, none has dealt with the rhetorical situation of the text. That is, no critic has made it her or his principal concern to study from what context the text originates. The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate how taking a rhetorical approach to the text will facilitate both the understanding of its theme of oppression and its stylistic peculiarities. Content and form are intricately linked in Devil on the Cross and in order to wholly understand it, attention must be drawn to how it is written, why it was written and the effect of this composition. I will use Lloyd Bitzer’s concept of the rhetorical situation as a framework for my discussion to further highlight the impact of rhetoric on the text and
the fact that it is equally important that Devil on the Cross is read as a rhetorical as much as literary text.
A Rhetorical Reading of Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Devil on the Cross*

1. The Rhetorical Situation and Its Application to Literary Texts

The rhetorical situation is the context in which a work of literature or art has been produced and it is a subject in rhetorical studies developed by Lloyd Bitzer in the 1960s. According to Bitzer, all discourses, whether oral or written, originate in a certain situation. The discourses can be regarded as answers to a given situation with the function “to produce action or change in the world” (Bitzer, 4). Thus, they perform a task. The rhetorical situation not only stipulates what will be composed but also how it will be composed and for whom. Inherent in it is the audience which is created by the author or speaker and ultimately comes into being by being addressed. Bitzer writes that “the situation controls the rhetorical response in the same sense that the question controls the answer and the problem controls the solution” (Bitzer, 6). Attention must be directed to the situation at hand, it is not the speaker or the writer who determines how the speech or written text will be structured but the situation.

Richard E. Vatz, critiques Bitzer’s theory in his “The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation”. He argues that “[n]o situation can have a nature independent of the perception of its interpreter or independent of the rhetoric with which he [the rhetor] chooses to characterize it” (Vatz, 154). Thus, the situation does not create rhetoric, rather there is an interdependence between the situation and the perspective applied (rhetoric). Bitzer’s view of all discourses originating in certain situations which further stipulate how the discourse will be composed is thus challenged by Vatz. In contrast to Bitzer’s view of the speaker or writer merely creating discourses produced by given situations, Vatz holds that all facts and events communicated are choices made by the speaker or the writer (156).

All discourses are communication and therefore Vatz’s position is crucial. When communicating, the sender chooses what to communicate and also in what mode and then the receiver interprets the message when delivered.¹ The sender can never be free from responsibility of what he or she communicates and the same goes for

¹ The basic communication model of  Sender (A) → Message → Receiver B. A lives in A’s reality and interprets a situation which is to be transmitted to the intended B who lives in B’s reality and interprets the message. From A to B the message might have changed due to different realities and interpretations. For further info see http://www.worldtrans.org/TP/TP1/TP1-17.HTML, 2010-11-09
literature. Although Vatz’s critique is theoretically valid – rhetoric does contribute to create situations – Bitzer’s theory is still useful in practice.¹

The rhetorical situation of Devil on the Cross is the neo-colonial situation in the Kenyan society and the oppression of the marginalised masses at the hands of foreign multinational conglomerates and the Kenyan bourgeoisie. The situation is an interpretation by Ngugi and it is created in his novel and the best mode to convey his purpose is by the use of rhetorical strategies. Therefore, it is not surprising that the novel might appear as didactic and in some cases propagandistic. The purpose is to urge the oppressed masses of Kenya towards a revolution by developing an awareness of the inequalities under which they suffer (Cook and Okenimpke, 268) and to restructure their society. Cook and Okenimpke state that for Ngugi’s country (or any country) to move forward, “the people must shake off apathy imposed by terror and act under a communal leadership that springs from themselves” (Cook and Okenimpke, 274).

Rhetoric is often applied to other discourses than literature but I believe that it is useful to use it on literature as well. The purpose of Devil on the Cross can be argued to be the same as any given speech or non-fictive text making use of rhetoric: to make a change and to convince an audience of the salience of the message conveyed. Rhetoric is the study of “writing or speaking as a means of communication and persuasion”³ and it is used by those who seek to inform or persuade, which is the case with Ngugi’s novel, according to me. Consequently, it is plausible to call a writer a rhetor since he or she works with the same goal in mind: to create a discourse in order to make a change and not only to amuse. Ngugi himself wrote Devil on the Cross while he was detained in Kamiti Maximum Security Prison. The reason for his arrest was his writing being too controversial according to the Kenyan government and he was detained without a trial in 1977 (Hawley, 320). The fact that he was held in a maximum security prison clearly indicates that his rhetorical product actually performed its task: it invoked a change and it was considered as dangerous to some extent since even today, Ngugi is unable to return to his native country.

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¹ Working out the theoretical complications of the Bitzer-Vatz debate is beyond the ken of this essay, but has been addressed by several scholars. See, e.g. Magnus Ullén’s “Politikern som politikerförfattare. Thomas Bodströms Rymmaren och den retoriska situationen” in TFL 2009:2.

³ “Rhetoric”, Encyclopaedia Britannica Online
Before proceeding, I feel the necessity of explaining the relation between the rhetorical situation and history. The rhetorical situation in the novel is linked to the real situation in Kenya during the 1970s. However, the account of it must be regarded as a reconstruction made by Ngugi and in order to appreciate the novel, some knowledge of the sociohistorical context is required but only for it to serve its purpose of invoking change. The rhetorical situation in the novel should not be confused with the actual situation in Kenya during the time in which the novel was created. The rhetorical situation is created in the novel by Ngugi, as a response to or a product of the historical situation in Kenya. My main focus is to examine how taking a rhetorical approach to the novel facilitates the understanding of it and I will not perform a close examination of the relation between the rhetorical situation and history since that is not my main concern.

