

“Ballad of the Downfall of the Fish-House” (Anonymous): A Forensic Approach to Finding the Author and Meaning from History and Critical Discourse Analysis

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Introduction

In this essay, I argue that Edward Lanza Joseph is the author of “Ballad of the Downfall of the Fish House,” also referred to as “Ballad,” since Joseph wrote periodically in the *Port of Spain Gazette* between circa 1832 to 1838, and was the Editor of the same newspaper for eight months in 1838 (Joseph [1838] 2001, xxiii). Edward Lanza Joseph is already known for the dramatic farces *Martial Law* and *Outlaw Slave*, circa 1832; the historical novel, *Warner Arundell*, 1838; the historical sketch, “Maroon Party,” 1835, and his historiographic publication, *History of Trinidad*, 1838. However, recovering poetic works by E. L. Joseph has proven more difficult since many of his poems were published anonymously. For this reason, I use historical sociopragmatic evidence to prove that Joseph did write the anonymous poem, “Ballad of the Downfall of the Fish-House.”

Published under the pseudonym “Robbing-Hood,” in 1836, “Ballad” evokes the activities of the thirteenth century figure, Robin Hood, who allegedly championed the cause of the poor, and fought against corrupt officials and the oppressive system that protected them. The pun on the writer’s *nom de plume* also suggests a satirical attack on the Port of Spain municipal executive (the Cabildo) for the downfall of an existing “Fish House” at the St. Vincent Jetty, King’s Wharf, Port of Spain. The Cabildo, mentioned in the poem, had responsibility for many municipal matters (including supervising markets, appointing city magistrates, scavenging and repairing streets, price fixing, controlling the police, controlling the Royal Gaol, admitting physicians and surgeons, and levying duties and taxes) first under Spanish rule, and then under British rule up to 1840.

Fraser’s *History of Trinidad*, Volume II, records that “Ballad” was published in the *Trinidad Gazette*, a bi-weekly newspaper, re-named as the *Port of Spain Gazette*, after 1825. However, it is not possible to verify the original publication of “Ballad” in the *Port of Spain Gazette* of November 1836, as ruthless collectors seem to have removed vital parts of the newspaper of that year.

Critical Framework

In order to decipher the author and the meaning of “Ballad,” I draw on a sociolinguistic approach to textual analysis, which is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Critical Discourse Analysis “shows how discourse (language in use) is shaped by relations of power and ideology, and the constructive effects that discourse has upon social identities, social relations and systems of knowledge and belief” (Fairclough 1993: 12). Actually, a critical examination of language use in “Ballad” can reveal the writer’s identity, and also give insight into the meaning and the ideology of the text in relation to other contemporary discourse types. Jonathan Culpeper ascribes the study of historical language use in relation to social context and meaning to the field of historical socio-pragmatics, which is an applied sub-discipline of pragmatics.¹

Tischer et al. also acknowledge that “because contextual meaning and postulated intertextuality are preconditions for CDA, there is need for comprehensive information about prevailing social and historical conditions, and historical chains of textual relationships.” Therefore, within the paradigm of CDA, I also relate Norman Fairclough’s distinction between “constitutive intertextuality” and “manifest intertextuality” to the social and the textual contexts of “Ballad.” Fairclough suggests that the “constitutive intertextuality,” of a text comprises the socio-historical practices of the society, and the discourse customs for producing and interpreting the text. Therefore, pertaining to socio-discursive practice, I examine the contexts of the society

and the newspaper, together with the discourse conventions of the publication, for clues about the author and the meaning of “Ballad.”

At the textual level, I also examine aspects of “manifest intertextuality” in the poem, which describe specific linguistic and discursive features of Edward Lanza Joseph’s style in relation to his other works. In essence, “in the intertextual analysis of a text, the objective is to describe its ‘intertextual configuration’, showing for instance how several text types may be simultaneously drawn upon and combined” (Fairclough 1995,14).

Interpreting “Ballad” in Its Socio-Discursive Context

Select editorials taken from the *Port of Spain Gazette* of October 25, and November 18, 1836 verify that the poem indeed refers to the downfall of an extant Fish House in Port of Spain, Trinidad:

(1) Allow me to ask you a question.- Of all the ugly, filthy, blackguard-looking buildings that ever disgraced the dirtiest of the dirty stinking back-streets of Wapping, or the rankest purilious of Row 101, Great Yarmouth, is there anything that can rival for either or any the above named qualities, the present Fish House in King’s Wharf ?..²

(2) Dear Sir,

Some of your Correspondents have at times been very hard upon the municipal authorities for not erecting a New Fish House. Allow me to undeceive them and the public on this subject. The new Fish House could not be erected until now. For with a laudable regard to economy it was resolved (although that resolution has never been made public) that the new fish house should be built out of the materials of the old one, so soon as the old one fell down, and the authorities have been waiting in patience for that event. It has at length taken place, and you shall speedily see a new Phoenix-“Phoenix redeviva” spring up on the same site, but of the materials of the old fish house.

