## Sample A



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Emmanuel is a transfer student and this essay was a labour of love crafted alone amidst a rather chaotic first year of 1 B elsewhere. All I had to do was help him organise it - the issights and connections are his own.

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"What themes are represented through the outhouse in Chris Abani's "Graceland"?"

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#### <u>Abstract</u>

This essay is a detailed analysis of the role the outhouse plays in Chris Abani's Graceland. It investigates how Abani develops a variety of themes through the outhouse such as: depravity, life and morality in the slums, democracy and governance, the comfort of a social network and structure within the slums. It sets out to establish the important metaphorical role the outhouse plays with reference both to Abani's themes and the development of the characters of Elvis, Efua, Okon and Sunday. Through textual analysis, it establishes that the connection between these themes is Abani using the familiarity of the outhouse to explore society as a whole. Parallels, such as the filth in the outhouse and the feculent nature of the slums, are drawn between the outhouse and other parts of the plot giving its central role in the text. The essay concludes by drawing up the connections between these desperate themes, the connection being that the themes discussed are omnipotent controlling forces that the characters have no power over. They cannot prevent them or even cushion their effects. The end result is escape becoming the only redemption, forcing Elvis to flee to America.

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#### <u>Introduction</u>

Abani touches on incest, rape, murder, crime, politics and a host of other provocative themes. This vast spectrum of themes caught my attention and got me thinking about the connection between such widely dispersed issues. I was also puzzled by the frequency of Elvis' visits to the outhouse and Abani's constant mention of it. In a novel which confronts very provoking issues, I was intrigued that the author would spend time talking about an outhouse in such excruciating detail. It is this nagging puzzlement, birthed by my pondering on this outhouse and its inextricable link to central themes that has led to this essay which attempts to answer the question: "What themes are represented through the outhouse in Chris Abani's Graceland?"

#### An outhouse in a slum, a slum in an outhouse

An outhouse is a section of a house that is separated from, yet a part of the house. This could be a metaphorical representation of a society within a society, an isolated yet prominent part of society. This is congruent with the plot of the novel as Elvis lives in a part of society that is separated from yet a part of Lagos society, the slums. It could therefore be appreciated that Abani's frequent mention of the outhouse is strongly correlated with his decision to focus more on the Lagos slums and the lives of the people that live in it. The slums become the setting for a huge part of the plot and key characters like the King, Redemption, Okon, Sunday and even the protagonist, Elvis, live in the slums. As the plot progresses the similarities between the outhouse and the slums become more glaring. In the novel the outhouse is usually a lavatory or a bathroom that is constantly in a putrid and unsavoury state. In chapter one Elvis tries not to "touch the slime-covered walls", hinting at the filthy state of the outhouse. This brings to mind slums like Maroko which are said to stink of "refuse dumps, unflushed toilets and stale bodies". The cause of this stench is neglect on the part of humans who for example create the "refuse dumps", as is the case with the outhouse which remains dirty as a result of neglect and a lack of human care.

In the same way the outhouse is tucked away at the back of the house, as if denied by the house, Lagosians never acknowledge the slums. This is why Elvis feels the "people conspired with the city to weave a web of silence around iounsavoury parts". The word "conspired" indicates a conscious attempt by Lagosians to ignore this part of the city. Also Elvis believes the people conspired with "the city" which implies the nature of the city itself tries to hide the slums in its shadow. This is consistent with the word "web" which brings to mind a complex structure

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Graceland, Chris Abani, c 2004.....p6

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Ibid p4

<sup>3</sup> Ibid p7

highlighting the hybridism of Lagos. Hybridism is a recurring theme in post-colonial literature<sup>4</sup>, and is definitely a major theme in the Lagos plot. An example of it is the "Molue", a bus comprising of so many different parts, it is described as a "hybrid vehicle" that is "unique to Lagos" . This illuminates why the outhouse serves multiple purposes. It houses "toilets, bathrooms and kitchens" which represent the myriad and variety that is Lagos. This hybridism is further emphasised by the mural on a wall of a lavatory of a "mermaid"<sup>8</sup>. A "mermaid" comprises of half-man and half-fish, these two parts that make one come from different worlds, fish from the ocean and man from land. This is symbolic for Lagos as it is also described as two different worlds becoming one. Elvis muses that Lagos is "half slum, half paradise"9. It is this "paradise" that seems to over shadow the "slum". This is because "paradise" often refers to a supernatural, or at least quasi-supernatural, place that fulfils all human desire and aspirations usually having some spiritual or religious co-notations. Though a "slum" brings to mind earthly squalor, it does not serve as a strong enough contrast to paradise.