2. Exploitation and Oppression: The Nexus of the Novel
The exigence in Bitzer’s terms is “an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be” (Bitzer, 6), in other words, something that needs to be altered. He also points out that not all exigences are rhetorical, meaning that if it cannot be modified it is not rhetorical. For instance, such phenomena as death, winter or similar things can only be altered by other means than discourse. Ultimately, a rhetorical exigence is something that can be altered by discourse to produce for instance public awareness and action (Bitzer, 6). Taking Vatz’s position, the exigence does not invite utterance (159) but rather, the exigence is created, in a way, by the utterance. That is, the rhetor has chosen in what way to portray the exigence and thus the text creates or shapes the depiction of the exigence. Again, it all goes back to the question of meaning. Bitzer implies that meaning is discovered in situations whereas Vatz suggests that meaning is something that is created. Since language and meaning is created by people it is always subject to interpretation and not inherent in a situation.

In Devil on the Cross the exigence is also the theme of the novel: the situation of the poor in neo-colonial Kenya and their suffering from oppression. The exigence can ultimately be said to have been created by Ngugi since he has chosen how to deliver it, or rather, the mode in which to convey it. He sets out to arouse a public
awareness of the situation at hand and to call the marginalised masses to act against their oppressors and to modify their oppressed situation. He needs the masses to realise that they do have the power to alter their future and he does this through his novel. Ngugi writes in his *Writers in Politics* that there is a link between writers and politics, that “[l]iterature and writers cannot be exempted from the battlefield” (Ngugi, *WP*, 68). Just as it is with different readers reading the same text, their appreciation of it will differ since they come from different backgrounds and they have been shaped by their different contexts and situations, which ultimately will affect their reading. It is exactly the same with authors. They write with all their experiences in their backbones and like all humans they are part of society. Ngugi mentions the Angolan writer Agostinho Neto who accordingly meant that the gun, the pen and the platform all served the same ends (Ngugi, *WP*, 69). The parallel between the gun and the pen can be directly linked to *Devil on the Cross* where Wariinga, the female protagonist, finally stands up to her tormentor and kills him with a gun. Thus the gun and the pen *are* power and instruments to make a change.

Ngugi has chosen to depict the exigence in a specific way in his novel where oppression is hierarchically constructed and carried out on different levels in society. I will briefly outline this structure in order to give a clear view of the pressing matter of the novel. At the top of the hierarchy the former colonisers rule. They still exert control over the country, but in the guise of foreign businessmen. The ruled ones in this case are the Kenyans. However, one social class within society has a double position and it is the national bourgeoisie. They act as rulers of the poor classes of Kenya and at the same time they are themselves ruled by the foreigners. Ngugi uses the terms master and slave in his discourse, and at the cave in Illmorog at the Devil’s Feast, the Master of Ceremonies gives an opening speech before the contest begins. He refers back to when “the master”, the imperialist, foresaw that the day would come when he no longer could remain in his occupied country (Ngugi, *DC*, 82). When leaving, the master “was much troubled in his heart, trying to determine ways of protecting all the property he had accumulated in that country and also ways of maintaining his rule over the natives by other means” (Ngugi, *DC*, 82). What he came up with was neo-colonial rule so that he could go back to his own country, exiting through the front door and still being able to return through the backdoor as a foreign businessman.
Neo-colonialism signifies the continuing economic control over a once colonised territory under “the guise of political independence” (Boehmer, 22) and the Master of Ceremonies reckons this as well when he confesses that he has returned the key to the country but still controls it; that is, Kenya is only independent on paper. In the novel it is further depicted how multinational companies govern Kenya, and this form of “new imperialism” is more insidious (and less overt) than the one enacted earlier (Boehmer, 22). Since the Kenyan economy allegedly is governed by external forces, it is of great importance for the former masters who inherited the top positions in the Kenyan society to ensure that the master’s interests were kept and the vacated seats were filled with Westernised Kenyans from the national bourgeoisie.

At the second layer of the hierarchy the foreigners have influenced the mindsets of their replacements, and this system was established during colonial rule: the system of a hegemonic construction of society, which basically means “domination by consent” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, 116). The ruling class dominates the economy and the state apparatus of society such as education and the media. The views and interests of the ruling class are presented as the interest of the entire society and are ultimately taken for granted. This is not done by force but by changing the mindsets of the ruled classes, making them believe that what they have been served is the truth, the way it should be. The hegemonic notion of the greater good is often couched in terms of “social order, stability and advancement, all of which are defined by the colonising power” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, 116). Then of course the ruling class could make use of the police and military when needed, but this form of domination is more insidious since when you hear something often enough you start to believe it. Consequently, the hegemonic structure of Kenyan society leads to mimicry where the rulers decide and form their subjects and the structure of society, maintaining the former colonisers’ state of rule. The vacant positions after independence were seated by mimics, upper class Kenyans who had been moulded by their former masters in how to govern the society to benefit the foreigners and their business corporations. Thus, the ruling elite of Kenya mimic their former masters in how to govern their country and ultimately prolong colonialism.

