

ALL THAT IS GONE IS GONE: A LITERARY ANALYSIS OF IMPERMANENCE AND RENEWAL

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Abstract

This paper presents a literary, philosophical, and theological analysis of the author's original poem "All That Is Gone Is Gone"—a reflective meditation on the irreversibility of the past and the need to live purposefully in the present. The poem foregrounds the fleeting nature of time, the futility of clinging to irretrievable moments, and the wisdom inherent in acceptance and renewal. Through close reading, the study explores major thematic concerns—impermanence, acceptance, human limitation, and divine order—and situates them within broader philosophical and theological reflections on temporality. Attention is given to diction, imagery, repetition, and metaphor, all of which reinforce the central theme of impermanence. Drawing upon reader-response theory and existential hermeneutics, the analysis shows how the poem provokes both intellectual and emotional engagement with the human condition. The study demonstrates that reflective African poetry can serve as a fertile ground for philosophical and spiritual inquiry, offering readers a poetic framework for embracing transience and cultivating a forward-looking orientation to life.

Keywords: *African poetry, time, impermanence, acceptance, renewal, existentialism, Isaac Obins Nuhu*

Introduction

The mystery of time has always haunted human imagination. Literary traditions across cultures testify to humanity’s struggle with the fleeting nature of existence, the irretrievability of moments, and the paradoxical longing to hold onto what cannot be retained. From the lament of the biblical Ecclesiastes—“Vanity of vanities, all is vanity” (Eccl. 1:2)—to Shakespeare’s Sonnet 60, which portrays minutes as waves against the “pebbled shore,” writers have continually sought to voice the inevitability of temporal passage. Modernist poetry, notably T. S. Eliot’s Four Quartets, extends this meditation, probing the intersections of past, present, and eternity.

Within African literary landscape, poets such as Christopher Okigbo, Kofi Awoonor, and Wole Soyinka have also confronted time as a force shaping history, identity, and communal memory. African temporality, according to John Mbiti (1969), privileges the “living present” and the “past of immediate relevance” while conceiving the distant future as abstract. The poem under study, however, aligns more closely with the biblical and Western linear sense of time, where the past is irreversible. Thus, *All That Is Gone Is Gone* operates as a dialogue between African cyclical temporality and Western linear temporality, suggesting that wisdom lies in reconciling both views through acceptance.

This study argues that the central theme of the poem is the irreversibility of the past and the existential necessity of living meaningfully in the present. The sub-themes include impermanence, acceptance, renewal, and the tension between human limitation and divine order. Each theme reflects the poem’s engagement with universal human experiences while retaining strong African cultural undertones. Stylistically, the poem relies on repetition, stark imagery, and free-verse rhythm to reinforce the unrelenting flow of time.

The paper’s significance lies in its ability to articulate what Ricoeur (244) terms the “aporia of time”: the tension between time as experienced and time as measured. Humans experience time as fleeting yet simultaneously as the ground of hope. By juxtaposing

metaphors of futility—“clutching smoke in one’s fist”—with images of renewal—“the sun does not mourn the night; it simply rises”—the poem captures this paradox. Such imagery resonates with existentialist authenticity in the face of temporality while echoing biblical assurances of divine renewal (Lamentations 3:23).

The paper therefore explores how *All That Is Gone Is Gone* functions not only as a literary reflection on impermanence but also as a spiritual and philosophical guide for living wisely amid loss and change.

Research Problem

African poetry often mirrors humanity’s negotiation with impermanence, memory, and continuity. In this negotiation, the interplay between oral aesthetics, existential reflection, and spiritual symbolism becomes particularly pronounced. *All That Is Gone Is Gone* employs a deceptively simple refrain, yet beneath its simplicity, there is a dense web of cultural, philosophical, and theological implications.

The primary research problem addressed here is how a seemingly straightforward poetic refrain communicates complex realities of loss, memory, and renewal within personal, communal, and spiritual contexts. While previous scholarship on African poetry has largely emphasised resistance, nationalism, and identity (Ngũgĩ, 1986; Irele, 2001), fewer studies have examined reflective African poetry as a vehicle for existential contemplation and spiritual resilience.

Accordingly, the guiding question is: How does Isaac Obins Nuhu deploy language, symbolism, and cultural memory to articulate impermanence while simultaneously affirming renewal, in his poem, *All That Is Gone Is Gone*?

Significance of the Study

The study’s significance is in three folds, namely, literary, cultural, and philosophical-spiritual as highlighted below:

1. **Literary Contribution:** It contributes to African literary criticism by demonstrating how minimalist poetic structures can carry profound symbolic weight. The poem exemplifies the fusion of oral cadence with modern literary form, enriching the corpus of African poetic discourse.
2. **Cultural Relevance:** By analysing the refrain “All that is gone is gone” within a postcolonial African context, the paper underscores how poetry can serve as a communal archive of resilience. It highlights the role of literature in negotiating memory and continuity in societies grappling with historical disruptions.
3. **Philosophical-Spiritual Insight:** The study offers a bridge between existential philosophy and biblical hermeneutics, showing how African poetry can mediate questions of mortality, hope, and renewal. This cross-disciplinary significance broadens the scope of both literary studies and theology, demonstrating how poetry provides a language for meaning-making in the face of loss.

