Aké: The Years of Childhood Study Guide

Aké: The Years of Childhood by Wole Soyinka

Contents

Plot Summary

Ake: The Years of Childhood is author Wole Soyinka's autobiographical account about events in his childhood between about 1934 and 1945 in the town of Ake in present-day Nigeria.

He begins his life in a parsonage compound. His father is Essay, Headmaster of the local equivalent of an elementary school, a man who delights in arguing. Wole's mother, called Wild Christian by most, is a strict disciplinarian, never failing to provide lashings for the slightest offenses.

Despite his toddler-aged stumbles (he gets knocked out playing see-saw, and nearly loses an eye to a grass-cutting scythe), Wole develops into a keenly curious and intelligent boy. His is a time of great transition, with traditional pagan spiritualism giving way to Christianity, and the local language of Yoruba becoming mixed with the English of Mother England. To many, the old ways still reign, with superstitions rampant, a world where gourds can be magical, amulets can make one invulnerable to harm, and forest creatures called ghommids live just beyond the nearby stream.

Wole navigates this world with a mixture of child-like ignorance (he once marches with a band to a distant town, getting completely lost), mischief (he cannot resist a taste of powdered milk, even at the promise of mother's lashings), and maturity, crying when his baby sister dies on her birthday.

Growing up is a sometimes difficult process for Wole. When he is old enough he is forced to move from his father's room to the crowded communal mat where the rest of the children sleep, where a child's random arm over his chest could translate to a nightmare in which Wole is attacked by a python. He also endures a tribal rite of passage, held down while an elder slices his wrists and ankles with intricate symbols. Young Wole must also suffer a scare from his father who nearly dies, and who Wole promises to get an education and go to college, the boy's ultimate goal.

Wole graduates to Grammar School, which is led by his uncle, the fierce and larger-than-life Daodu. Like Wild Christian, Daodu prefers to teach with punishment, though he rules his school like a court of law, where evidence is presented and witnesses are questioned for every accused offense.

Wole's mother eventually co-founds a women's union, dedicated to social issues and eventually an end to excessive taxation. In a rousing rally, the women storm the local governor's mansion demanding action, eventually staging a sit-in until their demands are met. The book ends with this protest at a standstill, and Wole leaving to interview for College.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

Author Wole Soyinka relates his childhood, beginning from the tender age of three. He is born and raised on a parsonage compound in a town called Ake in Nigeria, Africa. The master of the parsonage is called Canon, Reverend, or Pa Delumo (depending on who one asks), and he has a multiple-story house in the compound. The only other multiple-story building is the BishopsCourt, which houses the girl students. Between BishopsCourt and the school playground is a place with many plants and fruit trees called the Orchard. Wole becomes convinced from a very young age that the succulent and rare pomegranate is the "apple" mentioned in the Bible that tempted Adam and Eve.

Wole's young life is an indistinguishable blend of tribal spiritual beliefs and Christianity. He believes that, outside of the parsonage's walls in the forest, creatures called ghommids roam in search of straying children. Wole relates one episode in which his mother (named Wild Christian) and his uncle Sanya are visited bya ghommid, who warns them to stay away from a particular stream in the woods. Stubborn Uncle Sanya goes to the stream anyway, because that is where the largest and best snails are (apparently a delicacy). The ghommids get mad and chase Sanya through the forest, in the shape of a giant fireball. Sanya and Wild Christian run to their great uncle, Reverend J.J. Ransome-Kuti, who drives the ghommids off invoking the power of God. Sanya and Wild Christian are given half a dozen lashes apiece and made to cut grass for a week for their foolishness.

Everyone in the family is convinced Uncle Sanya is in fact an "oro," a nature spirit. One episode seems to confirm this. Sanya is heard talking to no one in particular during a trip into the woods. When he tries to bring a basket of picked mushrooms from the forest, an invisible hand seems to be holding him back. Later that night, Sanya comes down with a fever and is bedridden. An old woman suggests the solution is a "saara," a feast given as an offering to the spirits of the woods. They gather together a lot of food and soup and set it in Sanya's room. Though the children are not allowed to look, Wold presses his head against the door and hears what sounds like many people or creatures eating the food and slurping the soup. That night, Sanya is cured and sleeping peacefully, and the food is entirely gone.

From an early time, Wole remembers the parsonage master, Canon, as a large, strong, fearsome presence, second only to great Uncle Rev. J. J. Canon likes to visit and talk with Wole's father, named Essay (from real name initials S.A.), who is Headmaster of the Grammar School on the parsonage compound. Essay loves to argue and take the position of Devil's Advocate in arguments.

The family's extended family includes the local bookseller and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. B. Mr. B often visits and has lengthy arguments about religion or other subjects with Essay.

Mrs. B acts as a second mother to Wole and Tinu, his older sister. Mrs. B's one child, Bukola, is said to be an abiku, a spirit child halfway between the dead and the living, and so she is fear and coddled. Bukola uses this status to her advantage, faking trances so Mrs. B will give her gifts or pamper her, which Wole doesn't think is right. Wole believes Mr. B spends so much time at their house because he tires of Bukola.

Chapters 2 and 3

Chapters 2 and 3 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 2:

Tinu wakes up before Wole to go to school. She lines up with her age group outside of the school, where father Essay makes a speech and then pretty songs are sung. Wole becomes jealous of his sister, but is told he is still too young to go to school. When Tinu realizes Wole's desire and become smug about her status, Wole wakes up as early as she does, gets his bath, grabs a couple of his father's books, and follows Tinu and Aunt Lawanle to school. Amid laughs from the students, the teacher asks why Wole is there, and Wole says he wants to attend school. To Wole's aunt's surprise, the teacher says Wole is welcome anytime, though his attendance is not mandatory.