In the novel, Ngugi clearly takes the position that the upper class Kenyans are not free from blame. The critique of the national bourgeoisie is severe at times and it is
stated that “[a]ping others cost the frog its buttocks” (Ngugi, DC, 11). At first one might think that the upper class Kenyans are not aware of their double position in society as both oppressors and oppressed, that they might only realise their position of power as rulers of the country. However, this is not the case, they are aware of their position, and what is sad or worrying in this situation is that they accept being inferior subjects to the foreigners. Franz Fanon writes in his The Wretched of the Earth that the national bourgeoisie “has done nothing else but prolong the heritage of the colonial economy, thinking and institutions” (Fanon, 120). This is depicted in Devil on the Cross, in Wariinga’s dream about the crucifixion of the Devil who was brought down from the cross by upper class Kenyans:

Instead of Jesus on the Cross, she would see the Devil, with skin as white as that of a very fat European she once saw near the Rift Valley Sports Club, being crucified by people in tattered clothes […] and after three days, when he was in the throes of death, he would be taken down from the Cross by black people in suits and ties, and, thus restored to life, he would mock Wariinga. (Ngugi, DC, 139)

The upper class Kenyans still obey their former oppressor and in a way worship him. This is seen in the way Ngugi has chosen to depict the resurrection of the Devil by the Kenyan capitalists. Thus, they are satisfied with eating crumbs and leftovers when their oppressors sate themselves on choice dishes (Ngugi, DC, 82). By acceptance they embrace their servitude.

The peasants and workers are oppressed by both foreigners and the national bourgeoisie in Kenya. They are used as tools for accumulating wealth abroad. They are “the pot that cooks but never tastes the food” (Ngugi, DC, 208). However, one part of this group has a double position as oppressors as well, and those are the men. At the bottom of this hierarchy we have the women and they suffer from a threefold oppression. They are oppressed as colonial subjects and by patriarchal power structures; both by foreigners and by Kenyans. In Devil on the Cross women are objectified. They are used by the thieves and robbers at the cave to display wealth and they have no human value but rather a sign-exchange value (Tyson, 58). One example of this is how Wariinga was sold to the Rich Old Man by her uncle to settle a debt (Ngugi, DC, 142).
Further, it is depicted how foreign men consider the Kenyan women as exotic objects; they can travel to Kenya and “look for sexual experiences unobtainable in Europe (Said, 190). The inferior position of women is also made visible in the tales told by Wangari and Wariinga of how they failed to find a job since they refused to “spread their legs in the market of love” (Ngugi, DC, 218).

There has been some critique directed towards Ngugi concerning how he portrays the oppression of women in the broader perspective of national independence and international influence, which deals mainly with the fact that he reduces the oppression of women to a matter of class only, not directing any attention to patriarchal issues (Ogude, 125). Considering the scope of my essay I cannot embark on such a discussion. Suffice it to say that women are the most oppressed group within the Kenyan society and as I have demonstrated above, oppression multiplies the further down the hierarchy one moves.

Now I have outlined the exigence of Ngugi’s novel and no matter which position one takes, Bitzer’s or Vatz’s, one thing is evident: Ngugi sets out to invoke a change, to raise awareness among the masses. As a writer he does not write to merely entertain his audience, but also “to change society for the better”4 (Sander and Lindfors, 23) and he does this by the use of rhetoric. However, Bitzer’s view of the exigence determining the answer can be contested since in the novel it is clear that meaning is created. The situation described in the novel is created by Ngugi, by his choice of words and his choice of how to structure the content of his novel.

3. Awakening the Masses: Rhetorical Strategies as a Means of Enlightenment
According to Bitzer, each rhetorical situation contains a set of constraints which have the power to constrain the decision and action needed to modify the exigence (8). Standard sources of constraints include “beliefs, attitudes, documents, facts, traditions, images, interests, motives and the like” (Bitzer, 8). Vatz emphasises the responsibility of the rhetor (158) and to explain constraints further one might say that they are circumstances or issues that may alter the rhetor’s view of the exigence at hand. Certainly, there are some constraints that the rhetor needs to address in order to ensure the audience that he or she is aware of them. Also, the rhetor needs to address them in

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4 Excerpt from a discussion between Ngugi wa Thiong’o, John Nagenda and Robert Serumaga in 1966.
order to eventually overcome and deconstruct the power of these same constraints. I will now discuss some of the constraints Ngugi faces in his discourse, and in addition I will also discuss how he has modified them to serve his own purpose.

Beginning with Ngugi himself, he has shifted from writing in English into writing in his mother tongue and this can be seen as a strategy to not only gain credibility but more importantly to reach his intended audience in their language. He also faces some difficulties since he is writing from a position of the intellectual elite which he has solved by showing, in my view, that he has positioned himself on the side of the oppressed by writing in Gikuyu and not in English. He distances himself from the intellectuals who fail to act, like Gatuiria does in the novel, since he acts by writing and opposing the situation in Kenya.

The constraints that cannot be linked to the rhetor and which are often operative in society are called “the inartistic proofs” (Bitzer, 8) in Aristotle’s terms. In Ngugi’s novel several can be detected. Starting with the governmental institutions in society, the oppressive role of the capitalist is a strong constraint on the discourse. The foreign tycoons and their local representatives exploit the peasants and workers and they even control the police and military, leaving no exit or help to the poor. In the novel, Wariinga was evicted from her apartment and threatened by thugs that if she were to contact the authorities they would issue her “with a single ticket to God’s kingdom or Satan’s – a one-way ticket to Heaven or Hell” (Ngugi, DC, 10). Another example is how Wangari was imprisoned for vagrancy in Nairobi and was made to aid the police in locating the real thieves and robbers in Illmorog. However, when the police arrived the Master of Ceremonies glared at Superintendent Gakono who started to apologise for having disrupted the gathering at the cave (Ngugi, DC, 197). It is evident that the government and the legislative body are in the hands of the oppressors. Even politics is a corrupt system where the one who has the greatest capital and makes the most threats ‘wins’ a position; there are no fair elections.

