



LITERATURE

Resource Guide

An Introduction to Anglophone African Literature

2017–2018

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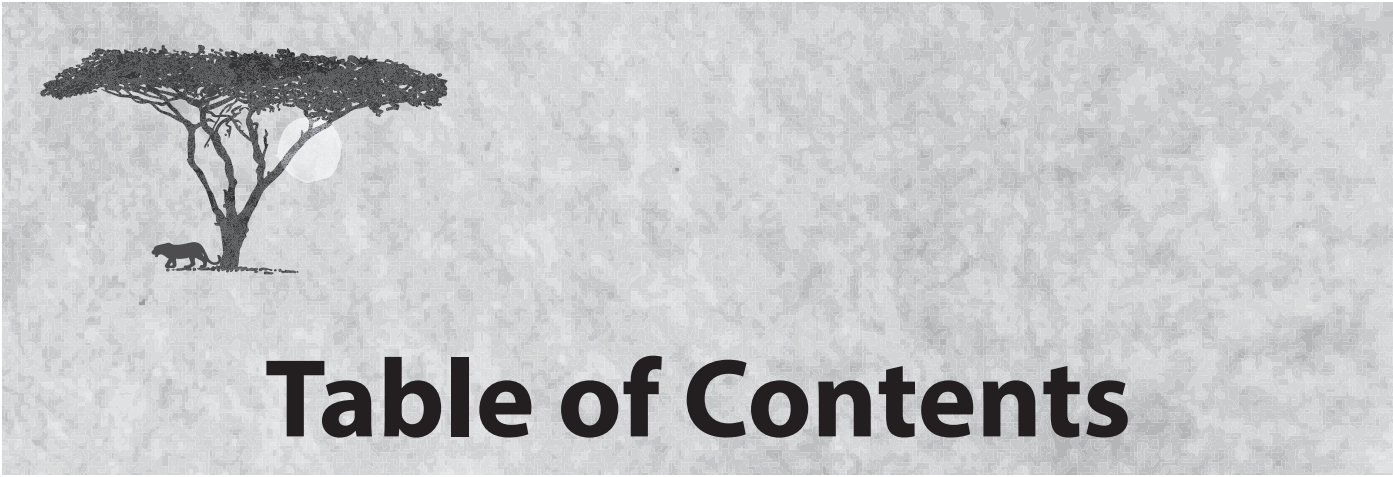


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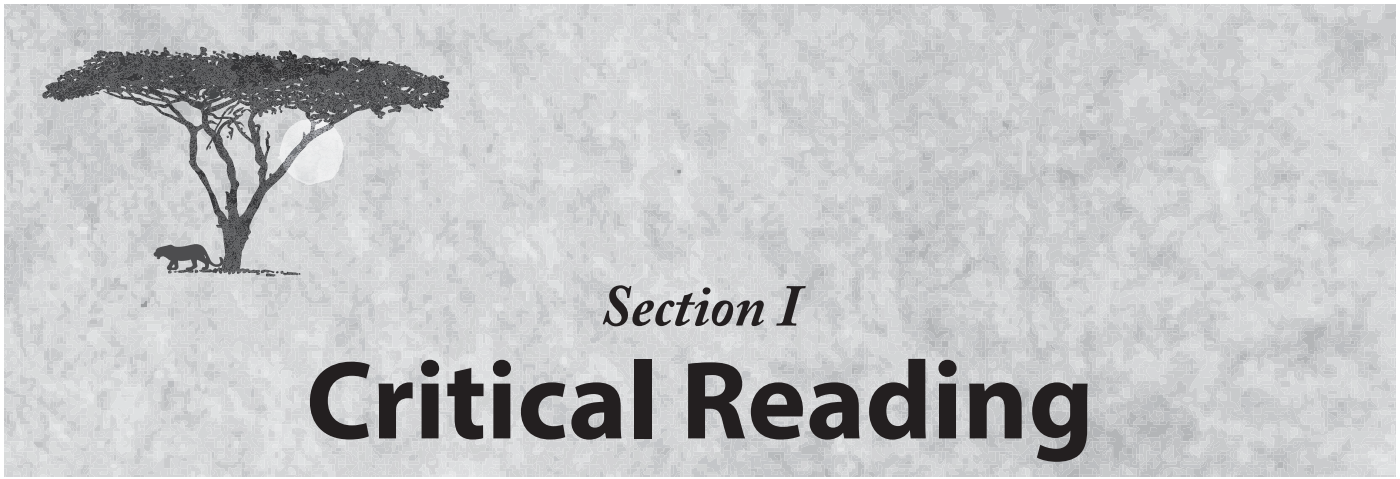
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Section I

Critical Reading

Critical reading is a familiar exercise to students, an exercise that many of them have been engaged in since the first grade. Critical reading forms a significant part of the PSAT, the SAT, the ACT, and both Advanced Placement Tests in English. It is the portion of any test for which students can do the least direct preparation, and it is also the portion that will reward students who have been lifelong readers. Unlike other parts of the United States Academic Decathlon[®] Test in Literature, where the questions will be based on specific works of literature that the students have been studying diligently, the critical reading passage in the test, as a previously unseen passage, will have an element of surprise. In fact, the test writers usually go out of their way to choose passages from works not previously encountered in high school so as to avoid making the critical reading items a mere test of recall. From one point of view, not having to rely on memory actually makes questions on critical reading easier than the other questions because the answer must always be somewhere in the passage, stated either directly or indirectly, and careful reading will deliver the answer.

Since students can feel much more confident with some background information and some knowledge of the types of questions likely to be asked, the first order of business is for the student to contextualize the passage by asking some key questions. Who wrote it? When was it written? In what social, historical, or literary environment was it written?

In each passage used on a test, the writer's name is provided, followed by the work from which the passage was excerpted or the date it was published or the dates of the author's life. If the author is well known to high school students (e.g., Charles Dickens,

F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Jane Austen), no dates will be provided, but the work or the occasion will be cited. For writers less familiar to high school students, dates will be provided. Using this information, students can begin to place the passage into context. As they start to read, students will want to focus on what they know about that writer, his or her typical style and concerns, or that time period, its values and its limitations. A selection from Thomas Paine in the eighteenth century is written against a different background and has different concerns from a selection written by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. prior to the passage of the Civil Rights Act. Toni Morrison writes against a different background from that of Charles Dickens.

Passages are chosen from many different kinds of texts—fiction, biography, letters, speeches, essays, newspaper columns, and magazine articles—and may come from a diverse group of writers, varying in gender, race, location, and time period. A likely question is one that asks readers to speculate on what literary form the passage is excerpted from. The passage itself will offer plenty of clues as to its genre, and the name of the writer often offers clues as well. Excerpts from fiction contain the elements one might expect to find in fiction—descriptions of setting, character, or action. Letters have a sense of sharing thoughts with a particular person. Speeches have a wider audience and a keen awareness of that audience; speeches also have some particular rhetorical devices peculiar to the genre. Essays and magazine articles are usually focused on one topic of contemporary, local, or universal interest.

Other critical reading questions can be divided into two major types: reading for meaning and reading for analysis. The questions on reading for

meaning are based solely on understanding *what* the passage is saying, and the questions on analysis are based on *how* the writer says what he or she says.

In reading for meaning, the most frequently asked question is one that inquires about the passage's main idea since distinguishing a main idea from a supporting idea is an important reading skill. A question on main ideas is sometimes disguised as a question asking for an appropriate title for the passage. Most students will not select as the main idea a choice that is neither directly stated nor indirectly implied in the passage, but harder questions will present choices that do appear in the passage but are not main ideas. Remember that an answer choice may be a true statement but not the right answer to the question.

Closely related to a question on the main idea of a passage is a question about the writer's purpose. If the passage is fiction, the purpose, unless it is a digression—and even digressions are purposeful in the hands of good writers—will in some way serve the elements of fiction. The passage will develop a character, describe a setting, or advance the plot. If the passage is non-fiction, the writer's purpose might be purely to inform; it might be to persuade; it might be to entertain; or it might be any combination of all three of these. Students may also be questioned about the writer's audience. Is the passage intended for a specific group, or is it aimed at a larger audience?

The easy part of the Critical Reading section is that the answer to the question is always in the passage, and for most of the questions, students do not need to bring previous knowledge of the subject to the task. However, for some questions, students are expected to have some previous knowledge of the vocabulary, terms, allusions, and stylistic techniques usually acquired in an English class. Such knowledge could include, but is not limited to, knowing vocabulary, recognizing an allusion, and identifying literary and rhetorical devices.

In addition to recognizing the main idea of a passage, students will be required to demonstrate a more specific understanding. Questions measuring this might restate information from the passage and ask students to recognize the most exact restatement. For such questions, students will have to

demonstrate their clear understanding of a specific passage or sentence. A deeper level of understanding may be examined by asking students to make inferences on the basis of the passage or to draw conclusions from evidence in the passage. In some cases, students may be asked to extend these conclusions by applying information in the passage to other situations not mentioned in the passage.

In reading for analysis, students are asked to recognize some aspects of the writer's craft. One of these aspects may be organization. How has the writer chosen to organize his or her material? Is it a chronological narrative? Does it describe a place using spatial organization? Is it an argument with points clearly organized in order of importance? Is it set up as a comparison and contrast? Does it offer an analogy or a series of examples? If there is more than one paragraph in the excerpt, what is the relationship between the paragraphs? What transition does the writer make from one paragraph to the next?

Other questions could be based on the writer's attitude toward the subject, the appropriate tone he or she assumes, and the way language is used to achieve that tone. Of course, the tone will vary according to the passage. In informational nonfiction, the tone will be detached and matter-of-fact, except when the writer is particularly enthusiastic about the subject or has some other kind of emotional involvement such as anger, disappointment, sorrow, or nostalgia. He or she may even assume an ironic tone that takes the form of exaggerating or understating a situation or describing it as the opposite of what it is. With each of these methods of irony, two levels of meaning are present—what is said and what is implied. An ironic tone is usually used to criticize or to mock.

A writer of fiction uses tone differently, depending on what point of view he or she assumes. If the author chooses a first-person point of view and becomes one of the characters, he or she has to assume a persona and develop a character through that character's thoughts, actions, and speeches. This character is not necessarily sympathetic and is sometimes even a villain, as in some of the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe. Readers have to pick up this tone from the first few sentences. If the author is writing

(continued on page 9)

SAMPLE PASSAGE TO PREPARE FOR CRITICAL READING

In order to prepare for the critical reading portion of the test, it may be helpful for students to take a look at a sample passage. Here is a passage used in an earlier test. The passage is an excerpt from Mary Shelley's 1831 Introduction to *Frankenstein*.

- "We will each write a ghost story," said Lord Byron, and his proposition was acceded to. There were four of us. The noble author began a tale, a fragment of which he printed at the end of his poem of Mazeppa. Shelley, more apt to embody ideas and sentiments in the radiance of brilliant imagery and in the music of the most melodious verse that adorns our*
- (5) *language than to invent the machinery of a story, commenced one founded on the experiences of his early life. Poor Polidori had some terrible idea about a skull-headed lady who was so punished for peeping through a key-hole—what to see I forget: something very shocking and wrong of course; but when she was reduced to a worse condition than the renowned Tom of Coventry¹, he did not know what to do with her and*
- (10) *was obliged to dispatch her to the tomb of the Capulets, the only place for which she was fitted. The illustrious poets also, annoyed by the platitude of prose, speedily relinquished their uncongenial task.*
- I busied myself to think of a story—a story to rival those which had excited us to this task. One which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature and awaken thrilling*
- (15) *horror—one to make the reader dread to look round, to curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart. If I did not accomplish these things, my ghost story would be unworthy of its name. I thought and pondered—vainly. I felt that blank incapability of invention which is the greatest misery of authorship, when dull Nothing replies to our anxious invocations. "Have you thought of a story?" I was asked each morning, and each*
- (20) *morning I was forced to reply with a mortifying negative.*

Mary Shelley

Introduction to *Frankenstein* (1831)

1. Tom of Coventry—Peeping Tom who was struck blind for looking as Lady Godiva passed by.

INSTRUCTIONS: On your answer sheet, mark the lettered space (a, b, c, d, or e) corresponding to the answer that BEST completes or answers each of the following test items.

- 1. The author's purpose in this passage is to**
- analyze the creative process
 - demonstrate her intellectual superiority
 - name-drop her famous acquaintances
 - denigrate the efforts of her companions
 - narrate the origins of her novel

- 2. According to the author, Shelley's talents were in**
- sentiment and invention
 - diction and sound patterns
 - thought and feeling
 - brightness and ornamentation
 - insight and analysis

3. The author's descriptions of Shelley's talents might be considered all of the following EXCEPT
- accurate
 - prejudiced
 - appreciative
 - detached
 - exaggerated
4. The author's attitude toward Polidori is
- amused
 - sincere
 - derisive
 - ironic
 - matter-of-fact
5. The author's approach to the task differs from that of the others in that she begins by thinking of
- her own early experiences
 - poetic terms and expressions
 - the desired effect on her readers
 - outperforming her male companions
 - praying for inspiration
6. At the end of the excerpt the author feels
- determined
 - despondent
 - confident
 - relieved
 - resigned
7. "Noble" (line 2) can be BEST understood to mean
- principled
 - aristocratic
 - audacious
 - arrogant
 - eminent
8. All of the following constructions, likely to be questioned by a strict grammarian or a computer grammar check, are included in the passage EXCEPT
- a shift in voice
 - unconventional punctuation
 - sentence fragments
 - run-on sentences
 - a sentence ending with a preposition
9. In context "platitude" (line 11) can be BEST understood to mean
- intellectual value
 - philosophical aspect
 - commonplace quality
 - heightened emotion
 - demanding point of view
10. "The tomb of the Capulets" (line 10) is an allusion to
- Shakespeare
 - Edgar Allan Poe
 - English history
 - Greek mythology
 - the legends of King Arthur

ANSWERS AND EXPLANATIONS OF ANSWERS

- (e) This type of question appears in most sets of critical reading questions. (a) might appear to be a possible answer, but the passage does not come across as very analytical, nor does it seem like a discussion of the creative process but rather is more a description of a game played by four writers to while away the time. (b) and (c) seem unlikely answers. Mary Shelley's account here sounds as if she is conscious of **inferiority** in such illustrious company rather than **superiority**. She has no need to name-drop, as she married one of the illustrious poets and at that time was the guest of the other. She narrates the problems she had in coming up with a story, but since the passage tells us that she is the author of *Frankenstein*, we know that she did come up with a story. The answer is (e).
- (b) This type of question asks readers to recognize a restatement of ideas found in the passage. The sentence under examination is found in lines 3–6, and students are asked to recognize that "diction and sound patterns" refers to "radiance of brilliant imagery" and "music of the most melodious verse." (a) would not be possible because even his adoring wife finds him not inventive. "Thought and feeling," (c), appear as "ideas and sentiments" (line 3), which according to the passage are merely the vehicles to exhibit Shelley's talents. Answer (d), incorporating "brightness," might refer to "brilliant" in line 4, but "ornamentation" is too artificial a word for the author to use in reference to her talented husband. (e) is incorrect, as insight and analysis are not alluded to in the passage.

3. (d) This question is related to Question 2 in that it discusses Shelley's talents and the author's opinion of them. The writer is obviously not "detached" in her description of her very talented husband. She is obviously "prejudiced" and "appreciative." She may even exaggerate, but history has shown her to be accurate in her opinion.
4. (a) This is another question about the writer's attitude. Some of the adjectives can be immediately dismissed. She is not ironic—she means what she says. She is not an unkind writer, and she does not use a derisive tone. However, there is too much humor in her tone for it to be sincere or matter-of-fact. The correct answer is that she is amused.
5. (c) This question deals with the second paragraph and how the author set about writing a story. Choices (a), (b), (d), and (e) may seem appropriate beginnings for a writer, but they are not mentioned in the passage. What she does focus on is the desired effect on her readers, (c), as outlined in detail in lines 13–16.
6. (b) This question asks for an adjective to describe the author's feeling at the end of the excerpt. The expressions "blank incapability" (line 17) and "mortifying negative" (line 20) suggest that "despondent" is the most appropriate answer.
7. (b) This question deals with vocabulary in context. The noble author is Lord Byron, a hereditary peer of the realm, and the word in this context of describing him means "aristocratic." "Principled," (a), and "eminent," (e), are also possible synonyms for "noble" but not in this context. Byron in his private life was eminently unprincipled (nicknamed "the bad Lord Byron") and lived overseas to avoid public enmity. (c) and (d) are not synonyms for "noble."
8. (d) This is a type of question that appears occasionally in a set of questions on critical reading. Such questions require the student to examine the sentence structure of professional writers and to be aware that these writers sometimes take liberties in order to make a more effective statement.
They know the rules, and, therefore, they may break them! An additional difficulty is that the question is framed as a negative, so students may find it a time-consuming question as they mentally check off which constructions Shelley does employ so that by a process of elimination they may arrive at which construction is not included. The first sentence contains both choices (a) and (e), a shift in voice and a sentence ending in a preposition. Neither of these constructions is a grammatical error, but computer programs point them out. The conventional advice is that both should be used sparingly, and they should be used when avoiding them becomes more cumbersome than using them. The sentence beginning in line 14 is a sentence fragment (c), but an effective one. Choice (b) corresponds to the sentence beginning in line 6 and finishing in line 11, which contains a colon, semicolon, and a dash (somewhat unconventional) without the author's ever losing control. This sentence is not a run-on even though many students may think it is! The answer to the question then is (d).
9. (c) Here is another vocabulary in context question. Knowing the poets involved and their tastes, students will probably recognize that it is (c), the commonplace quality of prose, that turns the poets away and not one of the loftier explanations provided in the other distracters.
10. (a) The allusion to "the tomb of the Capulets" in line 10 is an example of a situation where a student is expected to have some outside knowledge, and this will be a very easy question for students. *Romeo and Juliet* is fair game for American high school students. Notice that the other allusion is footnoted, as this is a more obscure allusion for American high school students, although well known to every English schoolboy and schoolgirl.

a third-person narrative, the tone will vary in accordance with how intrusive the narrator appears to be. Some narrators are almost invisible while others are more intrusive, pausing to editorialize, digress, or, in some cases, address the reader directly.

Language is the tool the author uses to reveal attitude and point of view. A discussion of language includes the writer's syntax and diction. Are the sentences long or short? Is the length varied—is there an occasional short sentence among longer ones? Does the writer use parallelism and balanced sentence structure? Are the sentences predominantly simple, complex, compound, or compound-complex? How does the writer use tense? Does he or she vary the mood of the verb from indicative to interrogative to imperative? Does the writer shift between active and passive voice? If so, why? How do these choices influence the tone?

Occasionally, a set of questions may include a grammar question. For example, an item might require students to identify what part of speech a particular word is being used as, what the antecedent of a pronoun is, or what a modifier modifies. Being able to answer demonstrates that the student understands the sentence structure and the writer's meaning in a difficult or sometimes purposefully ambiguous sentence.

With diction, or word choice, one must also consider whether the words are learned and ornate or simple and colloquial. Does the writer use slang or jargon? Does he or she use sensual language? Does the writer use figurative language or classical allusions? Is the writer's meaning clearer because an abstract idea is associated with a concrete image? Does the reader have instant recognition of a universal symbol? If the writer does any of the above, what tone is achieved through the various possibilities of language? Is the writing formal or informal? Does the writer approve of or disapprove of or ridicule his or her subject? Does he or she use connotative rather than denotative words to convey these emotions? Do you recognize a pattern of images or words throughout the passage?

Some questions on vocabulary in context deal with a single word. The word is not usually an un-

familiar word, but it is often a word with multiple meanings, depending on the context or the date of the passage, as some words have altered in meaning over the years.

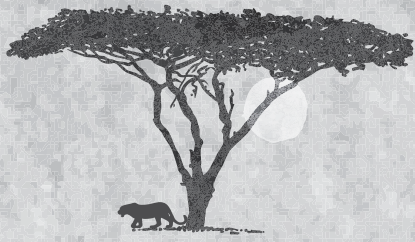
The set of ten questions on pages 6–7 is very typical—one on purpose, a couple on restatement of supporting ideas, some on tone and style, two on vocabulary in context, and one on an allusion. Students should learn how to use the process of elimination when the answer is not immediately obvious. The organization of the questions is also typical of the usual arrangement of Critical Reading questions. Questions on the content of the passage, the main idea, and supporting ideas generally appear first and are in the order they are found in the passage. They are followed by questions applying to the whole passage, including general questions about the writer's tone and style. Students should be able to work their way through the passage, finding the answers as they go.

Additional questions on an autobiographical selection like this passage might ask what is revealed about the biographer herself or which statements in the passage associate the author with Romanticism.

Since passages for critical reading come in a wide variety of genres, students should keep in mind that other types of questions could be asked on other types of passages. For instance, passages from fiction can generate questions about point of view, about characters and how these characters are presented, or about setting, either outdoor or indoor, and the role it is likely to play in a novel or short story.

Speeches generate some different kinds of questions because of the oratorical devices a speaker might use—repetition, anaphora, or appeals to various emotions. Questions could be asked about the use of metaphors, the use of connotative words, and the use of patterns of words or images.

The suggestions made in this section of the resource guide should provide a useful background for critical reading. Questions are likely to follow similar patterns, and knowing what to expect boosts confidence when dealing with unfamiliar material.



Section II

***Things Fall Apart* (1958), Chinua Achebe**

*Albert Chinnalumogu
(Chinua) Achebe*

Critics agree that Chinua Achebe (1930–2013) is the most read, and perhaps the most well-known, African writer of the twentieth and early twenty-first century. According to Ernest N. Emenyonu, a respected critic of African literature, “Chinua Achebe, a literary icon of the 20th century is widely regarded as Africa’s best novelist to date, and one of the world’s greatest in modern times.”¹ His first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), which we will focus on in this resource guide, is read worldwide as a classic in African studies as well as in Anglophone African and/or postcolonial literary studies. It is part of the required reading for many high school English or World Literature courses in the United States. In addition to the field of Anglophone literary studies, it is taught and discussed in a wide range of courses on Africa, in fields including anthropology, sociology, history, ethnography, oral literature and folklore, art, and performance studies. As such, it has also been translated into over fifty-five languages.²

The Nigerian writer and literary critic Albert Chinnalumogu Achebe, known to the world as Chinua Achebe, was born on November 16, 1930, in the village of Ogidi in eastern Nigeria (then part of the British Southern Protectorate) to “devout Christian parents.”³ His father, Achebe remembers, “had joined the new faith as a young man and risen rapidly in its ranks to become an evangelist and church teacher.”⁴ This background gave Achebe privileges, and he would benefit from his father’s position during his early education in the Church Missionary Society’s school. At fourteen (1944), he was enrolled in Gov-



Nigerian writer and literary critic Chinua Achebe.

ernment College, Umuahia. About his admission to college, Achebe writes, “I was, of course, most fortunate in gaining admission to a government college, one of those rare schools which the colonial administration built and endowed lavishly, for obscure reasons of its own.”⁵ Achebe later attended University College, Ibadan, where he studied literature and graduated with a Bachelors of Arts (B.A.) degree in 1953. In 1954, Achebe joined the Nigerian Broadcasting Company in Lagos. From 1961 until 1966, he was the Company’s Director of External Broadcasting.

Timeline of Major Events and Publications

In 1958, *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe’s first novel was published by Heinemann Educational Books, and in

1962 it became the first volume in the publisher's newly established African Writers Series.⁶ According to James Currey, Achebe later became "the first Editorial Adviser" to the African Writers Series. His "informed and calm efficiency was a factor in getting the Series off to such an extraordinarily fast start."⁷ *Things Fall Apart* won the prestigious Margaret Wong Memorial Prize shortly after its publication. Set at the moment of first contact between European and African peoples, the novel explores the political and social consequences of this contact, particularly the resulting disruption of African indigenous cultures.

Achebe's second novel, *No Longer at Ease*, was published in 1960, at the cusp of Nigerian independence. As a sequel to *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease* includes sections that Achebe had originally written as part of his first novel.⁸ In *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe examines a nation at the point of change or transition from the colonial to the post-colonial period. Focusing on Obi Okonkwo, who has just returned to Nigeria from England, where he had received a British education, Achebe looks at this moment of transition and the identity crisis of the new (Western-educated) Nigerian elite represented by Obi Okonkwo. Obi Okonkwo, who has been sent to study in England on a scholarship from the Umuofia Progressive Union (UPU), is the grandson of Okonkwo, the protagonist in *Things Fall Apart*. In 1964, Achebe published his third novel, *Arrow of God*. Many critics perceive this novel as Achebe's best and most artistically rigorous work. In this novel, as in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe examines precolonial Africa and the consequences of colonization for the Igbo people and their society.

Achebe's *A Man of the People* was published in 1966. This novel, set in a post-independence fictional country (critics have identified it as Nigeria), was published just before the [Nigeria-Biafra War](#) (1967–70). In it, Achebe focuses on the corruption and the lack of accountability of the emerging political leadership of a fictional African country. Scholars have suggested that the novel represents Achebe's prophetic vision of the Nigeria-Biafra War, which began only a few days after the publication of the work. When Igbos were being massacred in northern and western Nigeria in 1966, Achebe fled with his family from Lagos to Biafra in eastern Nigeria. He supported Biafra's cause and eventually began serving



Chinua Achebe is widely regarded as Africa's best novelist to date and one of the world's greatest in modern times.

as Biafra's advocate to the international community, traveling to many countries to lobby them to support Biafra. In 1971, his collection of poems written during the Nigeria-Biafra War was published under the title: *Beware, Soul Brother and Other Poems*. The collection won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1972.

Between 1972 and 1975, Achebe was a Visiting Professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. In 1973, he published *Christmas in Biafra and Other Poems*, a revised and extended version of the poems in *Beware, Soul Brother*. *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, a collection of essays, was published in 1975. In the same year, Achebe was appointed University Professor of English at the University of Connecticut, Storrs. In 1976, Achebe returned to Nigeria and accepted a position at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

In 1983, Achebe published the nonfiction book *The Trouble with Nigeria*, which examines Nigeria as a postcolonial state, pointing out that the nation's trouble is "the failure of leadership." In this work, Achebe criticizes the irresponsible and corrupt leaders of postcolonial Nigeria, a theme that he had explored earlier in *A Man of the People*. Achebe's novel *Anthills of the Savannah* was published in 1987. A year later (1988), Achebe published a collection of essays, *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays*, bringing together a number of his previously published essays, including "An Image of Africa: Rac-

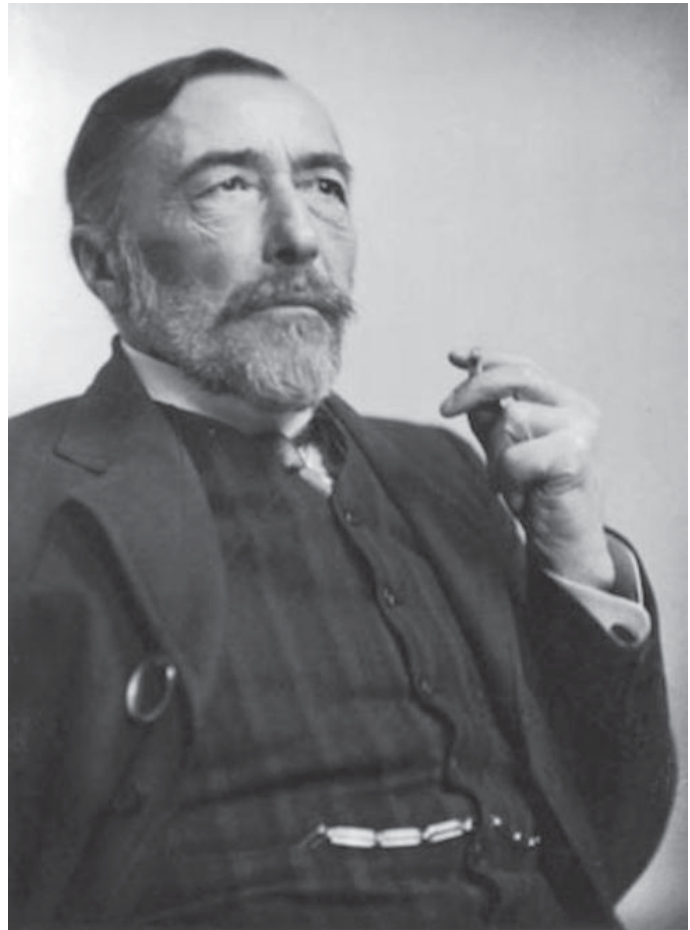
ism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," which we will discuss as one of our selected shorter works of literature later in this resource guide. In a number of these essays, Achebe examines the role of writers, art, and literature in society.

In 1990, Achebe was appointed as Charles P. Stevenson Professor of Literature at Bard College, New York. He was also involved in a car accident in Nigeria that left him paralyzed from the waist down for the rest of his life. Achebe was recognized for his lifetime literary achievement when he received the Man Booker International Prize in 2007, and in 2009, he was appointed as the David and Marianna Fisher University Professor and Professor of African Studies at Brown University, Rhode Island. In 2010, he received the Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize.

There Was a Country, Achebe's memoir and last work, which was published in 2012, deals with the Nigeria-Biafra War. This book is clearly Achebe's testimony to the horrors of the Biafran experience, which Achebe defines as a genocide, a precursor to Rwanda and Burundi, almost "thirty years earlier." This memoir, published more than forty years after the end of the Nigeria-Biafra War, was controversial, particularly because some Nigerians did not agree with Achebe's assessment of the role played by the Nigerian government and some politicians in the war. His description of the massacre of Igbos as a genocide also raised the ire of some. Furthermore, Achebe insisted that the Igbo continued to be oppressed even after the war. In the end, Achebe mourns for Biafra, a country that existed only for a short time in history. On March 23, 2013, shortly after the publication of his memoir, Achebe died in Massachusetts at the age of eighty-two.

An Anti-Colonialist Stance: The Quarrel with Joseph Conrad

Achebe's writing began in the 1950s, when many African nations were still under colonial rule. Nigeria was one of those nations, and Achebe's first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), not only explores the effects of colonization, but also underscores the nature of the indigenous communities that would be destroyed by colonization. Although, the novel is set at the point of initial contact between the Africans (here, the Igbo) and the European colonizers, the novel draws attention to the resulting tensions between the two groups. Indeed, besides Liberia and



Polish-British writer Joseph Conrad, whose best-known work is the novel *Heart of Darkness*.

Ethiopia, most African nations were still colonized until the 1960s and some into the 1980s.

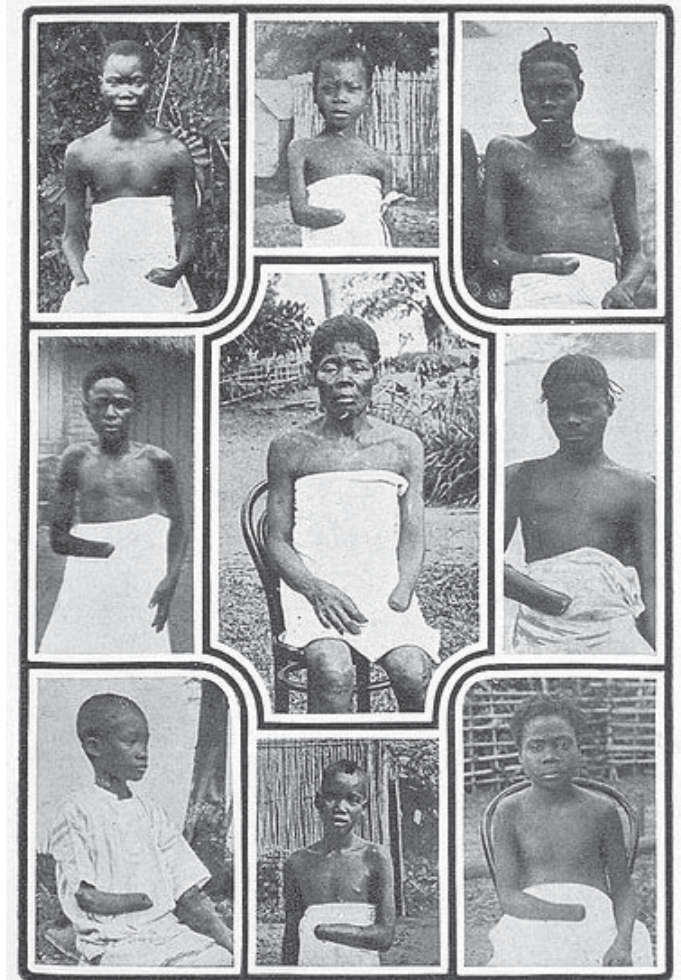
From the beginning of his career as a writer, Chinua Achebe served as a cultural critic, taking an anti-colonialist stance against what he saw as colonialist writing about Africa. Achebe states that this type of writing represented Africa through distorted lenses. In other words, Achebe's writing had a purpose. It was art that was engaged, and its purpose was corrective, specifically to respond to and correct the negative representations of Africans in Western texts. Achebe wanted to reveal his people's history, to restore it, because Western thinking had discounted African history.

For Achebe, the Polish-British writer [Joseph Conrad's](#) (1857–1924) portrayal of Africa and Africans in his novel *Heart of Darkness* epitomized the colonialist writing against which Achebe was working. In his now famous 1975 essay, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," Achebe takes Conrad to task over the latter's depiction of Africa

in *Heart of Darkness*. According to Achebe, Conrad's novel "projects the image of Africa as 'the other world,' the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality."⁹ So, despite the novel's place as a classic in the Western literary canon, *Heart of Darkness* is flawed, according to Achebe, because of its stereotypical portrayal of Africans. He adds that the novel suffers from "the need in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest."¹⁰ Achebe indicates that his criticism of Conrad is "simply in the manner of a novelist responding to one famous book of European fiction...which better than any other work...displays that Western desire and need"¹¹ to present Africa as "other." Achebe then asserts that his works are responses to these Western texts because, he insists, "the story we had to tell could not be told for us by anyone else no matter how gifted or well intentioned."¹²

Whether or not Conrad was "well-intentioned" or deliberately "racist," as Achebe has charged, has been the subject of endless debates and draws attention to the issue of representation. For instance, the South American novelist Wilson Harris sees Achebe's "judgement or dismissal of *Heart of Darkness*—and of Conrad's strange genius—[as] a profoundly mistaken one."¹³ But, literary scholar Patrick Brantlinger takes a middle-of-the road position in his article, "*Heart of Darkness*: Anti-Imperialism, Racism, or Impressionism?" and argues that *Heart of Darkness* "offers a powerful critique of at least certain manifestations of imperialism and racism, at the same time that it presents that critique in ways that can only be characterized as both imperialist and racist."¹⁴ In other words, Conrad was simultaneously critical and uncritical of European racist and imperialist attitudes toward Africa. Clearly, this debate over Conrad's imaging of Africa and Achebe's response is only a facet of the never-ending debate over the nature of Africa's relationship with the West, the latter's construction of Africa, and Africa's or African responses to these issues.