Ultimately, the study affirms that “All That Is Gone Is Gone” is not just a poetic lament but a cultural testimony and spiritual meditation. It validates the role of African literature in addressing universal human concerns while remaining rooted in its own symbolic traditions.

Literature Review

The theme of impermanence has preoccupied thinkers across cultures, appearing in philosophical writings, religious texts, and poetry. This literature review situates “All That Is Gone Is Gone” within three major bodies of scholarship: (1) African literary studies on time, memory, and existential consciousness; (2) global philosophical traditions on impermanence and temporal flow; and (3) poetic treatments of loss, acceptance, and renewal across world literatures. The review also highlights key theoretical foundations drawn from reader-response criticism, existential hermeneutics, and archetypal studies.

1. African Literary Engagements with Time, Memory, and Loss

African literature demonstrates a sustained engagement with the dynamics of time, memory, and human fragility. Irele (2001) observes that African writers often use poetic forms to mediate between personal experience and collective history. Similarly, Ngũgĩ waThiong’o (1986) argues that African artistic expression is grounded in the people’s lived realities, including their struggles with loss, displacement, and renewal.

Christopher Okigbo’s *Labyrinths* (1971) is notable for its reflections on the erosion of cultural memory, portraying time as both destructive and regenerative. Like Okigbo, Awoonor (1964) explores the tension between death and continuity, often turning to Ewe cosmology to portray the soul’s journey through time. Wole Soyinka, particularly in his elegiac poetry (*A Shuttle in the Crypt*, 1972), situates individual mortality within broader cultural cycles of decay and rebirth.

The poem “All That Is Gone Is Gone” aligns with this tradition by presenting time as a force that both dissolves and regenerates. Through its repetitive refrain and compressed imagery, the poem conveys a wisdom structure reminiscent of African proverbs such as the Yoruba saying: “The River that has passed cannot return to its source.” This proverbial worldview situates impermanence not merely as an emotional experience but as communal knowledge passed across generations.

John Mbiti’s concept of African temporality—emphasising the primacy of the present and immediate past—also provides essential context. Mbiti (1969) notes that African society generally views the future as undefined, and secondary to the present lived reality. The poem, however, subtly complicates this model by insisting on renewal through forward-looking orientation, thereby bridging African and Western temporal philosophies.

2. Philosophical Traditions on Impermanence and Temporal Flow

The poem’s meditation on the irreversibility of the past resonates strongly with global philosophical traditions.

Heraclitus and the Doctrine of Flux

Heraclitus famously asserted that one cannot step into the same river twice (Heraclitus, 1957)—capturing the idea that existence is defined by constant change. This philosophy of flux underlies the poem’s imagery of movement (“tide,” “river,” “moment lost”), suggesting that human attempts to reclaim the past are futile because reality itself is dynamic. Kirk’s (1954) commentary on Heraclitus emphasises this theme of unending transformation, which parallels the poem’s claim that “the key is always ahead, never behind.”

Stoicism and Acceptance

Stoic philosophers such as Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus taught that wisdom lies in recognising what is within one’s control and accepting what is not. Their reflections on time as an unstoppable current—and regret as wasted energy—mirror the poem’s metaphors about “clutching smoke” and its call to release the past.

Existentialism and Human Finitude

Existential thinkers like Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre emphasise human limitation and the need for authentic engagement with the present. Heidegger’s idea of being-toward-death reframes impermanence as a condition that enables meaning rather than despair. Sartre’s (1943) insistence that individuals recreate themselves through free choice echoes the poem’s emphasis on renewal—“the now... gives it root and bloom.”

Both traditions position time as a force that demands not resignation but vigilant acceptance and purposeful action.

3. Global Poetic Treatments of Time, Loss, and Renewal

Globally, poets have grappled with the transient nature of existence, often using natural imagery to reflect impermanence.

Western Poetic Lineage

William Shakespeare’s Sonnet 60 portrays time as relentless waves breaking upon the shore, a metaphor echoed in the present poem’s “unyielding tide.” Similarly, Shelley’s Ode to the West Wind uses the cycle of autumn leaves to illustrate decay and

transformation. T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* presents time as cyclical and mysterious, underscoring the paradox of endings that become beginnings.

Asian Aesthetic Traditions

Japanese poetic traditions such as *mono no aware* (the pathos of things) and Zen aesthetics emphasize the beauty and sadness inherent in transience. Donald Keene (1995) notes that Japanese literature frequently uses fleeting images — blossoms, seasons, light — to evoke emotional awareness of impermanence. These sensibilities parallel the poem's tone of quiet acceptance.

Biblical and Religious Poetics

Biblical literature, especially *Psalms* and *Ecclesiastes*, uses parallelism, repetition, and metaphors of seasons to capture themes of vanity, time, and renewal. The poem's structure and message echo these traditions, particularly in its assertion that the sun "simply rises," suggesting divine continuity amid human loss.