As I have touched on before, the hegemonic construction of society leads to a set of constraints that includes social institutions as well as values. These constraints are not that easy to make visible but Ngugi, as a skilled rhetor, has managed to do it. Cultural imperialism or Eurocentrism is portrayed in the social context depicted in the novel where the Western culture is promoted as superior and something to aspire
for whereas the indigenous culture is portrayed as inferior and primitive. Ashcroft et al writes that Eurocentrism is “[t]he conscious or unconscious process by which Europe and European cultural assumptions are constructed as, or assumed to be, the normal, the natural or the universal” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, 90-1). It is constructed in such a way that it will not be questioned whether it is wrong or not. This is why, in the novel, the poor masses may seem to acquiesce to their oppressed position. They have been fed and brainwashed into believing that their position, as inferior to European standards, is their only choice. In the novel, Wariinga tries to change her appearance in the beginning of the novel since she was convinced that it was “the root cause of all her problems” (Ngugi, DC, 11). Gatuiria’s parents also “cover themselves in the robes of foreign customs at all times, equating European culture with the culture of God” (Ngugi, DC, 236). The belief promoted by the oppressors of the superiority of European culture and customs began of course during the colonial era but has continued after it ended. The indigenous culture has been diminished and suppressed as something for the poor and uneducated. European names are also valued and used as a sign of progress. Those in society who possess a foreign name are those who have assimilated the foreign culture and this is most often done through education. Gaturia is the character aligned with the educated elite and he describes how, at the University of Nairobi, the Professor of History only knows European history (Ngugi, DC, 59). The promotion of European customs and values is a constraint on the rhetorical situation since the oppressed masses must be made aware of how they have been indoctrinated into believing that they are in fact inferior. Thus, in order for the rhetor to be able to provoke a change he must confront this matter, which he successfully does.

The fact that the upper educational system focuses on European schooling results in a promotion of English as the proper language to use and many educated Kenyans “stutter like babies” (Ngugi, DC, 56) when speaking their mother tongue but speaks fluently in English. Gatuiria is ambivalent in his choice of which language to use, making his speech almost intelligible: “Even mine… I mean, mine also, forget it – sorry, I mean…” (Ngugi, DC, 38). The national bourgeoisie want their children to acquire English as their mother tongue. In the testimony of Kihaahu wa Gatheeca it is made clear how attractive English speaking nurseries are. The rich want to send their children to nurseries where they can learn proper English and the pronunciation is of
great importance, the more you sound like a native speaker of English the higher your status. Cultural imperialism is insidious since it changes the native culture from within. Since the educated elite are the ones who voluntarily or not, pass on the notion of European values as superior and who incorporate the foreign culture suppressing their own, the entire society will ultimately change and become Westernised. As Gatuiria puts it: “Cultural imperialism is mother to the slavery of the mind and the body. It is cultural imperialism that gives birth to the mental blindness and deafness that persuades people to allow foreigners to tell them what to do in their own country” (Ngugi, DC, 58). In addition, education is not for all since educating people might lead to them starting to think on their own, as is the case with Gatuiria who rediscovered his heritage through his composition. Therefore it can be seen as a means of oppression as well. Keeping the oppressed class in the darkness renders it easier for the oppressors to exert control over them.

Religion functions as a source of different constraints since religion itself is not a constraint on the rhetorical situation. What constrain the situation is in effect the beliefs, attitudes and images and the like that stem from a religious outlook. In Devil on the Cross Christianity is used as “a facade for the unscrupulous and a narcotic for those who are suffering” (Cook and Okenimpke, 123). Here it is important to remember the role of the rhetor in creating the exigence, which is a product of the rhetorical situation. In the novel, religion is portrayed as a source of constraints where the oppressors use Christianity to promote views, beliefs and attitudes to serve their purpose of suppressing the poor masses. Religion is a controversial subject and therefore one must remember the role of the rhetor. He, in this case, has created the exigence and in a way, he has selected which constraints to address and in what fashion. In Devil on the Cross the oppressors use the Bible to sanction their unmoral actions preaching the catechism of slavery:

I say unto you
That ye resist not evil.
But whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek,
Turn to him the other also.
And if any man will sue thee at the law,
And take away thy coat,
Let him have thy cloak also.
(Ngugi, DC, 191)

Accordingly, the marginalised classes are not only kept in the dark when it comes to education, but they are soothed and brainwashed by “the words of God” interpreted and delivered to them by their oppressors. The result is that the poor classes need religion to endure their suffering and it thus becomes an opiate for them. At the same time it functions as a veil to cover up the real intention of their oppressors: the exploitation of the poor. One prominent example of “the religious robes of hypocrisy” (Ngugi, DC, 210) is when Boss Kihara draws upon the Bible when trying to convince Wariinga to become his mistress. She asks him if he ever reads the Bible (as a member of the church, of course he does) and propels him to read Romans, Chap XIII: 14 where it is said, “Make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof…” Boss Kihara interrupts her saying: “But in the same book it is also written: ‘Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth, and he that seeketh, findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened…’” (Ngugi, DC, 23). Everything can be justified by the Bible if you interpret and distort the original message.

Another constraint is how the rulers of Kenya execute marginalisation of the poor masses, in order to secure their own positions of power in society. The poor masses live in secluded areas and they are not allowed to take part in governmental issues or even to enter and look for jobs in the larger cities. Remember how Wangari was imprisoned and charged for vagrancy in Nairobi even though she is a citizen. Even residential areas are divided; there is Golden Heights with great mansions decorated with gold for the rich and Njeuruca for the poor described by Wariinga as Hell on Earth (Ngugi, DC, 130).