In addition to his condemnation of Conrad's racism, Achebe importantly insists that Africans had to tell their own story or stories and tell them in their



Congolese children mutilated under the rule of King Leopold II. In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad's narrative does not condemn the horrors that Leopold's regime inflicted on the people of the Congo.

own voices. This is particularly significant since Conrad's narrative did not succeed in condemning the horrors that King Leopold II had inflicted on the Congo, which Leopold had governed as his personal estate. Achebe, however, acknowledges that Conrad, through Marlow (the narrator of *Heart of Darkness*) as witness, attempts to address those horrors that he witnessed, but, even here, Conrad fails to recognize the humanity of the Africans he describes in his novel because Conrad denies the Africans any language or voice.¹⁵ In other words, the Africans do not speak for themselves. For Achebe, Conrad's treatment of the Africans seems to undermine any good intention he may have had. Achebe uses this essay, therefore, as an opportunity to criticize the stereotypical portrayal of Africans and Africa in Western texts such as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Joyce

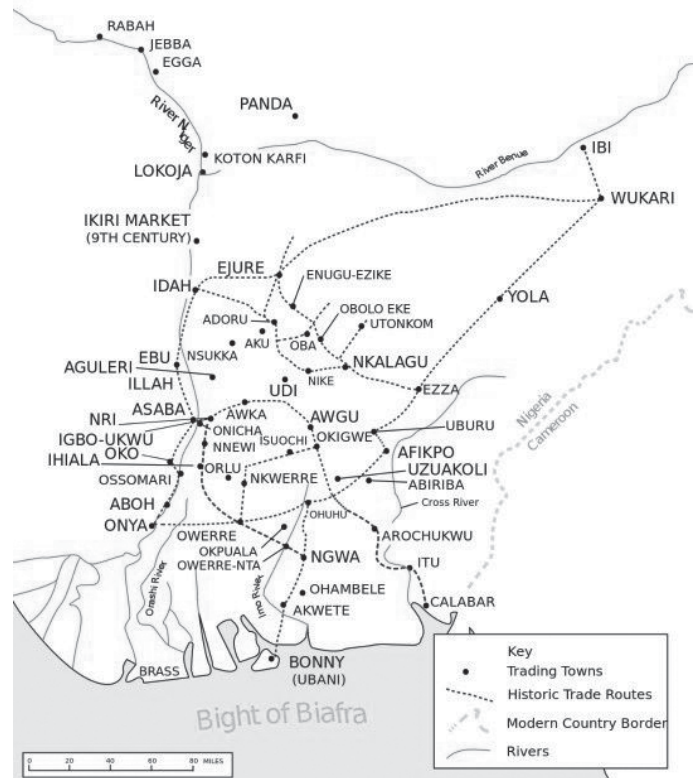
Cary's *Mister Johnson*, a novel about Nigeria that Achebe read while he was in college.

Achebe's criticism also anticipates Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's famous TED Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story," which we will discuss in more detail later in the resource guide. According to Adichie, a "single story" is dangerous because it negates other possible interpretations or views of the subject being represented. Specifically, a single story creates stereotypes. While a single story may contain some truth, the story is incomplete because it insists that it is the only story about a subject; so it becomes the dominant story. Achebe's protest is not about Conrad's or Joyce Cary's skills as storytellers. Rather, it is about these authors' reproduction of what Achebe claims as the "dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination."¹⁶ As such, Achebe explains that his first book, *Things Fall Apart*, was "an act of atonement with [his] past, the ritual return of a prodigal son,"¹⁷ meant to offer an alternative view to these dominant Western images of Africa. He says that "Most African writers write out of an African experience and a commitment to an African destiny."¹⁸ Consequently, *Things Fall Apart* provides an insider's perspective about the horrors and destructiveness of colonization in Africa.

The Historical Context of *Things Fall Apart*

The Igbo World and Culture in Context

Things Fall Apart describes an Igbo world or society at the cusp of change, at the point of first contact with Europe. As the novel suggests, Igbo society was organized with festivals, practices, rites, rituals, dances, folklore, and governance. Indeed, *Things Fall Apart* can be read as Achebe's homage to his culture and his people, particularly because of the acute attention he gives to representing various aspects of that culture. The novel can be seen as an imaginative cultural archive of the traditions of the Igbo people of the lower Niger (as the area was called in the late 1800s) before and at first contact with Europeans. According to Achebe, the first Anglican missionaries arrived among his people in 1857.¹⁹ Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century, Christianity was established in Igboland, and the



Igbo trade routes prior to 1900. *Things Fall Apart* describes Igbo society in the mid-nineteenth century, at the cusp of change.

Credit: By Ukabia - Chuku, Gloria (2005) Igbo women and economic transformation in southeastern Nigeria, 1900–1960, Routledge, p. 43 ISBN: 0-415-97210-8., CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=9696264>

society was in flux.

Although colonization through Christianity and the accompanying colonial education would erode and destroy various practices and aspects of Igbo society, *Things Fall Apart* suggests that the Igbo society had an organizational structure and values that allowed its people to function effectively and to survive the colonial onslaught. The novel highlights the resulting tensions in the society as well as those faced by certain individuals, for instance Okonkwo and his friend Obierika, as the society confronts the new culture at its doorstep. At the end of the novel, Okonkwo is out of place because his society has transformed, leaving him behind as it were. The morals and regulations that governed his life in the past are no longer applicable in the new "colonial" dispensation.

However, it is also important to note that Umuofia society was already fragmented before the coming of the Europeans. For example, Okonkwo is alienat-

MINORITIES COMMISSION MAP 5



Map of colonial Nigeria (1952–53) showing major ethnic groups and minority areas. The Igbo (located in the southern part of Nigeria) differed from the Hausa and Yoruba ethnic groups in that the Igbo did not have kings.

ed from his people because he is afraid of being like his father Unoka, who died poor and without a title. Consequently, Okonkwo overcompensates and even violates some of his customs in order to assert his manhood. So, the Igbo society which Achebe presents to us at the end of the novel is at the point of transformation, at a crossroads, where some elements of the past (African) culture are still present as a new (colonized) society is emerging. “We lived at the crossroads of cultures,”²⁰ Achebe says, where there is some continuity of some of the indigenous traditions. Thus, the novel is not only about the past, but also about the society’s efforts to navigate

the colonial experience. Like the people of Umuofia in Achebe’s novel, Igbo society was predominantly agricultural, consisting of a collective of closely knit villages and families. Each village was led by a group of male elders who represented either families or clans. Achebe did not present his audience with an idyllic society. Rather, he was only presenting his society as he understood it, with its beauty and its ugliness.

The society Achebe describes in the novel is patriarchal, organized around a male hierarchal structure of elders who manage events and activities in the community. Above this group of elders stand

the gods and ancestors. The family falls somewhere below the community, followed by the individual. Individuals are expected to comply or abide by the codes of the land—the collective. Hence, when an individual violates any of these codes, such a violation is seen as disrupting the balance of order in the community. We can understand, then, why Okonkwo cannot beat his wife during the “week of peace” without retribution. His action is a sacrilege against Ani, the earth goddess, who protects the land and all that comes from it. Thus, his action also threatens the land, and he must be punished, after which the land must be cleansed to restore balance.

So, in Achebe’s novel, the community is generally governed by accepted communal principles or beliefs, often translated through the group known as *Ndichie*, a primarily male collective of titled men and respected elders in the society. The gods and oracles also weigh in through their priestesses or priests. Another example of the application of communal principles or laws can be seen in the scene at the end of Part One, when Okonkwo’s compound is destroyed by his clansmen. Here again, the community must be cleansed to restore balance and safeguard the community’s survival. Okonkwo is forced to flee to his motherland because his gun inadvertently kills a clansman. Even though the death is accidental because “Okonkwo’s gun had exploded and a piece of iron had pierced the boy’s heart,”²¹ it is still a crime against “the earth goddess to kill a clansman”²² and Okonkwo must “flee from the clan” to Mbanta, although he “could return to the clan after seven years.”²³ We are told that “[as] soon as the day broke, a large crowd of men from Ezeudu’s quarter stormed Okonkwo’s compound, dressed in garbs of war. They set fire to his house, demolished his red walls, killed his animals and destroyed his barn.”²⁴ To Okonkwo and his community, these acts are part of the mores that govern the community’s existence. They do not see the actions as indicative of hatred, but simply as the carrying out of “the justice of the earth goddess,” and the men “were merely her messengers. They had no hatred in their hearts against Okonkwo. His greatest friend, Obierika, was among them. They were merely cleansing the land which Okonkwo had polluted with the blood of a clansman.”²⁵

Unlike some of their neighbors, such as the Hausa- and Yoruba-speaking peoples in Nigeria (the oth-

er two large ethnic groups) who had kings, the Igbo did not have kings prior to British colonialism.²⁶ Thus, it is through the collective that conflicts were resolved and a wide range of social transactions, including marriage, funerals, and initiation into titles were handled. A British colonial officer summed up the framework for organizing communal life among the Igbo as follows:

*The social structure of...all Ibo²⁷ and Ibibio peoples of the Eastern Provinces, was essentially democratic and in ancient times each village had been administered by a Council of Elders. Like most indigenous institutions, the composition of these Councils was vague and undefined and when serious matters of general concern required consideration virtually the whole community assembled in the village playground, the elders in the center, the younger men grouped around them and the women and children often sitting quietly at a discrete distance. Age was respected and, as in many a gerontocracy, policy was moulded upon the decisions of the ancestors.*²⁸

One cannot help but notice the similarity between the Igbo system of decision making and conflict resolution that Allen describes and that which Achebe represents in the marital dispute hearing scene in *Things Fall Apart*. It may seem ironic to use a colonial administrator’s record here as evidence. However, J.G.C. Allen’s representation of Igbo democratic processes challenges Joseph Conrad’s lack of depiction of African cultures in *Heart of Darkness* as well as the District Commissioner’s negative perception of the people of Umuofia and their society in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*.

As indicated by the marital dispute scene in the village *ilo*, marriage among Igbo people represents an alliance between families and sometimes communities. Achebe’s novel also indicates that the Igbo society of the time supported the marrying of multiple wives (polygamy). Indeed, the number of wives and children a man had suggested the level of a man’s wealth. The taking of titles was also a sign of wealth, and only titled men had multiple wives. In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo has three wives, several children, and a lot of yams, which is considered a

“male” crop.

The role of marriage as a communal event is evident in Chapter Twelve with the celebration of Obierika’s daughter’s marriage, which involves the whole community. Almost all the women in the community contribute to the preparation of the food for the ceremony, while most of the men help Obierika to slaughter the animals needed for the ceremony. The community empties into Obierika’s compound, which “was as busy as an anthill.”²⁹ As a communal event, the marriage ceremony provides an opportunity for members to meet and tell stories about past relationships and the forging of new ones. For example, Obierika’s eldest brother recognizes marriage as relational bonding when he tells his in-laws “let there be friendship between your family and ours,”³⁰ and the “oldest man in the camp of visitors replied: ‘it will be good for you and it will be good for us.’”³¹ This perception of marriage as a communal event helps us to understand why the marital dispute between Uzowulu and his in-laws has to be resolved by the community.

THE ORAL TRADITION

Oral traditions play an important role in most African societies. Like other African groups, the Igbo people have a storehouse of oral culture, which includes folktales, riddles, proverbs, fables, and songs. The oral tradition is alive in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. The oral tradition is transmitted from one generation to the next by word of mouth, although these oral forms may also become part of the written literary tradition. According to historian Thomas Spear, “[un]like written documents which were recorded in the past and passed down unchanged into the present, oral traditions had to be remembered and retold through successive generations to reach the present.”³²

In *Things Fall Apart*, Ikemefuna’s retelling of folktales to Nwoye is a form of orality. Indeed, it is through the oral tradition that much of the culture is communicated, and Achebe likewise reveals Igbo culture to his readers through these oral practices. For instance, in the scene where Okonkwo visits Nwakibie to borrow some yams, the elder greets Okonkwo and shows his support of Okonkwo through proverbs: “Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too. If one says no to the other, let his wing break.”³³ In simple terms, Nwakibie’s proverb



Oral traditions play an important role in most African societies, and the oral tradition is alive in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*.

is an acknowledgement of mutual support and respect. He says to Okonkwo, “You will have what is good for you, and I will have what is good for me.”³⁴ In the end, Nwakibie lends Okonkwo the seed yams he came to borrow.

Achebe also reveals Nwoye’s character and the differences between him and his father by telling us of the type of stories the young man likes. Although Nwoye “knew that it was right to be masculine and to be violent,” he “preferred the stories that his mother used to tell.”³⁵ These are stories about the wily tortoise or the one about “the quarrel between Earth and Sky long ago and how Sky withheld rain for seven years, until crops withered and the dead could not be buried because the hoes broke on the stony Earth.”³⁶ This story had lessons to teach and had a song in which Vulture the messenger sings asking Sky for mercy. It soothes Nwoye’s inner being and touches his compassionate self. But his mother’s story also allows him to imagine himself differently. According to the narrator in *Things Fall Apart*, “Whenever Nwoye’s mother sang this song he felt carried away to the distant scene in the sky where Vulture, Earth’s emissary, sang for mercy.”³⁷ This section foreshadows Nwoye’s later conversion to Christianity, as he is drawn to the new religion whose singing soothes him. Additionally, Nwoye and Ikemefuna bond through the latter’s stories.

Domination: British Colonization in Africa: Focus on Nigeria

By the end of the nineteenth century, the European presence in Nigeria was evident by the number of



A church music group poses for a photograph at a mission in Nigeria. By the mid-nineteenth century, missionaries had introduced Christianity to West Africa.

Christian missions in the region. By the mid-nineteenth century, missionaries had introduced Christianity to West Africa. Missionaries such as the Church Mission Society (CMS) and the French Catholic Holy Fathers were already operating along the Senegambia and Guinea coast in West Africa by the 1860s. Missionary activity in Africa was a response to the end of the transatlantic slave trade in 1807 and the European search for new markets for raw materials to support their industries. The Church Mission Society was part of the British antislavery society, which sought to find an alternative to trading relations with the African hinterland after the abolition of slavery in 1807 and especially after the British Slavery Abolition Act of 1833,³⁸ which ended slavery in most of Britain's territories, except for India and Southeast Asia.

By the early 1800s, the Church Mission Society had established missions in West Africa, beginning with Sierra Leone in 1804. Britain had founded Sierra Leone as a colony in 1792 as a home for freed blacks from its North American territories after the American Revolutionary War. As such, Sierra Leone would play an important role in British missionary activity and in British colonization of Africa in general and West Africa in particular. Thus, by the beginning of the 1800s, European nations had sponsored a series of expeditions into the African hinterland in search of new sources of trade and treaties with Africans. These expeditions were harbingers of European colonization of the continent, which had a two-pronged mission: colonization through

conversion and colonization through conquest.

The Berlin conference of 1884–5 formalized the colonization of Africa and initiated the “[Scramble for Africa](#).” This European Scramble for Africa was motivated by: 1) the exploration of the African hinterland for new markets or sources of trade and raw materials for European industries; 2) conversion and civilization, hence the French, for instance, defined their colonization project as a “civilizing mission;” and 3) nationalist competition among the European nations themselves, which was being played out on the African continent. Colonization means domination, the replacing of an existing culture and its practices with others considered superior. Colonization implies the extermination or destruction of all or some aspects of the colonized culture, as well as the assertion of power and force to subjugate another. In fact, under such a threat, the colonized might ask, “What becomes of us if we no longer can live as ourselves?” Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* responds to this existentialist question, and Okonkwo’s reactions to the presence of white men and their messengers among his people are indicative of the enormity of the threat that the new strangers posed.

By 1914, most of Africa, with the exception of Ethiopia and Liberia, had been occupied by European nations, with Britain holding a large share of the land. Two types of colonialism would emerge in Africa: settler and non-settler colonialism. Under settler colonialism, a minority group of white settlers dispossessed the indigenous peoples of their lands and installed itself over the larger indigenous and other non-white population, thus creating a political and social hierarchy based on perceived racial superiority and separation. The result was often the restriction of the freedom and rights of the non-settler population. Settler colonialism existed in Algeria, South Africa, Kenya, Mozambique, Tanganyika (now Tanzania), and Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), to mention a few examples.

Although preceded by British colonialism, which also emphasized a racial hierarchy, South Africa’s apartheid was a product of settler colonialism. In South Africa, the Group Areas Act of 1950, which was amended several times, relegated non-whites to residential areas, often townships, designated only for their racial group. Blacks were classified as non-South African and were restricted to the so-called

homelands or black townships, such as Soweto, near Johannesburg, as well as Langa and Guguletu near Cape Town.

INDIRECT RULE

Unlike settler colonialism, non-settler colonialism as found in Nigeria did not result in an extensive or permanent residence of a white population in the colony. Instead, the colonial administration implemented a system of governance called “indirect rule,” whereby the colonial administration governed through the surrogacy of appointed traditional African rulers.

Under indirect rule, colonies were defined as possessions of the European nations that controlled them. According to Sheldon Gellar, “the colonial state in Africa was an overseas extension of the metropolitan state, run by a relatively small number of European colonial administrators whose loyalty was to the metropole.”³⁹ (The term “metropole” refers to the “parent” state of a colony.) Gellar adds that the colonial staff was made up of “a small number of administrators, merchants, and missionaries concentrated primarily in the colonial capital and in the major trading centers.”⁴⁰ Because of the small size of the colonial administrative staff, the empire sometimes used existing local rulers as administrators. But, occasionally, the colonizers created or appointed kings, chiefs, and/or warrant chiefs who served as subordinates to the regional colonial administrators who reported to London. This was the case in Nigeria, where colonial administrators governed through the traditional rulers or those whom the colonial administration had appointed to collect taxes and maintain law and order. In these instances, the colonial administration did not often have direct contact (as in direct rule) with the Africans.

In Nigeria, the British eventually established two Protectorates: the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria and the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria (which included the formerly separate Lagos Colony as of 1906).⁴¹ In Yorubaland and Hausaland, the British governed through the traditional rulers, but British colonial administration of Igboland was different, particularly because of the absence of traditional rulers among the Igbo. Moreover, the Igbo have a long history of resistance to domination. The history of transatlantic slavery speaks of the Igbo as a rebellious group. The Europeans in the time of



Traditional heads of Ibeku (an Igbo clan) meet with heads of the British administration in Southern Nigeria. In Nigeria, colonial administrators governed via traditional rulers or rulers appointed by the colonial administration.

colonization likewise found the Igbo difficult to suppress, a point which historian Chima J. Korieh underscores. According to Korieh, “[unlike] any other groups in Nigeria, the British found the Igbo most intractable and were faced with several acts of revolt from the Igbo.”⁴²

Therefore, the British administration generally appointed local administrators, such as the *kotma*, who served in secondary roles and helped to enforce the colonial policies, collect taxes, and contain resistance. In other cases, the British also deployed Igbo from other regions as members of military expeditions to suppress resistance. This is the case with Abame in *Things Fall Apart*. Likewise, in the case of Umuofia, the *kotma* and other messengers come mostly from other communities and are used to enforce the colonial administration’s policies.

In sum, unlike the Igbo, the Yoruba and Hausa had traditional rulers. Therefore, governance among these groups was centralized. But, it is an established historical fact among Africanist scholars that the Igbo people did not have kings or traditional rulers; as a result, governance was not centralized. As such, the British colonial administration had to invent ways of governing the Igbo.

EXAMPLES OF INDIRECT RULE IN *THINGS FALL APART*

As noted, colonialism defined the indigenous people as inferior and often replaced or altered in-

indigenous systems to mimic European institutions that were otherwise alien to the people. Thus, the development of native cultures and ways of knowledge was often undermined. In *Things Fall Apart*, the alienation and destruction of indigenous institutions emerge in Part Three with the establishment of the churches in Mbanta and Umuofia, as well as with the establishment of the Native Court in Umuofia “where the District Commissioner (DC) judged cases in ignorance,”⁴³ one of which was the land dispute between Aneto and Oduche (chapter twenty). Also in the novel, the colonial administration has installed the *kotma*—a linguistic distortion of the term “court man”—or “court messengers,” many of whom were strangers to Umuofia. The *kotma* were used to enforce colonial policies and suppress the people.

Because the colonial project was also informed by European capitalist needs, the economy and administration of the colonies were tied to the metropole (i.e., Great Britain). For instance, after the District Commissioner arrests the six leaders of Umuofia, including Okonkwo, which marks the beginning of the forced or militarized pacification of the people of Umuofia, the District Commissioner tells the men, “We shall not do you any harm...if only you agree to cooperate with us. We have brought a peaceful administration to you and your people so that you may be happy.”⁴⁴ One cannot miss the irony of this statement, for the six men are in handcuffs at that moment. In addition, the District Commissioner imposes a fine on Umuofia as payment for the release of their leaders. The use of *kotma* and other similar officials as go-betweens to govern the people of Umuofia is an example of indirect rule.

Nigerian Independence (1960)

Most Nigerians credit Frederick Lugard, governor of the Northern Protectorate of Nigeria (1899–1906), as being the architect of the entity called Nigeria because he was responsible for eventually combining Lagos Colony and the Southern Protectorate with the Northern Protectorate in 1914 to form what would eventually become the contemporary nation of Nigeria.⁴⁵ One might also credit Lugard with introducing and implementing the indirect rule system in Nigeria; in particular, as governor of the Northern Protectorate, he worked with caliphs and emirs. But, “under Lugard, the indirect



Frederick Lugard, governor of the Northern Protectorate of Nigeria, eventually combined Lagos Colony and the Southern Protectorate with the Northern Protectorate in 1914 to form what would later become the nation of Nigeria.

rule system was conducted in a rather whimsical manner.”⁴⁶

Like Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, some Nigerians resisted colonization, rebelling against colonial policies, taxes, and the destruction of their cultures. The Nigerian historian Toyin Falola writes the following:

Colonial policies generated discontent among the people, especially the elite who originally demanded reforms, and later on, independence. Among the issues that displeased the people were racism and the damage to traditional values during European rule. Nigerians in the civil service complained of racial discrimination in appointments and promotions. The as-

piring ones among them were envious of the status and privileges enjoyed by white officials. Among those who complained about excessive changes, nationalism was expressed in cultural ways, that is, in deliberate efforts to promote Nigerian food, names, forms of dress, languages, and even religions. The Christians among them tried to reform Christianity to suit local values, such as large families and polygamy, and to draw from it ideas of liberty, equality, and justice. To the majority of the population, the Native Authorities were both oppressive and corrupt.⁴⁷

The growing discontent of many Nigerians over their treatment and governance under the colonial administration led to the emergence of youth movements, such as the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM) and national multiethnic groups that organized mass protests against the colonial administration. Many of these groups would provide the foundation for Nigerian independence parties.

Although the first organized political party in Nigeria, Herbert Macaulay's Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP), emerged in 1923,⁴⁸ the Nigerian independence movement would take off after World War II. In general, the 1950s saw the growth of independence activism across West Africa and the British Empire. India, Britain's largest colony, gained independence in 1947, and other nations, including Nigeria and Ghana in West Africa, were agitating for self-rule. According to Falola and Oyeniyi, "Between 1951 and 1954, three major political parties emerged [in Nigeria]: the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), the Action Group (AG), and the Northern People's Congress (NPC)."⁴⁹ Indeed, as Achebe says, "The nationalist movement in British West Africa after the Second World War brought about a mental revolution which began to reconcile us to ourselves."⁵⁰

In addition, World War II freed Europe from the clutches of Hitler and gave Nigerians (and other Africans)—many of whom had served in the war and were returning to their nations—new ideas about freedom and justice. Falola says that, "About 100,000 Nigerians were recruited to fight [in the war in Europe]. Many were exposed to wartime propaganda on liberty, equality, and freedom. After their discharge, many of them joined political par-



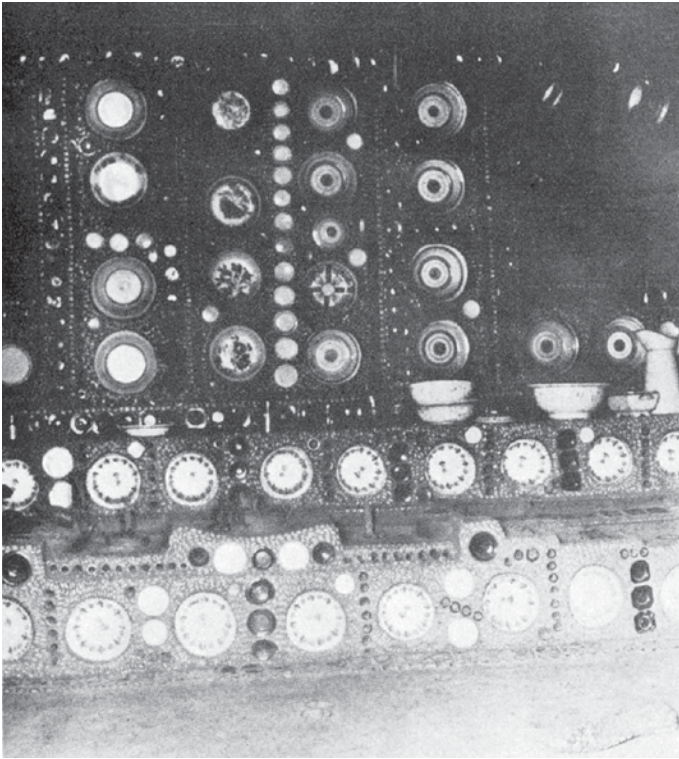
Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Nigeria's first Prime Minister (seated, left), at the signing of Nigeria's Independence Declaration in 1960.

ties."⁵¹ Upon their return, these Nigerians deployed "the Allied propaganda in favor of freedom and against exploitation...against the British."⁵² Moreover, Falola adds, "The interactions between Nigerian soldiers and their white counterparts, and the contacts with white soldiers stationed in Nigeria, diminished the respect which many Nigerians had for whites in general, further emboldening them to make demands."⁵³ In addition, "Many [Nigerians] who served abroad enjoyed a higher standard of living, which they could not maintain when the war ended, and they came to associate an end to colonial rule with better living standards."⁵⁴

In 1960, Nigeria became an independent nation, and since Nigeria did not have a settler population, Nigerian independence was "peaceful." Although the Nigerian Independence Constitution "created independence and self-rule in Nigeria," it "adopted the British parliamentary system for Nigeria and made Queen Elizabeth II the titular head of the new Nigerian state. A prime minister headed the government, and state powers were shared between the parliament and the judiciary."⁵⁵ However, in 1963, Nigeria became "a federal republic and substituted the titular role of the British queen with that of a president."⁵⁶

Religion and Spirituality: The Gods, the Spirits, and the Notion of Chi

Other features of culture among the Igbo people include religion and spirituality, especially the rela-



Interior of a *chi* shrine at Nkarahia, southern Igboland, 1900s. The notion of *chi* among the Igbo underscores the Igbo belief in a parallel world of ancestors, gods, and guardians who watch over the living in the present.

relationship between individuals or the group and the ancestors. The Igbo believe that spirits exert a great influence on the living and can alter one's fate or journey through life. One's success is a reflection of one's *chi* or personal god. As explained in *Things Fall Apart*, "the Ibo people have a proverb that when a man says yes his *chi* says yes also."⁵⁷ In other words, one has to live in accordance with one's personal god, one's inner being. To live in contradiction with one's *chi* means to challenge one's personal god to a quarrel. *Chi* among the Igbo "is often translated as god, guardian angel, personal spirit, soul, spirit-double..."⁵⁸ Achebe further describes *chi* as one's "other identity in spiritland—[one's] *spirit being* complementing [one's] terrestrial *human being*."⁵⁹ Today, we might describe an individual's *chi* as his or her "avatar" in spirit land. This notion of *chi* among the Igbo underscores the Igbo belief in a parallel world of ancestors, gods, and guardians who watch over the living in the present. Thus, in Igbo cosmology, there is no or very little boundary between the world of the living and that of the dead, the ancestors, and the spirits.

Ancestors and spirits can visit the world of the living either through reincarnation or under the guise of humans walking among the living. In *Things Fall Apart*, the people of Umofia believe that the *egwugwu* spirits who issued final judgement over the marital dispute between Uzowulu and his in-laws are the gods and/or the ancestors. In another example, Ezinma, Okonkwo's daughter, is believed to be an *ogbanje* or *abiku*, the spirit or reincarnation of the same deceased child who returns to her mother again and again only to die young each time. Thus, until she is bound to the world of the living and her family, she will continue to die young and reincarnate only to torture her mother repeatedly. The community believes that Ezinma has buried her *iyi uwa*, her link to the spirit world, somewhere, and until she finds it and destroys it, she will remain lost and tortured and will die with each reincarnation. *Iyi uwa* in Igbo translates as "life's river" or "life force." The *iyi uwa* is generally a stone, pebble, or crystal believed to be imbued with energy or power. Only when it is found and destroyed, severing the tie to the world of the dead, will an *ogbanje* remain in the world of the living. In chapter nine of the novel, Ezinma begins the search for her *iyi uwa*, and Okonkwo and Ukagbue begin to dig for it as the whole community watches. So, Ezinma's survival in the world of the living is linked to her *iyi uwa*.

The Igbo also believe in a Supreme Being, Chukwu, and that the gods and ancestors hold sway over the actions of human beings. So, any action by an individual that threatens the relationship between humans and their gods or deities also threatens the survival of the group. In effect, the gods may simply punish the whole group rather than violate the individual. So, when Okonkwo, for instance, violates the sanctity of the Week of Peace by beating his wife and thus angering the earth goddess, he also endangers his people. Afterward, it is necessary to purify the land by appeasing the earth goddess. So, Okonkwo has to be punished.

Religion and Spirituality: Ancestors, Ancestral Spirits, and Egwugwu

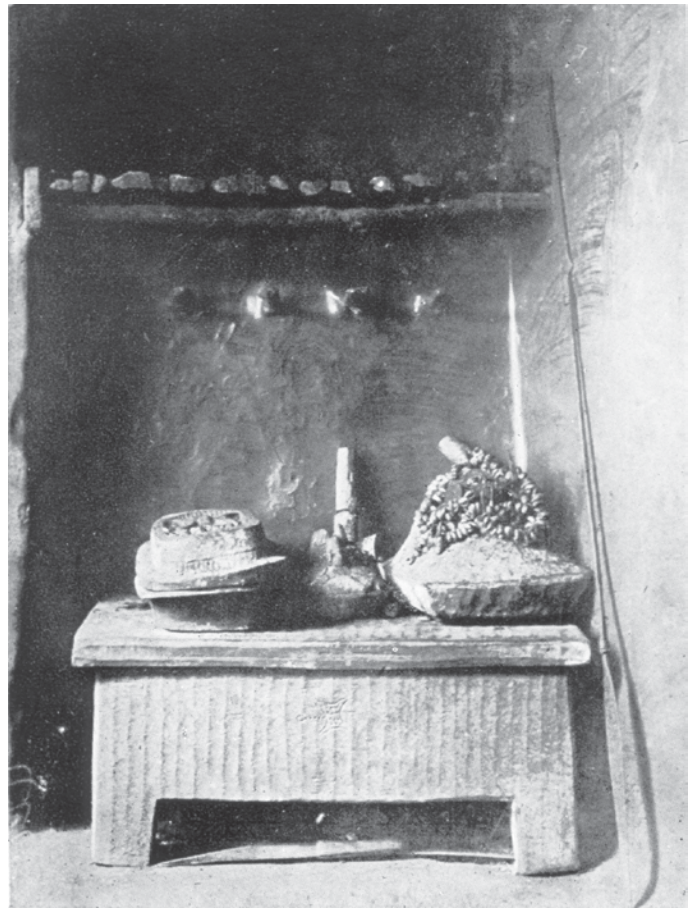
Although the Igbo believe in an all-supreme deity referred to as Chukwu, ancestor worship is common. Hence, the ancestors or ancestral spirits are often consulted to resolve disputes and to provide guid-

ance on matters of health, death, and birth. Indeed, ignoring the will of the ancestors or an ancestral spirit is tantamount to committing suicide—a sacrilege. Such an act may condemn one to the wrath of the ancestors for generations. The relationship between the ancestors and the living is generally negotiated by individuals with specialized power and/or roles in the community, such as Ezeani in *Things Fall Apart*, who serves as the chief priest of Ani, the earth goddess, or Chielo, the priestess of the Spirit of the Caves and Hills.

The ancestral spirits in *Things Fall Apart* are embodied in the *egwugwu* (the word itself means “fear,” “mystery,” or “the mysterious” in Igbo), the ancestral spirits representing the nine founding sons of the land, who render final judgment on the marital dispute between Uzowulu and his in-laws. In fact, in the scene in question, the *ndichie*, the council of titled and well-respected male elders in Umuofia, and the *egwugwu* work together to render justice. In this scene, Achebe introduces the power or authority of the *egwugwu* or ancestral spirits and the fear they evoke in the community, particularly in the women and children.

In the scene discussed, the community assembles at the village *ilo* (village space or square) to hear the pronouncement of the *ndichie* on the marital dispute between Uzowulu and his in-laws. As the community waits, the ancestral spirits emerge, represented by the *egwugwu*, whose voice is “guttural and awesome” producing a “wave [that] struck the women and children,” causing a “backward stampede.”⁶⁰ Interestingly, Achebe draws attention to the spirits’ effect on the children and women, many of whom faint or flee. Because the *egwugwu* is a masked spirit, the community does not know who dances or wears the mask. However, what is clear is that the *egwugwu* symbolizes patriarchal authority. It is the highest authority in the land, and its verdict is final.

As has been discussed, the Igbo people did not have a centralized system of governance, so decisions and laws were generally administered by a group of elders, who represented various villages, clans, houses, and/or families and thus carried out the will of the people or collective. The scene at the village *ilo* demonstrates this application of the collective will or values, and in this context the *egwugwu* holds the highest authority in the land. As one



An Igbo shrine to the ancestors. The ancestors or ancestral spirits are often consulted to resolve disputes and to provide guidance on matters of health, death, and birth.

elder notes, the marital dispute has “‘come before the *egwugwu*’” because Uzowulu “‘will not listen to any other decision.’”⁶¹ For the elder and the community, the *egwugwu* symbolizes not only collective male authority or will, but also spiritual power and ancestral voice.

When the nine *egwugwu* spirits emerge again on the *ilo* after leaving to consult among themselves, Evil Forest, the eldest *egwugwu*, addresses the elders and the community as well as the disputing parties. Evil Forest clarifies the function of the *egwugwu* as arbiters of justice: “Our duty is not to blame this man or to praise that, but to settle the dispute.”⁶² Then, he instructs Uzowulu to take a pot of wine to his in-laws and plead for his wife’s return, after which Evil Forest advises the in-laws (Mgbafo’s brothers) likewise to grant forgiveness to Uzowulu if he brings a pot of wine to them as a sign of contrition and begs his wife to return. In so doing,

the *egwugwu* succeeds in restoring the humanity of both groups and rendering justice.