4. Reader-Response, Hermeneutics, and Meaning-Making

Iser's (1978) reader-response theory highlights the role of interpretive gaps in poetic texts. The refrain "All that is gone is gone" serves as an interpretive gap that readers fill with personal experiences of loss or regret. Fish (1980) further notes that interpretive communities shape how meaning is perceived. Thus, readers grounded in African oral traditions will understand the poem's wisdom differently from those influenced by biblical or existential philosophy.

Ricoeur's (1975) hermeneutics provides another important interpretive lens. Ricoeur identifies symbolic language as mediating between literal and metaphoric meaning. The present poem's images — ashes, tides, dawn — exemplify this symbolic richness, enabling multilayered interpretations across cultural and philosophical contexts.

5. Positioning the Poem within Contemporary Scholarship

Few contemporary studies have examined reflective African poetry as a site for existential and spiritual inquiry; yet the cultural and

philosophical richness of such works is immense. The present poem fills this gap by offering a distilled meditation on time and human agency. Its minimalist style, proverbial tone, and symbolic depth position it squarely within the growing body of African reflective poetry that seeks to navigate modern uncertainty with ancestral wisdom.

This literature review therefore establishes the poem's relevance to ongoing scholarly conversations about time, impermanence, cultural memory, existential authenticity, and the moral imagination.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis, grounded in close reading and interpretive criticism. Poetry analysis requires close attention to language, symbolism, cultural context, and reader engagement; therefore, this methodology prioritises depth of interpretation rather than quantitative generalizability.

The methodological approach follows three interrelated stages:

1. Textual Deconstruction

A close reading of “All That Is Gone Is Gone” isolates its dominant metaphors, refrains, imagery clusters, and structural patterns. This step identifies how poetic devices shape the poem's thematic trajectory—from impermanence to acceptance and finally renewal.

2. Contextual Interpretation

The poem's imagery and symbolic patterns are situated within: African oral and literary traditions; existential philosophy and phenomenology; biblical and theological discourses; and global poetic treatments of time.

This contextual grounding ensures that the poem is not read in isolation but in relation to wider literary and philosophical influences, including the Heraclitean concept of flux.

3. Comparative Reflection

The insights derived from close reading and contextualisation are compared with related themes in African and global poetry, including the works of Soyinka, Awoonor, Okigbo, and selected Western poets. This stage highlights both continuity and distinctiveness in the poem's approach to impermanence and renewal.

Methodological Orientation and Rationale

This study is hermeneutic, not empirical. Its goal is not to measure but to interpret. Hermeneutics provides the methodological foundation for exploring symbolic meaning and existential resonance in poetic texts. Reader-response criticism is employed to account for how different audiences might interpret the poem's refrain. Archetypal criticism is used to explore the poem's symbolic motifs — dawn, flame, ashes, river — within a larger cultural and mythic framework. Biblical hermeneutics provides tools for interpreting the spiritual undertones of renewal. Existential hermeneutics clarifies the philosophical claims embedded in the poem's call to accept the irreversible.

Taken together, these methodological commitments ensure a holistic scholarly exploration of the poem as text, symbol, philosophy, and spiritual reflection.

Background to the Poem and the Poet

The poem "All That Is Gone Is Gone" belongs to the contemporary African tradition of philosophical and reflective verse. Unlike the expansive narrative or politically charged poetry of earlier generations such as Christopher Okigbo or Niyi Osundare, this poem distills its message into a minimalist structure, relying on repetition and imagery to evoke universality. Its brevity is deceptive: within its few lines lies a meditation on impermanence, memory, and renewal. Stylistically, the poem resonates with the African oral tradition, where proverbs, aphorisms, and refrains communicate profound wisdom in compact forms (Achebe 1975). The central

refrain —All that is gone is gone—functions much like a proverbial utterance, creating rhythm, emphasis, and permanence in memory. This echoes what Finnegan (2012) observes that repetition and brevity ensure the transmission of wisdom across generations in African oral aesthetics.

Isaac Nuhu Obins is a Nigerian scholar, poet, and educator whose intellectual work spans English language studies, literary criticism, linguistics, and philosophical reflection. Born on 25 September 1981, in Rebok, Zonkwa, Kaduna State, Obins has built an impressive academic and professional trajectory rooted in scholarship, language development, and community engagement. His academic background includes a Bachelor’s degree in English Language (Second Class Upper) and a Master degree in English from University of Jos, where he is currently pursuing a PhD in English Language, with a research focus on Nigerian English content words, semantic variation, and sociolinguistic patterns.

Obins has been a Lecturer at the Nuhu Bamalli Polytechnic, Zaria, since 2014, serving in the Department of General Studies at the School of Agricultural Technology, Samaru-Kataf Campus. His professional experience includes teaching linguistics, literature, pragmatics, and communication studies; facilitating courses at the National Teachers Institute/Open University; and holding multiple academic administrative positions, such as School Secretary, Unit Coordinator for English, and Member of the School Research and Development Committee.