Going to school, Wole becomes friends with an older boy, Osiki, based upon a mutual love of a food called iyan, pounded yam. Wole gets into some trouble with Osiki. Once, Wole gets home from school late, and finds that Osiki has eaten all of Wole's iyan. Wole chases Osiki, but Osiki is swift as the wind and cannot be caught. Another time, during a birthday celebration, Wole and Osiki use a rickety bench over a rock like a see-saw. The much larger Osiki slams his side down, sending Wole crashing to the ground headlong. He gets a nasty gash in his head and passes out. Wole is convinced that they must save the blood he bled and put it back in his head for him to get well. When Wole wakes up, surrounded by his parents, wise father Essay assures Wole that they did indeed put his blood back.

On Wole's fourth birthday, Wole invites about a dozen of his school friends back to his house for a party. No one is home, which Wole finds odd, as it is his birthday. Finally his mother arrives, but she doesn't seem to have any birthday food. Wild Christian scolds Wole for not telling her of his birthday plans; young Wole doesn't seem to think birthdays have to be planned. Wole and Osiki entertain the invitees, Wole with his singing and Osiki with tales of mysterious ancestral spirits called egungun. There are many types of egungun, and they range from harmless to mischievous to dangerous. Wole believes that St. Peter and two other saints depicted on a church window are egungun, and that he can talk to them.

One last episode recounted is a time when Wole and Osiki are playing tag in the grounds outside the church where older boys are cutting grass with scythes. One boy's follow-through with a scythe accidentally gashes a running Wole in the eye. As in the see-saw incident, Wole bleeds profusely and loses consciousness. Taken inside and surrounded by his father and church officials, Wole is able to open one eye. Everyone believes the scythe took out his other eye, and Wole starts to imagine how it will be to live with just one eye. However he opens the other eye and discovers both eyes are fine; the scythe cut as close to the eye as possible without actually cutting the eyeball. Those assembled call it a miracle from God.

Chapter 3:

Wole has never been aware of the world that existed beyond the parsonage walls. There is a ladder in the middle of town where adults can peer over the walls, and one day Mr. B hoists Wole on his shoulders to look out upon the surrounding countryside. Wole notices that the gate connects to the outside wall. The next time Wole hears noise outside the walls, he goes to the gate, which an adult unlocks for him.

The noise is coming from a band, which young Wole marvels at, especially the tuba player with his huge brass tube who is blowing hard enough to make his face blow up. The drums are also amazing; every beat seems to make his stomach vibrate. A group of boys are following the band, and Wole joins these boys.

By following the band, Wole essentially takes a walking tour of Ake. He is amazed by the amount of stores. He discovers where Aunt Lawanle goes to crush corn (the mill). He is frightened by a group of old ladies selling strange potions and shriveled up animal carcasses. Wole passes by a group of girls learning how to sew. He also passes by the grammar school where his great uncle Rev. J.J. is principal.

Eventually Ake ends up following the band all the way into a military compound in a somewhat distant town called Ibara. The band was a police band. The white officer (perhaps the first white man Wole has ever seen; he thinks he is an albino) questions him in a strange accent he can barely understand. A kinder Sergeant takes Wole aside and gives him fruit juice and learns he is from Ake. Wole is very tired and cannot stay awake. He remembers someone bringing him via bike on their handlebars back to Ake, and the next thing he knows he is sleeping on his mother's bed. He comes to the living room and finds dozens of people staring at him. He says, "I am hungry," which breaks the silence. Everyone is happy Wole is alive and well and they have a dance. The only glum member of the family is his mother, Wild Christian, who is angry at Wole for wandering off.

Chapters 4 and 5

Chapters 4 and 5 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 4:

Wole becomes fed up with the house servant Nubi bathing him in a rough fashion, and he thrashes and headbutts her. Nubi screams murder, and Wild Christian comes, scolding Nubi for overreacting. Wild Christian mutters that she doesn't understand where Wole's fear of water came from; Wole protests that he doesn't have any fear of water. For his evidence, he points out that he loves to be out in the rain. Debate-loving Essay counters that water and rain are two different things, and eventually Wole and Essay get out a Bible to settle the debate. Wild Christian admonishes Essay for instilling an argumentative spirit in Wole.

Wild Christian tells Essay that Wole has been arguing in church, something Essay disapproves of. Wild Christian also wants Wole to help her at her shop in town. For both of these reasons, Wole hides in the pantry from his parents. Essay is about to catch and discipline Wole, but Wild Christian calls to Essay at the last second, saving Wole. Thinking the "coast was clear," Wole sneaks from the kitchen past the Wash-Hand Basin, where he wets his finger and puts it to to his lips. Wild Christian comes out of nowhere and smacks him over the head for his transgression; Wole then relates how his whole family acts in unison to punish or warn him against sticking his fingers in the Wash-Hand Basin, a bad and unconscious habit.

Chapter 5:

Wole is crushed when his Sunday School teacher points out a distant rock to the class as a point of comparison for the size of the whale that swallowed Jonah in the Bible. This rock happened to be Wole's private rock and sanctuary from his bustling home life; now it is being crawled all over by the schoolchildren. The schoolchildren name it Jonah, and now all the magic is gone from the rock.

Wole recalls the New Year. New Year meant going to the town of Isara and visiting with his grandparents. Isara feels like an old, ancestral place, with different food and even customs, and Wole enjoys the change. One of Wole's favorite moments is when Father (everyone's name for his grandfather) brings down "mystery parcels" from the rafters of his house, amounting to presents for the children in the way of smoked meat or other goodies. Tantalized by the prospect, when Wole is alone at his own family's home he climbs to near the ceiling and starts to make a hole in it, looking for gifts.

By doing so, he sets Essay's hunting gun off, which pierces a bullet through the metal sheeting of the roof. Wole is overwhelmed by the huge sound, flying down to the ground, believing he might be dead. He in fact hopes he is wounded, so that he won't be beaten by Wild Christian or Essay for his mischief. He especially dreads Essay's

punishment, which might not come for days spent in torture. Wole runs to his Jonah rock to escape; it's unsure anyone caught Wole at all.