The sets of constraints Ngugi faces in his discourse can be seen as the means used by the oppressors to sustain their positions of power in society, such as control of government, education, religion and marginalisation and by instilling fear by threats. Thus, the constraints need to be regarded from the viewpoint of the oppressors’ methods rather than as secluded subjects of oppression. If not, the constraints I am referring to
might seem like exigences rather than constraints. All of the means used by the oppressors are of course oppressive and the task Ngugi faces is to educate the poor masses of their situation and to teach them that they are not victims. They can act in unison to terminate oppression and become masters of their own lives. Ngugi needs to deconstruct the power of the oppressors and make it visible that they are no demons but humans who can be opposed. Moreover, he needs to eradicate the feelings of fear and substitute them with hope and he succeeds with his mission. The capitalists are reduced to comical figures, caricatures, and thus the technique used by Ngugi is satire and the result is that the fear of the oppressors is reduced since no one fears what is comical. Rather, fear is turned into pity of the tormentors who so eagerly embrace their self-destruction (Cook and Okenimpke, 116). Satire ranges from visual symbolism and play on names to “frank divulgence by the contestants of the methods and motives with which they manipulate the Kenyan economy” (Cook and Okenimpke, 118). Gitutu wa Gataanguru, a contestant at the cave, sets up the following equation: “Hunger x thirst = famine [and] Famine among the masses = wealth for a man of cunning” (Ngugi, DC, 104). This is driven to extremes when he later proposes that they should trap the air in the sky and sell in tins just like food and water and the same goes with soil (Ngugi, DC, 107). He calculates that when the poor are hit with mass famine their basic human needs of shelter and air to breathe will create a demand on the market as well. Of course these propositions are absurd but still, Ngugi, by his use of satire and hyperbolic language, manages to raise an awareness of the ongoing exploitation of the poor even though it ranges on the verge of absurdity.

When it comes to the visual symbolic as Cook and Okenimpke terms it, the thieves and robbers are pictured as caricatures and they do by all means appear as figures in a comic book. Their appearances are ridiculed and mocked and often they are obese or in other ways distorted:

Gitutu had a belly that protruded so far that it would have touched the ground had it not been supported by the braces that held up his trousers. It seemed as if his belly had absorbed all his limbs and all the other organs of his body. Gitutu had no neck – at least, his neck was not visible. His arms and legs were short stumps. His head had shrunk to the size of a fist. (Ngugi, DC, 99)
Kihaahu was a tall, slim fellow: he had long legs, long arms, long fingers, a long neck and a long mouth. His mouth was shaped like the beak of the kingstock: long, thin and sharp. His chin, his face, his head formed a cone. Everything about him indicated leanness and sharp cunning. (Ngugi, DC, 108)

Gitutu is portrayed as a symbol for utter greed whose belly will soon devour him and Kihaahu as a bird of prey but still mocked. Also noticeable is their European names like e.g. Rottenborough Groundflesh Shitland Narrow Isthmus Joint Stock Brown, which are comical and ironic. In the original Devil on the Cross, only names were in English and surely this created an even greater effect than in the translated version. Another prominent way in which Ngugi employs satire is by turning Biblical language and symbols on its head. For instance, the Devil is crucified and not Jesus, the Devil is white and the pure are black, there is no select group of God but a select group of Satan comprised by capitalists. In conclusion, Ngugi shows how religion is used ideologically by the oppressors to maintain their position of power. Religion is an important source of constraints on Ngugi’s discourse and the strategy he uses to turn the constraints to arguments for his cause is by turning everything upside down. He unveils the eyes of the oppressed making them realise their suppressed situation and how religion is played on by their oppressors.

Thus, to reduce the power of the tormentors Ngugi uses satire but he also needs to meet the constraints by lecturing to the poor masses of their situation and thus one can also find a didactic and realistic trait in the novel. Gatuiria can be said to be the lecturer of the novel since he is the one who talks about the importance of their indigenous culture. Muturi is the one who shows that the peasants and workers do possess power if they unite like they do in the protest march at the cave in Illmorog. Realism in its own right can mainly be seen in the passages where the poor people are pictured, that is, through Muturi, Wariinga, Wangari and Gatuiria. Those passages do not contain any irony and thus they contrast the satiric episodes of the capitalists. This is another sign of the skilled rhetor since Ngugi juxtaposes the two literary styles to further show the distinction between them.
4. Stylistic Peculiarities and Multiple Intended Audiences

_Devil on the Cross_ is both a polyphonic and polygraphic novel, and by this I mean that it combines oral features with an intrinsic blend of different literary genres. The result is a novel composed both for the ear and the eye. In this section I will discuss the audience as the last constituent of Bitzer’s rhetorical situation. Since, in my view, the form of the novel is to a high degree determined by the intended audience, I will discuss both form and audience and the close relationship between them. Before I proceed I would like to give a brief outline of how the postcolonial novel can be said to have developed, in order to understand the importance of regarding the novel as something else than a Western novel. As I have discussed earlier in my essay, Ngugi’s novel is African and needs to be regarded accordingly, or it will likely neither be appreciated nor correctly understood.