According to indigenous beliefs, the spirits of masks assume the bodies of those who carry or dance with the masks. So, although the masks that represent the *egwugwu* spirits are worn by humans, the community has endowed the *egwugwu* with spiritual power. One simply accepts this as part of the Igbo belief system. For instance, when Evil Forest asks, “Uzowulu’s body, do you know me?” the latter’s response acknowledges the unknowability of Evil Forest, stating, “How can I know you, father? You are beyond our knowledge.”⁶³ In this situation, the people of Umuofia—like those of many African groups, as well as others who follow spiritual or religious belief systems—acknowledge that the gods, deities, and affairs of the spiritual world are unknowable to humans, and their power often lies in their mystery or secrecy. Indeed, as the scholar Pene Elungu points out:

...religion in the African context...‘is not seen as part of the rush of confessions which accompanied Western culture. In fact, our traditional religions placed that which is sacred (the secret-sacré), things that cannot be discussed, things before which we bow, not in the individual person but in the link with parents and ancestors, community, the universe, and with God.’⁶⁴

Religion and Spirituality: Christianity

Christianity undermined traditional Igbo beliefs and in many cases eradicated them, especially through conversion. Christianity had already been introduced in Nigeria by the middle of the nineteenth century. Bishop Ajayi Crowther, who would become the first Anglican Bishop of Nigeria, helped to evangelize the Yoruba (in the western part of Nigeria) by the mid-1800s. In fact, Crowther himself was a Yoruba teenager who had been captured as a slave and freed by the British who converted him to Christianity. In addition to destroying or undermining the belief systems of the local population, Christianity paved the way for colonization. In fact, in some cases, Christianity was part of the colonization project. In general, the contact between Africans and Europeans was not harmonious, as the



Bishop Ajayi Crowther, the first Anglican Bishop of Nigeria, helped to evangelize the Yoruba.

Christians also attempted to replace and/or destroy indigenous African religious beliefs and practices. An example of this in *Things Fall Apart* occurs when a Christian kills the sacred python of Umuofia.

Tradition and Gender Roles in Things Fall Apart

Like much of the Igbo society that the novel tries to portray (for some matrilineal communities existed among the Igbo people), Umuofia is a patriarchal society. Achebe announces the patriarchal structure of the community at the beginning of the second paragraph of the tenth chapter, when the narrator states that although people have gathered “on the village *ilo*,”⁶⁵ “[it] was clear from the way the crowd stood or sat that the ceremony was for men. There were many women, but they looked on from the fringe like outsiders. The titled men and elders sat on their stools waiting for the trials to begin.”⁶⁶

Achebe’s description of this representation of gendered relationships in the society through the spa-

tial placement of the women is important. Indeed, the women are outsiders; although the trial is about a woman's experience of violence from her husband, no woman has been invited to join the *ndichie* council of elders. Even Mgbafo, Uzowulu's wife whose case is being tried, is not invited to speak. She remains silent as do the other women who stand as props to a male-dominated hearing. When the two quarreling parties face each other before the elders in the *ilo*, Mgbafo is the lone woman. She is surrounded by two groups of men, three in each group. Uzowulu's party consists of his two relatives and him, while Mgbafo is accompanied by her two brothers, who act as her protectors. Achebe further underscores the "maleness" of this trial and of the *egwugwu* by pointing out that women cannot enter the "*egwugwu* house," although "specially chosen women" decorate the outside of the house. "These women never saw the inside of the hut. No woman ever did....No woman ever asked questions about the most powerful and the most secret cult in the land."⁶⁷ Clearly, in Okonkwo's Umuofia, patriarchy dominates because "the nine villages of Umuofia had grown out of the nine sons of the first father of the clan."⁶⁸ Thus, the nine *egwugwu* spirits represent the nine patriarchs of the nine villages of Umuofia.

Manhood or maleness in traditional Igbo society as presented in *Things Fall Apart* rests on a man's achievement or demonstration of his ability to achieve some measure of success. Hence, Unoka, Okonkwo's father, is seen as a failure because he was lazy, had not "taken a title" before his death, did not show or make any attempt to achieve any success, including maintaining his own farms, and "was heavily in debt."⁶⁹ Unlike his father, "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements."⁷⁰ Okonkwo had thrown "Amalinze the Cat... the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino."⁷¹ Okonkwo's great feat had gained him a title and brought honor to his village. Nwakibie praises a young Okonkwo when he visits the elder man seeking to borrow some "seed-yams" from Nwakibie.⁷² The latter agrees to lend Okonkwo twice the amount of yams he requested because Nwakibie "can tell a ripe corn by its look."⁷³ In other words, Nwakibie can "read" Okonkwo's determination and senses that Okonkwo will succeed where other young men his age will not. Besides,



An Igbo *ikenga*. Most titled men in traditional Igbo society had an *ikenga*, a wooden statue that could be described as the symbolization of a man's personal god.

Okonkwo has already earned his people's respect, for although "[he] was still young...he was a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams, and had just married his third wife...he was already one of the greatest men of his time."⁷⁴

The *ikenga* is generally used by the Igbo to signify a man's success or achievement, and most titled men in traditional Igbo society had an *ikenga*, a wooden statue that could be described as the symbolization of a man's personal god. According to cultural anthropologist Dorothy C. Ukaegbu, an *ikenga* "was the embodiment of Igbo manhood and a powerful emblem upon which male authority and identity were constructed....As an emblem (symbol) the *ikenga* encoded key cultural messages and values that must be adhered to in order for a male to be perceived as

a real man in Igboland.”⁷⁵ Thus, it is within this context that we may also understand Okonkwo’s preoccupation with success and the acquisition of wealth in *Things Fall Apart*.

But, while Achebe’s novel is not typically understood as depicting the achievement of womanhood or the significant role of women in Igbo society before colonization, scholars point out that despite the patriarchal nature of Igbo society, a dual-sex system of leadership existed among the Igbo before the advent of colonization. Some Igbo communities were matriarchal and as such inheritance was through the mother. In some areas, women with titles often married younger women who became surrogates and bore children for these titled women and their families. In general, scholars acknowledge that colonization marginalized African women by removing them from political and social positions that they had held in precolonial society.

Under the dual-sex system that existed in traditional Igbo society, women controlled specifically identified spaces and areas of the public, such as the markets, the worshipping of certain deities, and certain social ceremonies. Achebe attempts to represent some of these instances where women exercise power. For instance, despite his maleness, Okonkwo is punished and must flee from his clan because he has committed a female crime, a crime against the earth goddess. Importantly, it is to his motherland that he must flee for safety. When he is punished very early in the novel by Ezeani, the priestess of Ani, it is because he has also offended the earth goddess by beating his wife Ojiugo during the Week of Peace.

Additionally, in the scene where Chielo carries Ezinma to the shrine of *Agbala*, the Oracle of the Hills and Caves, Okonkwo, who “ruled his household with a heavy hand” must stand aside for the priestess.⁷⁶ When he follows the priestess, he follows her only from a “manly” distance, but Chielo outruns him because “Chielo was not a woman that night.”⁷⁷ She has transformed into the embodiment of the supernatural. Even when Okonkwo eventually arrives at the mount of the shrine of *Agbala*, Okonkwo does not dare to enter it. *Agbala*, the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves is male, but it is served by a powerful priestess named Chielo. During the days of Unoka, Okonkwo’s father, the priestess similarly “was a woman called Chika, [who] was full of the power

of her god, and she was greatly feared.”⁷⁸ During Okonkwo’s time, it is Chielo, who is likewise feared by Okonkwo.

These are just a few of the moments when Achebe attempts to represent women in positions that are not subordinate to those of the men in their society. Nigerian literary scholar Abiola Irele notes this tension in Achebe’s representation of women’s status in his novel, when he says that “the subjugation of women as a social practice is compensated for by the high valuation of the feminine principle in the symbolic sphere—the awe and respect accorded to Chielo, the priestess of *Agbala*, illustrates the institutional inversion of gender role and status she embodies at this level.”⁷⁹

This duality in humans—or simply within Igbo cosmology—helps to maintain balance in society or in the universe. For although women are marginalized in the political and social arenas presented in the novel, the society is governed by a value system that nonetheless accords tremendous power to the feminine principle. During Okonkwo’s exile in his mother’s homeland, Uchendu, Okonkwo’s youngest uncle, draws Okonkwo’s attention to the stature that the society accords women by explaining why “Nneka” (mother is supreme) is “one of the commonest names we give our children.”⁸⁰ As Uchendu explains, “A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you.”⁸¹

Historically, the [Aba Women’s War](#) of 1929, during which hundreds of Igbo women marched against the British administration and the local warrant chiefs in protest against colonial taxation, stands out in Nigerian history as representing the birth of Igbo women’s political resistance to colonization and indicates women’s ability to exert political influence in the Nigerian context.

Key Characters

Okonkwo

Okonkwo is the central character or protagonist of *Things Fall Apart*. Actions in the novel revolve around him. His tragic flaw is his fear of becoming like his father Unoka, whom he sees as feminine and lazy. Consequently, he is obsessed with assertions of masculinity or manliness and acts hastily. He be-

came wealthy at a young age because of his achievements and is respected in his community. He is well known “throughout the nine villages and beyond” because he had defeated Amalinze the Cat, “one of the fiercest” wrestlers in the community, who had been unbeaten for seven years.

Obierika

Obierika is Okonkwo’s best friend and advises him on many occasions. Obierika is calm, logical, and contemplative. He warns Okonkwo against going on the journey to kill Ikemefuna. Obierika can be seen as a foil to Okonkwo who is hasty and violent. Obierika visits Okonkwo while he is in exile in Mbanta and brings him news of the arrival of the missionaries and the colonizers in Umuofia. He also informs Okonkwo and Uchendu during his first visit to Mbanta that “Abame has been wiped out” by the colonizers for killing the first white man who came into their community and tying his “iron horse to their sacred tree.”⁸² At the end of the novel, Obierika takes the District Commissioner to Okonkwo’s hanged body and asks for help in taking him down and burying him. Obierika informs the Commissioner that it is against their custom to bury Okonkwo. He cannot be buried by his people because his suicide is an abomination, an “offense against the Earth.”⁸³ Obierika also scolds the Commissioner in the end, telling him that Okonkwo “was one of the greatest men in Umuofia” and accusing the Commissioner of driving Okonkwo “to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog.”⁸⁴

Nwoye

Nwoye is Okonkwo’s oldest son who converts to Christianity. Nwoye reminds Okonkwo of his own father Unoka because Okonkwo sees his son as weak and effeminate. Consequently, Okonkwo beats him frequently. Nwoye loves his mother’s stories with soothing songs, instead of those about war and violence. He bonds with Ikemefuna who mentors him like an older brother. Okonkwo’s killing of Ikemefuna traumatizes Nwoye and alienates him from his father and from his people. Thus, when the missionaries arrive, Nwoye easily turns to them.

Ikemefuna

Ikemefuna is the young boy who was sent to Umuofia as a sacrifice for the accidental killing of a young Umuofia woman by the neighboring commu-

nity. Ikemefuna becomes Okonkwo’s adopted son and a “big brother” to Nwoye.

Ezinma

Ezinma is Okonkwo’s sickly, but favorite daughter, whom he wishes had been a boy. She engages her father in ways that Nwoye, her brother, does not. Okonkwo sees aspects of himself—or what he defines as masculine traits—in Ezinma. For instance, unlike Nwoye, she is decisive, unafraid, and confident. She also challenges Okonkwo whereas Nwoye is afraid of his father. She is also her mother’s only child and is believed to be an *ogbanje*, the spirit of a dead child who reincarnates to the same mother repeatedly.

Chielo

Chielo is the Priestess of Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and Caves, who is neither woman nor human when she is “possessed” by her deity. It is during one of these phases that she carries Ezinma on her back (while running through the community) to take her to the shrine of Agbala. Although Okonkwo and Ekwefi, Ezinma’s mother, chase Chielo, she outruns them.

Unoka

Unoka is Okonkwo’s father, who is dead by the beginning of the novel. Unoka symbolizes Okonkwo’s greatest fear. We only know about him through Okonkwo’s perspective. Okonkwo sees him as lazy because he was not accomplished during his lifetime. He did not hold any title. Unoka loved to play the flute and did not maintain his farms. As a result, he could not pay off his debts, and he died disgracefully. Okonkwo constantly works against these character traits.

Ojiugo

Ojiugo is Okonkwo’s third wife. Okonkwo beats her during the Week of Peace and offends Ani, the Earth Goddess.

Ekwefi

Ekwefi is Okonkwo’s second wife and Ezinma’s mother. Ezinma is her only child.

Nwakibie

Nwakibie is a wealthy elder in Umuofia. Okonkwo worked for him to earn his “first seed yam.”

Okonkwo visits him later to borrow four hundred seed yams, but Nwakibie lends him twice as much because he believes that Okonkwo will succeed.

Mr. Brown

Mr. Brown is the Christian missionary who is respectful of the Igbo and their culture and tries to understand them. Because of his policy of “compromise and accommodation,”⁸⁵ he cultivates a beneficial relationship with Akunna with whom he has frequent conversations about Christianity and indigenous African religion. Insights that Mr. Brown gains from these conversations help him better understand his converts and the community. He builds a missionary church, a school, and a small hospital before his departure. He also advises his converts to be respectful of the people of Umuofia and their culture.

The District Commissioner (DC)

The District Commissioner is not a friend to the Africans although he describes himself as such. He is racist, arrogant, and paternalistic, and believes that he and his culture are superior to the Africans and their culture. He does not respect the people of Umuofia or their culture. He orders the arrest of the six Umuofia elders, including Okonkwo, whom he had invited to a “false” meeting after the community burnt down Rev. James Smith’s church. He also taxes the community. At the end of the novel, he plans to write a book, to which he will give the title: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*.

Akunna

Akunna is one of the leaders of Umuofia. He sends one of his sons to Mr. Brown’s school. Mr. Brown befriends him, and during his visits to the village, Mr. Brown spends time in Akunna’s *obi* talking to Akunna about religion. Mr. Brown gains cultural insights from his conversations with Akunna, and these insights help Mr. Brown achieve some of his goals.

Reverend James Smith

Reverend James Smith replaces Mr. Brown in Umuofia. Whereas Mr. Brown was understanding and willing to learn about the people and their cultures, Reverend Smith is insensitive, intolerant, and simply wants to convert the people. He sees himself as superior to the Africans and thinks of them ste-

reotypically. Reverend Smith expels any Christian converts who continue to practice their indigenous African beliefs after conversion. His teachings of religious intolerance encourage Enoch, a fanatical convert, to unmask one of the *egwugwu* spirits during a ceremony to honor the earth. In response, the *egwugwu* burn Enoch’s compound as well as Reverend Smith’s church. Reverend Smith informs the District Commissioner of the incident, thus leading to the arrest of the six elders of Umuofia.

The Plot of Things Fall Apart

Things Fall Apart is made up of twenty-five chapters, divided into three parts. The novel is set at the beginning of the twentieth century, at the cusp of colonization. This is the period during which the Christian missions and the British have finally made visible headway into Igboland. Achebe has indicated that the first missionaries arrived among his people in 1857, the year of Joseph Conrad’s birth. The novel begins several years before the arrival of the first missionaries in Umuofia, but ends just as the missionaries arrive. Achebe traces the impact of that contact and subsequent colonization on the Igbo society through the experiences of the fictional character of Okonkwo and his people. Because Achebe is engaged in cultural recovery, he spends the early sections (the first two parts) of the novel providing us with a lot of background information about Umuofia and its people. Hence, when the society is thrown into chaos and Okonkwo kills himself in response, we have enough contextual information to understand the protagonist’s reaction, as well as the enormity and impact of the horror confronting his people.

Part One (Chapters 1–13)

These chapters focus on Umuofia. They introduce us to Umuofia and its traditions—social and political processes, deities, festivities, beliefs—as well as the key characters that populate Achebe’s novel. Indeed, these chapters can be described collectively as the “exposition” since their function is to provide us with background information about the people of Umuofia, the society itself, and Okonkwo, the protagonist of the work. At this point, the Europeans have not yet arrived.

Chapters 1–4 introduce Okonkwo, the protagonist or central character of the novel, and present the

reader with information about this character, what motivates him, his strengths, and his fears. Okonkwo is contrasted with Unoka, his father. In this chapter, we come to know that Okonkwo is afraid of being like his father Unoka because the latter was “a failure;” he was lazy, unaccomplished, died without a title, owed a lot of debt, and was buried unceremoniously. In other words, Unoka was not considered a man within the social context of his people, who defined a man in terms of achievements and strength.

Achebe also tells us that unlike Unoka, Okonkwo “was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond.”⁸⁶ He achieved fame at an early age when he threw to the ground the local wrestling champion, Amalinze the Cat, who had held the title for seven years. The novel begins “twenty years or more” after Okonkwo’s fight with Amalinze. Okonkwo’s fame grew, and he became a “wealthy farmer,” a great warrior, and “he had taken two titles.” In addition to establishing his prowess, Achebe describes Okonkwo’s physical attributes: “He was tall and huge, and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him a very severe look.”⁸⁷

Achebe also describes Unoka physically in this chapter. Achebe establishes Okonkwo as a character in this chapter by contrasting him with his father, and the descriptions help to achieve this character exposition and help the reader understand why Okonkwo behaves in particular ways, especially in the latter parts of the novel. At the end of the chapter, on page 8, Achebe tells us that “among these people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father,” and since Okonkwo was accomplished, his community respected him. Unlike his father, Okonkwo eats with kings and elders. So, when the lad Ikemefuna was sent as a sacrifice “to the village of Umuofia by their neighbors to avoid war and bloodshed,” Okonkwo was chosen as Ikemefuna’s guardian. Ikemefuna arrives in chapter two.

Chapter 3 serves to further Okonkwo’s character development by contrasting him again with his father. We find out that when Unoka became ill with a swollen stomach and limbs, he was carried into the Evil Forest to die. He was not buried in the earth because his disease was “an abomination to the earth goddess.”⁸⁸ Okonkwo also receives eight hundred seed yams from Nwakabie to expand his farm.

In chapter 4, Okonkwo beats Ojiugo, his wife, thus violating the Week of Peace, and is punished. This chapter draws attention to Okonkwo’s fiery temper, impatience, and obsession with demonstrating his manhood and his ability to control his compound. These are the character traits that will eventually lead to his demise and his disappointment with his son Nwoye who has bonded with his ward Ikemefuna.

The chapters that follow introduce us to various communal activities and further Okonkwo’s character development. Chapter 5 introduces the New Yam Festival. We learn of Umuofia as an agricultural society and about the festivals, the seasons, the agricultural year, and the rituals and activities that are held in preparation for the festival. The reader learns that the “Feast of the New Yam was held every year before the harvest began, to honor the earth goddess and the ancestral spirits of the clan.”⁸⁹ This means that the feast helps to cleanse the community in preparation for the new agricultural season.

Chapter 6 focuses on several cultural and entertainment activities in Umuofia, including the wrestling match. Wrestling is presented as a male sport. The boys participate in contests, and there is drumming. We also meet Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves. We will meet her again later when she carries Ezinma into the caves.

Chapter 7 is an important chapter because it shows us the bond between Nwoye and Ikemefuna. It is in this chapter that Ikemefuna dies by Okonkwo’s hands, and Okonkwo is in crisis. It also marks a turning point for Nwoye, whose spirit breaks “like the snapping of a tightened bow.”⁹⁰ We also find out that although Nwoye knows what it means to be masculine, he still prefers his mother’s stories. But, because his father wants him to be a man, he abandons his mother’s stories for Okonkwo’s “stories about tribal wars, or how, years ago, he had stalked his victim, overpowered him and obtained his first human head.”⁹¹ The locusts arrive in this chapter. Also, Ogbuefi Ezeudu visits Okonkwo’s house to tell him that “Umuofia has decided to kill” Ikemefuna and warns Okonkwo not to have a hand in the killing of one who calls him “father.”⁹² The men of Umuofia, including Okonkwo, take Ikemefuna into the forest to kill him, and Okonkwo ignores Ogbuefi Ezeudu’s

warning and kills Ikemefuna when he runs toward him for protection. This is also a turning point in the novel.

Chapter 8 explores Okonkwo's crisis after the killing of Ikemefuna. Okonkwo is unable to eat for two days. He is sick—he shivers, and he is preoccupied with thoughts of Ikemefuna. Meanwhile, Nwoye avoids Okonkwo. Okonkwo visits Obierika, his friend, who reprimands him for killing his ward Ikemefuna, whom Okonkwo had raised as a son. In addition, Obierika worries that Okonkwo's action "will not please the Earth."⁹³ Also, in this chapter, Obierika entertains a marriage proposal for his daughter. Nwoye grows into manhood, but Okonkwo sees too much of his mother and too much of his grandfather in him. Nwoye becomes more alienated from Okonkwo. This chapter also helps to develop the plot of the novel as there seems to be no turning back for Nwoye or Okonkwo after the death of Ikemefuna as Okonkwo and Nwoye have both been changed by it.

Chapter 9 deals with the search for Ezinma's *iyi uwa* and the containment of her *ogbanje* spirit so that she will no longer die and return to torture her mother.⁹⁴

Chapter 10 deals with the marriage dispute which the community settles in the *ilo*, or village square. This chapter provides Achebe an opportunity to demonstrate the application of an indigenous democratic judicial process among the Igbo as the community bears witness to the resolution of a marital dispute between two families. The couple, accompanied by their relatives, appear in the *ilo* before the *egwugwu* ancestral spirits who issue the final decision on the marital dispute, a decision that all must accept.

Achebe's criticism of Conrad highlights the latter's use of Africa as a background in *Heart of Darkness*. As such, Africans do not have a voice in the novel. In fact, readers do not know much about African cultures or the Africans. But, Achebe's novel, thus far, highlights the Igbo and their cultural practices. Chapter 10 shows the community engaged in what amounts to a court hearing, albeit in a public space—the *ilo*. The collective solving of problems will be one of the practices that the colonial administration will erode as demonstrated in the land dispute that occurs in the third part of the novel.

In chapter 11 Ekwefi tells folktales to the children. Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and Caves, seizes Ezinma and takes her to Agbala's shrine with Okonkwo and Ekwefi (Ezinma's mother) in pursuit. Okonkwo is frightened for his daughter. This chapter exposes Okonkwo's love for his daughter. This will be one of the few occasions during which Okonkwo shows fear and/or affection. This is similar to his display of emotion or tenderness after the killing of Ikemefuna.

Chapter 12 deals with Obierika's daughter's *uri* and continues to show us the various aspects of a marriage ceremony. Together with chapters 8 and 10, this chapter underscores the communal importance of marriage as a liaison between two families and communities, which also involves a long process of negotiation.

Chapter 13 marks another moment of transition in the novel. Because Okonkwo commits a female crime when his gun accidentally explodes, killing a clansman, he is forced to flee to his motherland. An unintentional crime is classified as a female crime while an intentional crime is considered a male crime. This chapter serves as a climax to Part One of the novel and closes with members of Ezeudu's clan destroying Okonkwo's compound as an act intended to purify the land of the blood Okonkwo has shed.

Part Two (Chapters 14–19)

Okonkwo is in exile in Mbanta, his motherland. Chapter 14 is like a flashback to the events that have led to Okonkwo's presence in Mbanta. The *isa-ifi* ceremony takes place here to serve as witness to the purity or chastity of the bride. The ceremony is another marriage ceremony, but this ceremony is conducted by the *umuada* (daughters of the land). In this chapter, Uchendu makes his speech about "Nneka—'Mother is Supreme'" as one of the "commonest names" among his people. The remaining chapters prepare us for the arrival of the colonizers and Christianity.

In chapter 15, things have fallen apart. Obierika visits Okonkwo in his motherland and informs him that, "'Abame is no more.'⁹⁵ The people of Abame have been massacred by a military excursion that had been sent to punish them for killing the first white man to arrive in Abame. Now that a few white men are at their doorstep, more death will follow.

In chapter 16, it is two years later, and Obierika visits Okonkwo and informs him that the missionaries have now settled in Umuofia. They have built churches and converted some people. “None of [the converts] was a man of title.”⁹⁶ Okonkwo’s son Nwoye is one of the converts and is now estranged from his father. The missionaries—five Africans and a white man—later arrive in Mbanta and cause a “considerable stir” among the people.

In chapter 17, the missionaries spend the night at Mbanta. The people of Mbanta give them a “portion of the Evil Forest”⁹⁷ because they do not want the missionaries mixing with the people of Mbanta. Also, because they consider the land an “evil forest,” the people of Mbanta do not feel threatened and do not feel that they have lost anything. The missionaries succeed in winning more converts, particularly since they are not harmed by living in the Evil Forest.

In chapter 18, the missionaries establish themselves and begin to draw converts from those who have been marginalized by their societies, including *osu*, those whose twins had been cast into the evil forest. Mr. Kiaga preaches to two wavering outcasts who have joined the missionaries and encourages them to be steadfast in their beliefs, to “shave off the mark of [their] heathen belief.”⁹⁸ One of these new converts will kill the sacred royal python one year later, becoming a catalyst for the conflict between the missionaries and the people of Mbanta. The presence of the missionaries in Mbanta creates more conflict among the people.

Chapter 19 closes Part Two of the novel. Okonkwo has spent seven years in Mbanta. He is given a farewell ceremony by his mother’s people and prepares to leave his mother’s people to return to Umuofia. The people of Mbanta express their worry over the presence of the missionaries in their community and how their presence has begun to destroy the traditional family connections. The community is falling apart.

Part Three (Chapters 20–26)

These are the final chapters of the novel. Okonkwo returns to his fatherland at the beginning of this section. In chapter 20, Okonkwo returns to Umuofia only to be confronted by new challenges. He realizes that his seven-year absence has cost him his social



An Igbo *egwugwu*. In *Things Fall Apart*, conflict arises between the Christians and the clan in Umuofia when Enoch unmasks one of the *egwugwu* spirits.

status. Moreover, his community has changed, and his son Nwoye and some of his friends have joined the missionaries, thus fragmenting the clan. The white man has also built a court in Umuofia. A land dispute between Aneto and Oduche brings the European judicial system into conflict with an African system. We are introduced to the *kotma*, the white man’s subordinate or law enforcement officer. Ezinma has grown into a beautiful young woman.

Chapter 21 focuses on the relationship and conversations between Mr. Brown and Akunna who represent the two contending religions. Mr. Brown, who seems to have some respect for African cultural practices and tried to learn about African religion, is the primary white representative of Christianity at this point in Umuofia. A conversation between Christianity and indigenous religion is represented in the exchanges between Mr. Brown and Akun-

na. Mr. Brown builds a school and a little hospital in Umuofia. He sends “Okonkwo’s son, Nwoye, who was now called Isaac, to the new training college for teachers in Umuru.”⁹⁹ The Native Court is fully established. Mr. Brown becomes ill and leaves for his homeland, and Okonkwo “mourned for the clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart, and he mourned for the warlike men of Umuofia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women.”¹⁰⁰

In chapter 22, Mr. Brown’s successor, Reverend James Smith, arrives. He has no sympathy for the Africans. Conflict arises between the Christians and the clan in Umuofia when Enoch unmask one of the *egwugwu* spirits, and “Umuofia was thrown into confusion.”¹⁰¹ The *egwugwu* retaliate by burning Mr. Smith’s church to the ground. This marks the climax of the novel. This is the point where the tensions or conflicts between the two groups explode. There is no turning back for either group after this point. Achebe has prepared the reader for what will follow by providing earlier examples of the retaliatory actions of the British administration against resistant Africans. Abame is an example.

Chapter 23 is linked to chapter 22 because of the District Commissioner’s response to the news of the burning of the Christian church. The District Commissioner returns to learn of the burning of Mr. Smith’s church. Six leaders, including Okonkwo, are invited to meet the District Commissioner at his headquarters. The District Commissioner arrests the six leaders; they are handcuffed, humiliated, and imprisoned until a fine is paid to release them. Okonkwo is angry.

Chapter 24 deals with the release of Okonkwo and the other prisoners. Okonkwo hopes that Umuofia will go to war against the white man, but Okika reminds them that the clan is now faced with a crisis. They “must do what [their] fathers would never have done.”¹⁰² They must adapt, because “if we fight the stranger we shall hit our brothers and perhaps shed the blood of a clansman.”¹⁰³ Their large community gathering is interrupted by the arrival of “the five court messengers.” An angry Okonkwo kills the head messenger who has arrived to deliver a message from the District Commissioner ordering the group to stop their meeting. He realizes that Umuofia would not join his resistance by going to war, because “they had let the other messengers es-

cape.”¹⁰⁴ The novel draws rapidly to its conclusion after this chapter.

Chapter 25 ends the novel with Okonkwo’s suicide. Ironically, Okonkwo is buried by Christians and not his own people, whose beliefs and practices forbid them from touching a person who has taken his or her own life. The District Commissioner thinks of the title he has chosen for his book: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger* and indicates that “one could almost write a whole chapter on [Okonkwo]. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph.”¹⁰⁵ This chapter is also one of the shortest chapters of the novel.

Themes

Although Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* focuses on the first contact between Africans and Europeans and the resulting consequences of that contact, several other themes are present in the novel.

The Community and the Individual

One of the themes Achebe addresses is the tension between individual desires (Okonkwo’s will, for instance) and the collective will of the community. Okonkwo is driven by fear and his desire to assert himself as a man. This fear drives his actions and often causes him to undermine the collective values or the will of his people, the very principles he wishes to protect. An example is his killing of Ikemefuna. Although he believes that the Oracle has declared that the boy be killed, he did not have to carry out the will of the Oracle, as Obierika reminds him. He did not have to accompany the group on the journey to kill Ikemefuna. But, Okonkwo’s fear of being seen as unmanly propels him to undertake a journey that has tragic consequences for him and permanently destroys his relationship with his own son Nwoye.

The Exercise of Agency

Another theme in the novel is the exercise of agency (acting on one’s own behalf or the collective’s behalf), especially when confronted by a foreign culture that threatens the group’s survival. Okonkwo chooses to fight against the colonizers because he believes that he is fighting to preserve his people and their customs. However, his actions also stem from his fear of being seen as unmanly.

Resistance to Colonialism

Africans did not accept the European encroachment into their communities freely. For example, Okonkwo's decision to kill the messenger at the end of the novel, even though this action violated cultural mores, may be seen as an early form of "nationalist" resistance. The *egwugwu* who burn Mr. Smith's church also demonstrate resistance to the encroachment of the British into their community. Another example is Abame. In fact, the massacre of the people of Abame is an example of the colonizers' deployment of a "military" campaign against resisting Africans.

Tradition (African Indigenous Forms) and Modernity (Westernization)

This theme can be seen in the tension between the system of African values and the European presence—represented by their school, the church, the clinic, and the laws—which forces the society to change. For the people of Umuofia, modernity means change, a new way of looking at themselves, their environment, and their relationship with their changing world. Colonialism destroyed some African cultural systems and practices, but colonialism also introduced new systems such as Western schools (education), Christianity, and medicine, forcing African societies into a new era. Achebe's novel presents us with a precolonial society and then also depicts it as it enters a period of transition.

The Ancestors, the Gods, and the Spirits

The ancestors, the gods, and the spirits play important roles in the society depicted in *Things Fall Apart*, and one's relationship with them could affect the individual or the community in general. Hence, humans offer prayers and sacrifices to seek protection against the wrath of the gods. An example is when Okonkwo beats his wife during the Week of Peace or when he inadvertently kills a clansman. On these occasions, Okonkwo had to be punished, and sacrifices were offered to purify the earth and to appease the Earth goddess. The goal is to restore balance.

Governance

The novel shows that the Igbo had a well-structured society before the arrival of the Europeans. We see instances of this when the community holds a court to resolve disputes. Hence, when the District Commissioner establishes a court in Umuofia to deal with land cases, the people are displeased because the Commissioner is applying alien laws to African land issues, and the people do not recognize these laws.

Marriage

Marriage, as represented in the novel, is a community event. It represents an alliance between families as well as between communities. Consequently, the community is invited to the ceremony and serves as witness to the event. There are at least three occasions that focus on marriage in the novel: the marriage dispute case in the *ilo* before Okonkwo's exile, the marriage ceremony of Obierika's daughter, and the *isa-ifi* ceremony at Uchendu's house in Mbanta.

Religion

Christianity and indigenous religions are at odds in the novel, and this tension is represented in the various confrontations between the villagers and the Christians in Mbanta and Umuofia. Although the conversations between Akunna and Mr. Brown reveal a willingness to understand one another, the Christian converts, however, seem more violently anti-African religions than even Mr. Brown. Mr. Smith's arrival and the District Commissioner's hostile administrative policies increase the tensions between the groups.

Colonization and Cultural Displacement

The themes of colonization and cultural displacement are central to Achebe's novel. Imagine how the people of Mbanta and Umuofia must feel to observe strangers taking over their land and beginning to implement new laws and policies designed to govern them. Imagine also that they cannot resist because resistance could mean the death of Umuofia or Mbanta. In the novel, the colonized are separated from their cultures and societies by their exposure to Western education and Christianity—examples include Nwoye, Mr. Kiaga, and Enoch. Various com-



A royal meeting in Nigeria with British representatives. In *Things Fall Apart*, the people of Mbanta and Umuofia experience the colonization of their lands by Great Britain.

munities in the novel do not survive the arrival of the white man in their societies. Abame is an example. At the end of the novel, it is clear that Umuofia will survive, but it will not be the same, as its values will change. Okonkwo recognizes this transformation even before the killing of the court messenger. The people of Umuofia do as well, and this is obvious in Okonkwo's observation in chapter 24 when he tells his people that they may shed the blood of their own brothers if they fight the stranger.

Slavery

Slavery is objectification. It treats the individual as an object, something to be sold, traded, and sacrificed. Slavery also denies the enslaved their freedom. The history of slavery pre-dates the transatlantic slave trade, which brought several million Africans to the Americas; the Indian Ocean slave trade; and plantation slavery in the United States. Africans and other groups across the world have had histories of slavery at various times. Africans participated in the transatlantic slave trade as well as in trade across the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Peninsula. Like other societies across the world, Africans had internal slavery. In the precolonial society that Achebe describes in *Things Fall Apart*, people can become slaves in a number of ways: as war captives, as compensation for the loss of property or life, as bonded or indentured servants or workers,

as items of sale, or as inherited property.

Ikemefuna would not be considered a slave because he has been offered to a god as a sacrifice in atonement for an offence. Although Ikemefuna is innocent, he has, nevertheless, been selected as a sacrificial offering. As such, he does not have any rights. As *osu*, an outcast, Ikemefuna cannot mix with the free born and cannot marry a free born. His social status will also mark that of his descendants for generations. Although Okonkwo and his family have treated Ikemefuna like a member of their family, Ikemefuna will never be adopted into the family as a free born. The arrival of Christianity disrupted these value systems and gave

those, like Ikemefuna, who had been ostracized or alienated by their communities, a space where they felt accepted.

The Oral Tradition

The oral tradition includes stories, folktales, fables, proverbs, songs, chants, and performances. The oral tradition is generally handed down from one generation to another. The functions of the genres will vary depending on the context. The folktales or fables can be used to teach moral lessons or for entertainment as when Ikemefuna or Nwoye's mother tells the children stories with songs at night. These stories are often didactic and help to explain the group's cosmology or universe. The performance of these stories also helps to bring members of the community or family together, thus reinforcing a sense of belonging. Such stories are often passed down from one generation to the next.

Several fables or folktales appear in *Things Fall Apart*. They include the folktale about the mosquito and the ear to explain why the mosquito always buzzes at the ear and the story about the vulture and the sky and how the tortoise got its broken shell. Another form of the oral tradition is the proverb, which Achebe has described as the "palm oil with which words are eaten." When Okonkwo visits his friends or peers, they speak in proverbs, as for instance when Uchendu asks him why Nneka ("mother is su-

preme”) is a common name among his people. The purpose of the accompanying story that Uchendu tells Okonkwo is to remind the latter that he is safe in his mother’s homeland. The oral traditional forms also help to preserve the culture of the group and to maintain the continuity of knowledge, social mores, and systems of values.