Wole recalls a episode demonstrating just how punitive Essay can be. A teacher at school boasts of the rose he's affixed to his jacket; Essay recognizes it as a rose from his garden, cut without his permission. The teacher spends days of agony trying to make up for his transgression

The chapter ends with Wole tending those roses, a job he has been charged with for awhile. Be it from childish imagination, believing he is waving a sword, or from toddler irrationality, he winds up smashing all the roses with a large vegetable stalk. Essay is crushed and is about to give Wole the whipping of his life, but Wild Christian steps in to save Wole, excusing the act as a moment of madness.

Chapters 6 and 7

Chapters 6 and 7 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 6:

Wole describes the differences in odors between Essay's room, where he stays, and Wild Christian's room. Wild Christian takes in stray or unruly children and has them sleep on a communal mat on the floor. While Essay's room has an "ordered mustiness," Wild Christian's room is a "riot of smells," not the least of which is urine, as several of the children, through illness or otherwise, wet their mat at night.

Wole is destroyed when one day he is judged too old to sleep in his father's room, and he is forced to sleep with the other children on the mat in Wild Christian's room. Wole describes dreams of being attacked by snakes, only to wake up to find another child's arm around him in slumber.

Wole describes a funeral procession from Ake into the parsonage. The "procession" he truly dreads seeing, however, is the common practice of parading a child around town who has committed some sin. The child is whipped by the parent or guardian and yelled at publicly, as the child is made to dance or sing to look foolish. The one time Mrs. B earns Wole's disrespect is when she parades her maid around in this fashion for wetting her bed. Wole's own private sin is sneaking spoonfuls of powdered milk from the pantry. One day he is caught by Wild Christian, who seems to relish catching Wole, a boy who seems to always argue his way out of punishment like a lawyer. Wole, terrorized by the thought that he will paraded around town for his sin, makes a bundle and prepares to escape. He overhears Wild Christian trying to get Essay to punish Wole; Essay wonders why he needs to get involved, and why Wild Christian does not simply beat Wole. She does just this in the backyard, with Wole preparing to run away forever if she decides to parade him around town. She does not, and Wole does not appear very phased by the whole situation; that night, when everyone is asleep, he sneaks another spoonful of powdered milk.

Chapter 7:

Wole experiences change like never before when the new baby girl, Folasade, joins the family. He compares it to the time Dipo (his younger baby brother) joined the family, with Wild Christian growing large and Essay always with worried looks. Other changes include Wild Christian becoming bored with the furniture arrangement and changing the whole room; the framed homilies on the wall changing places; and the children's sleeping mat being moved from the parlor room, which Wole celebrates because it gives him more room to sleep.

Folasade's birth, however, brings a more profound and different change. She is a quiet child, and it is difficult for her to eat food and keep it down; Wild Christian and Essay

often spend hours in Essay's bedroom, chatting seriously. Wole's parents question the maid until the maid cries. Later Wole learns that his parents were demanding to know if the maid had dropped Folasade. Something is wrong with the baby, and it is taken to the hospital. Folasade returns with a plaster cast around her torso. The baby is very still for days.

One morning, Wole and Tinu are taken in to see Folasade in a pretty white dress sleeping in a little box for a coffin. She has died. Wild Christian explains that this is a time for relief, as Folasade will not suffer any more, but Wole seems to understand the enormity of death and he cries and wails.

In another episode some time later, Mrs. Odufuwa, wife to Wole's godfather, makes a visit. To Wole she is the most beautiful woman on earth, and he plans to marry her when he gets older. Mrs. Odufuwa has given Wole the affectionate nickname Lagilagi, the Log-Splitter. However, Wole is humiliated when Wild Christian Nubi, and other members of the family all converge to doubt that nickname, chiding Wole as instead a weakling and coward who retreats to his books instead of fight or do chores, all in front of Odufuwa. They even claim Wole could get beat up by his toddler brother Dipo, who starts to punch Wole as egged on by everyone in jest. However, Wole takes nothing in jest, and in a rage he blacks out. He regains awareness to see that he has pummeled his poor brother. His family awkwardly tries to apologize and claim they were only talking in jest. Later, Wild Christian has Wole pray with her, in the hopes that Wole is not possessed by the devil, called emi esu.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary and Analysis

Wole is introduced to two new inventions. Workers install a light bulb in the main room. Essay pretends he has to cast a magic spell to turn it on, but soon it's apparent there's a switch on the wall. The other novelty is a radio, which replaces their old gramophone. Its nickname is "One who speaks without expecting a reply." The news is regarded as some mystical oracle. Hitler and World War II dominate what's spoken about on the radio. Soon, "Win the War" is a common phrase exchanged by denizens of Ake. The radio news also causes hysteria. People black their doors, and lights are extinguished at night in fear of airplane raids. One morning a boat explodes in Lagos harbor, increasing panic and worry. At this time, Paa Adatan emerges.

Paa Adatan is a mentally unbalanced man who has made it his duty to arm himself and protect the village from Hitler. He wore a belt of amulets in order to deflect bullets and be invincible. He feels he is kept from killing Hitler because the white man doesn't want a black man to take the credit for taking the dictator down.

One day, a group of unknown troops arrive in town, and it is rumored they are the notorious "Bote," who supposedly are wild and lawless, raiding villages for supplies. Because of this reputation, everyone closes their shops with the exception of Wild Christian, who is less willing to indulge in superstition. From her one open store, the Bote troops buy all sorts of supplies at twice the price Wild Christian usually sells for, with Wole helping her fetch this and that supply.

At this time, Paa Adatan confronts the brandishing a sword and accusing them of being sent by Hitler. Wild Christian is embarrassed and doesn't speak. Only until the soldiers begin to leave and Paa Adatan draws a line in the road daring them to cross it does Wild Christian implore Paa Adatan to put his sword down. Wild Christian says they are against Hitler, not with him, but Paa Adatan doesn't listen.