I am your obdt. Servant
Silver- Stick
Marine Square, 15 Nov 1836.³

The writing of this ballad also coincides with the period of Apprenticeship which began in 1834 and was followed by full Emancipation in 1838, in which the plantation system suffered an acute labour shortage as explained by Gelien Matthews in her essay “Trinidad: A Model Colony for British Slave Trade Abolition.”⁴ That is to say, apart from the physical collapse of an extant building, the poem “Ballad” reveals a deeper level of intertextual meaning whereby the metaphor of “the downfall of the Fish-house” extends to the downfall of slavery:

Down fell into the briny sea
Roof, rafter floor and prop;
The fishmongers had grown quite proud
And so they “sunk the shop”

The fish they floundered in the gulf,
T’was their emancipation
Their owners had not mortgaged them,
So got no compensation.

(8 -9)

The mention of “emancipation” in Stanza 9 refers to slave emancipation and key effects of the British Government’s anti-slave labour policies: “Their owners had not mortgaged them, so got no compensation.” At this sub-textual level, “Ballad” also addresses the critical circumstances of the planters’ losses and the liability of “the Executive of the Colony” (The Council of Government)⁵ in administering a designated policy for Apprenticeship.” An anonymous letter to the Editor of the *Port of Spain Gazette* dated February 7, 1834, by a planter on a Tacarigua Estate, supports this notion:

“In consequence of the increased number of emancipated negroes in the Colony, it is not only difficult to employ hired labour without incurring the risk of having harboured a runaway slave, but it also offers an inducement to the latter, from the difficulty of detection, to hire himself as a free labourer, to the great loss of his owner. To remedy the above evils, I beg leave to suggest and I hope the Government will approve of the adoption of the same regulation which exists in France to regulate the agreements between master and workman, which is nearly as follows:- “ The workman is obliged to have a livret (a small book such as is given to every soldier in the British army), in which the Police insert his name, profession, and a description of his person, also his age; and he is obliged, when he goes to a master, to deliver him his book. ... I am warranted to recommend the same to the particular notice of the Executive of the Colony, as the only practicable mode, not only of correcting the evils complained of, but also of distinguishing the truly industrious and well-conducted labourer from the worthless and idle vagabond.”

Finally, the downfall also alludes to the temporary curtailment of revenue payable to the Cabildo when the “Fish House collapsed in 1836. Much later, the *Port of Spain Gazette* of November 21, 1837 recorded that tenders for “Rent of the Fish House” were being received at Cabildo Hall on December 12, 1837 for the following year, 1838:

Cabildo Hall 30th October 1837

Tenders will be received by the Illustrious Cabildo at or before 2’oclock p.m. on Tuesday the 12th December next, for the Rent of the Fish House, for Twelve Months, commencing on the 1st January, 1838, subject to the existing Regulations. The Rent to be paid monthly in advance and two substantial Securities will be required for faithful fulfillment of the Contract. The Tenders must be delivered to the Acting Secretary of the Board, (sealed with the words “Tender for the Fish House” on the cover.

By Order, Charles Fred Knox, Actg. Secretary Cabildo.

Historically, Joseph suggests that “the fish-hall,” a metaphor for the Cabildo Hall, “netted much,” prior to November 1836, in Stanza 3. For this reason, Joseph laments the financial insolvency of the Cabildo due to negligent maintenance and the resultant collapse of the Fish House:

“Illustrious Board! Illustrious Board!
Your errors all bewilder;
Your house has fall’n-you must be,
Cabildo-its rebuilder”

(14. 1-4)

Joseph also links autocratic management of this public interest to the resultant “downfall” of the Fish House and the loss of revenue owed to the Cabildo.

The Regidors were rigid men,⁶
They would make no repair;
But selfishly they still resolved
That folks should sell fish there.

(5. 1-4)

Overall, the foregoing evidence suggests that contemporary “social texts”⁷ were inscribed in the poem.