Women

Feminist scholars of Achebe have been critical of his treatment of women in this novel, claiming that the novel marginalizes African women and does not present an accurate picture of women in precolonial Igbo society. For example, critics have pointed to Okonkwo’s violence against his wives—he beats them frequently—as an example of the novel’s disregard for women. Other scholars suggest that women are generally silent in the novel. Examples are the marriage ceremonies that deal with women or the marital dispute hearing in the *ilo* where the women’s voices are absent. The *egwugwu*, for instance, is a male group although it can make decisions about women.

However, there are several strong female characters in the novel whose roles help to maintain balance in the community. Examples include Chika, the priestess of the Oracle of the Hills and Caves, who told Unoka that he was lazy. Chielo is another example. In addition, Okonkwo acknowledges that Ezinma, his daughter, behaves more like a man or son than Nwoye his son.

Despite Achebe’s attempt to correct the representation of Africans and Africa in this novel, the work does not engage a feminist perspective because that is not its focus. Women, just like Okonkwo, are presented as Achebe imagines them within the context of the culture at that point in time.

Culture Conflict or Clash

Things Fall Apart can be seen as a novel that bears witness to Igbo society before and after the arrival of Europeans. Achebe spends considerable time describing Igbo culture and providing a detailed account of various aspects of cultural life and makes plain how drastically Igbo society is impacted by the onset of colonialism.

Suicide

Among the Igbo, suicide is viewed as taboo and as an act against the Earth. Okonkwo commits sui-

cide at the end of the novel, and consequently he cannot be buried in the earth because that will contaminate it. Furthermore, his people must purify their land and their community because suicide is sacrilege. Ironically, Okonkwo can only be buried by Christians, who do not respect the values of his people. One can see Okonkwo’s act as an early form of Black Nationalist resistance to colonization because Okonkwo is fighting against the destruction of his culture and his people and the appropriation of his land by the “strangers.” He fails because he is unable to rally his people around him to mount a collective resistance. Obierika is correct in his lament that the colonial administration has destroyed his friend Okonkwo. However, one should also note that Okonkwo’s fear of being seen as weak and his hasty temperament tend to undermine him because he fails to see other possibilities.

Pacification, History, and Narrative

The District Commissioner considers dedicating a chapter, “or perhaps a paragraph” of the book he plans on writing to Okonkwo’s story. History is generally written by the conquerors, and the District Commissioner is a conqueror as well as a colonizer. In writing history or the story of these people from his prejudicial perspective, the District Commissioner minimizes the culture by “cutting out details,” because “there was so much else to include.”¹⁰⁶ What would he include that could be more important than the people, their culture, and their experiences? The title of the District Commissioner’s future book: *The Pacification of the Primitive Peoples of the Lower Niger* reveals a lot about the “official” colonial narrative and the recording of the history of these people. The story will focus on the people’s conquest and how the District Commissioner succeeded in “pacifying” or quieting down these “primitive peoples.” In this narrative, the people will have very little say. It is interesting that the District Commissioner’s narrative sounds like Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.

The Purpose of Art

Achebe believed art should be political and was not a proponent of “art for art’s sake,” a modernist principle.¹⁰⁷ *Things Fall Apart* reflects these ideas, particularly because Achebe does not try to idealize or glorify his people or culture.



Irish poet W. B. Yeats, whose poem “The Second Coming” is the source of *Things Fall Apart*’s title.

Achebe and W. B. Yeats

Achebe chose a line from [W.B. Yeats](#)’ poem “The Second Coming” for the title of his novel:

The Second Coming

By William Butler Yeats

Source: The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats (1989)

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and ev-
erywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

*Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those
words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of
the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a
man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cra-
dle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round
at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?*

Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* speaks not only about the impending chaos, the “anarchy” that will soon be unleashed on the land by the advent of colonialism, but also about the uncertainties of the period after. The District Commissioner’s establishment of policies and structures that are inimical to African systems of belief and politics are signs of the outcome of the birth of this strange beast. For Africans, colonization was anarchy. It disrupted existing African systems and social structures and threw Africans into confusion, a widening or whirling gyre, whose center can no longer hold.

William Butler (W. B.) Yeats was an Irish poet born in 1865, who is commonly recognized as one of the most important literary figures of the twentieth century. In 1923, Yeats was the first Irish writer to receive a Nobel Prize. According to Professor A.G. Stock, “The Yeatsian idea...takes the bitterness out of defeat by representing defeat as inevitable, victory as impermanent, and the contending forces as phases of a single, inexhaustible creative energy.”¹⁰⁸ Yeats’ poem “The Second Coming” written in 1919 at the end of World War I mourns a world devastated

by war and a tremendous loss of human life. If Europe is the “center” or perceived itself as the “center,” the poem then announces the end of a phase of history (European or World). The world, or society as the Europeans knew it, was ending because of this cataclysm, symbolized by the widening gyre Yeats references in “The Second Coming.”

The first two lines of Yeats’ poem suggest a situation that is no longer stable, in which the “falcon” has been separated from the “falconer,” that which anchors it. The two can no longer communicate with each other. One may read this as indicative of alienation. For Yeats, it seems to represent a temporal shift or rift whose implications are simultaneously known and unknown. This ambiguity is the source of tension, for while the current phase or past is ending because of alienation from its falconer, the future is unclear.

Let’s consider what it was about the vision of the world projected in Yeats’ poem that appealed to or fascinated Achebe. For twentieth-century individuals who had not before witnessed the scale of violence seen in the events of World War I, Yeats’ poem might seem apocalyptic, an indication of the end of the world, and in fact this is precisely how many people in Europe and North America felt upon the conclusion of World War I. In Yeats’ poem, an apocalyptic ending, however, seems to carry within it the seed(s) of a beginning, one whose nature is uncertain. This ending/beginning seems to be in keeping with Achebe’s narrative.

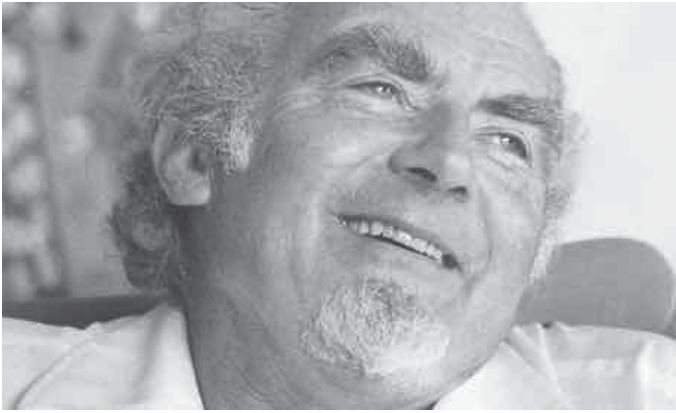
For the Igbo, the arrival of white people among them marks an ending, the death of their culture and values. Things will never be the same. There is no turning to the past, at least not to a familiar one or one in which they will be comfortable. By the end of Part 3 of *Things Fall Apart*, the death of Igbo culture seems imminent. The people of Abame have been massacred as Obierika informs an exiled Okonkwo. The Christians have arrived at Umuofia and established themselves, followed by new laws and administrative structures, such as the court, the District Commissioner, and *kotma*. This transformation, expressed through the structure and plot of *Things Fall Apart*, helps us understand Achebe’s use of Yeats’ poem as a framing device for his novel.

In Part 1, for instance, Achebe introduces us to Umuofia, Okonkwo, and the various characters, tra-

ditions, and cultural practices of the people. As the novel’s exposition, this section provides the reader with important information about Umuofia, its social and spiritual belief systems, customs, and the values that govern or inform the lives of the people as well as their relationships with one another. Although Umuofia is not a harmonious world, the people recognize themselves as belonging to a community. We witness this as they participate in various activities: village games, a marriage courtship and formalization, funeral rites, the festival of the new pumpkin leaves, a marriage dispute, a spiritual quest, and, by the end of Part One, Okonkwo’s exile. Okonkwo’s exile from his people marks the climax of this section of the novel. One could interpret Okonkwo’s exile from his people as symbolizing the end of a phase in his life, for his people destroy his compound and remove all signs of his presence in the community, thus disconnecting him from all the things that have helped to shape his identity.

The second part of the novel takes place in Mbanta, the home of Okonkwo’s mother and Okonkwo’s place of exile. It is during this period of seven years that Okonkwo—and the reader—begins to hear stories of the effects of the first contact between Africans and whites represented in the news of the destruction of Abame. Okonkwo also hears of the arrival of missionaries in Umuofia and their establishment of administrative offices there. The arrival of the Christian missionaries in Umuofia during his absence affects Okonkwo because Nwoye, his eldest son, finds spiritual refuge in the songs and teachings of the Christians. The missionaries represent a surrogate community for Nwoye and others like him who have felt marginalized or alienated by their society or its practices. Thus, these people become the first converts. Their conversion and association with the missionaries further fragment Igbo society. The people of Umuofia are now a divided people, and a symbolic representation of this division occurs when Okonkwo disowns his son Nwoye. It is important to note that the presence of the missionaries exposes already existing flaws in the community.

Furthermore, the fragmentation of Umuofia is worsened by the presence of the colonial administration, which soon establishes a colonial District Court and begins to impose its own laws, thus discarding existing African laws. For Okonkwo, the



Distinguished British historian and Africanist Basil Davidson. Davidson contended that European attitudes toward Africans extending back to the onset of slavery have their roots in racism.

center of Umuofia (or Igbo) society has been fractured and, as such, can no longer hold. This becomes clear in Part Three of the novel after Okonkwo's return from exile when he notes that his community has changed and his people have been weakened. Achebe writes:

*Umuofia had indeed changed during the seven years Okonkwo had been in exile. The church had come and led many astray. Not only the low-born and the outcast but sometimes a worthy man had joined it. Such a man was Ogbuefi Ugonna, who had taken two titles and...cast it away to join the Christians.*¹⁰⁹

Okonkwo also notes that the changes taking place in his community signify the death of his people and he "was deeply grieved. And it was not just a personal grief. He mourned for the clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart, and "he mourned for the warlike men of his Umuofia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women."¹¹⁰

In addition, the colonizers bring to Umuofia foreigners from "Umuru on the bank of the Great River" who serve as court messengers (*kotma*) and enforcers for the colonial administration.¹¹¹ They, in addition to the Christians, threaten and dishonor Umuofia's values and sacred customs. An example is when Enoch unmasks one of the *egwugwu* spirits during "the annual worship of the earth goddess."¹¹² In retaliation, the "band of *egwugwu*" march to Enoch's compound and destroy it; then, they burn

Mr. Smith's church. These actions eventually lead to the District Commissioner's imprisonment of the male elders of Umuaro, including Okonkwo.

Africa and the West: The Question of Representation (Stereotypes) and Voice

The relationship between Africa and the West has been fraught with tensions stemming from a long history of the West's representation of Africa in negative terms. Despite Africa's contributions to the world through its various civilizations, including those of Egypt, Kush, Zimbabwe, and Nok, among many others, the African continent has been consistently represented as less civilized than Europe or the West. Africans were frequently portrayed as not having any history worth noting—a claim that runs counter to the actual history of the African continent. In actuality, African peoples had trading relationships with the Americas, Europe, and the Arabian Peninsula long before colonization began in earnest during the nineteenth century. Some scholars point to examples such as the Olmec heads found in San Lorenzo, Vera Cruz, Mexico, as examples of African visitations to Mesoamerica, though other scholars dispute such claims.

Africa's presence is also visible in works such as the Old Testament in which Egypt figures strongly. Classical tradition reminds us of the Phoenicians, a seafaring people who established city states across the Mediterranean and North Africa between 1500 BCE and 300 BCE. Carthage, in what is now Tunisia, was perhaps the most famous of the Phoenician city states and competed with Rome for power. If such civilization existed in North Africa, how then does one explain Europe's erasure of this knowledge of Africa in books and in Western attitudes toward Africa and Africans over the course of the following centuries? The distinguished British historian and Africanist Basil Davidson asserted that:

The Ancient World failed to remember the Hittites, for example, just as a recent Europe largely forgot the brilliant skills of Islamic civilization in North Africa and Spain: with this last case, indeed, to the point that we still lack full translation and publication of many medieval works in Ar-

*abic, whether by Arabs or not.*¹¹³

Such amnesia and deliberate erasure has its roots in Europe's desire to see itself as the center of the world, a center which serves as the model for all else around or outside it. In other words, Europe saw itself as the ideal and rendered Africa and other parts of the world—such as the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, and East Asia—as the “other” and as less civilized than Europe. These viewpoints were propagated even further as European exploration of the rest of the world increased in the fifteenth century, continued through the colonial era of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and even continue into the present day.

An example of this erasure of African culture and history in the Western point of view is the fact that European colonization and colonial policies were defined as a “civilizing mission,” as in the case of the French, or as part of “the white man's burden” to Christianize and civilize those in Africa—both endeavors founded on the false notion that Africans did not already have a civilization. In some cases, this purpose was even framed as a need to save Africans and those who were not white. While such attitudes extended to European views of unfamiliar peoples throughout the world, Africa has long been viewed as the “dark continent” and the least civilized of European countries' colonial territories. Africans and non-whites were seen as savages or at best as “noble savages”—a mythic conception of non-Europeans as having innate natural simplicity and virtue uncorrupted by European civilization.

Chinua Achebe has stated that these ideas had their origins in European racism toward Africans, and Basil Davidson agrees, indicating that European attitudes toward Africans extending back to the onset of the transatlantic slave trade have their roots in racism. Davidson defines this racism as follows:

...the conscious and systematic weapon of domination, of exploitation, which first saw its demonic rise with the onset of the trans-Atlantic trade in African captives sold into slavery, and which, later, led on to the imperialist colonialism of our yesterdays ... this racism was conceived as the moral justification—the necessary justification, as it was seen by those in the white

*man's world who were neither thieves nor moral monsters—for doing to black people what church and state no longer thought it permissible to do to white people: the justification for enslaving black people, that is, when it was no longer permissible to enslave white people.*¹¹⁴

Racism, therefore, served as a tool, a “weapon of exploitation,” and a justification for conquest and the destruction of African communities and values. It justified the European assertion of (racial) superiority and the European assertion of power over and domination of Africans and other groups who were seen as inherently different from whites.

This is clear in *Things Fall Apart* (Part Three); after the District Commissioner has arrested Okonkwo and the elders/leaders of Umuofia, he tells them, “We have brought a peaceful administration to you and your people so that you may be happy.”¹¹⁵ The irony in this scene, of course, is that the Umuofia leaders are in handcuffs, and also that they are correct in their conclusion that the white man who now resides among them does not understand them. The Umuofia leaders recognize the cultural misunderstanding or potential for such misunderstanding and state as much when they tell Mr. Smith through Okeke, the interpreter:

*‘We cannot leave the matter in his hands because he does not understand our customs, just as we do not understand his. We say he is foolish because he does not know our ways, and perhaps he says we are foolish because we do not know his. Let him go away.’*¹¹⁶

Part of the complexity of the relationship between the people of Umuofia and the whites in their midst lies with the interpreters, who serve as cultural intermediaries. In the scene in Part Three where the leaders go to see Mr. Smith, Okeke, who is not from Umuofia, serves as a poor interpreter and misinterprets the exchange between Mr. Smith and the leaders. We must then consider the following question: How did the misinterpretation of ideas in these types of exchanges affect the relationship between whites and Africans?



Early Christian ministers in Nigeria. In *Things Fall Apart*, the Christians bring the people of Umuofia into contact with modernity, but Christianity also desecrated and destroyed African gods and values.

Nevertheless, let us not minimize the assumption among Europeans about Africa that Africans did not have their own history and civilization, and therefore could not be a subject of serious consideration. Basil Davidson cites Sir Richard Coupland, an early scholar of Africa who, writing about the British in the Zambezi, claimed that “up to the middle of the nineteenth century ‘the main body of the Africans’ had had no history, but had ‘stayed for untold centuries, sunk in barbarism...[so that] the heart of Africa was scarcely beating.’”¹¹⁷ Davidson adds, “African history could be no fit subject for scholarly investigation because no such history existed.”¹¹⁸ The implication of this position is the claim that African history began only with the arrival of Europeans.

This claim is significant to our consideration of *Things Fall Apart* and other texts because it negates African productions and contributions before European arrival. Indeed, Umuofia, with its established values and systems as portrayed in *Things Fall Apart*, does not coincide with European images of Africa as a place of darkness. So long as Europeans, as in the case of *Things Fall Apart*, saw Africans through racist lenses as disorderly and unmanageable, Africans were doomed to be objectified in their contact with Europeans, and African cultures and values could be destroyed or eradicated from a position of imagined cultural and moral superiority.

European colonization, therefore, was, among

other things, an assertion of power—an attempt to dominate, tame, control, and thus bring order to a place that Europe had defined as a “savage” land. From this point of view, colonization was justifiable, and racist stereotypes of Africans and Africa as uncivilized and subhuman could be further propagated. Given this context, Conrad’s portrayal of Africans and Africa in *Heart of Darkness* in many ways reproduces these racist views. This image of Africa, as Achebe insists, is humanly and intellectually illogical because Africa most certainly has a history and a past that has contributed to world cultures and civilizations, including those of Europe. Achebe’s response in *Things Fall Apart* and in his essay “An Image of Africa,” which we will discuss later in the resource guide, is to correct the centuries-long distortion.

Contact and Conflict

According to Nigerian literary scholar Francis Abiola Irele, “[central] to Achebe’s preoccupation in the third part of the novel is the conflict of cultures provoked by the introduction of Christianity in Igbo-land.”¹¹⁹ Despite its proclamation of “love thy neighbor as thyself,” Christianity did not preserve African cultures, values, and belief systems. If anything, Christianity, when brought to Africa in the context of European colonization, encouraged the destruction of African values and beliefs.

Achebe’s novel questions European and Christian assumptions about Africans. Irele affirms that the “novel’s powerful evocation of the vibrant quality of the pre-colonial culture represents a counter discourse that challenges this ideology” of a “civilizing mission.”¹²⁰ Irele adds, “Achebe depicts the human and intellectual limitations of the Christian missionaries, especially Mr. Smith, whose aggressive and uncompromising approach to his mission” has grave consequences for the people of Umuofia. The Christians bring the people of Umuofia into contact with modernity by creating a space in the Christian community for those like the *osu* and mothers of twins who have been marginalized in traditional society and by establishing a school and a small clinic. However, Christianity also desecrated and destroyed African gods and values. Therefore, while the two cultures stood side by side, they did not do so harmoniously or on equal footing in the new dispensation. As Irele notes, “we witness the historic

progression of the Christian religion set in motion, leading to a far-reaching reversal of the traditional order.”¹²¹

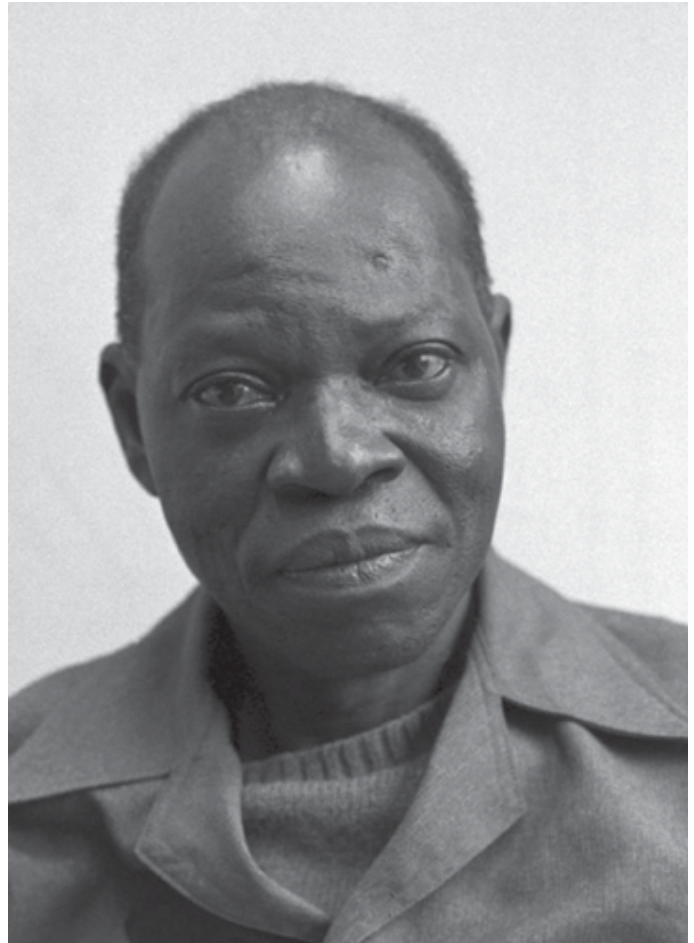
This reversal becomes representative of the disintegration of the culture and clan in Umuofia as the Christians and their church flourish in the Evil Forest while at the same time the District Commissioner’s court is established, as is taxation of the people of Umuofia. By the end of Part Three of the novel, things have truly fallen apart because the village of Umuofia has lost its leaders, who are now subservient to the District Commissioner; and Okonkwo has killed the messenger, thus violating a sacred principle of the land. His suicide further violates the sanctity of the land and the Earth goddess, ultimately signaling his final exclusion from the community that was so important to him, as the existing beliefs of Umuofia forbid his burial, and the Christians must bury him.

Reception and Literary Criticism

Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, and the Invention African Literature

Chinua Achebe has been described as the founder of African literature, and his novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) helped to establish and shape the field of what we regard today as African literature. Scholars still are baffled that Achebe was not the first African Nobel Laureate because not only is he considered to be the author who established the African literary tradition, but also his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, is the best-known piece of literature from Africa. It has sold millions of copies and stands as a prototype for the indigenization of English, in other words, giving English an African nuance. In addition, Achebe’s novel has been anthologized and taught as part of school curricula at various levels. Published only two years (1958) before Nigerian independence, its sentiments seemed to coincide with those of Nigerian independence activists.

From the beginning of his artist career, Achebe mapped out his responsibility as a writer and as a founder of the African Writers series and the African literary tradition in general:



Amos Tutuola (1920–97), a Nigerian writer who served as an inspiration to Chinua Achebe.

*I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them.*¹²²

This is the task of the novelist as teacher as Achebe saw himself and serves as both Achebe’s logos and ethos for not only himself as an African writer, but also for other African writers, whose works he nurtured into existence while serving as editor of the Heinemann African Writers series.

Things Fall Apart: Criticism and Global Reception

As indicated earlier, Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* has been adopted and translated into over fifty-five languages. A film adaptation of the novel was made in 1971, directed by Hans Jürgen Poh-

land. *Things Fall Apart* has become the prototypical narrative about Africa, and for some scholars this is problematic. One book, they argue, cannot serve as the representative text for an entire continent or even a nation or group of people. Despite such concerns, the book remains important in African literature, particularly Anglophone African literature.

In his tribute to Achebe, the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o recalls his meeting with Achebe in 1962 at the "conference of writers of English expression" at Makerere University, Uganda. According to Ngũgĩ, "The novel most discussed at the Conference as a model of literary restraint and excellence was *Things Fall Apart*."¹²³ Moreover, Ngũgĩ adds that Achebe "was the single most important figure in the development of modern African literature as writer, editor and quite simply a human being. His novel, *Things Fall Apart*, the most widely read novel in the history of African literature, since its publication in 1958, became an inspiring model."¹²⁴ Ngũgĩ acknowledged also that at the launching of his recent book in Nairobi, "the guest speaker P.O. Lumumba interspersed his speech with proverbs. They were taken from Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*."¹²⁵

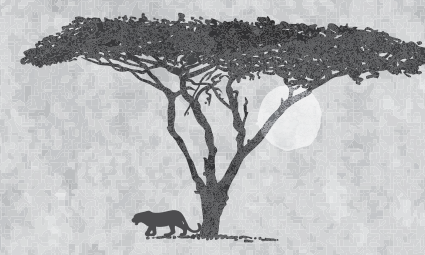
The Kenyan professor of literature and postcolonial scholar Simon Gikandi offers an elaborate assessment of the impact of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*:

For my generation of Africans born at the cusp between colonialism and decolonization, the most important event after the independence of Ghana (1957) was the publication of Chinua Achebe's Things Fall

*Apart (1958)...as a novel and event, the influence of Things Fall Apart in shaping the literary sensibilities of African readers was unprecedented. But the influence of Achebe's novel went beyond questions of sensibility.*¹²⁶

Achebe was certainly not the first African to publish a novel in English or in a European language. Writers such as [Amos Tutuola](#) (whom Achebe credits with inspiring him), [Sol Plaatje](#), and [Peter Abrahams](#) were already published. Nevertheless, as Gikandi reminds us, "*Things Fall Apart* transformed the African social imaginary, the stories Africans tell about themselves, their relations to the world and their place in the narrative of modern times. It also transformed the institutions of modern literature and the English language, heralding the emergence of what has come to be known as the postcolonial canon."¹²⁷

Of course, it is important to note that although Achebe's novel aimed to expose the horrors of colonialism, African literature is preoccupied with a plethora of topics, issues, and themes, including human rights, child soldiers, post-apartheid trauma, feminism and women's lives, gender and sexuality, masculinity, post-coloniality, the reexamination of African slavery, among many others. Still, the importance of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* cannot be minimized, for both the author and the text will serve us as literary compasses, showing "us Africans where the rain began to beat us...where we have come from, where we are and who and where we ought to be."¹²⁸



Section III

Selected Shorter Works of Literature

The Empire Writes Back

According to a proverb that has been associated with various African peoples from Nigeria to Benin, Ghana, Togo, Kenya, and Zimbabwe, as long as the hunter continues to tell the story of its encounter with the lion, the lion will always lose the battle, and the hunter will always be the winner. The grand narratives about the encounter between Africans and the West did not give Africans a voice. History was rendered through the perspectives of the conquerors, the conquistadors, and the colonizers. Achebe mocks this representation at the end of *Things Fall Apart* in his portrayal of the consciousness or voice of the District Commissioner as he contemplates the subject matter of his book about the Igbo or the people of Umuofia and decides what to include or exclude. The District Commissioner concludes that he would include the story of Okonkwo, “this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself,”¹²⁹ because it “would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph at any rate.”¹³⁰

Achebe’s irony cannot be missed, especially in light of Obierika’s angry outburst at the District Commissioner only a few minutes earlier, in which he accuses the Europeans of killing Okonkwo: “That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself and now he will be buried like a dog...’”¹³¹ Ending *Things Fall Apart* with the District

Commissioner’s perspective, which presents the experience of the colonized in reductive terms and as a “pacification,” further underscores European arrogance and the European perception of Africans as unimportant, as simply narrative fodder. Indeed, how can the history of colonial conquest with its attendant trauma, destruction, and devaluation of African lives and belief systems be described simply as “pacification,” as if one were calming down a child? It suggests that African lives and voices are unimportant.

Even the title of the District Commissioner’s book underscores this paternalistic attitude toward Africans. *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger* is even further patronizing because of its use of the word “primitive.” The District Commissioner’s book will represent the Africans through a Western imperialistic gaze, which privileges the power and voice of the conqueror. We will not hear Okonkwo’s voice or even Obierika’s agony because they do not matter and because as the District Commissioner states, “There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details.”¹³² Okonkwo’s life, to which Achebe devoted an entire book, will be rendered only in a “reasonable paragraph.” Indeed, as the proverb says, the lion will win the battle only when it tells its story from its own perspective.

Postcolonial literature renders the world it sees through the lion’s eyes and voice. In it, the lion talks back to the hunter. As suggested by Bill Ashcroft,

NOTE TO STUDENTS: In the essay “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” by Chinua Achebe, Achebe features a direct quotation of Joseph Conrad that includes a deeply offensive racial slur, and Achebe reiterates this slur in his discussion of Conrad’s viewpoints. It is our hope that Academic Decathletes will not only read and discuss this work with a scholarly appreciation for Achebe’s writing and his insights, but also will approach the subject matter with maturity and sensitivity.

Garreth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin in their book, *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), the people of the empire write back to the metropole, as located in European capitals such as London, Paris, Brussels, and Lisbon, to mention a few. The publication of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) helped to establish the field of African literature as an area of focus. Its project of "writing back to the empire" served as a model, a template for later writers of African literature immediately following independence.

In this next section of the resource guide, we will continue our exploration of African literature beyond Achebe's landmark work *Things Fall Apart*. We will consider an essay written by Achebe himself before moving on to various other works, including a TED talk by the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as well as a couple poems and a few short stories. However, before we delve into these specific works, let us take a step back to consider some larger topics and issues impacting the development of literature in Africa, so that we may further our understanding of the historical, political, and social context in which these works were written.

Empire and Colonialism

Of all the European nations during the era of colonization, Britain held the largest empire, spanning from the Americas to Asia and Africa. While its imperial possessions at one time included the thirteen American colonies, that would change after 1776 with the American Declaration of Independence. The rest of the British Empire, from India to Australia and Zimbabwe, remained intact until after World War II when India became the first of the British colonies to gain independence in 1947. African nations began to gain independence from their European colonizers after World War II. Outside of North Africa, the first of these was the Gold Coast (what became the nation of Ghana) in 1957.

The imperial project had not been a peaceful one. In some colonies, white settler populations developed, and the presence of white settlers who generally took indigenous lands led to new antagonistic political and social dynamics and created new hierarchies of power and racism, resulting in internal conflicts and sometimes liberation struggles. Some examples of regions where white settler colonialism had a significant impact are Kenya, South Africa, and Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe). In these places,

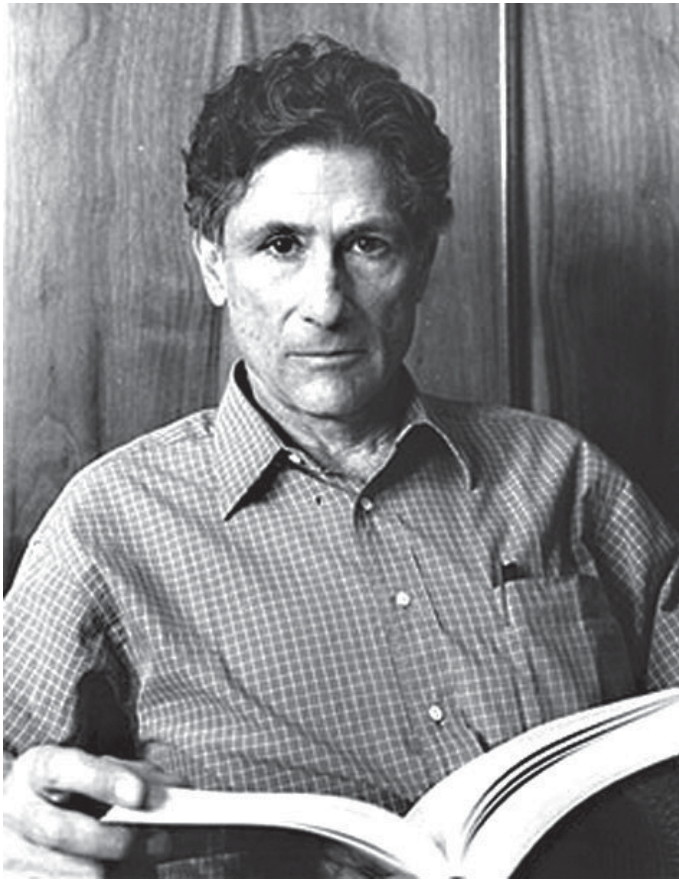
the white settlers created laws that alienated blacks and non-whites from their ancestral lands and restricted their freedom.

Colonialism was simply the domination of one group of people and land by a foreign or non-native group. It allowed the colonizers to exercise power or control over another's culture, traditions, economy, and geopolitical life. Colonized people generally do not have rights except those granted to them by their colonizers. This is why the colonized resist or rebel against their colonizers. According to Afro-Caribbean writer Frantz Fanon, "National liberation, national renaissance, the restoration of nationhood to the people, commonwealth...decolonization is always a violent phenomenon."¹³³ Colonialism had different effects on African nations and their peoples, but scholars generally agree that the negative impacts of colonialism on African peoples were numerous. For instance, colonialism destabilized African traditional societies (as shown in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*) by alienating many Africans from their cultures, belief systems, and institutions, as well as from the land. Colonialism also defined Africans and their traditional systems as inferior to the West.

Orientalism

The term "orientalism" was used by the Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* (1978) to describe and explain how the West (Europe and America) construct and understand the "Orient," particularly the Middle East and the East, through a discourse of language and historical relations that have been tainted by ideological and cultural positions and interests in which the "Orient" is rendered as Europe's "other." According to Edward Said:

Orientalism [is] a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western Experience. The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrast-



Edward Said (1935–2003) was a Palestinian-American scholar and founder of the field of postcolonial studies.

*ing image, idea, personality, experience. Yet none of this Orient is merely imaginative. The Orient is an integral part of European material civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles.*¹³⁴

There are clear parallels between Achebe's critique of Conrad and Said's description of the West's representation of those different from them through an orientalist lens. In other words, those representations are not innocent because they underscore the West's ideological positions and interests. In Said's view, the West has created a stereotypical image of the Middle East and its peoples as threatening and culturally inferior. Therefore, orientalism does not represent reality, but is a distortion, a projection of the West's ideas of "otherness" unto those that it

reads as different. Said's concept of "orientalism" would go on to have an extensive impact on fields such as postcolonial and cultural studies.

Nation, Nationalism, and Resistance

The notion of "nation" in Africa is a troubled one, especially because, as many scholars have pointed out, the borders of contemporary African nations are the result of Africa's colonial legacy. This is because colonizers carved up African communities without considering kinship and cultural and linguistic ties. Thus, Africans belonging to the same linguistic or ethnic groups may be citizens of two or more different nations with shared national borders. Some people have even called for the dismantling of such boundaries and a return to precolonial states. However, despite the challenges that arbitrary national borders present, many Africans seem to have accepted the idea of nations.

In his book *Imagined Communities* (1983), the scholar Benedict Anderson defines a nation as "an imagined community" because all members of even the smallest nation will never meet or come to know one another. Anderson adds that the nation imagines itself as limited because its boundaries cannot extend indefinitely. In effect, it is limited by its boundaries with other nations. Members of a nation, however, are united by a belief in a shared history, ideals, and sometimes, language, as well as the willingness or desire to protect or preserve these commonalities. In the context of Africa, nationalism emerged in response to colonization and was expressed as the desire for self-governance, read as independence. While colonization destroyed many African cultures and forced disparate peoples into nations, colonization ironically gave Africans a common goal—the overthrow of imperialism and the European presence in their societies.

