



Steve Inegbe's Birthdays are for the Living: A Dramasophic Synopsis of the Meaning of Life

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Abstract

This paper is an exposition of the dramasophic synopsis of the meaning of life as encapsulated in Inegbe's *Birthdays are for the Living*. The question, "what is the meaning of life?" continues to bemuse the finest of minds in human history. It has generated a litany of narratives that seems to be unsatisfactory in making sense of what it all means. In a bid to add his voice to this philosophical discourse, Inegbe adopts a dramatic approach to reflect on the meaning of life. In his dramatic master-piece, *Birthdays are for the Living*, he illustrates the workability of the idea of dramasophy as an interdisciplinary discipline at the intersection of drama and philosophy by reflecting on the philosophical question "does life have meaning?" In view of this, this paper sees Inegbe's work as a dramasophic synopsis of the meaning of life. In a bid to justify this claim, the paper attempts a conceptual analysis of dramasophy. It presents the meaning of life as espoused in Inegbe's play *Birthday's are for the Living*. In addition, it shows the proclivity between dramatic presentations and philosophical themes within the purview of Inegbe's birthdays are for the living. Finally, it calls for the cultivation of self-reflective attitude in recognition of the temporality of our earthly existence.

Introduction

In most cases, wherever I am invited for a birthday celebration, I ask the question, "Is it a time for celebration or a time for reflection?" Generally, birthdays are seen as a time for celebration and merriment as it is considered as a mark of being grateful to God for the gift of life. Philosophically, it is a time for reflection in order to come to terms with the fact that it is not the achievement of an additional year on earth, but in reality, a subtraction of a year from the number of years left to live on

earth. With this in mind, during any birthday anniversary, I simply get lost in a kaleidoscopic replay of events in my years of existence and at the same time imaginatively engaged in wondering what the remaining years have in stock for me. In a sweep of thought, the whole picture culminates in the question “What does it all mean?”

So, when I received an invitation on the 21st of January, 2024 to attend an event to mark Professor Stephen Inegbe’s 60th birthday, I got lost in my usual philosophical self-examination. At this point, I examined myself within the purview of trying to reconcile Inegbe’s age with his numerous and indelible contributions to dramatic scholarship and performance in particular and humanity in general. In view of this, I wondered “what could be the most appropriate and befitting speech from a philosopher on a renowned playwright and dramatist?” In a moment of ureka!, I recalled all the series of discussions we have had over-time in his office and several destined points on campus. More often than not, we usually but inadvertently bring forth our professional lenses on the subject-matter of our deliberations. This results into a sort of inter-disciplinary discourse between drama and philosophy on human existential predicaments. In view of the fact that he is a playwright/dramatist while I am a philosopher, our interactions triggered my interest in exploring the intersection between drama and philosophy on reflecting about human life. In fact, he eventually laid the foundation for the official commencement of this academic exploration when he invited me to partake in the festschrift in honor of Prof. Uwemedimo Atakpo of his department. This led me to the formulation and articulation of the idea of dramosophy as a discipline at the intersection of drama and philosophy. In view of this, I concluded to make my speech from the lens of dramosophy within the context of his play *Birthdays are for the living* as this resonates with celebrating the 60th birthday of an academic giant. This speech is what has metamorphosed into this scholarly article.

What is the Meaning of Life?

The question, “does life have meaning?” or “what is the meaning of life?” is the defining concern of philosophy, that is, the issue that provides philosophy’s *raison d’être*. At the centre of all philosophical concern is the desire to unravel the purpose of our existence. It is for this reason that philosophy is conceived as an attempt to understand the human condition and our place in the universe. In view of this, Albert Camus argue that the question about the meaning of life is the only important philosophical question while other questions are nothing but a set of games. In his words:

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem; and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest

whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories – comes afterwards. These are games, one must first answer [the primary question] (Camus 14).

Generally, the question of the meaning of life comes to the fore in two ways. On the one hand, people often come face to face with this question when death enters their lives: either the death of someone they love or their own imminent death. Death brings everything we are or even hoped to be to a complete end. What's the point of striving then? On the other hand, for many people, the question of whether life has any meaning arises even when death is not near. Many people seem to reach a point in their lives when things seem to have no value, when things they have spent their lives chasing begin to seem pointless. This is the case with the Shakespearean Macbeth who killed many people and strove mightily to become king. But then, realizing that all his striving has brought him nothing that made sense of his life, he laments, "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that strut's and frets his hour upon the stage and then is hared no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing" (Grunebaum 392). Events of life force many people to ask whether the things they have devoted their lives to achieving have any real meaning. This shows that the question of whether life has meaning is one that first brings many people to philosophy as the variety of answers that flood their mind during their solemn reflection inadvertently brings out the philosopher in them. But what, exactly, does this question mean?