As a researcher, Obins has contributed extensively to scholarly discourse in English linguistics and stylistics. His publications span areas such as politeness strategies, conjunction theory, stylistics, national language policy, X-bar syntax, pragmatics, and translation studies. His growing body of journal articles — including works in *Scientia*, the *Jos Journal of the English Language*, *Greener Journal of Languages and Literature Research*, and the *European Journal of Theoretical and Applied Sciences* — demonstrates a sustained commitment to linguistic inquiry and interdisciplinary scholarship.

Obins’ poetic work emerges from this rich intellectual ecosystem. His writing reflects a convergence of African oral traditions, Christian spirituality, existential philosophy, and linguistic sensitivity. “All That Is Gone Is Gone” exemplifies his characteristic fusion of reflective simplicity with profound philosophical resonance. His poetry often meditates on human temporality, moral consciousness, communal identity, and spiritual renewal—drawing from lived experience as well as extensive scholarly grounding.

Beyond academics, Obins has held leadership roles in professional bodies and student associations, including serving as President of the National Association of Students of English and Literary Studies (NASELS) during his undergraduate years and contributing editorial expertise to various publications. His work in community mobilisation, church service, and educational development underscores a distinct ethos of service and intellectual responsibility.

Today, Isaac Nuhu Obins represents a growing tradition of Nigerian scholar–poets whose creative expression is informed by rigorous scholarship, cultural consciousness, and spiritual insight. His poetry and academic writing both testify to his belief that language is a vessel for truth, renewal, and the shaping of human understanding. Through works like *All “That Is Gone Is Gone”*, he continues to contribute meaningfully to contemporary African literary discourse.

The background to the poem suggests that it was conceived not merely as an aesthetic exercise but as a spiritual and philosophical meditation. It belongs to a growing body of African reflective poetry that seeks to reframe ancient wisdom traditions for modern readers navigating uncertainty and dislocation.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study integrates multiple interpretive approaches that illuminate the poem’s complexity. The thematic preoccupations of *All That Is Gone Is Gone*, such as

meditation on time, loss, memory, and renewal, subjects it to an eclectic approach.

1. Reader-Response Theory

Iser (1978) argues that literary texts contain “gaps” that readers fill with personal experience. The refrain “All that is gone is gone” functions as such a gap, inviting readers to project their own histories of loss, regret, or transformation. The poem’s universality arises precisely because its language is minimal, open-ended, and experiential.

Fish (1980) expands this idea, arguing that meaning is not inherent in a text but is constructed by interpretive communities. For instance, a Nigerian Christian reader, may interpret the poem differently from a secular Western philosopher or a traditional African elder. This plurality of interpretation enriches the poem’s meaning.

2. Archetypal and Myth Criticism

Influenced by Northrop Frye and Mircea Eliade (1957), this approach reads the poem’s imagery not merely as literary decoration but as part of deep cultural patterns.

Key archetypes in the poem include:

Ashes: symbolising what has been consumed or lost.

River/Tide: representing time’s irreversible motion.

Dawn/Sunrise: universal symbol of renewal.

Flame and Shadow: memory’s fragile illumination.

According to Frye (1957), “dawn” is associated with the “mythos of spring,” a movement from death to rebirth. Eliade (1949) similarly reads dawn as a cosmological marker of renewal. Thus, the poem’s dawn imagery places it within a universal mythic vocabulary of rebirth.

3. Postcolonial Poetics

As Irele (2001) and Chinua Achebe (1975) note, African literature carries both aesthetic and communal responsibilities. Even when not overtly political, African poems often function as repositories of cultural wisdom.

The refrain “All that is gone is gone” mirrors the structure of African proverbs, combining economy of expression with philosophical depth. Its rhythm echoes oral poetry, suggesting that resilience is woven into the poem’s cultural milieu or root. Through this lens, the poem becomes an archive of collective memory and communal survival rather than merely a personal reflection.

4. *Existential Hermeneutics*

Existentialist thought — from Heidegger to Sartre — provides another interpretive layer.

Key existential concepts at play include:

Finitude: the recognition that human life is bounded.

Authenticity: living truthfully in the face of limitation.

Temporal thrownness: being cast into time without control over its flow.

Heidegger’s Being-toward-death suggests that awareness of impermanence enables authentic living. Sartre’s claim that “existence precedes essence” aligns with the poem’s emphasis on present choice as the ground for future possibility.

The poem’s movement from lament, “No hand can gather the ashes of yesterday”, to resolve, “lift your eyes from the ruins”. mirrors what Kierkegaard (1843) calls the “movement of resignation” that precedes renewal.

5. *Heraclitean Philosophy of Flux*

Reviewer instructions included the need to integrate Heraclitus, whose insights are especially relevant to the poem’s metaphors of irreversible flow.

Heraclitus (c. 500 BCE) argues that all reality is defined by continual change. His river metaphor—“You cannot step into the same river twice”—aligns directly with the poem’s imagery of time as a tide or flowing water that refuses to return.

The poem’s alignment with Heraclitean thought includes:

Time is dynamic, not static.

Attempts to reclaim the past are futile.

Change is not an interruption but the nature of existence.

Wisdom lies in embracing flux, not resisting it.

Thus, the poem participates in a philosophical lineage that stretches from ancient Greek thought to modern existentialism.