It is this earthly squalor Abani wishes to explore using the outhouse as a potent metaphorical tool. Thus Abani's protagonist, Elvis, becomes the boy in the outhouse and the intellectual in the slums. This may be the reason why it seems like Elvis is the only one who notices the filth of the outhouse, and similarly the problems with Lagos. That is why he is able to diagnose the cause of the problems of society on his bus ride; he says it is because "everything is accepted" 10 and yet the person he is talking to seems not to understand him. In the same way he wonders how anyone could "endure the stench" of the outhouse, this may be because he is the only one who actually perceives this "stench" which may symbolise how he seems to be the only one who

Though fortunte .. <sup>4</sup> CLCWeb Volume 8 Issue 4 (December 2006) Article 1 Isaiah Ilo, "Language in Modern African Drama"

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Graceland, Chris Abani, c 2004...p8

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Ibid p8

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Ibid p79

<sup>8</sup> Ibid p79

<sup>9</sup> Ibid p7

<sup>10</sup> lbid p58

<sup>11</sup> Ibid p79

perceives societal wrongs. Thus Abani uses the outhouse to illustrate the slums, a separate yet integral part of Lagos.

#### A structure with comfort

The outhouse could also represent Elvis' social network in Lagos and Afikpo. After losing his job, witnessing the death of an "Okrika" salesman and having a spell of depression, Elvis heads for the outhouse. He washes in the section of it that is a bathroom and "felt refreshed when he got out"12. This scene illustrates the soothing ability of the outhouse in Lagos. In Lagos the outhouse contains lavatories and bathrooms. In Abani's expositions to Afikpo it has no bathrooms as Elvis "washed hurriedly out in the yard" 13. The absence of a bathroom in Afikpo emphasises the absence of comfort from his social network in Afikpo. Following his refreshing wash in Lagos he has a lovely evening "flirting with the women" 14, showing how the residents of his neighbourhood added a bit of joy to an otherwise terrible day. Conversely in Afikpo there is no such comfort even amongst his friends, as it is during an outing with his friends that his uncle raped him. The presence of only a filthy lavatory in the outhouse symbolises the great discomfort his family and friends brought him in Afikpo. For example Elvis felt his Uncle Joseph's "sweaty, hot smell, choking him" 15, a strong resemblance to the outhouse which "stank in the heat" forcing him to rush out of the lavatory. In like manner Elvis always leaves his family and heads for the cinema or motor parks as he is void of constructive relationships in Afikpo. When his father slaps him after he tells him about Efua's rape he "headed for the local motor park" 17. Spending the evening watching characters like John Wayne leaves him feeling "elevated", it seems like the characters in movies take the role of people in his life. Abani thus uses the outhouse to represent Elvis social network in Lagos and Afikpo.

<sup>12</sup> Graceland, Chris Abani, c 2004...p80

<sup>13</sup> Ibid p124

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Ibid p80

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Ibid p197

<sup>16</sup> Ibid p64

Ibid p146

The outhouse could also represent some sort of structured way of life within the slums. In the last scene before Elvis' departure from Lagos there is a conspicuous absence of an outhouse. This correlates with the destruction of Elvis' neighbourhood, the death of its occupants and the Diaspora of the survivors. In could therefore be strongly argued that the absence of an outhouse in Bridge City represents the disintegration of the structured society Elvis once had. In this chapter Elvis has been forced to live in Bridge City, a place lacking in proper architectural or social structure. Thus, Elvis slept "on a pile of tires" 18 connoting the absence of a bed or conventional furniture. Also the "pile of tires" hints at the fact that is a society that lives on the streets, as "tires" are always on the road. Another pointer to the absence of a proper architectural structure is the fact that the "pile of tires" is the "only dry spot" 19. This highlights the absence of a roof, which illustrates a severe architectural glitch in whatever kind of structure Bridge City is made up of. Most importantly the absence of a roof to protect from "the thundering rain" is symbolic for the absence of a covering from the storms of life. A roof shelters the inhabitants of any building from the elements of nature; this makes a roof a metaphorical symbol of protection. This protection is obviously lacking in Bridge City as none of its inhabitants are sheltered from the harsh realities of life. A potent illustration of this is the daily condition of the children who are often "beaten, rapped, robbed and sometimes killed"21. This alarming situation bucks the trend of an archetypal society in which children benefit the most from societal protection. If children are not protected in Bridge City then no one is, making "surviving the evening"22 the only purpose of living.