The question "does life have meaning?" has remained a puzzle that has troubled the finest of minds in human history. Philosophers and other commentators have labored endlessly to grapple with what it all means. There are three basic approaches most thinkers have taken to unravel the meaning of life. The first approach is the theistic account. This is the idea that there exist a pre-established relationship between man and God. This relationship defines the meaning of human life. The theists argue that the purpose of life is to "know God and be perfectly united with Him" (Velasquez, 719). The major problem with this account is on the belief that God exists. The idea that God exists is very difficult to prove, and as such, if the basis of an argument is unsubstantiated, the whole argument becomes problematic. The theistic account, then, says little to the non-believer. The second approach is the metaphysical account which seeks an all-encompassing perspective that transcends the human situations and in terms of which human life can be given a meaning. The major problem with this account is that personal meaning is sub-sumed under all-encompassing phenomenon which is detached from human practical existential problems. The metaphysical account, then, says nothing about personal issues and problems of life.

The third approach is the nihilist or pessimist account which claims that human life has no meaning since there are no ultimate values worth pursuing

(Lawhead 634). In view of this, Schopenhauer concludes that life can best be seen as an ultimate process of disillusion; an experience that is empty and full of void. (46) The major problem with this account is its extreme pessimism and radical scepticism. The fact that the nihilists fail to perceive any ultimate value worth pursuing does not suggest that life is meaningless. Thus, the nihilist or pessimist account, says nothing tangible about the meaning life. From the foregoing perspectives, it is clear that the search for the meaning of life is far from being conclusive as each proposed account leaves something to be accounted for. For this reason, it becomes an imperative for us to continue to engage all human arsenals to probe into the purpose of life. This paper is therefore a response to this clarion call as it seeks to glean the meaning of life within the dramatic prowess of Stephen Inegbe as espoused in his play *Birthdays are for the Living*. Thus, in view of the philosophical nature of the question and the dramatic resource of the response, this effort is seen as a dramasophic synopsis of the meaning of life.

Dramasophy: A Conceptual Analysis

The term “dramasophy” was first conceptualized to describe a discipline at the intersection of drama and philosophy in Adekunle Ibrahim’s paper titled *The Metaphor of Dialogue of the Dead in Atakpo’s Watering the Hard Ground: A Case of Dramasophy*. This paper clearly articulates and outlines the meaning, scope and aims of dramasophy as a discipline. It is hereby acknowledged as the foundation and framework for the articulation of this section of the present effort. Accordingly, the term “dramasophy” is derived from the fusion of the words “drama” and “sophia” which means “to act” and “wisdom” respectively. In this sense, dramasophy means “drama-wisdom” or “drama-thinking” dramasophy therefore connotes the dramatization of wisdom or the wisdomization of drama. Dramasophy therefore “is a philosophical reflection on dramatic presentation or the dramatization of philosophical reflection” (Ibrahim 2023). This explains why dramasophy is seen as an inter-disciplinary discipline that explores the philosophical foundations of drama as well as the dramatic potency of philosophical ideas. The term “dramasophy” therefore presupposes two *modus operandi*: Philosophy of drama and drama as philosophy. In the former, drama undergoes a philosophical examination while in the later drama becomes a means of philosophical thinking. Ibrahim clearly outlines the conceptual distinction between philosophy of drama and drama as philosophy as follows:

On the one hand, Philosophy of drama refers to a philosophical study of drama. This involves a critical discussion of philosophical problems related to drama, its nature, effects and value. In this sense, drama becomes the object of philosophical reflection. On the

other hand, drama as a mode of philosophizing; a way of doing philosophy (223).

The point being addressed in the above is that philosophy of drama is an inquiry into the nature of the perception created in the mind of the audience through the imageries and symbolisms utilized in dramatic presentations. In addition, it examines the moral implications of this perceptual conditioning of dramatic presentations in the life of the audience. Ultimately, it seeks to ascertain the truth of an imitation of human actions and events. In addition, drama as philosophy basically entails the deliberate act of logically sequencing philosophical teachings or ideas in the narrative of events in a play. For this reason, Ibrahim (224) outlines the aims of dramosophy as follows:

- provide the platform for intellectual interaction between philosophers and playwrights/dramatists.
- situate drama back to its original philosophical disposition as an imitative critique of human existence.
- deepen our understanding of the complexities and conditionalities of existence.
- place philosophical ideas in practical life situations through stage performance.
- provoke debate among philosophers, playwrights and the audience on the meaning of life.
- provide the playwrights, directors and producers the needed philosophical insights and tools required in exploring the existential predicaments of human life as captured in dramatic ideas, plot developments, and dialectical engagements of plays.
- provide a platform for a synoptic account of existence.