At the end of World War II, independence movements emerged in several African colonial states. In 1957, the Gold Coast (Ghana) became the first nation in Sub-Saharan Africa to gain independence from a European colonial power. This movement toward independence continued into the 1980s—Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia) gained its independence from Great Britain in 1980. Scholars also see the end of apartheid in South Africa in 1994 as the final cur-

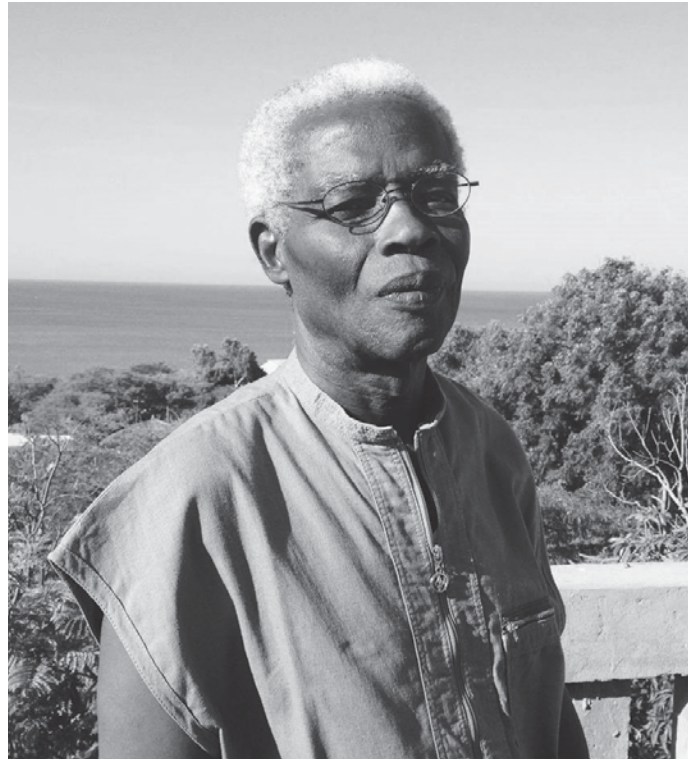


French paratroopers march through Algiers, 1957. Colonies with white settler populations often had to fight wars of liberation against their colonizers, as was the case in Algeria, where Algerians fought the French from 1954 until finally gaining their independence in 1962.

tain on the stage of colonization. Although most African nations gained their independence peacefully (passive resistance), some did not. Several nations engaged in active resistance and fought wars of liberation against their colonizers, this was especially the case in those colonies with minority white settler populations. Algeria, for instance, fought a protracted war of independence against the French (1954–62), and Kenya engaged in a land liberation struggle against the British (1944–62).

Neocolonialism

Although African nations had gained their independence from their European colonizers, the people in these nations soon realized that they were not truly independent because their former colonizers still exerted control over them through a range of



Ghanaian author Ayi Kwei Armah. Armah and other African writers have explored the impact of neocolonialism in their works.

economic and political systems, structures, and policies. The term “neocolonialism” came into use in the 1960s. In fact, scholars have attributed the coinage of the term to Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of newly independent Ghana, who stated:

*The neo-colonialism of today represents imperialism in its final and perhaps its most dangerous stage...The essence of neo-colonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside.*¹³⁵

Thus, while the African nations claimed independence, they remained politically and economically dependent on the West. Indeed, as Nkrumah pointed out, the neocolonial relationship with the West would eventually prove to be “dangerous” for African nations as they became more dependent on their former colonizers. Neocolonialism is supported through the exploitation of the formerly colonized. According to Nkrumah:

*The result of neo-colonialism is that foreign capital is used for the exploitation rather than for the development of the less developed parts of the world. Investment under neo-colonialism increases rather than decrease the gap between the rich and the poor countries of the world.*¹³⁶

Neocolonialism is a continuation of colonialism. Nkrumah describes it as “the worst form of imperialism. For those who practise it, it means power without responsibility and for those who suffer from it, it means exploitation without redress.”

The Afro-Caribbean writer [Frantz Fanon](#) foresaw the danger of neocolonialism in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), which has had a considerable impact on African literature and the ideas of many African political leaders. Fanon saw neocolonialism as antithetical to the promises of independence. He argued that the failure of the newly independent African nations was a failure of national consciousness which had been undermined by the vestiges of colonialism, that is, neocolonialism. This idea would become one of the central themes of African literature and political and cultural thought after independence. For instance, writers such as [Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o](#) (*A Grain of Wheat*) and [Ayi Kwei Armah](#) (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*), and [Ousmane Sembene](#) (*Xala*) explore the nature and continuing presence of colonialism, i.e., neocolonialism, in their nations.

Postcolonialism

The term postcolonialism does not stand for a political movement, but rather refers to a theoretical and academic practice that examines the effects of colonialism and neocolonialism on the colonized. Postcolonialism assumes that there are ongoing effects of colonization and explores the effects of colonialism from the moment of colonization up to the present day. Postcolonial theory also seeks to grant the colonized agency and to examine the ways in which that agency has been expressed, even under colonization. Postcolonialism as a political position defends the rights of those who have been colonized or marginalized. It demands the redress of colonial wrongs, and it challenges the destructive politics of state governments by demanding equality for all citizens. It is important to note that despite its import-

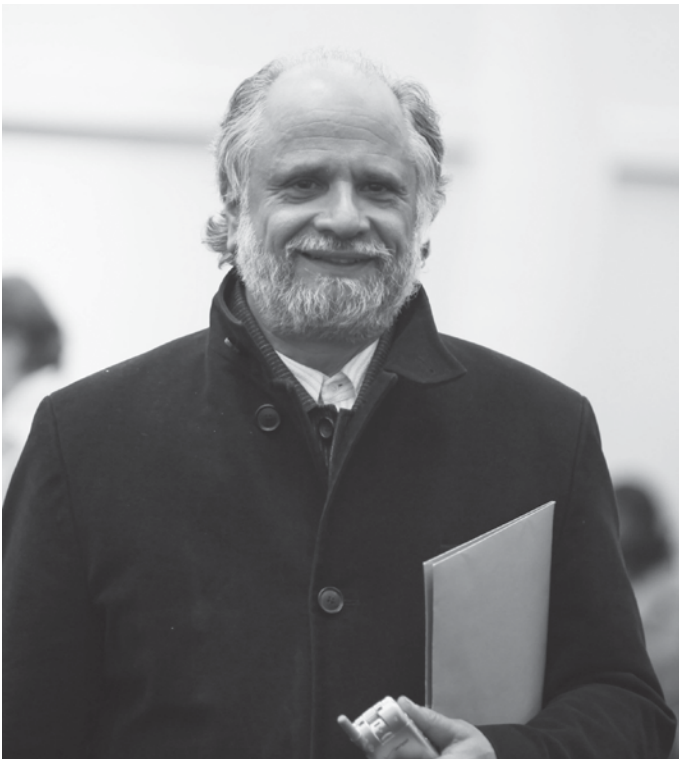
ant contribution as an organizing theory for analyzing the literatures of formerly colonized nations, critics such as the British-born Ghanaian-American writer and philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah and the Ghanaian author Ama Ata Aidoo have questioned the notion of a “post” in postcolonialism, particularly if the effects of colonization are still visible in the former colonies.

The condition of being postcolonial refers to a combination of the historical, political, economic, and cultural conditions that affect the world or global space in which the postcolonial nation finds itself. In other words, such identity relates to the changing connections between the postcolonial nation and other global communities. A useful working definition of the term “postcolonial” comes from Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, who use “‘post-colonial’ ...to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day.”¹³⁷ They add that, “This is because there is a continuity of preoccupation throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression.”¹³⁸ This definition recognizes the problematic nature of the term and takes into consideration Kwame Anthony Appiah’s and Ama Ata Aidoo’s question of the nature of the “post” in postcolonial.

Hybridity

In science, the term “hybridity” generally refers to the mixing or crossing of two or more species. But in the context of literary and postcolonial studies, the term hybridity refers to the product of the contact between or among several cultures and locations, thus making the transfer or exchange of values and ideas possible. The outcome of such contact is the emergence of new identities that still contain attributes of the original cultures. As such, a postcolonial nation or subject (where “subject” means an individual person who lives under colonial or postcolonial conditions) is located in an in-between space that is neither fully Western nor fully indigenous but a combination of the two.

In some works and from some points of view, the experience of hybridity, or being in-between two cultures, is presented as painful and difficult, while in other cases hybridity appears as a strategic practice with some positive outcomes. More often,



The postcolonial scholar Homi Bhabha popularized the usage of the term “hybridity” in cultural studies.

Credit: By Homi_K._Bhabha.jpg: jeanbaptisteparisderivative work: Hidro - This file was derived from Homi K. Bhabha.jpg; CC BY-SA 2.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=28662168>

hybridity is expressed as a mixture of both positive and negative attributes. Whether hybridity is celebrated or criticized depends on the individual scholarly interpretation or literary work. In any case, the concept of hybridity necessarily challenges any notion of racial or cultural purity or homogeneity since the hybrid subject is neither one culture nor the other.

According to postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha who popularized the usage of the term “hybridity” in cultural studies, hybridity is associated with postcolonial identity in that it involves the ability to be a part of more than one culture, nation, or identity simultaneously. Some people may see hybridity in terms of being a multicultural person. Others may describe this experience as that of being transcultural or even transnational. In any of these cases, the individual is a product of more than one culture and can live in those cultures comfortably, and sometimes not so comfortably, at any given time. This means that a person is constantly negotiating more than one culture and lives between two cul-

tural—and sometimes, national and geographical—locations.

As stated earlier, hybridity involves being in an in-between space. It challenges notions of racial and cultural purity or authenticity. Hybridity emphasizes the possibility of an unstable position that can be a place of transformation, resistance, tension, discomfort, and ambiguity. In this case, the melding of the two or more cultures in one person’s body or consciousness is seen as the true or real identity of the subject who exists in the space of hybridity.

Hybridity is useful for postcolonial subjects as a way of making sense of their histories because they have inherited the histories and cultures of their colonizers as well as retained attributes of their own indigenous cultures. In the case of Anglophone writers and literatures, for example, we can speak of the multiple variants of English now spoken in nations of the former British Empire as representative of hybridity. The British colonizers marginalized or saw these variants of English spoken in places like India, Nigeria, and the West Indies as inauthentic. However, postcolonial writers use these variants as recognized “regional” forms of English in their works and transform them into recognizable linguistic registers.

The writers whose works are discussed in this resource guide are located in-between cultures—European and African. Many of the writers have been educated in European schools, studied European languages, and in the cases of our selected authors, they studied English. These writers are also familiar with Western or European literary traditions, which have influenced their works, as can be seen in Achebe’s reference to Y.B. Yeats’ poem “The Second Coming.” As Africans who are the inheritors of both African and colonial legacies, these writers occupy the space of hybridity; they constantly cross and negotiate cultural and literary borders.

Border Crossing and Migration

People living across Africa are familiar with rural-urban migration. Every year, Africans from rural communities migrate to urban centers in their nations or other nearby nations in search of jobs. Consequently, it is not uncommon for many Africans to have homes in the urban centers as well as

in their villages or rural communities. Some people engage in seasonal migrations, traveling home (to the rural areas or villages) during certain periods of the year or for special events and returning to the urban environments to work. The movement from the village to the city or urban center entails a form of border crossing to a new landscape, which is generally the urban environment. This migration to the city is also part of the legacy of colonialism, which created urban centers as locations of commerce and administration in what became the newly independent nations.

These urban centers represent modernity, and for rural visitors or migrants, the centers may represent a place of confusion, alienation, and social disintegration. African writers have generally represented urban centers as threatening to the survival of the individual who travels to the city because the individual is separated from his or her other community. Women and young girls tend to be especially vulnerable because patriarchal societies and cultures in general believe that women who do not have men's protection are not safe. So, single or unmarried women in the cities tend to be seen as unsafe. Traveling from the village or rural setting to the urban center or city also involves crossing borders. The city is represented as a place of newness or strangeness. Therefore, it is often threatening. In the city, those from rural communities lose their innocence and cultural anchoring, and eventually themselves. We will have an opportunity to observe these stereotypical representations of the city in the attitude and comments of the village women in Ama Ata Aidoo's short story "The Message," which will be discussed later in this section.

Literature and Social Justice: Apartheid, Anti-Apartheid, and Post-Apartheid

The history of racism and apartheid in South Africa is an example of settler colonialism. Although the presence of whites in the Cape (today's Cape Town) dates as far back as the 1480s, when the Portuguese explorer Bartolomeu Dias rounded the Cape of Good Hope on his way to India, white settlement did not begin in the Cape until 1652 with the arrival

of the Dutch sailor Jan van Riebeeck, who represented the Dutch East India Company and founded the Cape Colony. The Dutch were not the only Europeans whose sights were set on South Africa; the Cape Colony was seized by the British in 1795, given back to the Dutch in 1803, and then ceded to the British in 1806. In 1835, the Dutch began their "Great Trek" and founded the Orange Free State and the Transvaal.¹³⁹

In 1910, the two English colonies (the Cape and Natal) joined with the two former Boer¹⁴⁰ Republics (the Transvaal and the Orange Free State) to form the Union of South Africa under the British. The new entity did not include Africans insofar as black South Africans were not considered as citizens of the newly formed republic and as such did not have any rights. In 1912, the Native National Congress (NNC), later renamed the African National Congress (ANC), was formed in response to the growing marginalization of black South Africans. In 1913, the Native Land Act further alienated Africans, except those in the Cape Colony, by prohibiting them from purchasing land outside their reserves. Additional policies that further restricted the movement of blacks and eroded their rights were declared and enforced, especially after the National Party came to power in 1948.

Upon winning elections in 1948, the National Party began to implement the policy of apartheid. Apartheid in Afrikaans means "separate development." It is systemic racism. Apartheid promoted the separation of people into racial groups, arguing that people developed better if they lived among those within their own racial groups. It forbade any form of contact between the races. It was similar to Jim Crow laws and other forms of state-sanctioned segregation in the United States. In the case of apartheid, it was the official policy of the government of South Africa for more than forty years (1948–94), and much legislation and many legal acts served to maintain it.

Although the British imposed laws that restricted the movement and rights of black (Native) South Africans even before 1948, grand apartheid became the national policy of the government in 1948 and was vigorously enforced through a series of laws or acts under the National Party. Under apartheid, the non-white population lived in racially demarcated areas. For example, the Group Areas Act (1950) forced people of different racial groups to live only



Map of colonial South Africa, 1878. In 1910, the two English colonies, the Cape and Natal, joined with the two former Boer republics, the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, to form the British Union of South Africa.

in areas designated for their groups. The Population Registration Act (1950) classified each resident of South Africa under a racial group. The government also created separate Black Homelands designated only for black South Africans—black South Africans lived in these nominally independent homelands or “blacks only” townships like Soweto. And, there were areas designated as “whites only,” “colored,” and “Indian.” Under apartheid, black South Africans had no rights and were not citizens of South Africa. They carried passes, which granted them entry into South Africa only to work. The Bantu Education Act of 1954 provided black South Africans education that prepared them only for the service industry. The Immorality Act of 1950 banned and criminal-

ized interracial marriages.

Africans did not quietly accept their oppression. Resistance took various forms, including anti-pass campaigns as well as the burning of passes, open rebellions, and peaceful marches. On March 21, 1960, for example, the police shot at peaceful protesters in Sharpeville, killing about 69 of them and wounding many more. This incident is commemorated as the [Sharpeville Massacre](#) of 1960. On June 16, 1976, thousands of students in the township of Soweto rose in angry protest against the Bantu Education policy (Soweto student uprising). They were protesting the compulsory use of Afrikaans as a language of instruction in their schools. During the peaceful march, police opened fire on the students,



Hector Pieterse is carried by Mbuyisa Makhubo after being shot by police. Pieterse's sister is running alongside them. Pieterse was the first student casualty of the Soweto student uprising. This photograph, taken by Sam Nzima, became an iconic image of the event.

killing thirteen-year-old Hector Pieterse. The resulting riots spread through various cities and townships in South Africa and brought considerable world attention to South Africa. This incident is known as the Soweto student uprising. Today, June 16 in South Africa is commemorated as Youth Day.

From the 1960s through the 1990s, many anti-apartheid leaders, including Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Lilian Ngoyi, Winnie Mandela, and Joseph Slovo, were arrested and imprisoned. Some of them, like Nelson Mandela, were sentenced for life. Others, like Steven Bantu Biko, died while in police custody, while others fled the country into exile. A series of organized and coordinated protests from the 1980s through the 1990s, coupled with sanctions from the international community, eventually helped to end apartheid in South Africa. In 1990, Nelson Mandela gained his freedom from prison after twenty-sev-

en years. In 1994, South Africa held its first democratic elections, voting the ANC into leadership and electing Nelson Mandela as the first democratically elected President of a multiracial South Africa. In 1994, the South African government also initiated a series of "Truth and Reconciliation" hearings under the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to address politically motivated wrongs committed under apartheid. The Commission's work ended in 2000.

Chinua Achebe's Essays

Now that we have completed our brief overview of some of the larger issues and topics affecting postcolonial African literature, we will narrow our lens to focus on a handful of selected literary works. We will begin with an author with whom you are already quite familiar, Chinua Achebe. However, in this case, we will examine Achebe's work not as a novelist, but as an essayist. While Achebe is best-known as the author of *Things Fall Apart*, in addition to four other novels, he also wrote numerous short stories, poems, and nonfiction works, including essays, political commentary, and literary criticism. His first book of essays, *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, was published in 1975; his notable collection of essays *Hopes and Impediments* was published in 1988; and his final collection of essays, *The Education of a British-Protected Child*, was published in 2009. We will discuss a couple of Achebe's essays from his collection *Hopes and Impediments* before moving on to focus on our selected work: "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" (also from *Hopes and Impediments*).

"The Igbo World and Its Art" by Chinua Achebe

One of Chinua Achebe's essays that has particular relevance to *Things Fall Apart* is his essay "The Igbo World and Its Art," which was included in his book *Hopes and Impediments*. In this essay, Achebe writes about the function of art in Igbo society. As in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe's discussion of Igbo beliefs and society in "The Igbo World and Its Art" demonstrates that the Igbo participate in a complex, rich, and multilayered system. According to Achebe, Igbo art is dynamic, "never tranquil but mobile and active even aggressive."¹⁴¹

In this short essay, Achebe also addresses religion



An *mbari* house, 1904. *Mbari* houses were sacred houses built by the Igbo.

district officer is depicted in *mbari* art as an interpretation of historical experience. For the Igbo, “*mbari* is life.” *Mbari* houses are brightly painted works on which are painted people, animals, and other kinds of figures.¹⁴⁷ In this essay, Achebe discusses the image of the district officer in *mbari* art to signal the dynamism of Igbo art.

For Achebe, masquerade—which can be seen in *Things Fall Apart* with the *egwugwu* and its dance—seems to represent an Igbo art form “par excellence” because it “subsumes not only the dance, but all other forms—sculpture, music, painting, drama, costumery, even architecture....”¹⁴⁸ Achebe believes that the masquerade’s agility and “deployment of motion” are akin to the Igbo dynamic spirit. In other words, the Igbo worldview and dynamism are actualized in the dance of the masquerade.

In this way, the Igbo channel through the art of the masquerade “a spiritual force into an aesthetically satisfying physical form that captures the presumed attributes of that force.”¹⁴⁹ These are represented in the masquerade’s use of performance and spectacle, which draw in the audience, thus entertaining it too. Despite Achebe’s emphasis on Igbo art’s dynamism and its ability to change with the broader cultural context, he also conveys a sense of loss, writing: “The awesomeness of masquerades has suffered in modern times.”¹⁵⁰ In “The Igbo World and Its Art,” Achebe does not attribute this loss directly to colonization, but he suggests that the whole belief system is suffering from “collapse.”¹⁵¹

“The Writer and His Community” by Chinua Achebe

In his essay “The Writer and His Community,” Achebe again draws upon the Igbo artistic tradition of *mbari* for his model. He likens the role of the writer in his/her community to that of the *ndimgbe*—the artist, curator, or translator of the creative spirit of the gods who lives among the people or community. However, in Achebe’s view, the *ndimgbe* cannot claim sole ownership of the art that belongs to the community, just as a writer cannot write without a community of readers. In other words, Achebe seems to suggest that even a writer’s individualism cannot surpass the collectivity of the group.

in Igbo society, pointing out that the Igbo are polytheistic, in other words, they worship more than one god simultaneously. Although the Igbo believe in a supreme god, Chukwu, other minor gods serve specific functions. For example, there is Ani, the earth goddess, who presides over what happens to the earth. Thus, in *Things Fall Apart*, when Okonkwo accidentally kills a clansman by shedding his blood on the earth, the community must appease the earth goddess to ward off their own destruction. In the conversation between Akunna and Mr. Brown about religion and God, Akunna tells Mr. Brown, “We also believe in Him and call Him Chukwu. He made all the world and the other gods.”¹⁴²

In this essay, Achebe also explains that art among the Igbo lies in the public domain: “There are no private collections among the Igbo beyond personal ritual objects like the *ikenga*.”¹⁴³ Like Igbo art, the Igbo worldview is also dynamic. Thus, in “Igbo cosmology even gods can fall out of use.”¹⁴⁴ Akunna addresses this dynamism in his conversation with Mr. Brown in *Things Fall Apart* when he says: “We make sacrifices to the little gods, but when they fail and there is no one else to turn to we go to Chukwu. It is right to do so.”¹⁴⁵ Indeed, Igbo art and life are connected since art is used to interpret lived experiences and beliefs. Achebe gives the example of the “representation of the alien district officer among traditional *mbari* figures.”¹⁴⁶ In this case, the colonial



SELECTED WORK:

“An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*”

by Chinua Achebe

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In the fall of 1974 I was walking one day from the English Department at the University of Massachusetts to a parking lot. It was a fine autumn morning such as encouraged friendliness to passing strangers. Brisk youngsters were hurrying in all directions, many of them obviously freshmen in their first flush of enthusiasm. An older man going the same way as I turned and remarked to me how very young they came these days. I agreed. Then he asked me if I was a student too. I said no, I was a teacher. What did I teach? African literature. Now that was funny, he said, because he knew a fellow who taught the same thing, or perhaps it was African *history*, in a certain Community College not far from here. It always surprised him, he went on to say, because he never had thought of Africa as having that kind of stuff, you know. By this time I was walking much faster. “Oh well,” I heard him say finally, behind me: “I guess I have to take your course to find out.”

A few weeks later I received two very touching letters from high school children in Yonkers, New York, who—bless their teacher—had just read *Things Fall Apart*. One of them was particularly happy to learn about the customs and superstitions of an African tribe.

I propose to draw from these rather trivial encounters rather heavy conclusions which at first sight might seem somewhat out of proportion to them. But only, I hope, at first sight.

The young fellow from Yonkers, perhaps partly on

account of his age, but I believe also for much deeper and more serious reasons, is obviously unaware that the life of his own tribesmen in Yonkers, New York, is full of odd customs and superstitions and, like everybody else in his culture, imagines that he needs a trip to Africa to encounter those things.

The other person being fully my own age could not be excused on the grounds of his years. Ignorance might be a more likely reason; but here again I believe that something more willful than a mere lack of information was at work. For did not that erudite British historian and Regius Professor at Oxford, Hugh Trevor-Roper, also pronounce that African history did not exist?

If there is something in these utterances more than youthful inexperience, more than a lack of factual knowledge, what is it? Quite simply it is the desire—one might indeed say the need—in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe’s own state of spiritual grace will be manifest.

This need is not new; which should relieve us all of considerable responsibility and perhaps make us even willing to look at this phenomenon dispassionately. I have neither the wish nor the competence to embark on the exercise with the tools of the social and biological sciences but do so more simply in the manner of a novelist responding to one famous book of European fiction: Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, which better than any other work that I know displays that Western desire and need which I have just referred to. Of course there are whole libraries of books devoted to the same purpose but most of them are so obvious and so crude that few people worry about them today. Conrad, on the other hand, is undoubtedly one of the great stylists of modern fiction and a good story-teller into the bargain. His contribution therefore falls automatically into a different class—permanent literature—read and taught and constantly evaluated by serious academics. *Heart of Darkness* is indeed so secure today that a leading Conrad scholar has numbered it “among the half-dozen greatest short novels in the English language.”¹ I will return to this critical opinion in due course because it may seriously modify my earlier suppositions about who may or may not be guilty in some of the matters I will now raise.

Heart of Darkness projects the image of Africa as “the other world,” the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality. The book opens on the River Thames, tranquil, resting, peacefully “at the decline of day after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks.”² But the actual story will take place on the River Congo, the very antithesis of the Thames. The River Congo is quite decidedly not a River Emeritus. It has rendered no service and enjoys no old-age pension. We are told that “going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world.”

Is Conrad saying then that these two rivers are very different, one good, the other bad? Yes, but that is not the real point. It is not the differentness that worries Conrad but the lurking hint of kinship, of common ancestry. For the Thames too “has been one of the dark places of the earth.” It conquered its darkness, of course, and is now in daylight and at peace. But if it were to visit its primordial relative, the Congo, it would run the terrible risk of hearing grotesque echoes of its own forgotten darkness, and falling victim to an avenging recrudescence of the mindless frenzy of the first beginnings.

These suggestive echoes comprise Conrad’s famed evocation of the African atmosphere in *Heart of Darkness*. In the final consideration, his method amounts to no more than a steady, ponderous, fake-ritualistic repetition of two antithetical sentences, one about silence and the other about frenzy. We can inspect samples of this on pages 103 and 105 of the New American Library edition: a) “It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention” and b) “The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy.” Of course there is a judicious change of adjective from time to time, so that instead of “inscrutable,” for example, you might have “unspeakable,” even plain “mysterious,” etc., etc.

The eagle-eyed English critic F. R. Leavis³ drew attention long ago to Conrad’s “adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery.” That insistence must not be dismissed lightly, as many Conrad critics have tended to do, as a mere stylistic flaw; for it raises serious questions of artistic good faith. When a writer while pretending to re-

cord scenes, incidents, and their impact is in reality engaged in inducing hypnotic stupor in his readers through a bombardment of emotive words and other forms of trickery, much more has to be at stake than stylistic felicity. Generally normal readers are well armed to detect and resist such underhand activity. But Conrad chose his subject well—one which was guaranteed not to put him in conflict with the psychological predisposition of his readers or raise the need for him to contend with their resistance. He chose the role of purveyor of comforting myths.

The most interesting and revealing passages in *Heart of Darkness* are, however, about people. I must crave the indulgence of my reader to quote almost a whole page from about the middle of the story when representatives of Europe in a steamer going down the Congo encounter the denizens of Africa.

We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil. But suddenly as we struggled round a bend there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember, because we were traveling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign—and no memories.

The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly and the men were—No they were not inhuman. Well, you know that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not

being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped and spun and made horrid faces, but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough, but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend.⁴

Herein lies the meaning of *Heart of Darkness* and the fascination it holds over the Western mind: “What thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours...Ugly.”

Having shown us Africa in the mass, Conrad then zeros in, half a page later, on a specific example, giving us one of his rare descriptions of an African who is not just limbs or rolling eyes:

And between whiles I had to look after the savage who was fireman. He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler. He was there below me and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind legs. A few months of training had done for that really fine chap. He squinted at the steam gauge and at the water gauge with an evident effort of intrepidity—and he had filed his teeth, too, the poor devil, and the wool of his pate shaved into queer patterns, and three ornamental scars on each of his cheeks. He ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank, instead of which he was hard at work, a thrall to strange witchcraft, full of improving knowledge.⁵

As everybody knows, Conrad is a romantic on the side. He might not exactly admire savages clapping their hands and stamping their feet but they have at least the merit of being in their place, unlike this dog in a parody of breeches. For Conrad, things being in their place is of the utmost importance.

“Fine fellows—cannibals—in their place,” he tells us pointedly. Tragedy begins when things leave their accustomed place, like Europe leaving its safe stronghold between the policeman and the baker to

take a peep into the heart of darkness.

Before the story takes us into the Congo basin proper we are given this nice little vignette as an example of things in their place:

Now and then a boat from the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality. It was paddled by black fellows. You could see from afar the white of their eyeballs glistening. They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks—these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there. They were a great comfort to look at.⁶

Towards the end of the story Conrad lavishes a whole page quite unexpectedly on an African woman who has obviously been some kind of mistress to Mr. Kurtz and now presides (if I may be permitted a little liberty) like a formidable mystery over the inexorable imminence of his departure:

She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent She stood looking at us without a stir and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose.

This Amazon is drawn in considerable detail, albeit of a predictable nature, for two reasons. First, she is in her place and so can win Conrad’s special brand of approval; and second, she fulfills a structural requirement of the story: a savage counterpart to the refined, European woman who will step forth to end the story:

She came forward all in black with a pale head, floating toward me in the dusk. She was in mourning.... She took both my hands in hers and murmured, “I had heard you were coming”... She had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering.⁷

The difference in the attitude of the novelist to these two women is conveyed in too many direct and subtle ways to need elaboration. But perhaps the most significant difference is the one implied in the author’s bestowal of human expression to the one and the withholding of it from the other. It is clearly not part of Conrad’s purpose to confer lan-

guage on the “rudimentary souls” of Africa. In place of speech they made “a violent babble of uncouth sounds.” They “exchanged short grunting phrases” even among themselves. But most of the time they were too busy with their frenzy. There are two occasions in the book, however, when Conrad departs somewhat from his practice and confers speech, even English speech, on the savages. The first occurs when cannibalism gets the better of them:

“Catch ‘im,” he snapped, with a bloodshot widening of his eyes and a flash of sharp teeth—“catch ‘im. Give ‘im to us.” “To you, eh?” I asked; “what would you do with them?” “Eat ‘im!” he said curtly.⁸

The other occasion was the famous announcement: “Mistah Kurtz—he dead.”⁹

At first sight these instances might be mistaken for unexpected acts of generosity from Conrad. In reality they constitute some of his best assaults. In the case of the cannibals the incomprehensible grunts that had thus far served them for speech suddenly proved inadequate for Conrad’s purpose of letting the European glimpse the unspeakable craving in their hearts. Weighing the necessity for consistency in the portrayal of the dumb brutes against the sensational advantages of securing their conviction by clear, unambiguous evidence issuing out of their own mouth, Conrad chose the latter. As for the announcement of Mr. Kurtz’s death by the “insolent black head in the doorway,” what better or more appropriate *finis* could be written to the horror story of that wayward child of civilization who willfully had given his soul to the powers of darkness and “taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land” than the proclamation of his physical death by the forces he had joined?

It might be contended, of course, that the attitude to the African in *Heart of Darkness* is not Conrad’s but that of his fictional narrator, Marlow, and that far from endorsing it Conrad might indeed be holding it up to irony and criticism. Certainly, Conrad appears to go to considerable pains to set up layers of insulation between himself and the moral universe of his history. He has, for example, a narrator behind a narrator. The primary narrator is Marlow, but his account is given to us through the filter of a second, shadowy person. But if Conrad’s intention is to draw a cordon sanitaire between himself and the moral

and psychological *malaise* of his narrator, his care seems to me totally wasted because he neglects to hint, clearly and adequately, at an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of his characters. It would not have been beyond Conrad’s power to make that provision if he had thought it necessary. Conrad seems to me to approve of Marlow, with only minor reservations—a fact reinforced by the close similarities between their two careers.

Marlow comes through to us not only as a witness of truth, but one holding those advanced and humane views appropriate to the English liberal tradition which required all Englishmen of decency to be deeply shocked by atrocities in Bulgaria or the Congo of King Leopold of the Belgians or wherever.

Thus, Marlow is able to toss out such bleeding-heart sentiments as these:

They were dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now—nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest.¹⁰

The kind of liberalism espoused here by Marlow/Conrad touched all the best minds of the age in England, Europe and America. It took different forms in the minds of different people but almost always managed to sidestep the ultimate question of equality between white people and black people. That extraordinary missionary Albert Schweitzer, who sacrificed brilliant careers in music and theology in Europe for a life of service to Africans in much the same area as Conrad writes about, epitomizes the ambivalence. In a comment which has often been quoted Schweitzer says: “The African is indeed my brother but my junior brother.” And so he proceeded to build a hospital appropriate to the needs of junior brothers with standards of hygiene reminiscent of medical practice in the days before the germ theory of disease came into being. Naturally he became a sensation in Europe and America. Pilgrims flocked, and I believe still flock even after he has passed on, to witness the prodigious miracle in Lamberéné, on

the edge of the primeval forest.

Conrad's liberalism would not take him quite as far as Schweitzer's, though. He would not use the word "brother" however qualified; the farthest he would go was "kinship." When Marlow's African helmsman falls down with a spear in his heart he gives his white master one final disquieting look.

And the intimate profundity of that look he gave me when he received his hurt remains to this day in my memory—like a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment.¹¹

It is important to note that Conrad, careful as ever with his words, is concerned not so much about "distant kinship" as about someone *laying a claim* on it. The black man lays a claim on the white man which is well-nigh intolerable. It is the laying of this claim which frightens and at the same time fascinates Conrad, "...the thought of their humanity—like yours...Ugly."

The point of my observations should be quite clear by now, namely that Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist. That this simple truth is glossed over in criticisms of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked. Students of *Heart of Darkness* will often tell you that Conrad is concerned not so much with Africa as with the deterioration of one European mind caused by solitude and sickness. They will point out to you that Conrad is, if anything, less charitable to the Europeans in the story than he is to the natives, that the point of the story is to ridicule Europe's civilizing mission in Africa. A Conrad student informed me in Scotland that Africa is merely a setting for the disintegration of the mind of Mr. Kurtz.

Which is partly the point. Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind? But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this

dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No, it cannot. I do not doubt Conrad's great talents. Even *Heart of Darkness* has its memorably good passages and moments:

The reaches opened before us and closed behind, as if the forest had stepped leisurely across the water to bar the way for our return.

Its exploration of the minds of the European characters is often penetrating and full of insight. But all that has been more than fully discussed in the last fifty years. His obvious racism has, however, not been addressed. And it is high time it was!

Conrad was born in 1857, the very year in which the first Anglican missionaries were arriving among my own people in Nigeria. It was certainly not his fault that he lived his life at a time when the reputation of the black man was at a particularly low level. But even after due allowances have been made for all the influences of contemporary prejudice on his sensibility, there remains still in Conrad's attitude a residue of antipathy to black people which his peculiar psychology alone can explain. His own account of his first encounter with a black man is very revealing:

A certain enormous buck nigger encountered in Haiti fixed my conception of blind, furious, unreasoning rage, as manifested in the human animal to the end of my days. Of the nigger I used to dream for years afterwards.¹²

Certainly Conrad had a problem with niggers. His inordinate love of that word itself should be of interest to psychoanalysts. Sometimes his fixation on blackness is equally interesting, as when he gives us this brief description: "A black figure stood up, strode on long black legs, waving long black arms"¹³—as though we might expect a black figure striding along on black legs to wave white arms! But so unrelenting is Conrad's obsession.

As a matter of interest, Conrad gives us in *A Personal Record* what amounts to a companion piece to the buck nigger of Haiti. At the age of sixteen Conrad encountered his first Englishman in Europe. He calls him "my unforgettable Englishman" and describes him in the following manner:

[his] calves exposed to the public gaze...dazzled the beholder by the splendor of their marble-like condition and their rich tone of young ivory.... The light of a headlong, exalted satisfaction with the world of men... illumined his face...and triumphant eyes. In passing he cast a glance of kindly curiosity and a friendly gleam of big, sound, shiny teeth...his white calves twinkled sturdily.