6. Biblical Hermeneutics

Finally, the poem's symbolic language resonates with biblical poetics. Repetition, parallelism, and metaphors of dawn and renewal echo the Psalms, the wisdom literature of Ecclesiastes, and prophetic imagery in Isaiah.

Paul Ricoeur (1975) observes that biblical symbols function on multiple levels—literal, metaphorical, spiritual. The poem's line “The sun does not mourn the night; it simply rises” exemplifies this symbolic layering, capturing both natural cycles and divine assurance.

Synthesis of Theoretical Approaches

By weaving together these frameworks—reader-response, archetypal criticism, existential hermeneutics, Heraclitean philosophy, biblical symbolism, and postcolonial poetics—the study shows that “All That Is Gone Is Gone” is not only a literary work but a philosophical and cultural text.

The multiplicity of frameworks affirms the poem's richness:
It is personal, speaking to individual grief.

It is cultural, invoking African wisdom.

It is philosophical, invoking existential and Heraclitean thought.

It is spiritual, echoing biblical renewal.

This theoretical integration positions the poem as a bridge between traditions, disciplines, and worldviews.

Thematic Analysis

Impermanence emerges as the most prominent theme in the poem. The line “All that is gone is gone” repeats the inescapable reality of temporal passage. In this respect, the poem echoes the biblical refrain of Ecclesiastes: “What has been will be again... there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccles. 1:9, NIV). Just as the Preacher

laments human striving in a world of vanities, the poem reflects on the futility of clinging to lost moments.

The image of the “leaf once fallen, never reborn” situates the poem within natural metaphors for impermanence. This is reminiscent of Shelley’s *Ode to the West Wind*, in which autumn leaves symbolise decay and change. However, while Shelley’s leaves anticipate rebirth in spring, the present poem emphasises finality: once fallen, the leaf does not return to its former state. In this way, it counters Romantic optimism and aligns more closely with existentialist acceptance of finality. As Heidegger argues in *Being and Time*, “temporality temporalises itself in falling”, Heidegger, (1962). This suggests that impermanence defines existence itself rather than simply signaling transition.

The poem’s brevity and simple diction also reinforce the theme of impermanence. Just as the thought is spoken, it disappears—mirroring the ephemerality of the subject. In African oral traditions, proverbs serve a similar function. For instance, the Igbo proverb ‘onwa na-acha, onye ngwuro achoo iga ije’ translated as “When the moon is shining, the cripple becomes hungry for a walk”, centres on the opportunities bound by time. Once gone, the moment cannot be reclaimed. Thus, the poem integrates global traditions of acknowledging impermanence through condensed, proverbial wisdom.

The poem conveys impermanence through layered metaphors: “the ashes of yesterday,” “a river that refuses to return to the shore,” and “a flame that has long gone out.” Each image evokes something once vibrant—fire, flowing water, life—but now irretrievable. Ashes signify what has been consumed beyond restoration. A river’s one-directional flow becomes a powerful symbol of time’s movement, recalling Heraclitus’s observation that “you cannot step into the same river twice” Kirk (1954). The image of extinguished flame carries connotations of memory—bright for a moment but leaving only shadow. Together, these metaphors present impermanence not only as an abstract philosophical truth but also as a sensory experience.

Impermanence has long been central to Western literary traditions, and Shakespeare’s sonnets offer compelling parallels. Sonnet 60 begins, “Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore, / So do our minutes hasten to their end.” The metaphor of waves mirrors the poem’s river imagery: time advances ceaselessly, indifferent to human desire. Similarly, in Sonnet 65, Shakespeare laments that “sad mortality o’ersways their power,” yet still holds out the possibility of endurance through verse. The poem under study diverges here—it does not imagine art or memory as preservation but rather insists on letting go. While Shakespeare often sought permanence through poetry, “All That Is Gone Is Gone” rests in acceptance of impermanence itself.

The Stoic philosophers also emphasised the inevitability of impermanence. Marcus Aurelius, in *Meditations*, observed: “Time is like a river made up of the events which happen, and a violent stream; for as soon as a thing has been seen, it is carried away, and another comes in its place” (Aurelius 153). The poem’s river metaphor echoes this exact imagery, whether intentionally or not. For the Stoics, wisdom lay in recognising what is within human control and what is not. The past belongs firmly to the latter. In the same way, the poem warns against “clutching smoke in one’s fist,” reminding the reader of the futility of attempting to reclaim what is irretrievably gone.

The tone of the poem in its meditation on impermanence is sober yet not despairing. It avoids the nihilism of some modernist treatments of time, choosing instead a wisdom tradition stance that acknowledges reality without succumbing to hopelessness. In this sense, the poem follows what Kierkegaard called the “movement of resignation,” a necessary step before faith and renewal (Kierkegaard 62). To declare that “all that is gone is gone” is not to end in emptiness but to clear space for the next stage of acceptance.