In view of the above, it is instructive to note that whenever drama becomes analytic, critical, reflective and/or speculative about the fundamental issues of human life, it is at that juncture that drama becomes philosophical in nature. Similarly, at any point philosophical issues are scriptable and adaptable to dialogue and actions on stage, it is at that moment philosophy becomes dramatic. This bond between drama and philosophy is inevitable as both disciplines deal primarily with a common phenomenon of experience. That is, human existence.

Inegbe's Birthdays are for the Living

The play *Birthdays are for the Living* opens with a celebrative atmosphere characterized by songs and drums in the land of Ayomipo. The people are grateful to God for the peaceful, productive and progressive ambience that defines and

distinguish their land as a community. Inegbe introduces the play with the appearance of a narrator who recites the prologue as follows:

Yes, what is it that we have
That has not been given to us?
Often time do we forget
That on our way to this earth
We brought nothing
And nothing indeed shall we take back
Be that as it may,
We need to make plans for our final home return
No matter how honey-sweet
We think earth is
We shall, one day, depart
So, we need to make plans... (47)

The prologue above underscore the thematic focus of the play as a teleological/theistic interpretation of the meaning of life. It gives the audience the picture of existence as a journey that we must constantly be self-reflective on in order not to get carried away with the sweet experiences we may have in this world. Thus, we are nothing but a way-farer on earth who certainty shall return back to our creator with an account of our activities on earth.

In scene one of the play, while Oba Ayeyemi and his Council of Chiefs where deliberating on the justification of their celebrative festivity, three elderly-looking men appear dressed in alien costumes. The three men are Sagacity, Feferity and Timidity. In their conversation with the King-in-Council, the three men explained that they may appear as strangers but in reality they are sons of Ayomipo land. They explained further that during the period of inter-tribal wars they were captured and sold off to the land of Kukute-Orun. But, while in Kukute-Orun, they became successful and made it a home, although, with the nostalgic feeling that the place was not their home. This made them to decide to come home to celebrate their sixtieth birthday anniversary in their native land – the land of Ayomipo. With a sense of curiosity, Chief Aina observes the disparity between the physical appearance of the three men as follows:

But how come... I mean (referring to feferity and Timidity) the two of you look eighty-five, weather-beaten and bent while sagacity looks forty. How?... (53).

In response to this observation, the following dialogue ensues:

Sagacity: It is a long story Chief Aina...

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- Feferity: ...which we shall not be ashamed to recount...
- Timidity: ...for the sake of youth and posterity...
- Feferity: ...knowing that in a little while, we shall be no more.
- Timidity: Posterity, we believe, shall learn from our experience.
- Sagacity: Thank you my good, good friends. Feferity and Timidity have said it all. We want posterity to learn from our experience... living here on earth is like living in a foreign land. Unfortunately, many of us forget too quickly that east or west...
- ALL: ...home will always be home.
- Sagacity: If one lives abroad for a long time and death does not visit one, one would one day return to one's native land.
- Feferity: So make plans.
- Sagacity: it is the same while you're still alive on earth. Many people, unfortunately, forget that we'll one day return to our saviour to give an account of how we lived our lives on earth. (54).

Feferity and Timidity elaborates on the above conversation with their personal lives. They explained that they were successful businessmen who wasted their youth and resources on partying and womanizing thinking that they were enjoying life. In their words:

Timidity and I lived a life of reckless abandon. At Kukute-Orun we were prominent merchants. We romanced with the sundry sides of life. In short, we enjoyed life to the Lees. Sweet sixteen's were at our beck and call. We were sure that we were enjoying life... little knowing that it was life that was enjoying and wasting us. (55)

In reaction to Feferity and Timidity's narratives, Sagacity a man his two friends describes as a very humble and amiable man with the fear of God says when he met them, he saw nothing but "a wasted fertile land" (55). What they could boast for, according to him, was liquid cash; no assets, no family to plan for, absolutely nothing. Feferity and Timidity corroborate Sagacity's narrative of their life as follows:

"At your age", he told us; "what can you boast of at your age?" that was five years ago. Timidity and I looked inwards and what we actually encountered was waste. (55).

In reaction to this narrative, Chief Aina interjected “what? At sixty?” Sagacity explains further that:

If they didn’t have money to organise their lives, perhaps, one could have excused them. They had all the money they needed and yet, they had nothing. A people of waste. (56).