Irrational love and irrational hate jostling together in the heart of that talented, tormented man. But whereas irrational love may at worst engender foolish acts of indiscretion, irrational hate can endanger the life of the community. Naturally, Conrad is a dream for psychoanalytic critics. Perhaps the most detailed study of him in this direction is by Bernard C. Meyer, M.D. In his lengthy book, Dr. Meyer follows every conceivable lead (and sometimes inconceivable ones) to explain Conrad. As an example, he gives us long disquisitions on the significance of hair and hair-cutting in Conrad. And yet not even one word is spared for his attitude to black people. Not even the discussion of Conrad's antisemitism was enough to spark off in Dr. Meyer's mind those other dark and explosive thoughts. Which only leads one to surmise that Western psychoanalysts must regard the kind of racism displayed by Conrad as absolutely normal despite the profoundly important work done by Frantz Fanon in the psychiatric hospitals of French Algeria.

Whatever Conrad's problems were, you might say he is now safely dead. Quite true. Unfortunately his heart of darkness plagues us still. Which is why an offensive and deplorable book can be described by a serious scholar as "among the half dozen greatest short novels in the English language." And why it is today the most commonly prescribed novel in twentieth-century literature courses in English Departments of American universities.

There are two probable grounds on which what I have said so far may be contested. The first is that it is no concern of fiction to please people about whom it is written. I will go along with that. But I am not talking about pleasing people. I am talking about a book which parades in the most vulgar fashion prejudices and insults from which a section of mankind has suffered untold agonies and atrocities in the past and continues to do so in many ways and many places today. I am talking about a story in which the

very humanity of black people is called in question.

Secondly, I may be challenged on the grounds of actuality. Conrad, after all, did sail down the Congo in 1890 when my own father was still a babe in arms. How could I stand up more than fifty years after his death and purport to contradict him? My answer is that as a sensible man I will not accept just any traveller's tales solely on the grounds that I have not made the journey myself. I will not trust the evidence even of a man's very eyes when I suspect them to be as jaundiced as Conrad's. And we also happen to know that Conrad was, in the words of his biographer, Bernard C. Meyer, "notoriously inaccurate in the rendering of his own history."

But more important by far is the abundant testimony about Conrad's savages which we could gather if we were so inclined from other sources and which might lead us to think that these people must have had other occupations besides merging into the evil forest or materializing out of it simply to plague Marlow and his dispirited band. For as it happened, soon after Conrad had written his book an event of far greater consequence was taking place in the art world of Europe. This is how Frank Willett, a British art historian, describes it:

Gauguin had gone to Tahiti, the most extravagant individual act of turning to a non-European culture in the decades immediately before and after 1900, when European artists were avid for new artistic experiences, but it was only about 1904-5 that African art began to make its distinctive impact. One piece is still identifiable; it is a mask that had been given to Maurice Vlaminck in 1905. He records that Derain was "speechless" and "stunned" when he saw it, bought it from Vlaminck and in turn showed it to Picasso and Matisse, who were also greatly affected by it. Ambroise Vollard then borrowed it and had it cast in bronze... The revolution of twentieth century art was under way!¹⁶

The mask in question was made by other savages living just north of Conrad's River Congo. They have a name too: the Fang people, and are without a doubt among the world's greatest masters of the sculptured form. The event Frank Willett is referring to marks the beginning of cubism and the infusion of new life into European art, which had run completely out of strength.

The point of all this is to suggest that Conrad's picture of the people of the Congo seems grossly inadequate even at the height of their subjection to the ravages of King Leopold's International Association for the Civilization of Central Africa.

Travellers with closed minds can tell us little except about themselves. But even those not blinkered, like Conrad, with xenophobia, can be astonishingly blind. Let me digress a little here. One of the greatest and most intrepid travellers of all time, Marco Polo, journeyed to the Far East from the Mediterranean in the thirteenth century and spent twenty years in the court of Kublai Khan in China. On his return to Venice he set down in his book entitled *Description of the World* his impressions of the peoples and places and customs he had seen. But there were at least two extraordinary omissions in his account. He said nothing about the art of printing, unknown as yet in Europe but in full flower in China. He either did not notice it at all or, if he did, failed to see what use Europe could possibly have for it. Whatever the reason, Europe had to wait another hundred years for Gutenberg. But even more spectacular was Marco Polo's omission of any reference to the Great Wall of China nearly four thousand miles long and already more than one thousand years old at the time of his visit. Again, he may not have seen it; but the Great Wall of China is the only structure built by man which is visible from the moon!¹⁷ Indeed travellers can be blind.

As I said earlier Conrad did not originate the image of Africa which we find in his book. It was and is the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination and Conrad merely brought the peculiar gifts of his own mind to bear on it. For reasons which can certainly use close psychological inquiry, the West seems to suffer deep anxieties about the precariousness of its civilization and to have a need for constant reassurance by comparison with Africa. If Europe, advancing in civilization, could cast a backward glance periodically at Africa trapped in primordial barbarity it could say with faith and feeling: There go I but for the grace of God. Africa is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray—a carrier onto whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate. Consequently, Africa is something to be avoided just as the picture has to be hidden away to safeguard the man's jeopardous integrity.

Keep away from Africa, or else! Mr. Kurtz of *Heart of Darkness* should have heeded that warning and the prowling horror in his heart would have kept its place, chained to its lair. But he foolishly exposed himself to the wild irresistible allure of the jungle and lo! the darkness found him out.

In my original conception of this essay I had thought to conclude it nicely on an appropriately positive note in which I would suggest from my privileged position in African and Western cultures some advantages the West might derive from Africa once it rid its mind of old prejudices and began to look at Africa not through a haze of distortions and cheap mystifications but quite simply as a continent of people—not angels, but not rudimentary souls either—just people, often highly gifted people and often strikingly successful in their enterprise with life and society. But as I thought more about the stereotype image, about its grip and pervasiveness, about the willful tenacity with which the West holds it to its heart; when I thought of the West's television and cinema and newspapers, about books read in its schools and out of school, of churches preaching to empty pews about the need to send help to the heathen in Africa, I realized that no easy optimism was possible. And there was in any case something totally wrong in offering bribes to the West in return for its good opinion of Africa. Ultimately the abandonment of unwholesome thoughts must be its own and only reward. Although I have used the word "willful" a few times here to characterize the West's view of Africa, it may well be that what is happening at this stage is more akin to reflex action than calculated malice. Which does not make the situation more but less hopeful.

The *Christian Science Monitor*, a paper more enlightened than most, once carried an interesting article written by its Education Editor on the serious psychological and learning problems faced by little children who speak one language at home and then go to school where something else is spoken. It was a wide-ranging article taking in Spanish-speaking children in America, the children of migrant Italian workers in Germany, the quadrilingual phenomenon in Malaysia, and so on. And all this while the article speaks unequivocally about language. But then out of the blue sky comes this:

In London there is an enormous immigration

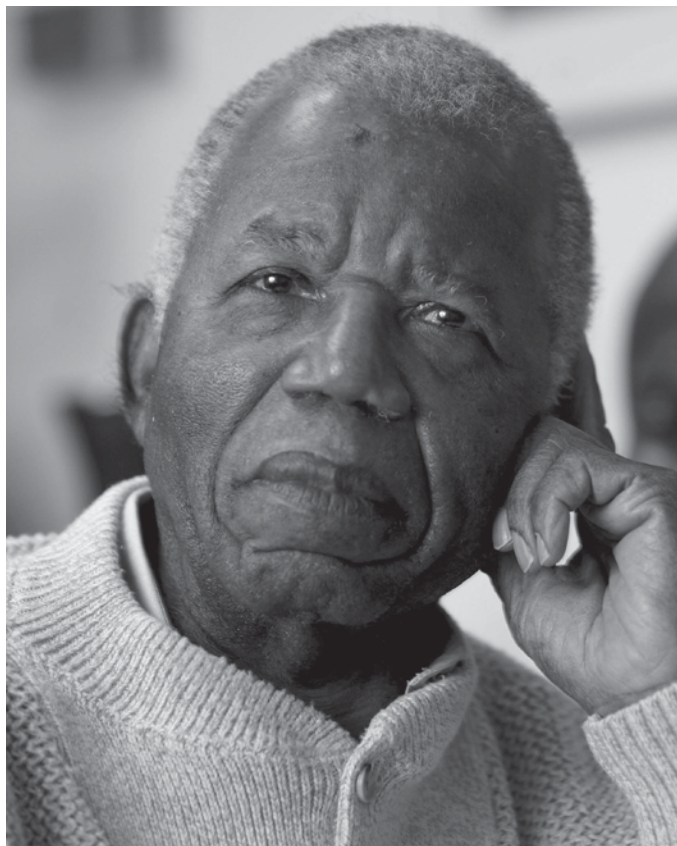
of children who speak Indian or Nigerian dialects, or some other native language.

I believe that the introduction of “dialects,” which is technically erroneous in the context, is almost a reflex action caused by an instinctive desire of the writer to downgrade the discussion to the level of Africa and India. And this is quite comparable to Conrad’s withholding of language from his rudimentary souls. Language is too grand for these chaps; let’s give them dialects!

In all this business a lot of violence is inevitably done not only to the image of despised peoples but even to words, the very tools of possible redress. Look at the phrase “native language” in the *Christian Science Monitor* excerpt. Surely the only native language possible in London is Cockney English. But our writer means something else—something appropriate to the sounds Indians and Africans make!

Although the work of redressing which needs to be done may appear too daunting, I believe it is not one day too soon to begin. Conrad saw and condemned the evil of imperial exploitation but was strangely unaware of the racism on which it sharpened its iron tooth. But the victims of racist slander who for centuries have had to live with the inhumanity it makes them heir to have always known better than any casual visitor even when he comes loaded with the gifts of a Conrad.

1. Albert J. Guerard, Introduction to *Heart of Darkness*, New York, New American Library, 1950, p.9.
2. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness and The Secret Sharer*, New York, New American Library, 1950, p.66.
3. F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1948; second impression 1950, p. 177.
4. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, op. cit., pp. 105–6.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 148.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 153.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 124.
12. Conrad quoted in Jonah Raskin, *The Mythology of Imperialism*, New York, Random House, 1971, p. 143.
13. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, op. cit., p. 142.
14. Conrad quoted in Bernard C. Meyer, M.D., *Joseph Conrad: A Psychoanalytical Biography*, Princeton University Press, 1967, p. 30.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
16. Frank Willett, *African Art*, New York, Praeger, 1971, pp. 35–36.
17. About the omission of the Great Wall of China I am indebted to “The Journey of Marco Polo” as re-created by artist Michael-Foreman, published by *Pegasus* magazine, New York, 1974.
18. *Christian Science Monitor*, Boston, 25 November 1974, p. 11.



Author Chinua Achebe.

Analysis of “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness”

Chinua Achebe’s claim that Joseph Conrad, the great European writer and model storyteller, was a racist because of his stereotypical representation of Africans and Africa in *Heart of Darkness* continues to engage scholars of literature. The differing positions on Achebe’s critical essay on Conrad also expose the various ideological perspectives that inform these scholars and their relationship to Africa, Conrad himself, and Achebe as well as their opinions on the function of literature. Achebe’s quarrel with Conrad over the latter’s stereotypical portrayal of Africa and Africans in his novel stems from Achebe’s attempt to recuperate the image of Africa and Africans from centuries of negative and distorted depictions by the West.

Achebe sees Conrad’s narrative as exemplifying the dehumanization of Africans by Western literature and by colonialism. What seems to vex Achebe is how deceptively seductive Conrad’s narrative is because the writer is able to manipulate language

and storytelling to dehumanize the Africans. In his essay, Achebe highlights several important points, which drive his claim. He informs us that Conrad is “undoubtedly one of the great stylists of modern fiction and a good storyteller...His contribution therefore falls automatically into a different class—permanent literature—read and taught and constantly evaluated by serious academics.”¹⁵² *Heart of Darkness*, Achebe reminds us, is secure because it is part of the literary canon. So, Achebe contends that these reasons justify why Conrad should be held accountable for what he says in his work, especially since as art this work has the power to shape or influence ideas about literature and people. Let us recall that Achebe’s position also has been informed by his own African—specifically, Igbo—worldview, which sees art as functional and dynamic and as an integral part of human society. Within this context, therefore, art has a social function and cannot be simply for exhibition.¹⁵³

Achebe asserts that *Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as “‘the other world,’ the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization.”¹⁵⁴ He begins by pointing out Conrad’s juxtaposition of the Thames and the Congo as two distant rivers, but with a “lurking hint of kinship, of shared ancestry.”¹⁵⁵ Achebe notes that Conrad’s deployment of binary opposition suggests that the two rivers are different—one is good while the other is bad. In this case, the Thames is good, while the Congo is bad. What troubles Conrad, Achebe insists, is the “lurking hint of kinship” between the two rivers. In other words, Europe or the Thames cannot reconcile itself with the possibility that it might find some version of itself in Africa or the Congo, respectively. For Conrad, Africa or the Congo can only serve as a foil, “the other” to Europe.

Published in 1899, Conrad’s novella is set in the Congo during the Scramble for Africa, when European nations were engaged in parceling out the continent among themselves. Scholars have documented Congo’s tragic fate under King Leopold II of Belgium, and part of Achebe’s anger at Conrad stems from the author’s silence over King Leopold’s horrors in the Congo. Achebe suggests that *Heart of Darkness* does not indict King Leopold II for his atrocities in the Congo. Though some scholars have suggested that Conrad’s novella represents Conrad’s criticism of European imperialism on the continent, Achebe dis-

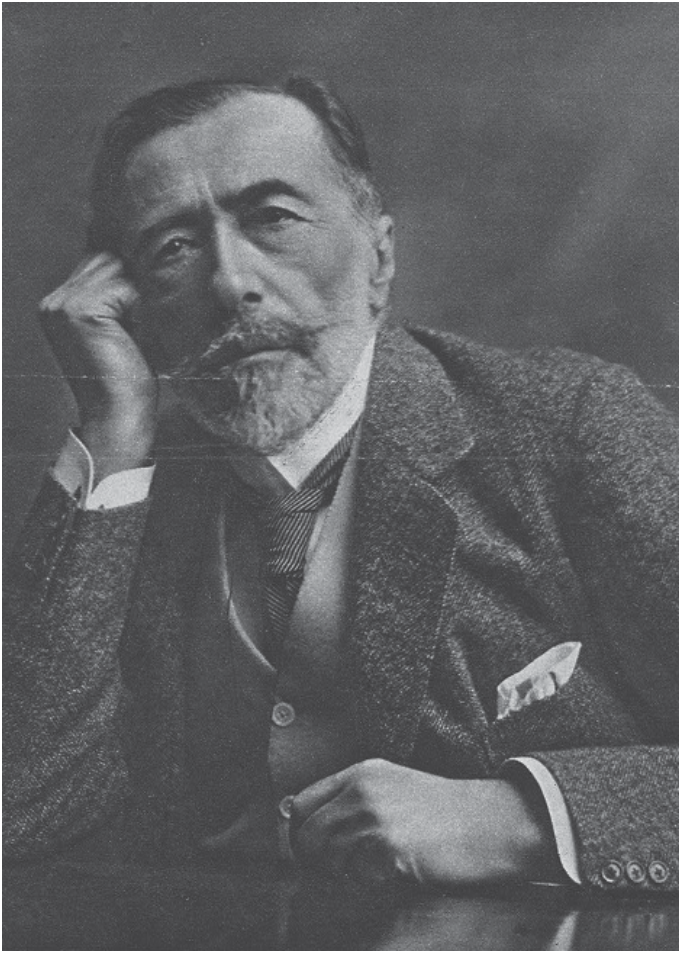
agrees, claiming that Conrad was silent and that by representing Africans as primitive, irrational, and belonging to a “prehistoric earth,” Conrad implicitly endorsed imperialism and European racism.

Apart from not condemning colonization outright, Achebe insists that Conrad did not engage in “artistic good faith” because he was using language to induce “hypnotic stupor in his readers through a bombardment of emotive words and other forms of trickery.”¹⁵⁶ Achebe then cites a long passage in which Conrad uses stereotypical language to describe the Africans that Marlow (the narrator of *Heart of Darkness*) and the European travelers observe:

*We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil.*¹⁵⁷

This passage, which has often been cited as representative of Conrad’s mastery of language and description, is problematic for Achebe, particularly because of Conrad’s description of the landscape as “prehistoric earth” and the reduction of the Africans to simply “a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling.”¹⁵⁸

Achebe’s ire is understandable, for these images of Africans and the continent continue to haunt Africans even in the present. Indeed, had Conrad not published his work earlier, one might mistake the description for a scene in a contemporary American film set in Africa. Perhaps Conrad’s book has influenced Hollywood’s stereotypical representations of Africans and Africa. Achebe’s point is that the Africans as rendered in Conrad’s work have no subjectivity and are inarticulate. As savages in the mythic imagination of the West, Africans cannot and do not speak. Note that in the passage Achebe cites, Marlow, as an eyewitness, observes the European travelers’ horror at the scene as these Europeans “glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak before a mad house.”¹⁵⁹ Achebe contends that Conrad and his narrator as well as those European travelers are horrified by their recogni-



Joseph Conrad, as photographed in 1919 or later.

tion that these Africans shared a common humanity with them. In other words, upon a closer or deeper look at the Africans, the Europeans saw their own atavistic selves, the “other of themselves,” which they would rather deny.

Achebe’s argument further suggests that Conrad—or Marlow, Conrad’s narrator—projects European ugliness upon the Africans. Africa and Africans in Conrad’s narrative are constructs of the European imagination. In fact, a careful and critical engagement with this passage supports Achebe’s claim that Conrad’s manipulation of language in this passage induces hypnotic stupor in his readers. Gerald Graff acknowledges this when he says, “One is a bit startled to realize that passages of apparent eloquence that have sent chills down the spine of Western readers sound worse than comic when read from Achebe’s point of view...”¹⁶⁰ While Conrad may be a consummate storyteller, his portrayal of Africans underscores a particular ideological position, articulated through language, which dehumanizes

African peoples.

Achebe also points out that Conrad dehumanizes Africa and Africans in his narrative by using Africa as merely a backdrop or setting for the exploration of (European) human psychology. Thus, this sacrifice of the continent for the sake of the artistic structure of Conrad’s book ignores the humanity of the Africans. Achebe asks if a novel which “celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called great work of art.”¹⁶¹ Achebe answers his own question, saying, “No, it cannot.” Although Achebe does not call for the elimination or deletion of *Heart of Darkness*, he refuses to acknowledge it as great art because it denies Africans their humanity and dignity, qualities that Achebe believes art should safeguard because in Achebe’s cultural worldview, art celebrates human achievement and is linked to human dynamism.

Achebe also examines Conrad’s portrayal of the two women associated with the European character, Kurtz, who has been living in Africa. One woman is black and African and the other white and European. Achebe contends that like the continent, the African woman serves as a prop and a necessary structural narrative counterpoint to the European woman. Like the continent, the African woman is also represented as savage, “wild-eyed and magnificent” and like the “wilderness itself,” she is threatening, “brooding over an inscrutable purpose.”¹⁶² Achebe asserts that Conrad’s racism is clearly apparent in his discriminatory portrayal of the two women.

Conrad’s novella was published in 1899, a period during which many middle- and upper-class women embraced the ideology of the nineteenth-century cult of domesticity or cult of true womanhood in the United States and Britain. The cult of domesticity or true womanhood emphasized four virtues in an ideal woman: purity, piety, domesticity, and obedience. Women were defined and came to define themselves in relation to their womanhood and domestic life. Women were also seen as vulnerable, needing protection. At the same time, women’s position in the home was seen as an essential part of maintaining society’s overall stability.

Marlow’s description of Kurtz’s fiancé seems to evoke some of the attributes of the cult. Achebe cites the following passage: “She came forward,

all in black with a pale head, floating toward me in the dusk. She was in mourning...She took my hand in hers and murmured, 'I heard you were coming'... She has a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering."¹⁶³ Conrad's description of the European woman in this scene grants her an ethereal, if not a near "saintly," quality, which is not accorded to the African woman, who is also Kurtz's mistress. Achebe explains that Conrad "[bestows] human expression to one and [withholds] it from the other,"¹⁶⁴ and for Achebe this unbalanced treatment of characters in Conrad's novella is additional evidence of Conrad's racism toward Africa and Africans.

Indeed, because Conrad deploys binary opposition as a narrative device, he cannot help but set up a Manichean¹⁶⁵ relationship between Africa and Europe, Africans and Europeans. So, if Europe is perceived as superior, the site of civilization, of beauty, and goodness, then Africa cannot be anything but inferior, savage, ugly, and evil or bad. Such relationships already existed in Europe's consciousness. Achebe's argument is that this was and is Europe's and the West's single story about Africa. Conrad was simply giving life to what he knew. Achebe also seems to acknowledge this when he says that "Conrad merely brought the peculiar gifts of his own mind to bear on it."¹⁶⁶ Thus, Achebe's essay anticipates and informs our next selected work, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED talk, "The Danger of a Single Story." A single story is destructive because it is based on stereotypes and is limited in its point of view, ultimately producing incorrect perceptions of individuals, groups, places, or nations.

In "An Image of Africa," Achebe also addresses the question of point of view and narrative voice in *Heart of Darkness*, which anticipates claims by scholars who argue that the attitude toward Africans conveyed in the narrative may be Marlow's—Conrad's narrator—and not Conrad's own view. From this perspective, the novella is read as ironic and as representative of Conrad's critique of Marlow's views and by extension imperialism. Nevertheless, Achebe insists that Conrad approves of Marlow's position with "only minor reservations."¹⁶⁷ Achebe points out that Conrad goes to "considerable pains to set up layers of insulation between himself and the moral universe of the story," thereby, confusing his reader. This is part of what Achebe describes earlier as Conrad not acting in "artistic good faith." One might ask:

Why so many layers of mask? Achebe responds that the multiple narrators in the story serve as a narrative device for Conrad/Marlow's liberalism, the type of liberalism of "the age in England, Europe, and America," which "always managed to sidestep the ultimate question of equality between white people and black people."¹⁶⁸ According to Achebe, within this type of liberalism, Conrad may be critical of imperialism but would not go so far as to refer to an African as a "brother" or an equal. So, Achebe concludes that Conrad/Marlow could only acknowledge some "kinship" with the African, but nothing more.

Additionally, Achebe addresses any claims by critics who may argue that the function of fiction is not "to please people about whom it is written."¹⁶⁹ He asserts that his focus is not "about pleasing people." Rather, he insists that a book that "parades in the most vulgar fashion prejudices and insults from which a section of mankind has suffered untold agonies and atrocities in the past" and present ought to be "called into question."¹⁷⁰ Simply put, Achebe wants readers and scholars to examine Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* through more critical lenses that take into consideration the nature of the society and times that inform the book, as well as the socio-cultural and ideological implications of the work for those about whom it is written. This position returns us to Achebe's statement throughout his career that his writing is corrective, an attempt to recuperate and redress the negative representation of Africans in the European imagination. His works, therefore, give Africans a voice, providing them a space to tell their own stories in their own voices.

Toward the conclusion of his essay, Achebe revisits his earlier claim that "Conrad did not originate the image of Africa which we find in his book. It was and is the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination."¹⁷¹ As Achebe pointedly puts it, "Conrad saw and condemned the evil of imperial exploitation but was strangely unaware of the racism on which it sharpened its iron tooth."¹⁷² Because of the nature of the violence stemming from the stereotypical representation of those rendered as "other" and the power of words to communicate such violence, Achebe abandons his plan to end his essay on a conciliatory, if not, "positive" note.

Certainly, Achebe's essay underscores the complexity of literature and the various approaches to reading, interpreting, and writing about literature.

As a postcolonial writer and critic, he could not perceive literature as primarily “art for art’s sake.” In Achebe’s worldview, art has a purpose, and the artist’s role is to serve in the interest of his or her society. Because of the history of colonization, which destabilized and dominated colonized people, most postcolonial writers perceive themselves as contending with the trauma of colonization and the challenges of neocolonialism, as well as the role of the colonized in their societies both during and after colonization.

SELECTED WORK:

“The Danger of a Single Story” by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Students should view “[The Danger of a Single Story](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story)” at the following URL: https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.



Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (b. 1977) was born in Nigeria in 1977 to an Igbo family. Her father was a professor at the University of Nigeria, and her mother was the university registrar. Adichie began her university studies in Nigeria, but later transferred, first to Drexel University and then to Eastern Connecticut State University, where she received her B.A. She later earned an M.A. in creative writing from John Hopkins University and received her M.A. in African Studies from Yale University. Adichie is a critically acclaimed author who has written three novels, a collection of short stories, as well as many essays. The work from Adichie on which we will focus is her well-known TED talk¹⁷³ “The Danger of a Single Story.”

“The Danger of a Single Story” by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

In this now famous TED Talk, Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie underscores the problematic nature of stereotypes, which are generally based on distortions of a single or reductive narrative about people or a culture or group and which deprive people of their humanity and equality. For Adichie—like Achebe, whom she has often referred to as her literary godfather—the focus of her talk is the single story that the West (Europe and North America) has about Africans as poor, starving, and vulnerable. Using some personal anecdotes, Adichie points out that we are “vulnerable in the face of a [single] story” of ourselves because a single story denies us our humanity. A single story is based on stereotypes, on the exaggeration of a single fact about the subject that does not encompass the multifaceted complexity of an individual, group, or nation.

In brief, Adichie’s argument is that no single story about any individual or group is complete. Rather, a narrative about any group has multiple components or stories; therefore, that narrative is layered. This means that in order to have a comprehensive picture and understanding of the story of any person or people, it is necessary to listen to all sides, all voices. Most of us have single (stereotypical) stories about other groups and cultures we do not understand, even in the face of facts. Adichie acknowledges that she had a single story about her family’s

male servant Fide being as poor until she visited his family in the village and discovered the beautiful artwork Fide's family made. Africans have suffered from this single story syndrome because of how the West has represented them. As a novelist, Adichie's texts, like Achebe's, work to undo that "single story" by presenting a multiplicity of complex experiences of people in both Nigeria and the United States.



SELECTED WORK:

"The Return"

by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

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The road was long. Whenever he took a step forward, little clouds of dust rose, whirled angrily behind him, and then slowly settled again. But a thin train of dust was left in the air, moving like smoke. He walked on, however, unmindful of the dust and ground under his feet. Yet with every step he seemed more and more conscious of the hardness and apparent animosity of the road. Not that he looked down; on the contrary, he looked straight ahead as if he would, any time now, see a familiar object that would hail him as a friend and tell him that he was near home. But the road stretched on.

He made quick, springing steps, his left hand dangling freely by the side of his once white coat, now torn and worn out. His right hand, bent at the elbow, held onto a string tied to a small bundle on his slightly drooping back. The bundle, well wrapped with a cotton cloth that had once been printed with red flowers now faded out, swung from side to side in harmony with the rhythm of his steps. The bundle held the bitterness and hardships of the years spent in detention camps. Now and then he looked at the sun on its homeward journey. Sometimes he darted quick side-glances at the small hedged strips of land, which with their sickly-looking crops, maize, beans, and peas, appeared much as everything else did—unfriendly. The whole country was dull and seemed weary. To Kamau, this was nothing new. He remembered that, even before the Mau Mau Emer-

gency, the overtilled Gikuyu holdings wore haggard looks in contrast to the sprawling green fields in the settled area.

A path branched to the left. He hesitated for a moment and then made up his mind. For the first time, his eyes brightened a little as he went along the path that would take him down the valley and then to the village. At last home was near, and with that realization, the faraway look of a weary traveler seemed to desert him for a while. The valley and the vegetation along it were in deep contrast to the surrounding country. For here green bush and trees thrived. This could only mean one thing: Honia River still flowed. He quickened his steps as if he could scarcely believe this to be true till he had actually set his eyes on the river. It was there; it still flowed. Honia, where so often he had taken a bath, plunging stark naked into its cool, living water, warmed his heart as he watched its serpentine movement around the rocks and heard its slight murmurs. A painful exhilaration passed all over him, and for a moment he longed for those days. He sighed. Perhaps the river would not recognize in his hardened features that same boy to whom the riverside world had meant everything. Yet as he approached Honia, he felt more akin to it than he had felt to anything else since his release.

A group of women were drawing water. He was excited, for he could recognize one or two from his ridge. There was the middle-aged Wanjiku, whose deaf son had been killed by the Security Forces just before he himself was arrested. She had always been a darling of the village, having a smile for everyone and food for all. Would they receive him? Would they give him a "hero's welcome?" He thought so. Had he not always been a favorite all along the ridge? And had he not fought for the land? He wanted to run and shout: "Here I am. I have come back to you." But he desisted. He was a man.

"Is it well with you?" A few voices responded. The other women, with tired and worn features, looked at him mutely as if his greeting was of no consequence. Why! Had he been so long in the camp? His spirits were damped as he feebly asked: "Do you not remember me?" Again they looked at him. They stared at him with cold, hard looks; like everything else, they seemed to be deliberately refusing to know or own him. It was Wanjiku who at last recognized

him. But there was neither warmth nor enthusiasm in her voice as she said, "Oh, is it you, Kamau?" We thought you—" She did not continue. Only now he noticed something else—surprise? fear? He could not tell. He saw their quick glances dart at him and he knew for certain that a secret from which he was excluded bound them together.

"Perhaps I am no longer one of them!" he bitterly reflected. But they told him of the new village. The old village of scattered huts spread thinly over the ridge was no more.

He left them, feeling embittered and cheated. The old village had not even waited for him. And suddenly he felt a strong nostalgia for his old home, friends, and surroundings. He thought of his father, mother, and—and—he dared not think about her. But for all that, Muthoni, just as she had been in the old days, came back to his mind. His heart beat faster. He felt desire and a warmth thrilled through him. He quickened his step. He forgot the village women as he remembered his wife. He had stayed with her a mere two weeks; then he had been swept away by the colonial forces. Like many others, he had been hurriedly screened and then taken to detention without trial. And all that time, he had thought of nothing but the village and his beautiful woman.

The others had been like him. They had talked of nothing but their homes. One day he was working next to another detainee from Muranga. Suddenly the detainee, Njoroge, stopped breaking stones. He sighed heavily. His worn-out eyes had a faraway look.

"What's wrong man? What's the matter with you?" Kamau asked.

"It is my wife. I left her expecting a baby. I have no idea what has happened to her."

Another detainee put in: "For me, I left my woman with a baby. She had just been delivered. We were all happy. But on the same day, I was arrested..."

And so they went on. All of them longed for one day—the day of their return home. Then life would begin anew.

Kamau himself had left his wife without a child. He had not even finished paying the bride price. But now he would go, seek work in Nairobi, and pay off the remainder to Muthoni's parents. Life would indeed begin anew. They would have a son and bring

him up in their own home. With these prospects before his eyes, he quickened his steps. He wanted to run—no, fly to hasten his return. He was now nearing the top of the hill. He wished he could suddenly meet his brothers and his sisters. Would they ask him questions? He would, at any rate, not tell them all: the beating, the screening and the work on roads and in quarries with an askari always nearby ready to kick him if he relaxed. Yes. He had suffered many humiliations, and he had not resisted. Was there any need? But his soul and all the vigor of his manhood had rebelled and bled with rage and bitterness.

One day these wazungu would go!

One day his people would be free! Then, then—he did not know what he would do. However, he bitterly assured himself no one would ever flout his manhood again.

He mounted the hill and then stopped. The whole plain lay below. The new village was before him—rows and rows of compact mud huts, crouching on the plain under the fast-vanishing sun. Dark blue smoke curled upward from various huts, to form a dark mist that hovered over the village. Beyond, the deep, blood-red sinking sun sent out finger-like streaks of light that thinned outward and mingled with the gray mist shrouding the distant hills.

In the village, he moved from street to street, meeting new faces. He inquired. He found his home. He stopped at the entrance to the yard and breathed hard and full. This was the moment of his return home. His father sat huddled up on a three-legged stool. He was now very aged and Kamau pitied the old man. But he had been spared—yes, spared to see his son's return—

"Father!"

The old man did not answer. He just looked at Kamau with strange vacant eyes. Kamau was impatient. He felt annoyed and irritated. Did he not see him? Would he behave like the women Kamau had met at the river?

In the street, naked and half-naked children were playing, throwing dust at one another. The sun had already set and it looked as if there would be moonlight.

"Father, don't you remember me?" Hope was sinking in him. He felt tired. Then he saw his father suddenly start to tremble like a leaf. He saw him stare

with unbelieving eyes. Fear was discernible in those eyes. His mother came, and his brothers too. They crowded around him. His aged mother clung to him and sobbed hard.

“I knew my son would come. I knew he was not dead.”

“Why, who told you I was dead?”

“That Karanja, son of Njogu.”

And then Kamau understood. He understood his trembling father. He understood the women at the river. But one thing puzzled him: he had never been in the same detention camp with Karanja. Anyway he had come back. He wanted now to see Muthoni. Why had she not come out? He wanted to shout, “I have come, Muthoni; I am here.” He looked around. His mother understood him. She quickly darted a glance at her man and then simply said:

“Muthoni went away.”

Kamau felt something cold settle in his stomach. He looked at the village huts and the dullness of the land. He wanted to ask many questions but he dared not. He could not yet believe that Muthoni had gone. But he knew by the look of the women at the river, by the look of his parents, that she was gone.

“She was a good daughter to us,” his mother was explaining. “She was waiting for you and patiently bore all the ills of the land. Then Karanja came and said that you were dead. Your father believed him. She believed him too and keened for a month. Karanja constantly paid us visits. He was of your Rika, you know? Then she got a child. We could have kept her. But where is the land? Where is the food? Ever since land consolidation, our last security was taken away. We let Karanja go with her. Other women have done worse—gone to town. Only the infirm and the old have been left here.”

He was not listening; the coldness in his stomach slowly changed to bitterness. He felt bitter against all, all the people including his father and mother. They had betrayed him. They had leagued against him, and Karanja had always been his rival. Five years was admittedly not a short time. But why did she go? Why did they allow her to go? He wanted to speak. Yes, speak and denounce everything—the women by the river, the village and the people who dwelled there. But he could not. This bitter thing was choking him.

“You—you gave my own away?” he whispered.

“Listen, child, child ...”

The big yellow moon dominated the horizon. He hurried away bitter and blind, and only stopped when he came to the Honia River.

And standing at the bank, he saw not the river, but his hopes dashed on the ground instead. The river moved swiftly, making ceaseless monotonous murmurs. In the forest the crickets and other insects kept up an incessant buzz. And above, the moon shone bright. He tried to remove his coat, and the small bundle he had held on to so firmly fell. It fell down the bank and before Kamau knew what was happening, it was floating swiftly down the river. For a time he was shocked and wanted to retrieve it. What would he show his—Oh, had he forgotten so soon? His wife was gone. And the little things that had so strangely reminded him of her and that he had guarded all those years, had gone! He did not know why, but somehow he felt relieved. Thoughts of drowning himself dispersed. He began to put on his coat, murmuring to himself, “Why should she have waited for me? Why should all the changes have waited for my return?”