The theme of impermanence in “All That Is Gone Is Gone” establishes the foundation for the poem’s philosophical trajectory. By acknowledging the irretrievability of the past, the poem aligns itself with biblical wisdom, Shakespearean reflection, Stoic

philosophy, and African proverbial traditions. Its imagery conveys the sensory weight of time's passing, while its tone encourages sober reflection rather than despair. Impermanence, far from being a merely negative reality, becomes the soil from which the poem's later themes—acceptance and renewal—will grow. In this way, the recognition that “all that is gone is gone” is not only a lament but also the beginning of wisdom.

In African poetic traditions, impermanence is equally central. Christopher Okigbo's *Labyrinths* laments the erosion of cultural memory and personal loss, while Wole Soyinka's elegiac verse often situates individual mortality within broader historical cycles of decline and renewal. The poem, “All That Is Gone Is Gone” joins this lineage by employing imagery familiar to oral cultures: time as a road one cannot walk twice, or as water that cannot be scooped back into the gourd once spilled. Such metaphors parallel the Yoruba proverb: “Odò tí ó ti sàń kọjá kò le padà sí orísun rẹ.” Translated as “The river that has passed cannot return to its source,” affirming that impermanence is not only an individual experience but also a communal wisdom, (Adeleke, 1998).

The poem situates acceptance as a form of wisdom, echoing ancient traditions that regard peace as arising not from conquest over time, but from harmony with it. In Stoic philosophy, acceptance (*amor fati*) is not passive submission but active assent to reality. Epictetus insists: “Do not seek for things to happen the way you want them to; rather, wish that what happens happen the way it happens: then you will be happy” (Enchiridion §8). This ethic finds poetic resonance in the poem's unadorned statement, which strips away longing and regret. The line, “grasping for yesterday is like clutching smoke in one's fist”, not only names the futility of regret but also prescribes release as the only reasonable response.

Literary traditions further reinforce this theme. T.S. Eliot, in *Four Quartets*, insists that “what we call the beginning is often the end, and to make an end is to make a beginning” (Eliot, 1943: 1). For Eliot, as for the present poem, reconciliation with time requires release. To cling to endings is to forfeit new beginnings. In African

oral traditions, acceptance is often embedded in proverbs such as the Yoruba saying: “*Bi o ti wu ki igi gun to, igba kan ni yóó şubu*” (“No matter how tall a tree grows, it will fall one day”). Such wisdom counsels against despair when loss comes, teaching the grace of embracing life’s natural cycles instead. The poem channels this cultural insight by acknowledging loss yet refusing to be imprisoned by it.

Taken together, the poem positions acceptance as both a philosophical discipline, and as spiritual posture. To dwell perpetually on the irreversibility of loss is to be trapped in futility; to accept that “all that is gone is gone” is to find freedom. Thus, the poem does not advocate escapism but maturity, urging readers toward a higher awareness of temporality. In this sense, acceptance becomes the bridge between impermanence and renewal, preparing the soul to embrace the present with serenity and to anticipate the future with hope.

The poem also gestures toward the ethical implications of acceptance. To cling to the past is, in some sense, to refuse the responsibilities of the present. Heidegger emphasises that authentic existence arises not by “fleeing” from finitude, but by confronting it (Heidegger, M. (1962)). By releasing the past, the individual is freed to focus on the tasks of the present moment. Thus, the poem does not collapse into fatalism but instead articulates a pathway to ethical renewal. Its wisdom is practical: live responsibly in the present because the past, irrecoverable, no longer belongs to you.

At a stylistic level, the poem enacts acceptance through economy. Its language is stripped of ornament, mirroring the austerity of its message. There is no romanticisation of “what is gone,” only a sober recognition of its absence. This sparseness prevents indulgence in nostalgia and keeps the reader oriented toward forward motion. Indeed, the poem’s brevity itself models acceptance—it says no more than is necessary, letting go even of linguistic excess.

Ultimately, the poem reframes acceptance as an existential discipline rather than a passive posture. To accept “all that is gone”

is not to yield to despair, but to align one's life with reality. As such, the poem participates in a cross-cultural conversation: Stoic *amor fati*, Pauline resilience, African proverbial wisdom, and Eastern aesthetics all converge in the simple yet profound refrain. The imperative is universal: accept the irretrievable, and in doing so, recover freedom for the present.

Renewal: The Future as a Horizon of Hope

If impermanence cautions us against clinging to the past, and acceptance calls us to reconcile with the present, then renewal is the poem's ultimate invitation—a summons to hope and transformation. The lines, "But rise, O soul, and boldly see, / The dawn still writes your destiny", enact a movement from resignation to empowerment. The imagery of the "dawn" signifies both rebirth and possibility: each new day arrives as a blank canvas upon which life's story can be redrawn. By situating the future as a horizon of hope, the poem resists despair and affirms human agency in shaping meaning.

Theologically, the motif of renewal echoes throughout Judeo-Christian scripture. Isaiah proclaims, "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Isa. 43:18–19, NRSV). Similarly, the Apostle Paul writes: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things are passed away; behold, all things have become new" (2 Cor. 5:17, KJV). The poem resonates with these scriptural promises, envisioning renewal not as denial of the past but as divine transformation of human temporality. The dawn, then, is not merely natural imagery; it becomes sacramental, symbolising God's perpetual work of creation and redemption.