The Interdiscursivity of Joseph's "Fish" Motif

"Ballad" also exemplifies the "interdiscursivity" of Joseph's works in relation to a recurrent "fish" motif. In *To Find Freedom*, for instance, Anthony De Verteuil cites an excerpt from Joseph's farce *Barrachon*, 1831, in which he questions: "Think you I take the fishes' drink?" Also, the editorial by 'Piscator' cited earlier in this essay can plausibly be traced back to the same author –Edward Lanza Joseph, as a "piscator" is a fish specialist or fishmonger. The Editor of the *Port of Spain Gazette*, H.J. Mills even endorsed Piscator's editorial of October 25, 1836:

"We recommend Piscator's letter to the attention of those who it may concern. We must remark that independent of the dilapidated state of the Fish-House, the site itself is a very great nuisance. The proper place for the erection of such a building would be, at the extreme end of the South Quay, at the corner of St Vincent's Wharf. There the tide would sweep out the offals...."

The introduction to *Warner Arundell* also describes Joseph's narrative as "restless, mirroring the predictable volatility of the sea" (Winer et al. 2001, xxxi). He also shows a penchant for "fishy anecdotes" in *Warner Arundell*,⁸ and in his own historiographic work, *History of Trinidad*, where he remarks quite tongue-in cheek: "I must confess I have bestowed little attention to Icythyology, conceiving that fishes are, except at table, rather 'insipid people'" (Joseph 1838, 67). Indeed, in an otherwise historiographic and referential work, Joseph reveals his "appetite" for satire by superimposing the foregoing de-contextualized negative evaluation on a descriptive section about "Fishes of Trinidad" in *History of Trinidad*. Similarly, in "Ballad," Joseph alludes to activities of the Fish Market which brought revenue to the Cabildo through the sale of local varieties of fish, pearl mining and berthing fees for docking ships, among other activities:

They there sold King-fish, mullets, sprats,
And our Cabildo paid..."
El branche, and oyster branches too,
Were branches of their trade.

Their commerce throve-and every month
Much profit did they get;
The fish-hall netted much- (for all,
Was fish that came to net.) (2 - 3)

Beyond the concomitant use of icythyological imagery in various types of discourse written by E. L. Joseph for satirical effect, there are also distinctive, linguistic features of Joseph's style which warrant examination in the next section, as proof that he is the author of "Ballad."

Manifest Intertextuality and Joseph's Style

At the textual level, Joseph's style is characterized by lexical and discursive strategies for achieving satire in his writing. Joseph uses intertextual strategies such as puns, mixed linguistic codes, and specific lexical items to produce this distinctive effect.

Puns

A *Dictionary of Stylistics* defines puns or word-play as "antanaclasis," or "the repetition of the same word or form or sounds, but in different senses in the near co-text" (Wales 2001, 21). Select examples from "Ballad," *Warner Arundell*, and *History of Trinidad*, given in Table 1, illustrate Joseph's brand of satirical humour.

Table 1: Cross-Sectional Examples of Puns in the Discourse of E. L. Joseph.

TEXT	TEXT TYPE	SAMPLES
<i>Ballad</i>	verse narrative	The crowds for <i>snappers snappish</i> were, And <i>groped</i> in vain for <i>grouper</i> (12. 4-5).
<i>Warner Arundell</i>	historical novel	T'was <i>grease</i> , but living <i>grease</i> no more. (See <i>Annotations in Joseph</i> [1838], 2001 461).
<i>History of Trinidad</i>	historiography	Some years since a Spanish lady of this town had a Carnival dress composed thus:- it was of finest gauze, <i>puckered</i> ; between these <i>puckers</i> small and great fireflies were introduced... (Joseph 1838, 72).

Code-mixing

Another feature of Joseph's satirical humour is his practice of "code-mixing" particularly in coinages using determiners and nouns. In "Ballad" the example of "el branche," in Stanza 2, represents a variation on "branch" which is a license for piloting a maritime vessel. The satirical effect of this mixed coinage is derived from a covert reference to French and Spanish domination in Trinidad's history. Once again, in another poem, "Grog Shop," cited in *To Find Freedom*, Joseph deplors the excesses of drunkenness among the certain social classes and alludes to the hybridity of their lingua franca, French Creole, through code-mixing:

Behold *yon*⁹ Creole youth with tattered dress...
Regard *yon* Negro seated at the door... (De Verteuil 1998, 232)

Lexical Items

There are also specific lexical items which are recurrent feature of Joseph's style in "Ballad," which are used in similar textual contexts in his other works. For example, in "Ballad" the lexical item, "maw," now obsolete, refers figuratively to appetites of voracious slavemongers in Stanza 11, while "maw" literally describes the stomach of a boa constrictor, in a section on "Snakes of Trinidad" in *History of Trinidad* (Joseph 1838, 66). Similarly, "half seas over," in Stanza 12, Line 1, can connote a state of drunkenness among emancipated slaves, as well as being "halfway between one state and another," that is, referring to being between slavery and freedom under the system of Apprenticeship. However, the same lexical item, "half seas over" specifically connotes "being halfway towards a goal or destination," when Joseph describes a failed attempt by a negro boatman to capture a whale in *Warner Arundell* and in "Maroon Party," (Joseph [1838] 2001, 118, 512).