As they argue, two men creep up behind Paa Adatan and grab his arms. It takes many more men to finally detain him, as Paa Adatan fights with a warrior spirit. Finally captured, the Bote troops leave Paa Adatan to the local police. As they debate whether to free him or take him to an asylum, Wild Christian undoes his ties and lets him loose. Thoroughly disillusioned and sensing that the town is against him, he crushes his magical gourd, the sere, with his boot, and then flees the village. Wole never sees him again.

Another more humorous brief visitor in Wole's life is someone he nicknames "You-Mean-Mayself," because the man always says "You mean mayself [myself]?" when Essay refers to him or asks him a question. He has a thick accent, and the children have no end in laughter and fun in imitating the accent behind his back. Essay has a long history in temporarily housing those in need; Mayself is one of these, but he in fact

overstays his welcome and begins to mooch a lot of food from the family. Essay is too polite to say anything, and he usually goes without his lunch which is gobbled up by Mayself. Wild Christian gets wind of this. She hatches a diplomatic but forceful way to oust Mayself from her household. She comes home every day at lunch and prepares lunch especially for Mayself while excusing Essay from the table. Mayself gets the picture and soon moves on from the home.

A final visitor related is Uncle Dipo, who Wole doesn't know he has. One day a drunken soldier arrives at the home, and Wole and his cousins hide on the roof as they believe him to be Hitler. The soldier starts to urinate in the family's outside water pot/well. This so infuriates the children that Wole and the cousins attack the soldier, knocking him out by hitting his head on the water pot. This is revealed to be Uncle Dipo, who joined the army despite family objections. Wild Christian calls Dipo a "wild one," and soon after she announces Wole's brother, also Dipo, will henceforth be called Femi, to avoid any negative power the name Dipo holds. Dipo now Femi, nevertheless, turns out to be a wild child when he temporarily runs away to another town to escape punishment.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary and Analysis

Odemo, the head of a large nearby town called Isara, where Essay is from, visits the village. Essay and Wole, in turn, visit Odemo's palace. He is ordered to prostrate himself before one of Odemo's chiefs. He refuses, stating that he wouldn't prostrate himself before God, so why would he prostrate himself before a man? This causes much commotion among the chiefs of Odemo, and Essay fails to explain where Wole may have gotten such a notion.

The family takes a lorry (truck) to near Isara, and then walk another seven miles. The family is distantly related to some traders there (the caravanserai), and closely related to Father and Mother, the parents of Essay. Despite the tall and exotic tales the caravanserai told Wole about Isara, in reality the town is provincial and unsanitary, as children are allowed to defecate in the streets. Father's simple mud-house is a sanctuary away from the heat, noise, and odors.

Father promises to take Wole to his farm, but he gets busy with several duties, so Father gets a neighbor barber named Broda Pupa to take Wole to his farm. On this little excursion, Wole helps to gather fruits and hoe farmland. The exciting part of the trip comes when a large black snake is discovered coiled in a tree. Broda Pupa gathers rocks to fling at it, and soon the snake drops to the earth. Broda Pupa then hits it over the head until it's dead, with expert skill. They bury the snake's head (for the head is still poisonous), and that night they have a feast of snake meat. Wole has never had snake meat and he enjoys the taste.

While on the way back from the farm, they encounter a moaning man with a bloated body and face. He had been stung many times by bees. Broda Pupa tells Wole that, should this ever happen, drop to the ground and roll, rather than run. Wole uses this very technique some time weeks later during a hunt in which, in his capacity as a "beater," he stirs up a hornet's nest. Broda Pupa knew what he was talking about, and Wole only gets two stings.

Wole spends time with Father. Father is not Christian, believing instead in traditional spirits. Father makes Wole worry about Essay's plans for him to join grammar school and college. Father says that there are men at that level, not boys, and Wole must be prepared for them being jealous of Wole's young age.

On the topic of manhood, Father forces Wole the next day to endure a traditional tribal rite of manhood. An elder man comes and Wole is held down by his shoulders and ankles. The elder cuts Wole's ankles and wrists with a scalpel in intricate patterns; this is called scarification. The pain blends together, and Wole feels sometimes as if he's in a dream. He is kept inside for a few days to heal.

Chapters 10 and 11

Chapters 10 and 11 Summary and Analysis

Speaking in the present, Wole regrets that the smells of his homeland, all the wonderful local dishes, are gone, replaced mostly by sounds, the hustle and bustle and noise of modern living. Where before life was simple and good, now it is endlessly complicated and Westernized for the worse, with McDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Western music and European fashions in Wole's opinion ruining his culture, or at least changing it for the worse.

On the topic of sound, Wole goes back to the past and recalls a period in which he exits a Sunday service singing a tune. The organist hears him, and asks Essay his permission to include Wole in the church choir. This is agreed to, and every early Sunday Wole and another inductee named Edun would go through Ibarapa market on the way to choir practice. There, intoxicated by all the smells of the market, they would spend their pennies (intended for church) on market foods, including akara (fried bean cake), kasada (coconut cakes), tinko (hard-fried lean meat), ogiri (cheese product) and a crayfish and locust bean-based stew.

Wole finally relates the story of Sorowanke. In the midst of a commercial and market district called Dayisi's Walk, a homeless and mentally unstable woman named Sorowanke makes a makeshift home near a mango tree in the center of the square. She is joined by a homeless man named Yokolu, and soon they have quite a large home made from trash and bits of cloth and things in the middle of the square by a mango tree. Peddlers move their stands away from the mango tree, only increasing Sorowanke's territory. Months pass, and it's clear that Sorowanke has become pregnant. This seems to be 'the last straw' for the denizens of Dayisi's Walk. Children pelt her with sticks and stones, and scatter her meager belongings, forcing her to leave. Right afterwards, the peddlers clean the area and re-establish their carts, and everyone forgets about Sorowanke.