Elvis has a first hand experience with this awkward societal structure when a young adolescent girl tries to seduce him. The absence of protection from the ill elements of society has left her with "knowledge far beyond her years" 23. It is therefore pertinent to note that it is as these

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Graceland, Chris Abani, c 2004...p313

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Ibid p313

<sup>20</sup> Ibid p313

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Ibid p309

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Ibid p309

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Ibid p311

events are unfolding that Okon emerges from a "shrubbery in the shadows which served as a toilet"<sup>24</sup>. Here the makeshift lavatory is very similar to the makeshift way of life. Firstly this lavatory is in the "shadows" which confers a lack of light, which could represent a lack of wholesomeness, and so suggests a depraved ethos in Bridge City as "time lost all meaning in the face of that depravation"<sup>25</sup>. Most importantly this darkness is a "shadow", meaning that it is not created by the lack of a light source but rather an object blocking the light source. Abani therefore suggests that kindness is not necessarily absent but hindered. This may be attributed to the extreme poverty in Bridge City as its inhabitants "had been out all day begging"<sup>26</sup>. Thus Blessing and Okon care for Elvis in a place that is supposedly filled with "scavengers", because of the latent kindness hidden in their hearts.

The fact that the lavatory is a "shrubbery" is also vital, as a "shrubbery" is a natural occurrence. This suggests that the people of Bridge City follow primal impulses rather than a structured set of rules or code of conduct. This is buttressed by the fact that Okon, a fully grown man, has relations with a twelve year old girl just after leaving the "shrubbery". Okon's act is described as "crude and lusty" which highlights the fact that he is given into a basic animalistic instinct not a rational human decision. This obviously differs from the first outhouse scene in which Sunday provokes Elvis but he refuses to respond as he "thought better" of it. The difference being that Elvis acts based on logic when there is an outhouse, whilst Okon acts based on passion in the absence of one. This further suggests that the outhouse could symbolise some sort of structure and its absence chaos. This is because even though the outhouse may sometimes be uncomfortable, at other times it may be intellectually productive as Elvis always keeps a book tucked in a "hole in the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Graceland, Chris Abani, c 2004...p311-312

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Ibid p309

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Ibid p309

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Ibid p312

<sup>28</sup> Ibid p5

wall in the toilet"<sup>29</sup>. Thus the outhouse represents some sort of structured way of life within a separate yet integral part of Lagos, the slums.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Graceland, Chris Abani, c 2004...p7

#### An evident decay

At the beginning of the novel the outhouse symbolises Elvis' struggle with moral decay in the slums. In Abani's novel, Graceland, we are first given a detailed description of Elvis' surroundings, we are told about "the smell of garbage from refuse dumps" but very little about Elvis himself. This gives the impression that the situations surrounding this sixteen year old's life and his reactions to them are more relevant than Elvis' biography. That is to say the main conflict in the novel is between Elvis and society. Elvis' first struggle in the novel occurs when he is in the outhouse "trying not to touch the slime-covered walls and used sanitary pad in the corner" 31. What highlights this scene is the fact that prior to this incident Elvis has not attempted to do anything. When his copy of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man cracks at the spine "falling neatly into two halves" Elvis makes absolutely no effort to put it back together. Similarly Elvis opts for walking past his father as opposed to confronting him and his "desire to drive his fist through his fathers face"33. With Jagua Rigogo he chooses resignation over blatantly confronting him about his pointless rhetoric at "past six in de morning"34.

Yet here in the outhouse Elvis makes an attempt "not to touch the slime-covered walls"35. What defines a room or any confined space are its walls so "slime-covered walls" mean that the enclosed space in question is defined by slime (which symbolises filth and decay) on all sides. As the novel progresses it becomes apparent that slums (the part of Lagos the setting is in most of the time) are perfect examples of moral decay as "time lost all meaning in the face of that deprivation"36. Elvis' desire "not to touch" or have anything to do with the filth of the outhouse extends to his desire not to dabble in the moral decay in the slums. This scene illustrates Elvis' initial desire not to have anything to do with the "deprivation" of the slums.