Historical Context of “The Return” by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o

The Kenyan struggle for independence was an example of active resistance, where indigenous Africans had to go to war to gain independence from a European colonial power, in this case Britain. According to Africanist scholar Edmond J. Keller in “Decolonization, Independence, and the Failure of Politics”:

*The presence or absence of European settlers in African colonies greatly influenced the rate and pattern of decolonization no matter who was the colonizing power. Where there were no settlers, the colonizing powers looked more favorably on the notion of self-government by Africa, but, where there were settlers, the process of decolonization was usually characterized by periods of violent conflict between Africans and Europeans.*¹⁷⁴



Jomo Kenyatta, 1978. Kenyatta became the leader of the Kenyan African Union (KAU) in 1947 and later became the first president of independent Kenya, serving in that capacity from independence in 1963 until his death in 1978.

Credit: By Unknown - [1] Dutch National Archives, The Hague, Fotocollectie Algemeen Nederlands Persbureau (ANeFo), 1945-1989, beijk toegang 2.24.01.04, Bestanddeelnnummer 929-8665, CC BY-SA 3.0 nl, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=36812332>

Kenya is an example of a nation with white settlers, and Kenyans experienced a land liberation struggle between 1944 and 1962. Although whites had settled in the Kenyan uplands after World War I, the introduction of restrictive laws and the forced appropriation of African lands, especially at the end of World War II, led to increasing hostilities between white settlers and indigenous Africans. In 1942, the Kenyan African Union (KAU) was formed with the goal of securing Kenyan independence. At the end of World War II, the British government encouraged white soldiers to immigrate to Kenya and offered them African lands as “payment” for serving in the European war. The presence of a growing population of white settlers on African lands and the imposition of hostile land policies led Africans to begin agitating for the right to self-rule. British resistance to African demands and the growing conflicts between Africans and white settlers locally gave rise to increased violence in which both Africans and European settlers lost their lives, and many Africans were imprisoned.

In 1947, Jomo Kenyatta (who would later become the first leader of an independent Kenya) became

the leader of the KAU, which continued to advocate for Kenya’s people to have more political power. Kenya’s attainment of independence from Britain, which came in 1963, was brought about in part by the emergence of a guerilla land liberation group under the name of Mau Mau. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s short story “The Return” deals with the return of Kamau, a land liberation fighter, from his detention camp.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o—Dramatist, Novelist, and Essayist

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (b. 1938) was born in Kenya of Kikuyu parentage in 1938. Like his contemporary Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ was also educated at a missionary school. Thereafter, he studied at Makerere College in Kampala, Uganda, and at Leeds University, London. Ngũgĩ’s earlier works, especially those situated between the 1960s and 1970s, focus on the historical struggle for independence (*Weep Not Child*, 1964), the problematic nature of some cultural practices (*The River Between*, 1965), and the disillusionment over the failure of independence (*A Grain of Wheat*, 1966). In the 1970s, Ngũgĩ’s works, such as *Petals of Blood* (1977), articulated his and the African masses’ disillusionment with postcolonial leadership.

Ngũgĩ’s essays on African cultural nationalism, decolonization, and colonial and postcolonial violence are foundational in African literary and cultural studies. In his later works, Ngũgĩ turns attention to the failure of the postcolonial state, exploring the relationship between power and society. His critique of the relationship between the African masses and the political leadership, especially highlighting the leadership’s abuses of power, have earned him the wrath of the Kenyan leadership. Ngũgĩ was arrested and detained without trial in 1978. He was imprisoned for over a year. Ngũgĩ details this experience in his book, *Detained: A Writer’s Prison Diary* (1981). After his release, Ngũgĩ left Kenya for the United States.

In the 1980s, Ngũgĩ turned his attention to the language question in African literature, publishing *Devil on the Cross* (1982), his first novel in Kikuyu. His play *I Will Marry When I Want* (1982), co-authored with Ngũgĩ wa Miri and first written in Kikuyu (1977), used drama and songs as means of social criticism. The play was banned in Kenya and may have contributed to Ngũgĩ’s detention without



Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, whose works have collectively helped to reshape the nature of African literary discourse and cultural studies.

trial. His series of essays in works such as *Barrel of a Pen* (1983), *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986), and *Moving the Center* (1993) engage the question of cultural nationalism. In 2010, he published his memoir *Dreams in a Time of War*. His works collectively have helped to reshape the nature of African literary discourse and cultural studies.

Analysis of “The Return”

The short story “The Return” focuses on Kamau’s return to his village after his imprisonment in a detention camp. The story suggests that Kamau has been detained for five years as a land liberation fighter, a member of the group known as the Mau Mau. The story highlights several themes, including alienation, loss, the individual and the community, and betrayal.

Kamau’s separation from his community has alienated him from them. In fact, his relationship to the road and the landscape signals this alienation: “he looked straight ahead as if he would, any time now, see a familiar object that would hail him back as a friend and tell him that he was near home.” The narrative suggests that Kamau will be met with disappointment and loneliness for the “road stretched on,” as if nature were either working against him or foreshadowing his displacement and loss of community.

“The Return” is a story that highlights loss at various levels—personal as well as communal. Kamau’s detention has cost him his wife and community. Other Kenyans have lost their lives, family members, or their lands to white settlers and the Security Forces. “The Return” also addresses the relationship between the individual and the community. Kamau considers his detention a sacrifice for his community, but he is disappointed when the women he encounters at the Honia River do not seem to recognize him or give him a hero’s welcome. His questions before greeting them also underscore his own uncertainty about his community’s response. Kamau feels that his community and his family have betrayed him. This is evident in the scene at the river where the women seem not to recognize him—they “stared at him with cold, hard looks; like everything else, they seemed to be deliberately refusing to know or own him.” Even when Wanjiku, one of the women, recognizes him, Kamau notes that “there was neither warmth nor enthusiasm in her voice.”

Kamau also notes fear in the women; he observes that “a secret from which he was excluded bound them together.” This is because they may think he is a ghost; they had believed that he was dead because Karanja, who also had been held in prison and had been released earlier, had returned home and informed the village that Kamau had died in detention. Then, Karanja left with Kamau’s wife Muthoni. The villagers know this, but cannot tell Kamau. Kamau feels that his family—his parents and his wife—has betrayed him. His parents betray him by letting his wife leave with Karanja, and Kamau believes that his wife also betrayed him by leaving with Karanja. But, Kamau’s mother explains to him that they were deceived by Karanja’s lies about Kamau’s death. In other words, they, too, had been wronged. Kamau’s mother speaks to him about his wife Muthoni, saying:

[She] ‘was a good daughter to us’...‘She waited for you and patiently bore all the ills of the land. Then Karanja came and said that you were dead. Your father believed him. She believed him too and keened for a month. Karanja constantly paid us visits. He was of your Rika, you know. Then she got a child.’

Here Ngũgĩ makes the reader empathize with Ka-



Members of the British military check the identification papers of Kenyans as they search for Mau Mau rebels.

mau as well as with his parents. It becomes difficult for the reader to pass judgement on them because they, too, have experienced trauma as a result of the political turmoil in their land.

Kamau returns excited to see his family again. He assumes that his family is still the same. But, he soon realizes that his family has changed. His wife has left by marrying Karanja with whom she now has a child. In fact, it is not only his family that has changed, but also his community has transformed. Ngũgĩ suggests that Kamau's village may have been relocated, noting that, "[Kamau] mounted the hill," and found "the new village...before him—rows and rows of mud huts, crouching on the plain under the fast-vanishing sun." Ngũgĩ adds, "In the village, he moved from street to street, meeting new faces." Kamau's experience as he enters his village seems to foreshadow his later alienation from his family and the village. He has returned home, but home is no longer a welcoming and familiar place for him. He even wonders about his relationship with his people when he muses after the encounter at the river: "Perhaps I am no longer one of them!"

Kamau was expecting his family and the village to give him a hero's welcome, but he does not receive one. Indeed, his departure or flight from the village upon finding out that his wife Muthoni has betrayed him by marrying Karanja reinforces his realization that he no longer belongs with his community. For Kamau, Muthoni represented hope and the possibility of a new beginning—this is revealed to the reader by Kamau's thoughts as he walks home from the prison. He plans "to pay off the remainder [of the bride-price] to Muthoni's parents. Life would indeed

begin anew. They would have a son and bring him up in their own home." His steps change in response to these thoughts. Ngũgĩ narrates: "He wanted to run—no, fly to hasten his return."

Kamau's bundle and the Honia River both have potent symbolism. Kamau has held onto this bundle throughout the story, only to accidentally lose it to the river upon his return. The bundle represents Kamau's connections to Muthoni, his wife, who has left him. The loss of the bundle is a symbolic representation of the loss of his wife and the permanence of that loss. He cannot retrieve the bundle from the river just as he will not get back his wife. The loss of the bundle also provides Kamau closure; it helps him to disconnect emotionally from his wife and to come to terms with his new status, as the story reveals:

His wife had gone. And the little things that had so strangely reminded him of her and that he had guarded all those years, had gone! He did not know why, but somehow he felt relieved. Thoughts of drowning himself dispersed. He began to put on his coat, murmuring to himself, 'Why should she have waited for me? Why should all the changes have waited for my return?'

Kamau's thoughts and mood suggest closure—there is a shift in his attitude and mood. He is no longer angry at his family, his wife, or even the community; he is relieved. Kamau begins to examine his current situation more critically and perhaps moves toward understanding their dilemma too.

Ngũgĩ uses nature and the landscape as narrative or storytelling devices. For example, the Honia River is symbolic for Kamau because it is a familiar landmark to him and connects him to the land and to his people. Therefore, it provides him with a sense of place and a sense of security that things have not changed. He is able to locate himself and his direction or distance from his home through the location of the river. Moreover, the river reminds him of his childhood. This is evident in his reaction upon hearing the sound of the river. Ngũgĩ writes, "Honia River still flowed. He quickened his steps as if he could scarcely believe this to be true till he had actually set his eyes on the river. It was there; it still flowed." While the river may signify constancy to Kamau, the

people and the community have changed.

Ironically, it is also to the river that Kamau loses his bundle. Although we never see the inside of the bundle, it is important to Kamau. But, in losing it to the river, Kamau finds resolution. Thus, we could say that the Honia River heals him by carrying away his past and the painful reminder of that past, represented by the bundle, which held “the bitterness and hardships of the years spent in detention camps.”

The beginning of the story also uses nature to foreshadow Kamau’s displacement. Ngũgĩ describes the land as if it were in an antagonistic relationship with Kamau: “The road was long. Whenever he took a step forward, the clouds of dust rose, whirled angrily behind him, and then slowly settled again.” Ka-

mau notes the “hardness and apparent animosity of the road.”

One of the themes that this story suggests is the responsibilities of a community to those who have suffered to protect the community. Kamau has suffered through five years of detention and trauma to protect his people. He sees himself as a hero, because he “had suffered many humiliations,” so that “One day these wazungu [white people or Europeans] would go.” Kamau sees himself as a land liberation figure, fighting to free his people from European domination. His struggle is for the independence or self-determination of his people. Because of this sacrifice, he believes that his community should honor him. Hence, when they fail to do so upon his return, he is disappointed and embittered toward them.

SELECTED WORK:
“And So It Came to Pass”
by Funso Aiyejina

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And so it came to pass
many seasons after the death of one Saviour
that a new crop of saviours, armed with party programmes
came cascading down our rivers of hope;
poised for the poisoning of our atlantic reservoir
they sought out the foxes in the family
to whom they gave their thirty pieces of silver
in local and foreign exchange
for the secrets of the passage—
way into the castle of our skins . . .

men we had taken for fearless warriors
as protectors of our secret recipes
suddenly turned crabs, carapace and all
shedding shame like water from duck-backs,
seeing sideways beyond the good of all
to the comfort of the selves;

and with their divination bag of tricks
slung over arrogant shoulders
they crawl over our dreams
under the cover of moonless nights
sidestepping traps, destroying hope
they turn our green august of rains,
of showers with which to persuade crops
towards harvest-circles
around whose fire we would have exchanged
happy tales of toil
into an orgy of furious flames . . .

And so it came to pass
that our saviours gave us a gift of tragedy
for which we are too dumb-struck to find a melody.



Nigerian poet, short story writer, and playwright
Funso Aiyejina.

Funso Aiyejina

Funso Aiyejina (also written as “Ayejina”; b.1949) is a Nigerian poet, short story writer, and playwright. He was born in Edo State, Nigeria in 1949. He was educated at the University of Ife. His works include *A Letter to Lynda and Other Poems* (1988), for which he received the Association of Nigerian Authors’ Poetry Prize in 1989, and contributions to several anthologies. Aiyejina’s book *The Legend of the Rockhills and Other Stories*, a collection of short

fiction, was awarded the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize in 2000 for Best First Book (Africa). His most recent collection of poems, *I, the Supreme and Other Poems*, was published in 2004. Aiyejina has also written numerous critical works on African literature and culture. He currently serves as a professor of literature and Dean of Arts and Humanities at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine.

Analysis of “And So It Came to Pass”

Aiyejina’s poem “And So It Came to Pass” reads like an extensive denunciation or condemnation of the leaders, “the saviours,” who according to the narrator have failed to save their people. The speaker is frustrated or disillusioned and seems to charge those who have come to save them with destroying the country: “poised for the poisoning of our atlantic reservoir.” The poem’s speaker is disillusioned by the failure of the saviours to save the people. These saviours who came, “cascading down our rivers of hope” did not fulfil their promises, or what people read as the potential for hope, but rather seem to have poisoned them. The speaker goes on to say that these seemingly “fearless warriors” have turned into “crabs.”

The environment and nature figure significantly in this poem. The poem invokes the environment as

witness to what is happening to the people. We see images of fire and water—together, these point to some tragedy, which Aiyejina describes as a “gift.” He is being sarcastic here since such a gift is destructive. The leaders are no longer “saviours” or “fearless warriors,” but harbingers of destruction. They betray their people when they accept the “thirty pieces of silver,” choosing financial profit, “the comfort of the selves,” over a just course of action, and in doing so they have destroyed their people’s hope.

The environment is present throughout the poem; for instance, the narrator mentions the “poisoning of our atlantic reservoir.” This may be a reference to the environmental pollution of the Niger Delta. Constant [oil spills](#) in the region have suffocated fishing in the area and forced the Ogoni and other Niger Delta people to leave their lands. There has been an ongoing struggle for autonomy by the Ogoni and various groups in the Niger Delta region. One of the leading figures in this struggle against the environmental destruction of the area was the writer [Ken Saro-Wiwa](#) (1941–95), who was executed by the Nigerian government in 1995. He was also the leader of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), which has led a nonviolent protest against Royal Dutch Shell Company for its pollution of Ogoni land.

Aiyejina’s poem deals with political transition from one form of government to another. It pays particular attention to the nature of the transition from colonial rule to self-governance or independence. Independence means self-rule—the people determine their own laws and select their own leaders. This means that they exercise the right to govern themselves and as such empower themselves. These are the rights that the British Administration denies the people of Umuofia in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. Okonkwo recognizes this loss of rights, hence, his determination to chase out the white men who occupied their land.

In Aiyejina’s poem, the “new crop of saviours, armed with party programmes” could refer to the new leaders of the African nations. Like political leaders in the United States, African political leaders also affiliate with political parties. Although there were more than a dozen political parties in Nigeria when it first achieved independence in 1960, the prominent ones include the Nigerian National Dem-



Map of Nigeria indicating the location of the oil-rich Niger Delta region, which has suffered numerous oil spills that have wreaked havoc on the environment.

ocratic Party (the first Nigerian political party), the Action Group (AG), the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), and the Northern People’s Congress (NPC). Many of these parties were regionally based or represented specific groups. The “party programmes” refer to the visions of each political party. During campaigns, each party laid out a plan of programs for the country. Funso Aiyejina is a Nigerian and would be familiar with this history and practice.

The party system continues today in Nigeria, although the names and composition of the parties have changed. In addition, since independence in 1960, Nigeria has gone through several governmental transitions—there have been four civilian republics (i.e., the people elect their leaders democratically) and several military transitions. Today, Nigeria is in the fourth civilian republic. Given that Nigeria went through a series of military coups, the first of which was in 1966, “the new saviours” may refer to the new leaders during each political change since independence.

Aiyejina’s poem makes significant use of allusions;¹⁷⁵ the word “saviour” alludes to Christianity. Colonization operated by two means: evangelization or Christianization and conquest. “The death of one Saviour” is an allusion to Christianity, which was introduced to African nations by the colonizers. Moreover, the political leaders of newly independent African nations were like saviors to their people since many of them had led their nations’ struggles for independence. Some were murdered or tortured to death—for instance, [Steve Biko](#) in South Africa. Others were imprisoned for many years; examples



The writer Ken Saro-Wiwa was one of the leading figures of the struggle against the environmental destruction of Ogoniland. He was executed by the Nigerian government in 1995.

include [Jomo Kenyatta](#), Kenya's first president, and [Nelson Mandela](#), who spent twenty-seven years in prison because of his opposition to South Africa's apartheid.

Another allusion is to "the castle of our skins," which is strikingly similar to the title of West Indian author [George Lamming's](#) book *In the Castle of My Skin*, which explores childhood in the West Indies. The allusion to George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* draws attention to the transatlantic connections between Africa and the New World, between Africans and their descendants in the Americas or New World. Furthermore, this allusion reminds readers of the pan-Africanist vision of African diaspora leaders such as [Edward Wilmot Blyden](#) (St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands and Sierra Leone), [W.E.B. DuBois](#) and [Malcolm X](#) (United States), and [Kwame Nkrumah](#) (Ghana). Pan-Africanism emphasizes the connected struggles of people of African descent against all forms of domination—slavery as well as colonialism.

The tone of "And So It Came to Pass" betrays the narrator's frustration, anger, and disappointment. These feelings are evident in the poet's choice of words as well as the length and tempo of the lines or sentences. Lines such as "They sought out the foxes in the family/to whom they gave their thirty pieces



Photograph of Barbadian author George Lamming, 1955, by Carl van Vechten. In his poem, "And So It Came to Pass," Aiyejina alludes to Lamming's book *In the Castle of My Skin*.

of silver" reveal the speaker's disgust and represent the political leaders as traitors. This is an allusion to the biblical story of Judas who accepted thirty pieces of silver in return for his betrayal of Jesus. Foxes are traditionally seen as being treacherous and serve as a metaphor in this poem for corrupt people or those who cannot be trusted.

Aiyejina's poem makes significant use of sound repetition such as alliteration and assonance. Read the poem out loud so that you can hear it. What sounds do you hear? Alliteration occurs when we use words or a group of words that begin with the same sounds. Here is an example of alliteration from the poem: "poised for the poisoning" (line 5). Phrases like "crabs, carapace," "shedding shame," and "seeing sideways" communicate emotions and tone by giving the poem an internal rhythm. Those phrases are also alliterative; the words in each group or pair begin with similar sounds. Assonance occurs when words in close proximity to each other have the same vowel sound, like "crabs, carapace."

Repetition is a rhetorical device often used to emphasize an idea, feeling, or image. It also communicates emotion. Repetition can add to the effectiveness of a speech or poem and can lend it a memorable tempo. In this case, Aiyejina repeats the phrase "and so it came to pass" and the word "saviour."

SELECTED WORK:

“The Message”

by Ama Ata Aidoo

Ama Ata Aidoo, “The Message” from No Sweetness Here and Other Stories. Copyright © 1970 by Ama Ata Aidoo. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, Inc., on behalf of The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, www.feministpress.org. All rights reserved.

‘Look here my sister, it should not be said but they say they opened her up.’

‘They opened her up?’

‘Yes, opened her up.’

‘And the baby removed?’

‘Yes, the baby removed.’

‘Yes, the baby removed.’

‘I say...’

‘They do not say, my sister.’

‘Have you heard it?’

‘What?’

‘This and this and that...’

‘A-a-ah! That is it...’

‘Meewuo!’

‘They don’t say meewuo...’

‘And how is she?’

‘Am I not here with you? Do I know the highway which leads to the Cape Coast?’

‘Hmmm...’

‘And anyway how can she live? What is it like even giving birth with a stomach which is whole... eh?...I am asking you. And if you are always standing on the brink of death who go to war with a stomach that is whole, then how would she do whose stomach is open to the winds?’

‘Oh, *poo*, pity...’

‘I say...’

My little bundle, come. You and I are going to Cape Coast today.

I am taking one of her own cloths with me, just in case. These people on the coast do not know how to do a thing and I am not going to have anybody mishandling my child’s body. I hope they give it to me. Horrible things I have heard done to people’s bodies. Cutting them up and using them for instructions. Whereas even murderers still have decent burials.

I see Mensima coming... And there is Nkama too... and Adwoa Meenu... Now they are coming to... ‘*poo* pity’ me. Witches, witches, witches... they have picked mine up while theirs prosper around them, children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren—theirs shoot up like mushrooms.

‘Esi, we have heard of your misfortune...’

‘That our little lady’s womb has been opened up...’

‘And her baby removed...’

Thank you very much.

‘Has she lived through it?’

I do not know.

‘Esi, bring her here, back home whatever happens.’

Yoo, thank you. If the government’s people allow it, I shall bring her home.

‘And have you got ready your things?’

Yes... No.

I cannot even think well.

It feels so noisy in my head... Oh my little child... I am wasting time... And so I am going...

Yes, to Cape Coast.

No, I do not know anyone there now, but do you think no one would show me the way to this big hospital... if I asked around?

Hmmm... It’s me has ended up like this. I was thinking that everything was alright now... *Yoo*. And thank you too. Shut the door for me when you are leaving. You may stay too long outside if you wait for me, so go home and be about your business. I will let you know when I bring her in.

‘Maami Amfoa, where are you going?’

My daughter, I am going to Cape Coast.

‘And what is our old mother going to do with such swift steps? Is it serious?’

My daughter, it is very serious
 'Mother, may God go with you.'
 Yoo, my daughter.
 'Eno, and what calls at this hour of the day?'
 They want me at Cape Coast.
 'Does my friend want to go and see how much the city has changed since we went there to meet the new Wesleyan Chairman, twenty years ago?'
 My sister, do you think I have knees to go parading on the streets of Cape Coast?
 'Is it heavy?'
 Yes, very heavy indeed. They have opened up my grandchild at the hospital, *hi, hi, hi* . . .
 'Eno *due, due, due*. . .I did not know. May God go with you. . .'
 Thank you *Yaa*.
 'O, the world!'
 'It's her grandchild. The only daughter of her only son. Do you remember Kojo Amisa who went to sodja and fell in the great war, overseas?'
 'Yes, it's his daughter. . .'
 . . . O, *poo*, pity.
 'Kobina, run to the street, tell Draba Anan to wait for Nana Amfoa.'
 'And where is she?'
 'There she comes.'
 'Just look at how she hops like a bird. . .does she think we are going to be here all day? And anyway we are full already . . .'
 O, you drivers!
 'What have drivers done?'
 'And do you think it shows respect when you speak in this way? It is only that things have not gone right; but she could, at least have been your mother. . .'
 'But what have I said? I have not insulted her. I just think that only Youth must be permitted to see Cape Coast, the town of the Dear and Expensive. . .'
 'And do you think she is going on a peaceful journey? The only daughter of her only son has been opened up and her baby removed from her womb.'
 O. . .God

O
 O
 O
Poo, pity.
 'Me. . .*poo*—pity, I am right about our modern wives. I always say they are useless as compared with our mothers.'
 'You drivers!'
 'Now what have your modern wives done?'
 'Am I not right what I always say about them?'
 'You go and watch them in the big towns. All so thin and dry as sticks—you can literally blow them away with your breath. No decent flesh anywhere. Wooden chairs groan when they meet with their hard exteriors.'
 'O you drivers. . .'
 'What have I done? Don't all my male passengers agree with me? These modern girls. . .Now here is one who cannot even have a baby in a decent way. But must have the baby removed from her stomach. *Tchiaa!*'
 'What . . .'
 'Here is the old woman.'
 'Whose grandchild. . .?'
 'Yes.'
 'Nana, I hear you are coming to Cape Coast with us.'
 Yes my master.
 'We nearly left you behind but we heard it was you and that it is a heavy journey you are making.'
 Yes my master. . .thank you my master.
 'Push up please. . .push up. Won't you push up? Why do you all sit looking at me with such eyes as if I was a block of wood?'
 'It is not that there is nowhere to push up to. Five fat women should go on that seat, but look at you!
 And our own grandmother here is none too plump herself. . .Nana, if they won't push, come to the front seat with me.'
 ' . . . Hei, scholar, go to the back. . .
 . . . And do not scowl on me. I know your sort too well. Something tells me you do not have any job at

all. As for that suit you are wearing and looking so grand in, you hired or borrowed it. . . .’

‘Oh you drivers!’

Oh you drivers . . .

The scholar who read this tengram thing, said it was made about three days ago. My lady’s husband sent it. . . .Three days. . . .God—that is too long ago. Have they buried her. . . .where? Or did they cut her up. . . .I should not think about it. . . .or something will happen to me. Eleven or twelve. . . .Efua Panyin, Okuma, Kwame Gyasi and who else? But they should not have left me here. Sometimes. . . .ah, I hate this nausea. But it is this smell of petrol. Now I have remembered I never could travel in a lorry. I was always so sick. But now I hope at least that will not happen. These young people will think it is because I am old and they will laugh. At least if I knew the child of my child was alive, it would have been good. And the little things she sent me. . . .Sometimes some people like Mensima and Nkansa make me feel as if I had been a barren woman instead of only one with whom infant-mortality pledged friendship . . .

I will give her that set of earrings, bracelet and chain which Odwumfo Ata made for me. It is the most beautiful and the most expensive thing I have. . . .It does not hurt me to think that I am going to die very soon and have them and their children gloating over my things. After all what did they swallow my children for? It does not hurt me at all. If I had been someone else, I would have given them all away before I died. But it does not matter. They can share their own curse. Now, that is the end of me and my roots. . . .Eternal death has worked like a warrior rat, with diabolical sense of duty, to gnaw my bottom. Everything is finished now. The vacant lot is swept and the scraps of old sugar-cane pulp, dry sticks and bunches of hair burnt. . . .how it reeks, the smoke!

‘O, Nana do not weep . . .’

‘Is the old woman weeping?’

‘If the only child of your only child dies, won’t you weep?’

‘Why do you ask me? Did I know her grandchild is dead?’

‘Where have you been, not in this lorry? Where were your ears when we were discussing it?’

‘I do not go putting my mouth in other people’s

affairs . . .’

‘So what?’

‘So go and die.’

‘*Hei, hei*, it is prohibited to quarrel in my lorry.’

‘Draba, here is me, sitting quiet and this lady of muscles and bones being cheeky to me.’

‘Look, I can beat you.’

‘Beat me. . . .beat me. . . .let’s see.’

‘*Hei*, you are not civilized, eh?’

‘Keep quiet and let us think, both of you, or I will put you down.’

‘Nana, do not weep. There is God above.’

Thank you my master.

‘But we are in Cape Coast already.’

Meewuo! My God, hold me tight or something will happen to me.

My master, I will come down here.

‘O Nana, I thought you said you were going to the hospital. . . .We are not there yet.’

I am saying maybe I will get down here and ask my way around.

‘Nana, you do not know these people, eh? They are very impudent here. They have no use for old age. So they do not respect it. Sit down, I will take you there.’

Are you going there, my master?

‘No, but I will take you there.’

Ah, my master, your old mother thanks you. Do not shed a tear when you hear of my death. . . .my master, your old mother thanks you.

I hear there is somewhere where they keep corpses until their owners claim them. . . .if she has been buried then I must find her husband. . . .Esi Amfoa, what did I come to do under this sky? I have buried all my children and now I am going to bury my only grandchild!

‘Nana we are there.’

Is this the hospital?

‘Yes, nana. What is your child’s name?’

Esi Amfoa. His father named her after me.

‘Do you know her European name?’

No, my master.

‘What shall we do?’

‘. . . Ei lady, Lady Nurse, we are looking for somebody.’

‘You are looking for somebody and can you read? If you cannot, you must ask someone what the rules in the hospital are. You can only come and visit people at three o’clock.’

Lady, please. She was my only grandchild . . .

‘Who? And anyway, it is none of our business.’

Nana, you must be patient. . .and not cry . . .

‘Old woman, why are you crying, it is not allowed here. No one must make any noise . . .’

My lady, I am sorry but she was all I had.

‘Who? Oh, are you the old woman who is looking for somebody?’

Yes

‘Who is he?’

She was my granddaughter—the only child of my only son.

‘I mean, what was her name?’

Esi Amfoa

‘Esi Amfoa. . .Esi Amfoa. I am sorry, we do not have anyone whom they call like that here.’

Is that it?

‘Nana, I told you they may know only her European name here.’

My master, what shall we do then.

‘What is she ill with?’

She came here to have a child . . .

‘. . . And they say, they opened her stomach and removed the baby. Oh...oh, I see.’

My Lord, hold me tight so that nothing will happen to me now.

‘I see. It is the Caesarean case.’

‘Nurse, you know her?’

And when I take her back, Anona Ebusuafo will say that I did not wait for them to come with me . . .

‘Yes. Are you her brother?’

‘No. I am only the driver who brought the old

woman.’

‘Did she bring all her clan?’

‘No. She came alone.’

‘Strange thing for a villager to do.’

I hope they have not cut her up already.

‘Did she bring a whole bag full of cassava and plantain and kenkey?’

‘No. she has only her little bundle.’

‘Follow me. But you must not make any noise. This is not the hour for coming here . . .’

My master, does she know her?

‘Yes.’

I hear it is very cold where they put them.

It was feeding time for new babies. When old Esi Amfoa saw young Esi Amfoa, the latter was all neat and nice. White sheets and all. She did not see the beautiful stitches under the sheets. ‘This woman is a tough bundle,’ Dr. Gyamfi had declared after the identical twins had been removed, the last stitches had been threaded off and Mary Koomson, alias Esi Amfoa, had come to.

The old woman somersaulted into the room and lay groaning, not screaming, by the bed. For was not her last pot broken? So they lay them in state even in hospitals and not always cut them up for instruction?

The Nursing Sister was furious. Young Esi Amfoa spoke. And this time old Esi Amfoa wept loud and hard—wept all her tears.

Scrappy nurse-under-training, Jessy Treeson, second-generation-Cape Coaster-her-grandmother still-remembered-at-Egyaa No. 7 said, ‘As for these villagers,’ and giggled.

Draba Anan looked hard at Jessy Treeson, looked hard at her, all of her: her starched uniform, apron and cap. . .and then dismissed them all. . . ‘Such a cassava stick. . .but maybe I will break my toe if I kicked at her buttocks,’ he thought.

And by the bed the old woman was trying hard to rise and look at the only pot which had refused to get broken.

Ama Ata Aidoo

Ama Ata Aidoo (b.1942) is a Ghanaian dramatist, essayist, novelist, and poet. Aidoo was educated at the University of Ghana and began writing while she was an undergraduate. She later served as Ghana's education minister (1982–83). She is one of the leading feminist voices in African literature, and this is significant in a field where women writers tend to resist the term “feminist.” Her first play *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965) examines the relationship between Africa and the African diaspora, particularly with regard to the legacy of slavery. In her collection of short stories *No Sweetness Here and Other Stories* (1970), Aidoo examines her characters' experiences in postcolonial Ghana, calling attention to the challenges posed by a changing society. Aidoo's works focus especially on gender oppression and the marginalization of women, as well as on culture clash as part of the legacy of colonization and neocolonialism.

Analysis of “The Message”

Ama Ata Aidoo's short story “The Message” is one of the stories from her collection *No Sweetness Here* (1970). It is about the experience of Maami Amfoa, an old woman who travels to Cape Coast from her village to see her only granddaughter who has given birth via caesarian section (hereafter referred to as a C-section). When Maami Amfoa receives the news, she is worried because “they opened up” her only grandchild and “removed” the baby. The story begins with this news through the eyes or voices of the village women. For the women and Maami Amfoa, the news is not positive. Maami Amfoa sees the C-section as a bad thing. She asks, “How can she live? What is it like even giving birth with a stomach which is whole...?”¹⁷⁶ In other words, the C-section is “unnatural” or not normal.

Maami Amfoa also thinks that the village women whom she sees approaching her have killed her only grandchild, her only surviving relative. Hence, she calls them witches. In African societies, some people believe in witchcraft, especially as a way of explaining events and experiences that they define as “unnatural” or that they cannot otherwise understand. A C-section is seen as “unnatural” because it is not the norm. It becomes necessary only when “natural childbirth” poses a danger to the mother



Ghanaian dramatist, essayist, novelist, and poet
Ama Ata Aidoo.

or the baby. The women interpret Maami Amfoa's news as a “misfortune.” The news spreads, and the women begin to interpret it in gloomy ways. Until Maami Amfoa arrives at the hospital, one is never sure whether her grandchild is still alive or whether the baby has survived. Maami Amfoa assumes the worst and simply wants to gather whatever is left of her grandchild to return to the village. One woman tells her, “Esi, bring her here, back home whatever happens’.”¹⁷⁷

Aidoo presents the old woman's journey to the city as a mission to rescue her only granddaughter—or her granddaughter's corpse, as Maami Amfoa fears she is dead. However, the presentation of the story is also humorous, even though the message Maami Amfoa has received is taken seriously by the characters in the story. The humor also undermines Maami Amfoa's view of the city, suggesting that her perspective is unrealistic. Aidoo also uses this story to introduce a historical reality, namely the involvement of Africans in the World Wars; Maami Amfoa's son (the father of her grandchild) is said to have “fell in the great war, overseas.”¹⁷⁸

In addition, the story underscores a clash of cultures or the tension between tradition (the village) and modernity (the city and the hospital). We notice the clash in the women's treatment of Maami Amfoa, which contrasts with the attitudes of those she encounters in the lorry and in the city. Maami Amfoa



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Map of Ghana. In Aidoo's short story "The Message," Maami Amfoa must travel from her village to the city of Cape Coast.

learns that she must navigate the two spaces in order to survive or reach her destination. In fact, her voyage to Cape Coast from the village can be seen as a form of border crossing. The advice of the lorry driver who brings her to the hospital prepares her to navigate the city. In this case, he acts as her guide, even if only briefly, on the journey. In this short story, the lorry driver represents hybridity because his identity is ambiguous—neither city dweller nor village dweller. He understands and can live in both spaces, but he does not belong completely to any of them. Therefore, he is able to travel between the two areas without much discomfort. It is appropriate then that he serves as the bridge between the village and the city for Maami Amfoa.

During the journey, the driver helps the old woman negotiate her relationships with the other passengers on the bus because he understands both groups.¹⁷⁹ He stops her from disembarking from the bus too early and takes her to the hospital. When the old woman attempts to get down from the bus and “ask [her] way around,” he tells her: “Nana, you do not know these people, eh? They are very impudent here. They have no use for old age. So they do not respect it. Sit down, I will take you there.”¹⁸⁰ Although the driver was not originally planning to go to the hospital, he offers to take the old woman there. His actions will keep her safe while honoring her age. The driver’s attitude underscores his understanding of the two cultural spaces—the city and the village. He accords the old woman the respect she deserves as the culture dictates, and in so doing he honors her. In response, she thanks him, saying, “Ah, my master, your old mother thanks you.”¹⁸¹

The hospital, on the other hand, represents the former colonial administration and as such is frightening to Maami Amfoa and the other villagers. Historian Tara Dosumu Diener has interviewed people who were treated in hospitals in Sierra Leone during the colonial era. Diener explains that for many, there is “a visceral association of ‘the hospital’ with extractive imperial regimes aiming to civilize and control, and missionary crusades to administer salvation to the body and soul of the unwashed savage through the balm of Christianity and cleanliness.”¹⁸² In a similar context, it is not surprising that Maami Amfoa and the other women in the village worry about a young woman being cared for in a European-style hospital in the city.