Chapter 11:

Essay keeps more and more to his room, and Wole realizes his father will soon die. The house is silence and no mischief or mirth goes on.

Essay puts a brave and smiling face on for his son when he invites him to his room. Essay makes Wole promise he will become the man of the house and never let his family down, and that most importantly he will continue his education and go on to college. Wole promises this.

Wole, sick with the idea of his father dying, develops a high fever, which dissipates after a few days. When Wole is well enough, Essay hires a photographer who photographs Essay in a variety of positions and places and with his family together and separate, as

a sort of going-away gift. Only Essay doesn't die in the end; he lives. Only gradually does the "shadow" pass from the home and normal activity resume.

Chapters 12 and 13

Chapters 12 and 13 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 12:

Wole attends The Abeokuta Grammar School. In the first week he gets his math box (full of a compass and protractor, etc.) stolen by a bully, something that would never happen in elementary school, and he realizes he must harden himself and grow up. In some ways, the proverbial inmates run the asylum. The current headmaster, Daodu or Rev. A.O. Ransome-Kuti, Wole's uncle, is off on a trip in Britain advocating for education, and so the temporary headmaster is a man nicknamed Wee-Wee, because of his hen-like gait. He does not seem to be able to control the school, as evidenced by his punishment for a boy who gets a girl pregnant. Wee-Wee orders 36 lashings, and in the auditorium he publicly carries this punishment out on the boy. Wee-wee is weak and by the 36th lashing he is exhausted. Meanwhile, the boy doesn't flinch and he is in fact given a standing ovation by the other boys, who Wee-Wee says are Satanic children for applauding.

Soon Daodu returns. He is hailed as a hero, not only for getting Britain to provide more schools and universities in the area, but for braving Hitler's submarines and war machine. Wole gets his first real meeting with Daodu during grass-cutting. Grass-cutting, using scythe-like blades, is a constant disciplinary exercise for the school boys. Daodu inspects four boys' patch of grass, one of whom is Wole, and he gives them six lashes apiece for sloppy cutting. Unlike Wee-Wee, Daodu's lashings are feared, and Wole is given a lot of hurt.

Daodu seems larger than life. He handles his school like a court of law. When any offense is presented, the accuser must present evidence, and the accused are innocent until proven guilty. Daodu presents these "cases" before the entire school and seems to relish them, presiding as judge. When punishment is warranted, it comes hard and immediately. Wole wonders why an educated man such as Daodu is so much like Wild Christian when it comes to belief in the phrase "spare the rod, and spoil the child."

Wild Christian is starting to attend a women's group gathering at the school. They chat about social issues, like sanitation, infant mortality, and civil service, and ways to improve them.

Chapter 13:

Wild Christian takes her friend Mama Aduni to the women's meeting. The meeting gradually grows and includes both wives of "professionals" and peasant farmers and merchants. Soon, in addition to discussions and lectures, there are teaching sessions, where literacy and writing is taught. Wole even joins in as a teacher for these sessions.

One day, many women report that they have been stopped and forced to pay exobitant tax on their goods, as dictated by the white District Officer (D.O.). This enrages the women, especially a fiery young orator who has emerged called Kemberi. Kemberi gives a rousing speech, and the women agree to give notice to the District Office of a demand for an abolition of taxes to women.

Beere, Daodu's wife and a leading member of this group, goes off to England to spread word of the country's needs in England. Wild Christian and Wole spend the next weeks very busy. Women meet at Wild Christian's shop or home, telling of a tax crisis or other social issue crisis, and Wild Christian goes to help as a representative of the women's group, which now has the official title Egba Women's Union. Wole usually either tags along or maintains the shop. Through all this, Essay never lets Wole skip his homework, forever concerned with Wole getting to college.

After only a year of Grammar School, Wole applies for the Government College and gets accepted, only without a scholarship, so he must wait until next year. In his interview at the school Wole is amazed at its size and potential and badly wants to go. He speaks about his aspirations to Daodu, who has reservations about a school that uses white people to teach black people, and that doesn't discipline with lashings.

Word comes back from Britain that Beere has stirred up a hornets' nest of controversy about the condition of Egbaland (where Ake is located) and its condition as a British colony. A vicious retort to Beere's claims winds up in a newspaper. The response claims that everyone in Egbaland lives in health, cleanliness, and wealth, obviously untrue. Another letter in the paper states the truth about Egbaland. Daodu orders the Women's Union to print 10,000 copies of that letter and take them to distribute at the dock in Lagos where Beere will land on her return trip.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary and Analysis

Beere is given a hero's welcome, and a festival is had. The festival is interrupted by a queer naked woman, who is found with a sacrificial offering. This woman is assumed to have been sent by a pro-government force upset with Beere's progressive actions, her sacrifical offering actually a curse. The woman does not say a word, and she is taken to the police station.

This galvanizes the Women's Union into stepping up their efforts. The Union grows significantly in size and professionalism. Other places in Africa are beginning to unionize too, with the call for an end to white man's rule. During one meeting, a tearful elderly woman relates how she has to raise 13 children alone on a farm, and they live in dire poverty, yet she receives a tax notice stating she has to pay a large amount she cannot. Kemberi rallies the troops to action, using this pathetic story as inspiration. They march upon the Alake, who is the local governor.

Wole holes up in his mother's shop, which is near the Alake. The women arrive, including Kemberi and Wild Christian, forcing their way past guards and demanding an audience with Alake. Alake greets them and hears their concerns, which end in a demand for no more taxation. Alake is wise, calm, and measured, asking how it might be possible to govern without any taxation. Alake says policy is really not his choice but the choice of the government council, and he has already summoned the chief ogbonis, or local chiefs, to his residence.