Elleke Boehmer makes an important distinction in her _Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors_ where she discusses how postcolonial authors have evolved their polysemic modes of expression by “mixing and crossing languages, forms, and styles” (Boehmer, 112). When exploring postcolonial writing the hybridised form, the blend of traditions, stands forth clearly and it is possible to detect a development in the non-Western literary tradition. Without generalising too much I would divide this development into two phases, drawing on the ideas stipulated by Boehmer. The first phase is characterised by mimicry, with postcolonial literature copying the literary tradition of the West. Since the postcolonial societies were Westernised, in terms of state structure as well as thought, yet at the same time subordinated and degraded, the authors needed first to absorb the cultural structures in order to speak up. Thus, the purpose in the beginning was to make their voices heard and the only way accessible to them was to use what they had been taught, and hence they mimicked. Boehmer writes, “[m]aking meaning using his master’s tools at first signifies very little. But at the same time, in this very show of dumbness, the muted man takes the initiative in representing himself” (Boehmer, 163). In order to start remaking and negotiating their realities they imitated. It is important, though, to realise that what was produced was not a stale copy but something new, that a new literary tradition was initiated, “subversion by imitation” in Boehmer’s words (Boehmer, 165). The second
phase is characterised by transforming and remaking. The crafts incorporated during the first stage was rethought and remoulded during the second phase and a blend of Western literary styles, techniques, themes and so forth were combined with myths, language, oral features etc from their own local tradition. What emerged was a new, non-Western art form which needs to be judged on its own. Boehmer writes, “through manipulating these inherited forms, and combining them with their own conceptual structures, they were able, bit by bit, to begin to create imaginative spaces beyond the ambit of European definitions” (Boehmer, 166). Considering this, even though some might argue that it is too simplistic to make such a division I feel it is plausible enough to argue that the non-Western literary tradition, in a sense, has developed on its own as well as out of opposition to the Western one.

Moving on to the audience it must first be stated that in the case of the intended audience one must be aware that this might not be the same audience as the actual audience who read the novel. As I will demonstrate, this novel is directed to multiple audiences, as can be seen in its form. Any rhetorical discourse requires an audience since they are the intended workers of change. The rhetorical audience has been selected by the rhetor to serve his aim of digesting his message and fulfilling his purpose at least from the outset of creating the novel. Then, of course, the rhetor can never know who will read his novel or how the novel will be interpreted. In the case of Devil on the Cross the question of who is the intended audience is rather complex. The fact that there are several ones in this novel is one of the reasons why it is complex and a real challenge to analyse.

There are at least three different audiences of the novel; the first is the Gikuyu audience, the second the Kiswahili audience and the third is the English-speaking audience and they are all addressed accordingly. That Ngugi first wrote the novel in Gikuyu and then translated it into English is a fact that any interpretation must take into account. As Booker writes, Ngugi has created a text that is highly accessible to Kenyan readers with relatively little experience in reading novels, and it is easily understood when read aloud. At the same time, the book presents multiple layers of literary complexity for Western readers who are accustomed to the Western literary canon and Western literary techniques of writing (Booker, 180). The multiple audiences influence both the way the novel is structured, how it is written stylistically as well as
how the content and the message is delivered unto the reader. When conducting an analysis it is therefore essential that one considers the rhetorical situation. As a reader of the translated version one does not only read a translation “across languages, but also across cultures” (Booker, 172).

The most prominent way in which Ngugi shows that there are several intended audiences to his novel is of course by indication of language. Even though one reads the translated English version, one is aware that another audience is addressed as well since there are some words and phrases that Ngugi has decided not to translate. However, I would say that it is more important to locate the different addressees in the structure and literary technique of Ngugi’s writing. If, as a Western reader, I fail to understand some aspects of the text, it might be because I do not have the referential frame to that particular technique and the other way around. An illiterate native Kenyan does not have to know about the allusions to Joseph Conrad and Jonathan Swift in order to appreciate the message and content of the novel. In Ngugi’s *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* Ngugi gives a brief account of how his novel was received, “A family would get together every evening and one of their literate members would read it for them. Workers would also gather in groups, particularly during the lunchbreak, and they would get one of them to read the book. It was read in buses; it was read in taxis; it was read in public bars” (Ngugi, *DM*, 83). Thus, the different layers of the text are directed to different addressees with different purposes. The workers and the family members referred to above did not need to apprehend the allusions to Swift and Conrad in order to appreciate and understand the message of the novel.

I will now proceed with examining the form of the novel from the viewpoint of the different audiences to display how the theme of oppression is visible even in the composition of the text. The oral features of *Devil on the Cross* are prominent. There are proverbs, songs, riddles and the invocation of the Gicaandi player who introduces the reader to the story, “This story is an account of what I, Prophet of Justice, saw with these eyes and heard with these ears when I was borne to the rooftop of the house” (Ngugi, *DC*, 8). Thus, the introduction to the story also introduces the oral aspects of this work. The primary audience in my terms, the Gikuyu audience, which consists of

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5 *Devil on the Cross* was published in Gikuyu in 1980 and later translated by the author into English in 1982.
both illiterate and literate people, is introduced to the story in a familiar milieu since the Gicaandi player is part of their culture. The Western reader might experience the oral features as odd since the novel opposes the literary conventions of how a novel should be structured. This blend of genres perhaps confuses some but speaks directly to the native reader. Another thing about the structure is that it is not a linear but rather a circular composition resembling the structure of a song with verses and a refrain. The refrain in this case is the parable of the talents and the lines, “For the Kingdom of Heaven is a man travelling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods. And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one…” (Ngugi, DC, 81). These lines are repeated several times during the novel and if the novel is read aloud it is especially important with this type of technique since it is difficult to keep too much new information in mind at once. Repetition is crucial in this setting. Thus, Ngugi has composed his own novel by mixing oral features with written text. Walter J. Ong discusses in his Orality and Literacy: Technologizing of the Word how The Iliad and The Odyssey were created according to a formula in order for the poet to be able to retell and remember them. He mentions for example how the burlesque technique is used, how characters are created as types and the importance of creating support for the memory (Ong, 86). These techniques can still be detected in fairy tales and fables which are often used as bedtime stories for children (Ong, 86). In Devil on the Cross repetition is used along with characters who are portrayed as types rather than as developing individuals and the burlesque is ever present in for instance the portrayal of the capitalist.