At this point there was a total silence as sadness pervades the atmosphere. In a bid to sustain the celebrative mood in the land, Oba Ayeyemi intervenes. He welcome the three alien sons of the land and thanked them for the revelation which holds deep message for the youths. He noted that it is not for late to start afresh and that it is quite clear why sagacity looks younger and healthier. He expressed his happiness that the birthdays of the three alien sons coincided with their celebrations. He therefore ne-integrates them into their midst by giving them chieftaincy titles. He concludes with the declaration that “we shall celebrate their birthdays in style after all birthdays are meant for the living” (57).

The Meaning of Life in Inegbe’s Birthdays Are for the Living

This paper sets out to detail the dramaspophic synopsis of the meaning of life as espoused in Inegbe’s *Birthdays are for the Living*. In view of this, the paper anchors it’s analysis here on the two basic approaches to dramaspophy: philosophy of drama and drama as philosophy. The former refers to a philosophical critique of drama while the later projects drama as a medium of philosophical reflection. A critical look at the play reveals that it fulfills these two basic approaches of dramaspophy. From the standpoint of philosophy of drama, Inegbe’s conceptual and narrative technique is methodologically creative, realistic and prescriptive. It is creative in the sense that Inegbe consciously created the character’s name to vividly capture the personalities they represent. His choice of names such as “Sagacity” (the wise one), “Feferity” (the showman), “Timidity” (the faint-hearted one) and “kukute Orun” (a metaphoric hereafter) strengthens the theme of the play. It is realistic as it sequences the daily realities of human experience in the dialogue and events of the play. Human experiences such as happiness, sadness, regrets, pride, honour, self-reflection, self-realisation and nostalgic feeling are portrayed in the play to capture what gives meaning to human life. It is prescriptive because it outlines what ought to be done to live a happy and fulfilled life devoid of regrets and wasteful experiences. For instance, living a life of conscious self-reflection.

From the standpoint of drama as philosophy, Inegbe through this play reflects on the meaning of life. This is a central philosophical theme that continues to generate a litany of theories over the years. The question of the meaning of life examines the paradox of human struggles that defines the gap between birth and death. It x-rays the perplexing realisation of the meaninglessness of our endless strive

in the face of an end that is as certain as certainty. In the play, Inegbe addresses the question of the meaning of life from a teleological/theistic approach. An account is said to be teleological if it explores the meaning of a phenomena in terms of the purpose it serves or fulfills. In addition, it is theistic if the account sees the purpose for a phenomenon in relation to God.

In this play, Inegbe creatively scripted the meaning of life in a dualistic metaphor. On the one hand is the theistic account in which he sees the meaning of life within the purview of God's plan for us. In this context, he sees our sojourn in this world as a short period as we shall certainly return back to our creator with a burden of account. He captures this in Sagacity's words that "many people, unfortunately, forget that we'll one day return to our saviour to give an account of how we lived our lives on earth" (54). In this sense, the meaning of life in Inegbe's play is anchored on the future re-union with our creator. As such, the purpose of life is to know God and be perfectly fixed into his plan for us. On the other hand, Inegbe sagaciously admonishes diasporans not to lose sight of their status as foreigners and the need to always remember that home will always be home. He captures this message in Sagacity's words as follows:

Living in a foreign land... many of us forget too quickly that east or west... home will always be home... if one lives abroad for a long time and death does not visit one, one would one day return to one's native land. (54).

A deep reflection on the above, perhaps gives us an insight into the inner state of Inegbe's self-reflection as a diasporan in Akwa Ibom State as well as a symbol of "sagacity" to the "Feferities" and "Timidities" in Akwa Ibom State and other places in the world. This is because if we are foreigners where we work and live, we are as well strangers in our own native land where we have stayed away for many years. Thus, Inegbe's play is a clarion call for us to remember why we are where we are so as not to get carried away with the beauty and comfort our host communities have to offer. In a nutshell, north or south, east or west; home is home!

Conclusion

This paper sets out to explore the dramasophic synopsis of the meaning of life within the purview of Inegbe's *Birthdays are for the living*. In order to achieve this objective, the paper presents a conceptual analysis of dramasophy. It outlines the basic philosophical approaches to the question of the meaning of life. Furthermore, it presents the dialogue and events in the play. On the basis of this, the paper extrapolates the meaning of life in Inegbe's play as a fulfillment of God's plan for human life. The paper concludes that Inegbe's *Birthdays are for the Living* is a clarion call to remember that life is a journey that terminates in the re-union with our creator.

It also admonishes that when we are in a foreign land we should endeavour to constantly remind ourselves of the need to return to our home land as home will always be home.

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