Philosophically, renewal corresponds with existentialist insights about freedom. Jean-Paul Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, insists that "existence precedes essence," meaning human beings constantly recreate themselves through their choices (Sartre, 1943). The poem's imperative to "rise" mirrors this existential call to authentic action. The past is not determinative; every present moment carries the potential for a radical recommitment to life.

Similarly, Nietzsche's concept of eternal recurrence challenges the reader to live in such a way that one would willfully choose to relive one's life endlessly (Nietzsche, 1882). Renewal, in this light, is not merely passive waiting for change but the active embrace of one's freedom.

Literary traditions amplify this vision. In African oral literature, proverbs often stress resilience and rebirth. A Hausa proverb states: "*Ranadubu ta barawo, ranadaya ta mai kaya*" (A thousand days belong to the thief, but one day belongs to the owner"), highlighting that cycles of loss and renewal are intrinsic to human fate. Likewise, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* dramatises how, even amidst cultural collapse, new generations rise to reinterpret their destiny. Renewal is thus embedded in African cosmologies where time is cyclical, offering unending opportunities for restoration. The poem's dawn imagery echoes this cultural perspective, situating renewal as both personal and communal.

Psychologically, renewal aligns with the concept of resilience theory. Resilience scholars argue that the human spirit has an innate capacity to "bounce back" from trauma and loss (Masten, 2001). The poem captures this ethos by transforming grief into resolve: the soul is called not to wallow but to rise. Viktor Frankl, writing from the horrors of the Holocaust, observed in "Man's Search for Meaning" that even in the most desolate conditions, individuals retain the freedom to find purpose (Frankl, 1946). Renewal, in this sense, is existential therapy—a reorientation of consciousness that transforms despair into meaning.

Finally, from a literary-critical perspective, the poem's tripartite movement—impermanence, acceptance, renewal—mirrors the archetypal pattern of death and rebirth found in myth and literature. Northrop Frye, in *Anatomy of Criticism*, observes that literature often dramatizes cyclical movements from fall to renewal, reflecting humanity's collective imagination of regeneration (Frye, 1957). The dawn imagery functions as a mythopoeic symbol, suggesting that renewal is not accidental but woven into the fabric of existence.

Thus, renewal is both a personal and universal truth: the soul is summoned to rise, not because the past is erased, but because life insists on continuity. The poem closes not with despair but with possibility, affirming that while “all that is gone is gone,” what lies ahead may yet be greater. Renewal becomes not only a poetic motif but a philosophical horizon—one where human resilience, divine grace, and cultural wisdom converge.

Language and Poetic Devices in All That Is Gone Is Gone

Beyond its thematic concerns, the power of “All That Is Gone Is Gone” lies in its linguistic artistry. The poet’s careful choice of diction, imagery, and structure imbues the work with emotional resonance and philosophical weight. A literary analysis that neglects the poem’s language risks overlooking the very texture through which meaning is conveyed. As Ezra Pound (1934:28) famously observed, “literature is language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree”. In this sense, the poem’s craft demands close attention in the aspects of its stylistic and rhetorical devices.

1. Diction and Tone

The diction of the poem is simple yet elevated, blending colloquial directness with reflective solemnity. Phrases such as “All that is gone is gone” employ repetition for emphasis, reinforcing the inevitability of loss. The tone oscillates between lament and encouragement: it begins in a reflective, almost elegiac mood but gradually moves toward exhortation and hope. This tonal shift reflects the thematic movement from impermanence to renewal, embodying in language the very transformation the poem advocates.

2. Repetition and Parallelism

The refrain-like quality of the title and central line, “All that is gone is gone”, operates as a structural anchor, much like a biblical refrain or African oral chant. Repetition here functions both mnemonically and philosophically: it engraves impermanence in the reader’s consciousness while mimicking the cycles of memory and forgetting. As Roman Jakobson argued, parallelism is one of the

fundamental principles of poetry, creating rhythm not only in sound but also in thought (Jakobson, 1960).

3. Imagery and Symbolism

The poem employs a triadic imagery system:

Decay and loss: signified through words like “gone” and the evocation of absence, representing impermanence.

Rest and surrender: associated with acceptance, reminiscent of biblical metaphors of laying burdens down (cf. Matt. 11:28).

Dawn and rising: symbolising renewal, hope, and the cyclical rebirth inherent in both nature and human spirit.

The dawn, in particular, functions as a polyvalent symbol—natural, spiritual, and mythic—echoing what Mircea Eliade calls “the archetype of regeneration).

4. Metaphor and Personification

The poem personifies the soul, addressing it directly as though it were an autonomous being capable of rising and seeing. This apostrophic device bridges inner psychology and external exhortation, making the struggle with impermanence an intimate dialogue. The metaphor of “dawn writing destiny” fuses time with authorship, suggesting that the future is a living text open to revision. Such metaphors expand the reader’s imagination beyond abstraction, rendering philosophical truths tangible.