If looking at the form of the novel from the perspective of the Western reader, the characteristic of it being a blend of multiple genres is prominent. As Booker puts it, the novel is “sprinkled with extracts from other genres, ranging from newspaper advertisements to stories from the Bible to the musical oratorio” (Booker, 179). There are also a large number of allusions to works now listed in the Western literary canon. The outrageous propositions at the cave, made by the capitalist, echoes the proposition in Swift’s A Modest Proposal and so does the song sung by Muturi and Wangari, “Two bourgeoisie women / Ate the flesh of the children of the poor” (Ngugi, DC, 51). Marlow’s internal travel in Conrad’s The Heart of Darkness is also alluded to in the novel via Wariinga who travels from Nairobi to Illmorog but at the same time travels
deeper into her own subconscious just like Marlow did. The journey motif is double and so is the plot throughout the novel. The overt story is about Wariinga and the sufferings she has been through. A second story is the allegorical one about the political situation in Kenya where capitalists feed off the poor, and this story is covert in a sense since the narrative must be interpreted for the story to get through to the reader. Ashcroft et al says that allegory is often employed by postcolonial writers to write back to the former empire (9) since it is a symbolic mode of writing. Almost nothing in the novel is what it seems and thus the traditional form of allegory has been altered by the author since he uses it not only in the plot, to tell a second story, but even in his language. If one extends the notion of allegory to encompass “writing one thing but meaning another”, the proverbs, the dreams, the cave, everything can be interpreted into meaning something other than what is explicitly written. If we take the cave for example, we have the thieves and robbers from different parts of the world as well as native capitalists who meet at the cave in Illmorog to give their “testimonies” to the foreign tycoons. This is what we are told in the story and if we examine it more closely we may start to draw parallels to a church service where sinners give their testimonies for penance in the hope that God will forgive them their sins. In this case, of course, it is not God who is to forgive them but the Devil, and the local capitalists do not repent any actions but rather give an account of how much wealth they have accumulated so far and by what means. In addition, the testimonies given are linked to the parable about the talents ordained by God to his servants in the Bible but here, again, it is the Devil who has bequeathed them. The symbolic writing is ever-present in the novel.

Booker draws attention to how the Western Bildungsroman can be located in *Devil on the Cross* (173), only here it is not a young man who sets out on a journey filled with obstacles and who has matured as a person at the end, but a young female. Wariinga changes during the course of the novel, from a young girl who used skin lighting creams and hot irons to straighten her hair in order to look European into a strong independent woman who works as an engineer. She even attends judo and karate classes.

As I have already stressed, *Devil on the Cross* is a hybrid cultural phenomenon and when analysing it one must be aware of the different audiences at hand. It is hybrid in the sense that it is a blend of African and Western literary traditions.
as well as the fusion of an oral and a written mode. Ogude states that Ngugi has subordinated the oral mode of the novel to the written form (92) but here I feel that he misses the point. What has been done is more in line with Adewoye’s view of the novel as being part of a written oral tradition (388). In other words, Ngugi has created a hybrid discourse where the oral and the written form is fused, creating his own song. This can be linked to Gatuiria’s oratorio in the novel where he declares:

There’s no national tradition that we, the people of Kenya, can’t develop and build on – our architecture, our songs and our way of singing them, our theatre, our literature, our technology, our economy. [...] we shouldn’t always run after foreign things, following in the footsteps of other people, singing only songs that have been composed by others, joining in the chorus of songs sung by soloists from other lands. We can compose our own songs, produce our own soloists, sing the songs to ourselves. (Ngugi, DC, 243-4)

Hence, it is crucial not to judge the novel as written tradition with inserted oral elements, but rather, to look at it as a composition containing both. The written word came with the colonisers and thus the African cultural tradition leans more towards orality than towards the written word. The effect of this hybrid composition can be further viewed in the light of individualism vs. union and the purpose of the novel is to unite the poor masses against their oppressors. Unity can thus be said to be part of the African culture since it is a tribal system where the values are “to never eat alone” (Ngugi, DC, 38). Ong even mentions how oral communication is a uniting process whereas reading and writing are solitary activities (84-5). When regarding the spoken vs. the written word, the former is directed to a group to unite whereas the Western construct of the written form is directed to individual readers and Ngugi succeeds in combining two different modes of communication in one novel and he does it in order to reach out to different audiences.