<sup>30</sup> Graceland, Chris Abani, c 2004...p4

<sup>31</sup> Ibid p6

<sup>32</sup> Ibid p5

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Ibid p5

<sup>34</sup> Ibid p5

<sup>35</sup> Ibid p6

<sup>36</sup> Ibid p309

Also it is when he enters the outhouse he thinks about how he moved from a small town in which his father had a good job to "a slum in Lagos"<sup>37</sup>. Meaning he directly equated the outhouse and the Lagos slums, thus Abani again hints at the parallels between the outhouse and the slums. If this is the case and the outhouse represents the slums, then his struggle with filth in the outhouse extends to his struggle with immorality in the slums. The darker side of Elvis' struggle with moral decay in the slums is also highlighted when "closing his eyes, he rushed through his morning toilet"<sup>38</sup>. Elvis "closing his eyes" may represent the dulling of his moral lamp as he blindly follows Redemption on a crime spree. As the plot progresses, there is an obvious reduction in Elvis' will to do the right thing. This eventual lack of desire to consider his actions before taking them is emphasised by Elvis "closing his eyes", as when an individuals eyes are closed he cannot see if what his doing is good or bad. Meaning Abani foreshadows Elvis' mild prostitution, packing cocaine and child trafficking. Elvis' fall from grace is best illustrated when he was more concerned that the white of the grey mound was not the way "he had expected cocaine to be"<sup>39</sup> rather than the illegality of his actions. Thus Abani uses the outhouse scene at the beginning of chapter one to symbolise Elvis' struggle with moral decay in the slums.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Graceland, Chris Abani, c 2004...p6

<sup>38</sup> Ibid p6

<sup>39</sup> Ibid p105

#### Depravity

In chapter six Abani uses Elvis' trip to the outhouse to highlight his departure from the innocent world of children to a world of depravity and filth. In this chapter Elvis "left the others playing and headed for the outhouse, one of these bucket affairs that had to be emptied regularly"<sup>40</sup>. This scene is as awkward as it is foreboding as a young Elvis leaves playing fun games with his mates to deal with the removal of faeces. This is metaphorical for how Elvis leaves the children's world of fun and innocence to face filthy and disgusting matters comparable only to human defecation, as it is soon after he sees Efua "legs spread wide, while Uncle Joseph grunted away between them"<sup>41</sup>. It is symbolic that Elvis witnesses Efua's rape by her own father, just after he had seen an outhouse which "stank in the heat and was home to tomb flies the size of helicopters"<sup>42</sup>. The outhouse is a hidden part of the house; although still part of the house it resides secretly at the back of the house. Consequently it symbolises domestic secrets which are furtive to the innocent onlooker. Elvis witnessed the appalling stench of the outhouse before his firsthand experience with the nauseating stench of a domestic secret so vile "hatred and revulsion filled his nostrils and head"<sup>43</sup>. Thus the outhouse foreshadows Elvis attaining a consciousness of domestic perversity.

Another issue highlighted in this scene is the dung man, this is an individual who "emptied the bucket" which entails taking away the faeces in order to make the outhouse a more hygienic and sanitary environment. This is a job that requires a great deal of self-sacrifice and endurance, as he himself must endure the feculence and stench to ameliorate the condition of the outhouse. The dung man is used to portray Efua's self- sacrifice, so Elvis witnesses her rape while trying to pay the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Graceland, Chris Abani, c 2004...p64

<sup>41</sup> Ibid p64

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Ibid p64

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Ibid p64

dung man his wages. Efua easing the burden on Elvis' conscience by telling him "it's not (his) fault"<sup>44</sup> is similar to the dung man bearing the worst to make things better. She "pulled him to her tiny body"<sup>45</sup> to comfort him, after she had been traumatically raped by her own father, disregarding her ordeal to make him comfortable. In this chapter Abani uses Elvis' trip to the outhouse to highlight his departure from the innocent world of children to a world of depravity and filth. He also highlights Efua's self-sacrifice through the dung man; this correlates with themes discussed earlier. As if the outhouse represents the Elvis' social network, it is coherent that in this scene it symbolises the underlying depravity in his family.

44 Graceland, Chris Abani, c 2004...p65

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Ibid p65

#### A mural of governance

In chapter seven Abani uses the mural on the outhouse to symbolise Lagos' democracy and governance in Lagos. Elvis is about to use the outhouse after the incident in which the "Okrika" seller commits suicide because the government burned his goods It is therefore metaphorical that he encounters a strange yet symbolic mural on the wall of one of the toilets. This mural represents democracy and governance in Lagos. As Elvis has just witnessed an atrocity committed by the government, his mind must have been burning with questions as to the injustice of the state's leadership. A metaphor laced mural answers these questions. The first thing about the mural is it was put there by the landlord to "clean things up" Correspondingly Lagosians, who, like the landlord, own the land, installed a democratic government to improve their quality of life. Yet this democracy, like the mural, has faded due to "grime and heat" as there is an omnipresent military force throughout the novel (here Abani allows the plot to correlate with historic events here General Buhari's coup in 1983) 49.