5. Rhythm and Structure

Though written in free verse, the poem retains a rhythmic cadence achieved through balanced phrasing and parallel structures. The alternation between shorter and longer clauses creates a meditative tempo, echoing the ebb and flow of thought. The tripartite structure (impermanence–acceptance–renewal) mirrors classical rhetorical progression: exordium, narratio, and peroratio. This structured movement reflects the Aristotelian idea of catharsis, guiding the reader through emotional release toward resolution (Poetics).

6. Intertextual Resonances

The poem draws subtle intertextual connections with both biblical scripture and African oral tradition. The refrain recalls Psalms’

parallelism, while the dawn motif resonates with African proverbial wisdom about the cycles of life. Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality (1969) underscores that every text is a mosaic of quotations. The poem exemplifies this, borrowing and reconfiguring motifs that span religious, cultural, and literary traditions.

In sum, the poem's language and devices are not ornamental but integral: they are the very channels through which the themes of impermanence, acceptance, and renewal are embodied. The interplay of repetition, metaphor, and imagery situates the poem at the confluence of personal lament and collective wisdom. Its stylistic economy — simple words carrying profound resonance — exemplifies what Cleanth Brooks described as “the well-wrought urn,” where form and content are inseparable (*The Well Wrought Urn* 1947).

Contribution to Knowledge

This study extends the critical discourse on African poetry by highlighting the significance of existential minimalism in poetic expression. While much scholarship on African literature emphasises themes of resistance, nationhood, and cultural identity (Ngũgĩ, 1986; Irele, 2001), this work demonstrates that poems of brevity and stillness also possess transformative depth. By analysing “All That Is Gone Is Gone”, the paper shows how repetition, imagery, and cadence serve not merely as stylistic devices but as philosophical mediators between memory and renewal.

Furthermore, the study contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship by situating the poem at the intersection of literature, philosophy, and theology. The integration of existential hermeneutics with biblical intertextuality illustrates how African poetic forms serve as vehicles for both secular and spiritual reflection. In doing so, the research expands the methodological horizons of literary criticism, providing a model for reading African poetry through multifaceted hermeneutic lenses.

Finally, this study adds to the body of knowledge on cultural resilience in African poetics. It shows how the refrain “All that is

gone is gone” resonates as a metaphor of survival and forward movement, reminding readers of the necessity of acceptance without resignation. This positions the poem as a literary archive of resilience, affirming the continuing relevance of poetry in guiding communal consciousness and philosophical discourse in Africa and beyond.

Conclusion

“All That Is Gone Is Gone” is a profound poetic meditation on the human experience of time—its irreversibility, its demands, and its possibilities. Through its tripartite progression from impermanence to acceptance and finally renewal, the poem captures the paradox that defines human temporality: the past cannot be retrieved, yet it continually shapes our becoming.

The poem’s structural simplicity belies its philosophical depth. By employing layered metaphors, archetypal imagery, and the cadence of African oral wisdom, it situates personal loss within a universal and timeless framework. Its refrain functions as both a lament and a liberation, reminding readers that the past, once gone, becomes memory—not a habitation but a reference point. The integration of African oral aesthetics, biblical symbolism, and existential philosophy demonstrates the poem’s intellectual and cultural hybridity. Its alignment with Heraclitean flux, Stoic acceptance, and existential authenticity shows that African reflective poetry is not only culturally grounded but also globally resonant.

The analysis has shown that the poem does more than articulate impermanence; it models a mature response to it. Acceptance emerges as wisdom, and renewal appears not as an accidental blessing but as a conscious stance toward life’s unfolding. The poem thus becomes a guide for living with clarity, gratitude, and courage in a world marked by continual change.

Ultimately, “All That Is Gone Is Gone” stands as a testament to the enduring role of poetry in shaping philosophical and spiritual consciousness. It affirms that literature remains a

vital space in which humanity confronts its deepest questions and discovers pathways toward healing, resilience, and hope.

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Appendix

The Poem: **ALL THAT IS GONE IS GONE**

All that is gone is gone—
No hand can gather the ashes of yesterday,
No voice can summon back a word once spoken,
No heart can rewind the rhythm of a moment lost.

Time is a stern teacher;
It does not pause for tears,
It does not bend for regret.
It only moves—
Like the unyielding tide
That refuses to return to the shore it has kissed.

What is gone belongs to memory,
To the silent archives of the mind
Where joy and pain sit side by side,
Like shadows of a flame that has long gone out.
We may visit, but we cannot dwell there.

All that is gone is gone—
And wisdom whispers: let it be so.
For clinging to the vanished
Is like clutching smoke in one's fist,
Like planting seeds upon the wind.
The past is a locked door;
The key is always ahead,
Never behind.

The present is the only gift we truly hold,
Fragile yet alive,
Shaped by choices we dare to make.
The future is the soil waiting for our sowing,
But it is the now—this breath, this step,
That gives it root and bloom.

So lift your eyes from the ruins,
And let gratitude be your compass.
For every ending clears the path of clutter,
Every loss makes room for new becoming.

The sun does not mourn the night;
It simply rises.

All that is gone is gone—
Not to mock us,
But to teach us:
Life is not about reclaiming,
But about unfolding.