Not only has Ngugi been criticised for having subordinated the oral mode of the novel to the written form, but also for his characterisation and use of binary oppositions. The characters in the novel “are not so much individuals as types who represent specific groups in Kenyan society” (Booker, 176). In the case of Ngugi’s
novel I must say that when considering the audience at hand, it is reasonable to assume that the content or message of the book is what he wants to convey. Since it is directed towards the Gikuyu audience which consists of both literate and to a greater extent illiterate people, complex characters with psychological development might not be the most effective way to proceed. By complex characters I mean characters who develop throughout a story as opposed to more stereotypical ones who serve as types such as ‘the hero’, ‘the villain’ and the like. Also, as I mentioned above, using types is a technique to support the memory of the listeners. The types in the novel are: the worker represented by Muturi, the rebellion represented by Wangari who participated in the Mau Mau movement of resistance, the intellectual elite represented by Gatuiria and then we have Wariinga. According to James Ogude, Ngugi is locked in a binary opposition between the oppressor and the oppressed and the characters can only be positioned in those two groups and he concludes that since Gatuiria in the end fails to act he takes the side of the oppressors (67, 76). I cannot comply with his view. In my opinion, Ngugi has transformed the traditional characters. There are certainly some types in the novel but at the same time Wariinga develops and Gatuiria is in between. The categorisation of the characters is not as easily done as Ogude suggests since they are not traditional characters. To begin with Gatuiria, it is obvious that he can be termed as possessing a hybrid identity. When he travels in the matatu he has difficulties with expressing himself since he cannot decide which language to use: Gikuyu or English. Language equals culture and identity and since he almost fails in expressing himself his ambivalent state is clear. Later in the novel, when he composes his national oratorio he develops, perhaps not as a character in a Western novel, but he is more self-assured and he is aware of the situation in Kenya. In the end he fails to act but I interpret that as him being on the verge of a decision. He does not follow Wariinga but he does not turn to the oppressors either. The message in the end is that of unity and the need to act, and this goes for both intellectuals and the poor. Without action the situation can never be altered.

Moving on to Wariinga, even she changes during the course of the novel, and the pattern is the same as with Gatuiria, and the transformation is initiated at the cave in Illmorog. When the reader meets her later in the novel she has transformed during a time period of two years which is not conveyed to the reader. Ogude indicates
that where Ngugi fails in developing his characters he draws on the fantastic (104) with dreams and voices. I feel that nothing is included in this novel without a reason. Ngugi’s method of characterisation is not Western and perhaps not solely African either but rather a construction of both: hybridity once again.

To return to Ngugi’s use of binary oppositions and the critique he has received, it must be said that it is a literary technique selected and utilized by the author. Nothing in the novel is a coincidence. To refer to the intended audience again, if we hypothesize that a group of illiterate Kenyans might form the audience, they would be listeners and not readers. The purpose of the author is to get a message through to these people too. He wants them to realise the oppression under which they live. In Kenya the literacy level is relatively high at 85.1%, but one must remember that Kiswahili and English are official languages alongside numerous indigenous languages. Thus, being literate might not mean literate in their mother tongue. Often enough the indigenous language is used as communication and it is neither written nor read but only spoken. Let us presume then that the intended Gikuyu audience might consist of some readers and mostly of listeners. The most effective way of transferring a message then would be by using contrasting images. Ngugi’s text is rhetorical, and anyone who has listened to a great speech, like for example Martin Luther King’s “I have a Dream”, knows that overly ambivalent or unclear passages might ruin the deliverance. King’s speech would not have been that successful if it had not been composed straightforwardly, and it is exactly the same thing with Devil on the Cross. Binary oppositions to a Western reader might seem too black or white since all grey areas are left out, but as Wariinga says in the novel: “There is no love that is not linked with hate. How can you tell what you love unless you know what you hate?” (Ngugi, DC, 132). The human mind works with opposites, and the listening audience in this case must realise what they are and what they are not, what they want to become and what they do not want to become. Then the binary construction is not simplistic but effective since it strengthens the message, setting the oppressors apart from the oppressed and showing that the powerless can gain power and become powerful like Wariinga.

Before judging any aspect of this novel one must thus consider the audience and the rhetorical situation. Now I have discussed mainly the Gikuyu audience

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6 85.1% of population 15+.
and the English-speaking audience and the importance of examining the novel from the vantage point of multiple audiences. Awareness of audience, context and one’s own position as a reader is crucial when conducting a study of this work. Otherwise, the directed criticism might feel unfounded or even Eurocentric.

5. Conclusion
To conclude, this essay has shown the importance of considering the rhetorical dimension of literature in order to understand how Ngugi’s *Devil on the Cross* functioned as a cultural object. In order to appreciate the novel correctly, care must be taken to how it is approached. Bitzer’s rhetorical situation provides a good model for analysis, and when examining each of the constituents it becomes clear how rhetoric has been employed by the author. However, as Vatz points out, the linguistic aspect cannot be neglected and it is therefore important to remember that what is portrayed in the novel is created by Ngugi. Thus, the historical situation in *Devil on the Cross* must be viewed as a reconstruction of the historical situation in Kenya in the 1970s created by the author. Both the theme of oppression as well as the stylistical peculiarities in it is best understood in the light of a rhetorical reading.

In my essay I have shown how Ngugi has depicted oppression as hierarchically constructed and that some groups in society have a double position as both oppressors and oppressed. As a rhetor Ngugi faces certain constraints on the deliverance of his discourse which he manages to turn to his own vantage. One of the best examples of this is his use of religion.

When examining the theme of oppression one can detect how the situation of the poor is outlined according to a rhetorical model to invoke change. The contrast between the workers and the capitalist buffoons creates an effect of the former being sane in a sense, whereas the latter are vane and something to be laughed at. Stylistically, the novel is best understood from a rhetorical viewpoint as well. As I have mentioned, the novel is directed both to listeners and readers. Hence stylistic features such as repetition, the creation of characters as types, and the use of the burlesque all make sense. The text operates on a level where memory support is crucial in order for a
listener to collect the information given. At the same time, the text is directed towards a reading audience familiar with Western literary techniques.

There are multiple intended audiences to this novel and each audience may absorb the novel differently. I believe that in order grasp the novel, emphasis must be placed on the importance of there being multiple audiences and the best way to reach this comprehension and insight is through a rhetorical reading.
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