Maami Amfoa’s experience at the hospital seems to confirm this notion of the hospital as an alienating location. When she asks a nurse for help, the nurse tells her that she must read and follow the hospital rules or ask someone to read them to her if she cannot read. The nurse’s attitude traumatizes Maami Amfoa, who begins to cry and consequently receives some help. In fact, the nurse’s questions to the driver confirm his earlier comments about the impudence of the people of the city. The nurse asks him if Maami Amfoa brought “all her clan.” When the driver informs her that the old woman came alone, the nurse responds, “Strange thing for a villager to do.”¹⁸³ Then, she continues to ask if the old woman brought “a whole bag full of cassava and plantain and kenkey”¹⁸⁴ before taking Maami Amfoa to see her granddaughter. The nurse’s questions underscore her arrogance and feeling of superiority. She is educated and lives in the city and consequently treats villagers like Maami Amfoa and the driver as inferior.

The story also reveals a sense of community among the villagers. The conversations among the women show how close the characters are with each other. It emphasizes the feeling of village communal life where everyone seems to know everyone else, particularly because individual speakers are not always identified in the dialogue. As such, we observe how quickly the news of Maami Amfoa’s granddaughter’s childbirth spreads through the village. We also see her neighbors’ reactions to it and their concern for the old woman and her granddaughter. We also note, in contrast, the sense of alienation that Maami Amfoa experiences on the bus and in the city and in the hospital.

Women are central in Aidoo’s works, and this story is a prime example. There are very few men in the story because it is about women’s lives. The story can be seen as one about motherhood. It is ultimately about the relationship between an old woman and her granddaughter, who has herself just become a mother. In the story, both women also end up appearing quite strong. Although Maami Amfoa feels out of place in the city, she succeeds at reaching her granddaughter in the hospital, while the younger Esi Amfoa is described as “a tough bundle”¹⁸⁵ by the doctor and as “the only pot which had refused to get broken”¹⁸⁶ by Maami Amfoa. Aidoo uses this story to examine various themes including genera-

tional differences, family, and culture shock as the grandmother who travels to a city hospital to see her granddaughter must learn to navigate and survive the city.

SELECTED WORK:

“To Whom It May Concern”

by Siphso Sepamla

“To Whom It May Concern” by Siphso Sepamla, from One World of Literature, Eds. Shirley Geok-Lin Lim and Norman A. Spencer. Boston Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993.

Bearer
Bare of everything but particulars
Is a Bantu
The language of a people in Southern Africa
He seeks to proceed from here to there
Please pass him on
Subject to these particulars
He lives subject to the provisions
Of the Urban Act of 1925
Amended often
To update it to his sophistication
Subject to the provisions of the said Act
He may roam freely within a prescribed area
Free only from the anxiety of conscription
In terms of the Abolition of Passes Act
A latter-day amendment
In keeping with the moon-age naming
Bearer’s designation is Reference number 417181
And (he) acquires a niche in the said area
As a temporary sojourner
To which he must betake himself
At all times
When his services are dispensed with for the day
As a permanent measure of law and order
Please note
The remains of R/N 417181

Will be laid to rest in peace

On a plot

Set aside for Methodist Xhosas

A measure also adopted

At the express request of the Bantu

In anticipation of any faction fight

Before the Day of Judgement

Siphso Sepamla

Sydney Siphso Sepamla (1932–2007) was born in Krugersdorp, South Africa, in 1932. He was trained as a teacher, but he abandoned the profession for the theatre, and then turned to writing poetry, plays, and novels. Sepamla was influenced by the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) founded by Steven Bantu Biko. [Black Consciousness](#) was a movement in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, which was both an ideology and a political movement that emphasized the liberation and empowerment of black people. Black Consciousness validated blackness, black cultural productions, and worldviews. According to Steve Biko, the goal of Black Consciousness was to unite black people around the source of their oppression “the blackness of their skin” to “operate as a group in order to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude.”¹⁸⁷ Biko stated that Black Consciousness infuses the black community with a vision of itself, newfound pride in its values, cultures, and beliefs.¹⁸⁸ Black Consciousness emphasized the use of art as a weapon of empowerment, and it encouraged black people to empower themselves by claiming and telling their own stories. Note that Black Consciousness was also a movement in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s and found expression in the Black Arts period. It is possible to make connections to the plays of Amiri Baraka, for instance, or to some of the speeches of Malcolm X.

In 1978, two years after the [Soweto student uprising](#), Sepamla helped to found the Federated Union of Black Arts (FUBA). Its goal was to promote the artistic productions of black people and to use art as a means of protest against apartheid. As such, it also incorporated the ideals of Black Consciousness into the arts. Siphso Sepamla’s works include “I Remember Sharpeville” (1978), an homage to the



South African poet, playwright, and novelist Siphiso Sepamla.

Sharpeville Massacre of 1960, *Hurry Up to It!* (1975), *A Ride on the Whirlwind* (1981), and *Children of the Earth* (1989). “To Whom It May Concern” is his protest poem against the traumatic effects of apartheid policies on black South Africans.

Analysis of “To Whom It May Concern”

Siphiso Sepamla’s poem “To Whom It May Concern” is a form of resistance literature in which the narrator protests his or her dehumanization by apartheid laws. The poem sounds like an official document or certification of the identity of the subject. In fact, it pokes fun at the language of the pass book (or “dompas”) that black South Africans were forced to carry under apartheid. The poem uses sarcasm to expose the absurdity and oppressive nature of apartheid, a policy that stripped black people of their humanity and dignity. The subject is reduced to facts on paper in “Bearer/Bare of everything but particulars.” He is unnamed and is identified only as number “417181,” both alive and in death. His movement is restricted by the “Urban Native act of 1925” although “he

may roam freely within a prescribed area.” The word “roam” suggests movement, but it also suggests the unplanned or purposeless movement that we associate with animals.

Furthermore, the poem’s subject is dehumanized by a denial of individual attributes—he is not unique. Rather, he is identified in terms of a collectivity—he is “a Bantu.” “Bantu” comes from the Zulu word “aBantu” which refers to people in general. The word “ntu” means “person” in Zulu and in ki-Swahili. Under apartheid, the government appropriated the word “Bantu” as the designation for all black South Africans. Note that in general, the term itself also refers to a band of linguistic and cultural groups that run from West Africa to Southern Africa. Scholars suggest that the Bantu migration from West Africa to Southern Africa made possible the transfer of cultures, values, linguistic styles, and belief systems among these groups. However, apartheid’s distortion or misapplication of the term “Bantu” served to alienate Africans. The only specific group identity mentioned is “Xhosa,” one of the ethnic groups living in the Eastern Cape and Western Cape Provinces of South Africa. Besides, it is only at death that the poem’s subject “will be laid to rest/On a plot/Set aside for Methodist Xhosas.” Even this designation of burial space is discriminatory. Does this suggest that only Christians and only those of a certain denomination are buried on the allocated hallowed ground? Should one then ask what happens to the body of a non-Methodist Xhosa?

Clearly, Siphiso Sepamla uses the poem to satirize the racialization of identity, specifically the pass book, which under apartheid was the only means for identifying black South Africans. Though apartheid in South Africa was a morally reprehensible and racist institution, it sadly does not stand in isolation as a historical anomaly. In the United States, the Supreme Court decision [Plessy v. Ferguson](#) in 1896 was similar to apartheid in that it advocated for the so-called “separate but equal” policy. Scholars also point to many similarities between the Civil Rights movement in the United States and the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa.



A segregated train station entrance in Apartheid-era South Africa.

SELECTED WORK:

“Comrades”

by Nadine Gordimer

“Comrades” from *JUMP AND OTHER STORIES* by Nadine Gordimer. Copyright © 1991 by Felix Licensing, B. V. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux LLC.

As Mrs. Hattie Telford pressed the electronic gadget that deactivates the alarm device in her car a group of youngsters came up behind her. Black. But no need to be afraid; this was not a city street. This was a non-racial enclave of learning, a place where tended flowerbeds and trees bearing botanical identification plates civilized the wild reminder of campus guards and dogs. The youngsters, like her, were part of the crowd loosening into dispersion after a university conference on People’s Education. They were the people to be educated; she was one of the committee of white and black activists (convenient generic for revolutionaries, leftists secular and Christian, fellow-travellers and liberals) up on the platform.

—Comrade...—She was settling in the driver’s

seat when one so slight and slim he seemed a figure in profile came up to her window. He drew courage from the friendly lift of the woman’s eyebrows above blue eyes, the tilt of her freckled white face:—Comrade, are you going to town?—

No, she was going in the opposite direction, home...but quickly, in the spirit of the hall where these young people had been somewhere, somehow present with her (ah no, she with them) stamping and singing Freedom songs, she would take them to the bus station their spokesman named.

—Climb aboard!—

The others got in the back, the spokesman beside her. She saw the nervous white of his eyes as he glanced at and away from her. She searched for talk to set them at ease. Questions, of course. Older people always start with questioning young ones. Did they come from Soweto?

They came from Harrismith, Phoneng Location.

She made the calculation: about two hundred kilometres distant. How did they get here? Who told them about the conference?

—We are Youth Congress in Phoneng.—

A delegation. They had come by bus; one of the groups and stragglers who kept arriving long after the conference had started. They had missed, then, the free lunch?

At the back, no one seemed even to be breathing. The spokesman must have had some silent communication with them, some obligation to speak for them created by the journey or by other shared experience in the mysterious bonds of the young—these young. —We are hungry.—And from the back seats was drawn an assent like the suction of air in a compressing silence.

She was silent in response, for the beat of a breath or two. These large gatherings both excited and left her overexposed, open and vulnerable to the rub and twitch of the mass shuffling across rows of seats and loping up the aisles, babies’ fudge-brown soft legs waving as their napkins are changed on mothers’ laps, little girls with plaited loops on their heads listening like old crones, heavy women swaying to chants, men with fierce, unreadably black faces breaking into harmony tender and deep as they sing to God for his protection of Umkhonto we-

Sizwe, as people on both sides have always, everywhere, claimed divine protection for their soldiers, their wars. At the end of a day like this she wanted a drink, she wanted the depraved luxury of solitude and quiet in which she would be restored (enriched, oh yes! by the day) to the familiar limits of her own being.

Hungry. Not for iced whiskey and feet up. It seemed she had scarcely hesitated: —Look, I live nearby, come back to my house and have something to eat. Then I'll run you into town.—

—That will be very nice. We can be glad for that.—And at the back the tight vacuum relaxed.

They followed her in through the gate, shrinking away from the dog—she assured them he was harmless but he was large, with a fancy collar by which she held him. She trooped them in through the kitchen because that was the way she always entered her house, something she would not have done if they had been adult, her black friends whose sophistication might lead them to believe the choice of entrance was an unthinking historical slight. As she was going to feed them, she took them not into her living-room with its sofas and flowers but into her dining-room, so that they could sit at table right away. It was a room in confident taste that could afford to be spare: bare floorboards, matching golden wooden ceiling, antique brass chandelier, reed blinds instead of stuffy curtains. An African wooden sculpture represented a lion marvelously released from its matrix in the grain of a Mukwa tree-trunk. She pulled up the chairs and left the four young men while she went back to the kitchen to make coffee and see what there was in the refrigerator for sandwiches. They had greeted the maid, in the language she and they shared, on their way through the kitchen, but when the maid and the lady of the house had finished preparing cold meat and bread, and the coffee was ready, she suddenly did not want them to see that the maid waited on her. She herself carried the heavy tray into the dining-room.

They are sitting round the table, silent, and there is no impression that they stopped an undertone exchange when they heard her approaching. She doles out plates, cups. They stare at the food but their eyes seem focused on something she can't see; something that overwhelms. She urges them—Just cold meat, I'm afraid, but there's chutney if you like it...milk

everybody?...is the coffee too strong, I have a heavy hand, I know. Would anyone like to add some hot water?—

They eat. When she tries to talk to one of the others, he says *Ekskuus*? And she realizes he doesn't understand English, of the white man's languages knows perhaps only a little of that of the Afrikaners in the rural town he comes from. Another gives his name, as if in some delicate acknowledgement of the food. —I'm Shadrack Nsutsha.—She repeats the surname to get it right. But he does not speak again. There is an urgent exchange of eye-language, and the spokesman holds out the emptied sugar-bowl to her. —Please.— She hurries to the kitchen and brings it back refilled. They need carbohydrate, they are hungry, they are young, they need it, they burn it up. She is distressed at the inadequacy of the meal and then notices the fruit bowl, her big copper fruit bowl, filled with apples and bananas and perhaps there is a peach or two under the grape leaves with which she likes to complete an edible still life. —Have some fruit. Help yourselves.—

They are stacking their plates and cups, not knowing what they are expected to do with them in this room which is a room where apparently people only eat, do not cook, do not sleep. While they finish the bananas and apples (Shadrack Nsutsha had seen the single peach and quickly got there first) she talks to the spokesman, whose name she has asked for: Dumile. —Are you still at school, Dumile?— Of course he is not at school—*they* are not at school; youngsters their age have not been at school for several years, they are the children growing into young men and women for whom school is a battleground, a place of boycotts and demonstrations, the literacy of political rhetoric, the education of revolt against having to live the life their parents live. They have pompous titles of responsibility beyond childhood: he is chairman of his branch of the Youth Congress, he was expelled two years ago—for leading a boycott? Throwing stones at the police? Maybe burning the school down? He calls it all—quietly, abstractly, doesn't know many ordinary, concrete words but knows these euphemisms—'political activity'. No school for two years? No. —So what have you been able to do with yourself, all that time?—

She isn't giving him a chance to eat his apple. He swallows a large bite, shaking his head on its thin,

little-boy neck. —I was inside. Detained from this June for six months.—

She looks round the others. —And you?—

Shadrack seems to nod slightly. The other two look at her. She should know, she should have known, it's a common enough answer from youths like them, their colour. They're not going to be saying they've been selected for the 1st Eleven at cricket or that they're off on a student tour to Europe in the school holidays.

The spokesman, Dumile, tells her he wants to study by correspondence, 'get his matric' that he was preparing for two years ago; two years ago when he was still a child, when he didn't have the hair that is now appearing on his face, making him a man, taking away the childhood. In the hesitations, the silences of the table, where there is nervously spilt coffee among plates of banana skins, there grows the certainty that he will never get the papers filled in for the correspondence college, he will never get the two years back. She looks at them all and cannot believe what she knows: that they, suddenly here in her house, will carry the AK-47s, they only sing about, now, miming death as they sing. They will have a career of wiring explosives to the undersides of vehicles, they will go away and come back through the bush to dig holes not to plant trees to shade home, but to plant land-mines. She can see they have been terribly harmed but cannot believe they could harm. They are wiping their fruit-sticky hands furtively palm against palm.

She breaks the silence; says something, anything.

—How d'you like my lion? Isn't he beautiful? He's made by a Zimbabwean artist, I think the name's Dube.—

But the foolish interruption becomes revelation. Dumile, in his gaze—distant, lingering, speechless this time—reveals what has overwhelmed them. In this room, the space, the expensive antique chandelier, the consciously simple choice of reed blinds, the carved lion: all are on the same level of impact, phenomena undifferentiated, undecipherable. Only the food that fed their hunger was real.



South African author Nadine Gordimer, 1981.

Nadine Gordimer

Nadine Gordimer (1923–2014) was born in Johannesburg, South Africa in 1923. She studied at the University of Witwatersrand. She received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1991. Gordimer lived in South Africa throughout the period of apartheid. Although she was critical of apartheid, she refused to leave the country unlike many of her peers. Nadine Gordimer remained steadfast in her choice, preferring to challenge the system of apartheid from within. Indeed, her works tend to address the dilemma of the white liberal under a system such as apartheid. They reveal the violence and dehumanizing effects of apartheid on the characters in her works.

Analysis of "Comrades"

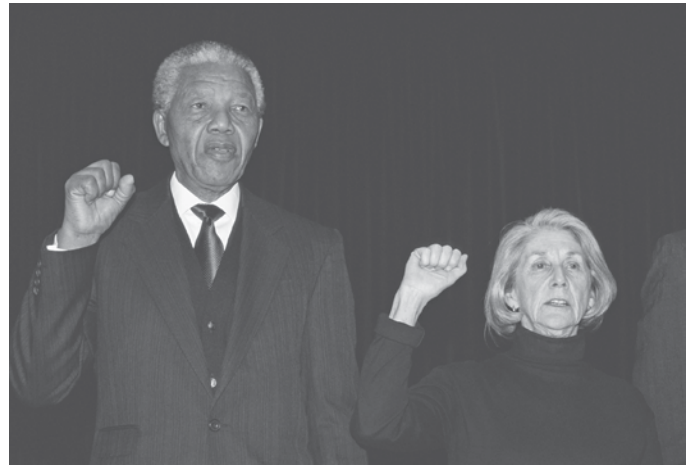
In this short story, a liberal white woman, Mrs. Hattie Telford, attends a university conference on the People's Education, and as she prepares to drive her car away, four young black men approach her and ask her to drop them off somewhere. Although she was traveling in the opposite direction from them, she offers to take them to their destination. During the drive, they confess that they are hungry, and she offers to take them home to feed them. The story ends after they have eaten at her home. The short story is set during apartheid, and Gordimer uses it to present her perennial theme: the dilemma of the liberal white South African living under a

state of apartheid and the fraught race relations between whites and blacks in South Africa at the time.

It is clear that Mrs. Hattie Telford is a white liberal because she is an activist, and she is sympathetic to the cause of the black South Africans. She attends a conference devoted to the People's Education. "They were the people to be educated," she tells us. She is also sympathetic enough toward them that despite her initial hesitance, she willingly drives the young men to her home to feed them. Ironically, the author tells us that Mrs. Telford secures her car against theft, but she seems untroubled by the young men whom she has just picked up in her car. One could say that Mrs. Telford exercises white privilege in her assumption of safety before a group of young black men, whose people she oppresses directly or indirectly. She also seems to ignore apartheid policy that prohibits racial mixing. The young men could easily be arrested for violating a national law. The awareness that they are violating prescribed national policy and the fear of being caught could explain the young men's fear and the tension present in the scene. Gordimer states that the young men in the back seat were hardly breathing.

The story also addresses class. Mrs. Telford invites them to her house and offers them cold meat and coffee. While they eat, she tries to engage in a conversation with them only to realize that they do not understand her. At least one of them does not speak English. Recall that the apartheid government's Bantu Education policy prepared black South Africans to work only in the service industry. Thus, the meeting at her home reveals that they have limited English and limited education. They are poor, and this is demonstrated by the fact that the size of Mrs. Telford's multi-room home was an unfamiliar setting for them, and they find themselves "not knowing what they are expected to do with [their used cups and plates] in this room which is a room where apparently people only eat, do not cook, do not sleep."

Despite Mrs. Telford's kindness toward them, her gesture seems paternalistic because she thinks of them as children "who hold pompous titles of responsibility beyond childhood" or who have "little boy" necks. Yet, these are the young men who will eventually join Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation), the African National Congress' armed wing, and "carry the AK-47s they only sing about."



Nelson Mandela and Nadine Gordimer.

Mrs. Telford's hypocrisy and social discomfort are also made clear when she "did not want them to see that the maid waited on her." In addition, while she seems to value the opulence of her house and artefacts, she finds out at the end of their stay that her wealth was not "real" to them. "Only the food that fed their hunger was real."

Clearly, Gordimer's story underscores differences in value systems. The young men live in an oppressive society where even sitting near a white woman could lead to their death or imprisonment. They have limited resources—making it a challenge for them to even get a taxi or find food. For them, their liberation from apartheid is important, and, as a result, they have traveled from a long distance to attend a conference in the city, which could easily be Johannesburg. Mrs. Hattie Telford asks them if they live in Soweto (a black township). Johannesburg is the closest urban center near Soweto. In fact, they live in Harrismith, nearly "two hundred kilometers" (about 125 miles) away, and they seem not to have eaten all day. Mrs. Telford is observant. She notes the body sizes of the women who attend the conference with their children of all ages. It seems as if the African community is strongly invested in the conference because it is about the people's education. The story also demonstrates the absence of resources for African women, who must attend the conferences with their children of various ages. The women do not have access to childcare, so they bring their children to the conference.

In the end, Mrs. Telford serves as a witness to the events, providing us with what seems like an insider's view, even though she remains distant from the

group. She thinks she knows the Africans because she is a “comrade,” but she does not know them well enough. She is tense around them, and even her assumption that they would appreciate her house because of its art turns into disappointment. The story reveals some contradictions in Mrs. Telford, who despite her liberalism and sympathies for the plight of the black South Africans does not see them as equals.

New Voices

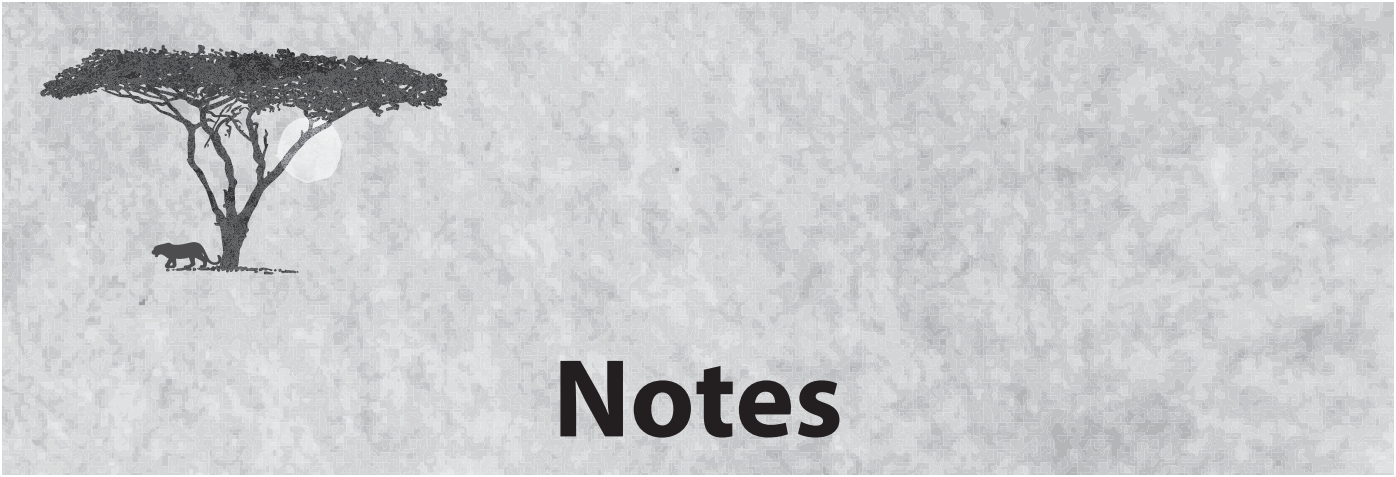
Contemporary African literature is witnessing the emergence of new voices on the continent and overseas. Indeed, a new generation of writers, most of whom reside outside the continent, have helped to shift the focus of African literature from its initial goal of correcting the stereotypical representation of Africa and Africans by the West to new emphases.

These writers are now examining their relationship with the continent through African diasporic lenses. These writers are also transnational and transcultural. Indeed, they are representative of the hybridity of the postcolonial culture, in that they straddle African and Western identities and often live in both worlds simultaneously. As such, their works reveal the mixing of cultures, styles, tones, and topics, as well as characters who live in these multiple locations. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013) and Dinaw Mengestu’s *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2007), for instance, deal with identity and migration. While such writers may examine the postcolonial conditions of African nations, they do not seem to be preoccupied with the relationship with the colonial past. Their works address issues of migration, wars, globalization, and human rights, among other topics.

Appendix



Political Map of Africa, 2012.

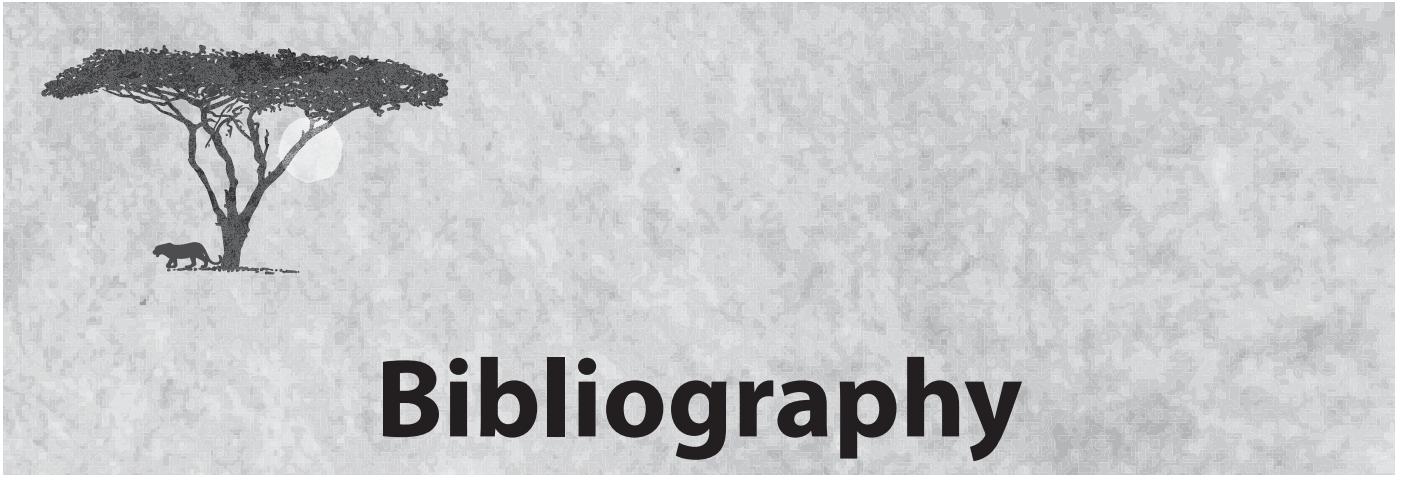


Notes

1. *Emerging Perspectives on Chinua Achebe* xvii.
2. Emenyonu xvii.
3. *Hopes and Impediments* 30.
4. *Hopes and Impediments* 31.
5. *Morning Yet on Creation Day* 40.
6. Ezenwa-Ohaeto, *Chinua Achebe: A Biography* 92.
7. Nana Ayebia Clarke & James Currey, *Chinua Achebe: Tributes and Reflections* 30.
8. Ezenwa-Ohaeto, *Chinua Achebe: A Biography* 72.
9. *Hopes and Impediments* 3.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Hopes and Impediments* 38.
13. *Research in African Literatures*, 12.1, 1981:86.
14. *Heart of Darkness* 279.
15. *Hopes and Impediments* 11.
16. *Hopes and Impediments* 17.
17. *Hopes and Impediments* 39.
18. "Colonialist Criticism," *Hopes and Impediments* 74.
19. *Hopes and Impediments* 13.
20. *Hopes and Impediments* 34.
21. *Things Fall Apart* 124.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Things Fall Apart* 125.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Toyin Falola and Bukola Adeyemi Oyeniyi, *Nigeria* 33.
27. Ibo here is interchangeable with Igbo.
28. J.G.C. Allen, quoted in Chima J. Korieh 3.
29. *Things Fall Apart* 112.
30. *Things Fall Apart* 117.
31. *Things Fall Apart* 117.
32. *The Journal of Pacific History* 16.3, 1981:133.
33. *Things Fall Apart* 19.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Things Fall Apart* 53.
36. *Things Fall Apart* 53.
37. *Ibid.*
38. www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/slavery/.
39. *Africa* 145.
40. *Ibid.*
41. Toyin Falola, *The History of Nigeria* 68.
42. Chima J. Korieh, *Olaudah Equiano and the Igbo World: History, Society and Atlantic Diaspora Connections* 12.
43. *Things Fall Apart* 174.
44. *Things Fall Apart* 194.
45. Toyin Falola and Bukola Adeyemi Oyeniyi, *Nigeria* 46.
46. Toyin Falola and Bukola Adeyemi Oyeniyi, *Nigeria* 47.
47. Toyin Falola, *History of Nigeria*. Westport, US: Greenwood Press, 1999, p. 82. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 12 December 2016. Native Authorities here refers to the local Africans who served as administrative officers (like the kotma in *Things Fall Apart*).
48. Falola and Oyeniyi 49.
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Hopes and Impediments* 38.
51. Toyin Falola, *History of Nigeria*. Westport, US: Greenwood Press, 1999, 88. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 12 December 2016.
52. *Ibid.*
53. *Ibid.*
54. *Ibid.*
55. Falola and Oyeniyi 50.
56. *Ibid.*
57. *Things Fall Apart* 27. Again, Ibo and Igbo refer to the same people.
58. Chinua Achebe *Morning Yet on Creation Day* 93.
59. *Ibid.*
60. *Things Fall Apart* 88.
61. *Things Fall Apart* 94.
62. *Things Fall Apart* 93.
63. *Ibid.*
64. Quoted in Keyan G. Tomaselli, Arnold Shepperson, and Maureen Eke, "Towards a Theory of Orality in African Cinema." *RAL*, 26.3, 1995: 21.

65. *Things Fall Apart* 87.
66. *Things Fall Apart* 87.
67. *Things Fall Apart* 88.
68. *Things Fall Apart* 89.
69. *Things Fall Apart* 8.
70. *Things Fall Apart* 3.
71. *Ibid.*
72. *Things Fall Apart* 21.
73. *Things Fall Apart* 22.
74. *Things Fall Apart* 8.
75. Korieh 97.
76. *Things Fall Apart* 100–101.
77. *Things Fall Apart* 107.
78. *Things Fall Apart* 17.
79. *Things Fall Apart* Norton Critical Edition xviii.
80. *Things Fall Apart* 133–134.
81. *Things Fall Apart* 134.
82. *Things Fall Apart* 138.
83. *Things Fall Apart* 207.
84. *Things Fall Apart* 208.
85. *Things Fall Apart* 184.
86. *Things Fall Apart* 3.
87. *Things Fall Apart* 3–4.
88. *Things Fall Apart* 18.
89. *Things Fall Apart* 36.
90. *Things Fall Apart* 61.
91. *Things Fall Apart* 54.
92. *Things Fall Apart* 57.
93. *Things Fall Apart* 67.
94. *Ogbanje* among the Igbo is like the *abiku* in Soyinka's poem by the same title, which will be discussed further later in the resource guide.
95. *Things Fall Apart* 137.
96. *Things Fall Apart* 143.
97. *Things Fall Apart* 149.
98. *Things Fall Apart* 157.
99. *Things Fall Apart* 182.
100. *Things Fall Apart* 183.
101. *Things Fall Apart* 186.
102. *Things Fall Apart* 203.
103. *Ibid.*
104. *Things Fall Apart* 205.
105. *Things Fall Apart* 208–209.
106. *Things Fall Apart* 209.
107. Achebe referred to the notion of "art for art's sake" as "just another piece of deodorized dog [excrement]." *Morning Yet on Creation Day* 10.
108. Irele 259.
109. *Things Fall Apart* 174.
110. *Things Fall Apart* 183.
111. *Things Fall Apart* 174–175.
112. *Things Fall Apart* 186.
113. *African Civilization Revisited*, 8–9.
114. *African Civilization Revisited* 3–4.
115. *Things Fall Apart* 194.
116. *Things Fall Apart* 191.
117. *African Civilization Revisited* 5.
118. *Ibid.*
119. *Things Fall Apart*, Norton Critical Edition xix.
120. *Ibid.*
121. *Ibid.*
122. *Hopes and Impediments* 45.
123. Clarke and Currey 40.
124. Clarke and Currey 41.
125. Clarke and Currey 42.
126. Clarke and Currey 51.
127. Clarke and Currey 51.
128. James Currey and Nana Ayebea, eds., *Chinua Achebe: Tributes and Reflections*, 260.
129. *Things Fall Apart* 208.
130. *Things Fall Apart* 208–09.
131. *Things Fall Apart* 208.
132. *Things Fall Apart* 209.
133. *The Wretched of the Earth* 35.
134. Edward Said, *Orientalism* 1–2.
135. See Kwame Nkrumah, "Neocolonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism" <https://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/nkrumah/neo-colonialism/introduction.htm>.
136. *Ibid.*
137. *The Empire Writes Back* 2.
138. *Ibid.*
139. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-14094918>.
140. The word "Boer" is Dutch and Afrikaans for "farmer" and is used to refer to descendants of Dutch-speaking settlers in South Africa.
141. *Hopes and Impediments* 62.
142. *Things Fall Apart* 179.
143. *Hopes and Impediments* 63.
144. *Hopes and Impediments* 64.
145. *Things Fall Apart* 180.
146. *Hopes and Impediments* 64; *mbari* is a visual art form practiced by the Igbo, which involves the construction of a *mbari* mud house to pay homage to the gods and also involves singing, dancing, drumming, and chanting.
147. Herbert M. Cole, "Mbari Is Life."
148. *Hopes and Impediments* 65.
149. *Hopes and Impediments* 64.
150. *Hopes and Impediments* 67.
151. *Ibid.*

152. *Hopes and Impediments* 3.
153. See Achebe in "Igbo World and Its Art," *Hopes and Impediments*.
154. *Hopes and Impediments* 3.
155. *Hopes and Impediments* 4.
156. *Hopes and Impediments* 5.
157. This quote is from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and is quoted by Achebe in his essay, *Hopes and Impediments* 5.
158. *Hopes and Impediments* 5.
159. Quoted in Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments* 6.
160. Irele *Things Fall Apart* 183.
161. *Hopes and Impediments* 12.
162. *Hopes and Impediments* 9.
163. Quoted by Achebe in *Hopes and Impediments* 8.
164. *Hopes and Impediments* 8.
165. See <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/Manichean>.
166. *Hopes and Impediments* 17.
167. *Hopes and Impediments* 10.
168. *Ibid.*
169. *Hopes and Impediments* 15.
170. *Ibid.*
171. *Hopes and Impediments* 17.
172. *Hopes and Impediments* 19.
173. TED Talks are influential videos from expert speakers on education, business, science, tech and creativity. See <https://www.ted.com/talks>.
174. Edmond J. Keller in "Decolonization, Independence, and the Failure of Politics" 161.
175. An allusion is an indirect reference to an idea, thing, event, place, or person. It calls attention to something else without necessarily naming the object of reference. For example, calling someone "an Einstein" suggests that the person being referenced is a genius just like Einstein or maybe acting like one. In literature, an allusion is a literary device used to draw similar associations or parallels. For example, "*Things Fall Apart*," the title of Achebe's book alludes to a line in Y. B. Yeats' poem "The Second Coming." Thus, readers will associate the two works and draw parallels between the events and visions in the poem and the experience of colonization that Achebe describes in his novel.
176. Brunner 25.
177. Brunner 26.
178. Brunner 27.
179. Brunner 31.
180. *Ibid.*
181. *Ibid.*
182. See Tara Dosumu Diener, "Wards Apart?: Rethinking the Hospital through a West African Lens," <http://www.historyoftechnology.org/diener.html>.
183. Brunner 30.
184. *Ibid.*
185. Brunner 53.
186. Brunner 54.
187. Steven Biko, *I Write What I Like* 49.
188. *Ibid.*



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