At this point, the white District Officer arrives, and tells Beere to "shut your women up." Beere retorts, essentially, "do you talk to your mother like that?" and the women applaud her comeback. An ogboni arrives and then yells for order, insulting the women by calling them "agb'eyin-to" (those who urinate from the rear) and telling them to mind their homes instead of state matters. This infuriates the crowd and, as other summoned ogboni pour into the compound, they begin to strip these chiefs of their formal scarves and robes, in a symbolic stripping of their power. It's pandemonium.

Wole is surprised to find that his mother, so free with punishments and lashings, leaves the mob at this point, not believing in the violence being now committed. In fact, she ushers an ogboni into her shop before the mob can tear at him.

Later, as dawn breaks, it's clear that a decision has to been made to have a "sit-in" on the Alake's compound until the women's demands are met. The protest gets organized; food and water goes in and out, younger women are sent on errands, etc. People from far and wide start to join the protest. A birth takes place amid the chaos, and a female is born, which for many is a joyous and positive omen for the protest.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary and Analysis

The protest continues. The Alake is given a bad name, and several derogatory songs are sung with him as the butt of the joke. A new District Officer has taken over, and meetings with him have largely ended with deadlock. The government has sent squads of officers to keep the peace, and they are mocked by the protesters. The ogboni (local chiefs) forgive the women for their treatment of them, and promise they are doing all they can to meet the women's demands.

Wole is about to go away for his second government college interview. He is given a farewell by Daodu and Beere. Both uncle and aunt feel that there is racism in every white man, and that Wole must be careful at college. For example, Beere feels that the white man dropped the A-Bomb on Japan because of the race of its people, sparing the whites in Germany. And Daodu thinks a rule about "no pockets" in school uniforms is racism, as it assumes black students will do mischief and try to carry contraband. One rule everyone but Wole and Beere agree with, however, is "no shoes." Essay believes shoes are the height of spoiling a child. Beere secretly promises Wole that, should he get a scholarship and enter college, she will get him shoes to wear, though his parents can never know. Wole says goodbye for his trip to College.

Characters

Wole Soyinka

Wole Soyinka is the author of the autobiography and the one through whose eyes we witness the events of the story. He is aged from three and one-half to eleven in the span of the narrative. As such, he brings a child's perspective to events. He is very intelligent (he is progressing through elementary and then grammar school very quickly), but that is not to say he is not without his stupid decisions and faults. He is a mischievous boy, mischief primarily borne from his intelligent curiosity. In one incident, while playing tag Wole nearly loses an eye to a grass-cutting scythe. In another, searching his ceiling for presents he makes a gun go off.

Human as the rest of us, he is capable of humiliation and violence, as when his family makes fun of him in front of a woman he fully intends to marry, at which point he takes his frustrations out on his little brother in a flurry of punches. He is also capable of great sorrow and grief, as he displays in a fit of tears when his baby sister dies, or when he believes his father Essay will die and he develops an intense fever.

Toward the end, he demonstrates maturity and responsibility, acting as Chief Courier for the burgeoning Egba's Women's Union against excessive taxation, and diligently following his father's wishes to enter college and get a proper education.

Wild Christian

.Wild Christian is Wole's mother. Her nickname is not explicitly explained; undoubtedly there is some connection between it and her fiery temper, which is perhaps her chief attribute. She is a firm believer in the Biblical advice "spare the rod, and spoil the child," and whereas Essay is more laid-back, Wild Christian seems happy to take on the role of strict disciplinarian. She is a hard worker, and fiercely loyal to her children. She is also generous and community-minded, taking in orphaned children or children with sicknesses or behavioral issues.

Eventually, this community-mindedness comes to a zenith when she helps to organize the Egba Women's Union, concerned with women's social issues and the betterment of the community. In these Union days, Wild Christian acts as a leader and mediator when problems arise around the immediate countryside. In these instances, she tempers her innate anger into problem-solving and diplomacy. Like Essay, she believes in education and wants the best for her children.

She is not afraid of letting her opinion be known, as when she manages to kick out a moocher friend of Essay's, Mayself, from her kitchen and home. While strict with the children, she can also be affectionate and tender, as when she assuages her children's grief for their dead sister by stating that she is free from pain.

Essay

Essay is Wole's father. He is the Headmaster of the parsonage's elementary school that Wole initially attends. Intelligent and thoughtful, Essay is frequently seen debating religion, politics, or other issues with neighbors and friends. Wild Christian suspects that Wole got his stubborn and argumentative nature from Essay. Essay usually takes a backseat to disciplinary issues within the family, leaving those to Wild Christian. Above all, he wishes Wole to grow up to be a strong, capable man with a good education who never lets down his family.

Tinu

Tinu is Wole's older sister. It is from her going to school that Wole starts his lifelong love affair with education. They argue as siblings do. Despite arguments, Wole feels very protective of her.

Father

Father is Essay's father. He is a man who is still set in the old tribal ways, and decidedly non-Christian. Father initiates Wole in a rite of passage, branding his wrists and ankles with scarification.

Daodu

Daodu is Wole's uncle, and the larger-than-life principal of the Akeobuta Grammar School. He rules his school like a judge in a court of law, and prefers lashings as the best sort of teacher for young boys.

Paa Adatan

Paa Adatan is a screws-loose warrior who has armed himself in a bid to destroy Hitler and his minions. When a group of troops come to town, he attacks them and is pinned to the ground.

Sorowanke

Sorowanke is a homeless woman who makes her home in the middle of a busy public square. Rejected by the community, she is stoned and driven from her makeshift abode.

Beere

Beere is Daodu's wife and Wole's aunt. She is a very progressive activist, and she travels to England to tell the English about the poor conditions in Egbaland.

Kemberi

Kemberi is a fiery orator, and the emotional leader of the Egba Women's Union. Her rhetoric inspires women to march upon the governor's mansion to demand action, and she usually speaks for the Union as a whole.