Conclusion

As the first critical assessment of one of E. L. Joseph's poems, this essay has opened the door to future critiques on Joseph's poetic legacy. On this occasion, I have adapted Fairclough's model of Critical Discourse Analysis to prove that the author of "Ballad" is Edward Lanza Joseph, who often drew on his existing writings and social issues in his literary discourse. Therefore, the evidence used in this essay was derived from three contexts of intertextuality: the *socio-historical context* of local history, the *discursive context* of editorial commentary and historical sources in the *Port of Spain Gazette*, and the *linguistic context* of Joseph's satirical language use in "Ballad" and in other contemporary genres authored by him. However, both the social and discursive contexts were condensed as socio-discursive evidence for the purpose of analysis in this essay. In addition, a survey of Joseph's writings reveals that he used "fish" imagery as a recurrent form of criticism against dominant political groups. Another characteristic of Joseph's writing was his use

of puns, code-mixing, and particular lexical items, as persistent elements of his satirical style. Such evidence seems to suggest that it might have been his custom of intertextual borrowing, which brought Joseph under attack by his detractors, who accused him of plagiarism.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to Professor Bridget Brereton for her valuable comments on the manuscript.

Endnotes

1. Jonathan Culpeper, "Historical Sociopragmatics: An Introduction," *Journal of Historical Pragmatics* 10: 2 (2009): 179-186. "Historical Sociopragmatics concerns itself with any interaction between specific aspects of social context and particular historical language use that leads to pragmatic meanings. Its central focus is on language use in its situational context, and how those situational contexts engender norms which speakers engage or exploit for pragmatic purposes."
2. Piscator, Letter to the Editor, *Port of Spain Gazette* October 25, 1836. Sir, my consolation is, the building is in much a state of dilapidation, being now completely without support on one side, that the very first day there happens to be an influx of customers in the building, it will, in all probability, tumble to pieces into the sea beneath. True, the weight of the roof may crush some unfortunate devil of a servant's skull, thick as the negroes caput is said to be, or at least break an arm, or leg, or so; but as Doctors must live, why "that will be all in the way of trade..."
3. Silver-Stick, Letter to the Editor, *Port of Spain Gazette* November 18, 1836. This is likely a response from a member of the Cabildo since the pseudonym "Silver-Stick" is figurative designation for a bodyguard position in the British Royal Household.
4. Gelien Matthews, "Trinidad: A Model Colony for British Slave Abolition." in *The British Slave Trade: Abolition, Parliament and People*, ed. Stephen Farek, Melanie Unwin and James Walvin, (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2007), 84-96. Matthews highlights that a historical shortage of slave labour was exacerbated in Trinidad by Apprenticeship and then Emancipation.
5. Bridget Brereton, *A History of Modern Trinidad 1783-1962*. (Kingston, Heinemann Educational Books Caribbean Ltd, 1981), 73. Brereton shows that the Council of Government, formed in 1832, was of superior political standing and had an executive function over the Colony.
6. The Cabildo continued its municipal function in Port Spain up to 1840 and was relegated to an assembly of authoritarians and antagonists, inferior in status to the Council of Government. *See also note 5*.
7. J.A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*. (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1991), 80. Regarding the discourse conventions of the popular ballad, Cuddon notes that the ballad poet drew his materials from community life, from local and national history, legend and folklore. Allen further explains that 'text' comes to stand for whatever meaning is generated by the intertextual relations between one text and another... Graham Allen, *Intertextuality*. (London: Routledge, 2000), 220.
8. E. L. Joseph, *Warner Arundell*. Edited by Winer et al. (Mona: University of the West Indies Press, 2001), 115-119. Joseph's association with whale expert and harpooner Hilsen described in the *The Urich Diary 1830-1832* might have inspired the tale of the whale.
9. Paul Crosbie et al., *Kwéyòl Dictionary*. (Castries: Ministry of Education, St. Lucia, 2001), 5. "Yon," in the French-Lexicon Creole of Trinidad, is a variant of "Yonn" which translates [a/an] in English.

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