He notices a "river scene"<sup>50</sup>, the river symbolising life as water is essential for life, and in rural areas the river is a main source of livelihood. The "mermaid"<sup>51</sup>, a hybrid, symbolises the hybridism of this democracy. Half of a mermaid is human which is not part of the river life; this represents the foreign aspects of democracy, as it is not indigenous to Lagos. The other half is fish which is found in the river representing the fact that Lagosians practice democracy, inculcating their Lagos ideas and value systems. She is "holding a baby in one hand" <sup>52</sup>which represents the future, as

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Graceland, Chris Abani, c 2004...p73-74

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Ibid p74

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Ibid p74

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> The Nigerian State, William D. Graf...p149

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Ibid p74

<sup>51</sup> Ibid p74

<sup>52</sup> Graceland, Chris Abani, c 2004...p74

babies are symbols of posterity. In the other hand "a staff of power" which symbolises the authority and governance of the democratic government.

Unfortunately there is "a python draped around her neck"<sup>54</sup>, emphasising the brutal strangulating forces that have robbed Lagos democracy of breath and strength. And this python is "still discernable"<sup>55</sup> as the military are ruling and menacing individuals, like the Colonel have a tremendous amount of power. Thus Jimoh says, "Dere is no right or wrong with soldier. Just what we want"<sup>56</sup>. What is represented by the crown that "hovered over her black hair" is the destined glory of democracy that Lagosians have sensed but not touched, as the crown "hovers" but does not touch the hair. The stars that "gleamed in the air around her blue body"<sup>57</sup> represent those beacons of light and hope that seem so close yet are so distant and farfetched as no one has ever touched a star. Her identity is lost as "her face, however, was scratched out"<sup>58</sup> and without a face she is totally and completely unrecognisable as her face is her identity. In chapter seven Abani then uses the mural on the outhouse to symbolise Nigeria's democracy and governance in Lagos. This is vital to the outhouse representing the slums as government negligence is most obvious in the slums.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid p74

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Ibid p74

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> Ibid p74

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Ibid p121

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> Ibid p74

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> Ibid p74

#### Conclusion

Thus the outhouse symbolises Elvis' society in its entirety, becoming a disquieting place that is unfailingly unsavoury to the senses, both physically and emotionally, yet is revisited time and time again. Elvis loathes going there but has no choice as the themes expressed through the outhouse are omnipotent forces that mould the lives of the characters, yet are forces they have no control over. The outhouse becomes a place for the close inspection of these forces which evokes disgust as well as distressing enlightenment. A potent example is the last outhouse scene. After Sunday realises that Uncle Joseph raped both Efua and Elvis he releases what is described as "a howl" 1999. In the next Lagos scene with Sunday in chapter nineteen, Sunday awakes and heads for the outhouse where:

"He peed, staring at the amber liquid collecting in the bowl as though he expected to divine what had woken him. As he poured the bucket of water in to flush it, he felt like his life was going down the drain" 60

At this point Sunday analyses his life through a close inspection, the urine representing the pollution of his life actions which are just as nasally offensive. As he looks at the urine he can see the obvious wrong of his past actions staring him in the face as clear and eye catching as the "amber liquid collecting in the bowl". Its presence cannot be ignored and its pungent aroma is unmistakeably offensive. At this point of personal conviction he is aware that he has finally awoken to the realities of his life's actions but cannot "divine what had woken him". Though he is confused about the source of his sudden epiphany, he is certain that his actions, based on all manner of falsehoods, are nothing but worthless hence he does not he sitate "to flush it". This is not a

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Graceland, Chris Abani, c 2004...p189

<sup>60</sup> lbid p202

revelation that offers the comfort or joy of knowing but the bitter sting of acknowledging, "his life was going down the drain". This revelation explains why at the end of his life, Sunday makes no attempt to survive, for he knows it was over a long time ago, as he never had control of the brutal forces steering his life to a disheartening conclusion.

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Achievement level Second First maximum examiner examiner 2 A research question Assessment criteria 2 **B** introduction C investigation 4 **D** knowledge and understanding 4 E reasoned argument F analysis and evaluation G use of subject language H conclusion 2 I formal presentation 4 J abstract 2 4 K holistic judgment Total out of 36

Name of first examiner: (CAPITAL letters)	Examiner number:
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