Mrs. Odufuwa

Mrs. Odufuwa is the wife of Wole's godfather, and by Wole's estimation the most beautiful woman in the world. He plans to marry her when he grows up, and he is humiliated when his family makes fun of his character flaws in front of her.

Dipo

Dipo is Wole's younger brother. He is a "wild one" who runs away to another town rather than get punished, an act which earns Wole's respect.

Folasade

Folasade is Wole's short-lived baby sister. She could never eat or breathe right, and she died on her first birthday.

Alake

Alake is the equivalent of the town governor. While he is very wise and calm in the face of the angry Women's Union, he cannot honor their wishes immediately as he must confer with a council first for all policies and laws. As a result he is vilified by the women.

Objects/Places

Ake

Ake is the town Wole lives in. It contains the parsonage compound (Wole's immediate living quarters), as well as a bustling marketplace.

Egungun

Egungun are ancestral spirits. They come in many types, from harmless pixies to more mischievous gremlins to very dangerous and lethal creatures. Wole believes St. Peter, as depicted on a church window, is an egungun because of his flowing robe, and he hopes to speak to him.

Egbaland

Egbaland is the region, a subset of Nigeria, where the Yoruba people live, and where Ake is located. In Wole's time, it is ruled by a District Officer appointed by England.

Isara

Isara is the town in which Father lives, an older town than Ake. While Wole is told exotic tales about Isara, when he visits he realizes how dirty and mean the town is.

The Communal Mat

Wild Christian's refugee children all sleep on a large mat inside her bedroom. Wole dreads the day he is asked to sleep on this mat, as many of the children wet their beds and role around on the crowded mat.

The Radio

The radio is installed in Wole's home, and to him it is a magical device, capable of reporting events ("The News") like a prophet. It is from radios that the people of Egbaland learn of Hitler.

Abeokuta Grammar School

Abeokuta Grammar School is what Wole attends after elementary school at the parsonage. The school is led by his uncle, Daodu. Discipline is strict, and Daodu's goal is to build character in his young charges.

Egba Women's Union

This Union of concerned women is formed by Wild Christian and Beere. It means to stamp out social injustice, and eventually its largest concern is the excessive tax levied against women. Women from all over Egbaland rally to this cause, and eventually the Union storms the governor's mansion, demanding abolition of taxes.

Ibarapa Market

During his time in the church choir, Wole never failed to pass through this aromatic part of town to partake in some local delicacies.

Shoes

Shoes represent a generation gap, and another thing for Wole to question adults for. Essay and many of his generation feel that shoes are the ultimate item to spoil a child with. Beere promises to sneak Wole a pair of shoes should he attend College.

Themes

The Spirit World

Despite Wole's upbringing as a Christian in a Christian parsonage compound, the "spirit world" of his immediate ancestors constantly pervades his life and the life of his family. As a child who doesn't know better, Wole wholeheartedly believes many of the superstitions and primitive beliefs and practices handed down through the Yoruba people. It is in fact crucial that Wole write with a childlike openness in respect to these religions, to avoid any judgment or derision in regards to these customs; instead, like Wole, the reader can simply absorb them and take them for granted as a part of the world Wole is crafting. In this world, creatures called ghommids are waiting to attack little children who dare go by the local stream to collect snails. A variety of amulets and other trinkets can block bad "juju," or magic. And cursed items can wither hands or cause death.

More than merely demonstrating local color, Wole's intention with representing and exploring these myths and beliefs are largely anthropological. As Wole discovers himself with his autobiography, he also discovers his people. What has the infusion of Christianity meant to the Yoruba people? Could Yoruba spiritualism and Christianity exist side by side? In Wole's childhood, it very much did. Part of Wole's own inner exploration is exploring this innate duality of his upbringing. Wole is both Christian and Yoruban, and perhaps only in embracing both traditions can full self-discovery, one of the intentions for this book, be had.

The Irrational World of Adults

Wole often questions the rationality of certain aspects of the world of the adults, from his perspective as a young child. Wole seems to arrive at a conclusion that, given Wole-as-child's distance from the adult world, his innocence, his lack of prejudice and bias, and his curiosity, he may in fact be particularly well-suited to render judgments on adult behavior. This is part of the charm and humor of the book.

For example, when Wole is caught eating the contraband powdered milk from the pantry, Wild Christian revels in punishment for a child who seems to always talk his way out of it or escape it somehow. She goes to Essay for a particularly cruel punishment, and Essay can only wonder why Wild Christian dragged him into it; just beat the kid, is Essay's conclusion. Meanwhile, Wole has just seen a young girl paraded around town, whipped, and made to dance and sing for her sing of bedwetting; to Wole, this humiliation is the worst punishment imaginable. When Wild Christian proceeds to beat Wole in the backyard, and not in public, Wole is nearly grateful of the punishment, because Wild Christian chose not to do it publicly.

That night, Wole explains that he was undeterred, and he sneaks into the pantry for another spoonful of illicit powdered milk, claiming the sweet taste took the edge off his beating. The question here, arrived at with some degree of humor and irony, is What is the point of Wild Christian's punishment? It did not stop the behavior, and it didn't particularly punish Wole, as it was not done publicly. This pattern emerges at several places in the book, from the matter of shoes to ancient customs to social protocol. As Wole states his preparation for the adult world, "it was time to commence the mental shifts for admittance to yet another irrational world of adults and their discipline" (230).

Old Versus New

Wole's narrative is intriguing due in large part to his childhood being a time of great transition within his country. As discussed, there is the fine line between Yoruba spiritualism and modern Christianity, which often merge, for example when Wole believes St. peter to be an ancestral spirit he should talk to. Naturally there is also the matter of language. Wole grows up speaking both Yoruban and English; this provides connections and opportunities for Wole, but it can also create rifts between Wole and people who feel English is another oppressive policy of the white man. On that topic, there is the ever-present problem of race relations, with people like Daodu and Beere expressing incredulity that white people can rule over black people and know what is best for them to represent them properly. This is a time where the seeds of nationalism are being sewed; what starts as a small gathering of women to discuss social problems becomes a region-wide and even national movement toward independence.

Within the Egbaland community, there is the distinction between aroso, the peasant and uneducated class, versus the onikaba, the "gown-wearers" or educated wives of professional men. At first, only the onikaba meet at the Women's Union. Daodu rightly points out that the Union needs aroso women as well if they are to truly represent the women of Egbaland, and with this inclusion comes the opportunity for teaching and interaction.

Overall, there is both a sense of optimism for what is in store in the future (African independence, women's rights, Christianity over spiritualism, English uniting the Yoruba people with the world), and nostalgia or even sadness for what has been lost, including the richness of that spiritual world, and the richness of the Yoruban culture which has been increasingly neutered by Western influence.

Style

Perspective

Wole Soyinka the real man is a professor of comparative literature at a university in Nigeria. He has achieved what Wole the young boy is constantly striving for in the text; that is, an education. As such he turns a very intelligent and critical eye to the events of his boyhood, deconstructing them, so to speak, in order to understand them better. However, the book is far from a dry academic dissertation; Wole injects an infectious joy and sense of wonder in the past. The first-person child's perspective is crucial in establishing this joy and wonder. Writing as through the eyes of a child, he is able to (mis)understand situations, make judgments, and relay childlike beliefs that are humorous and touching. Wole also relishes the certain irony of a child sometimes understanding the world better than adults. When, for example, Wole the child questions the usefulness and value of corporal punishment, the reader gets a sense that Wole the adult feels just the same way.

While Wole's status as a man decades removed from the life events he's recounting provides a certain detached objectivity, there is still an undeniable intimacy and affinity for the material that result in a vivid narrative. Wole has the wisdom to avoid moralizing or demagoguery, especially when it comes to the primitive beliefs of his people; his aim is not to teach facts or conclude narrowly-defined "lessons" so much as to explore and ask questions

Tone

Wole Soyinka's voice is lively, thoughtful, and somewhat nostalgic. It is clear that Wole values his boyhood greatly, and that it was a unique time full of wonder and possibility. For example, Wole speaking as a child can wonder at the reality of the "ghommid" creatures outside the parsonage walls, or can marvel at the new radio that seems to relay world events as only an oracle or prophet could.

Weaved through this childlike joy is a very adult thoughtfulness. There is a sense that Wole is recounting events from his youth in order to make sense of them as an adult, to perhaps find truths by examining the world as a child. When Wole the child questions an adult's behavior or motives, Wole the adult is doing the same.

Finally, Wole has a certain nostalgia for the land of his past. Certain "detour" from the narrative of the past show Wole's sadness and regret in seeing his hometown of Ake in bad disrepair, or overly Westernized with hamburger cartons littering the street. Wole wears "rose-colored glasses" to a degree in viewing the past; there is a certain poetry and lyricism in his writing style that lends itself to this optimistic view.

Structure

The book is divided into fifteen chapters, though each chapter does not necessarily deal with a specific episode, nor are chapter divisions particularly neat and final. Rather, they represent time ellipses on the part of the author, "skipping ahead" in his life in favor of the next interesting incident. The book is presented roughly in chronological order, from the time Wole's memory began when he was about three and a half, up to his second interview for Government College, when he is eleven. Exceptions to this chronological order happen when Wole steps outside the narrative in the past in order to comment on the contemporary state of affairs in his homeland, writing as he does around the year 1980. For example, he contrasts the Dayisi's Walk of his day, a place of succulent food and simple pleasures, to Dayisi's Walk of 1980, a loud and unpleasant place where McDonald's competes with traditional cuisine and young hipsters listen to the latest Western music.

The narrative is presented in fairly episodic fashion, though chronology is important if only to indicate Wole's increasing awareness, perspective, and intelligence. More often than not, episodes are recounted to provide examples of particular things - such as Wild Christian's short temper, or Essay's argumentative nature - with the assumption that these characters have acted in similar fashion many other times. Episodes included are thus perhaps the best-remembered or best indicative of such character traits or the like.

Quotes

"The Mission left the parsonage just a vicar and his catechist; Ake was no longer worth a bishop. But even the Vicar's 'court' is a mere shell of itself. The orchard has vanished, the rows of lemon grass have long been eaten by goats. Lemon grass, the cure of fevers and headaches - an aspirin or two, a cup of hot lemon grass tea and bed. But its effusion was really fragrant and we drank it normally as a variant of the common tea. Stark, shrunk with time is that white square monument which, framed against the rocks dominated the parsonage, focusing the eye on itself as a visitor entered the parsonage gate. The master of that house was a chunk from those rocks, black, huge, granite head and enormous feet." (12)

"My mother gave a sigh, shook her head and left us to listen to Osiki's tales of the different kinds of egungun, the dangerous ones with bad charms who could strike a man with epilepsy and worse, the violent ones who had to be restrained with powerful ropes, the opidan with their magical tricks. They would transform themselves into alligators, snakes, tigers and rams and turn back again into egungun. Then there were the acrobats - I had seen those myself over the wall, performing in a circle of spectators near the cenotaph. They did forward and backward somersaults, doubled up their limbs in the strangest manner, squeezed their lower trunks into mortars and then bounced up and down in the mortar along short distances as if they were doing a mortar race. Apart from Giro, the crippled contortionist to whose performance we had once been taken in the palace compound, only these egungun appeared to be able to tie up their limbs in any manner they pleased." (32)

"'Is rain not the same as water?' I demanded.
'Rain means water, but water does not necessarily mean rain.'
With suitably solemn nods, Wild Christian sighed, 'Ngh-hunnh!' , called for her wosi-wosi bag to be brought to her bedroom in preparation for the shop.
'But there can be no rain without water,' I protested.
Father nodded. 'True. But there can be water without rain.'
'The water came from rain in the first place didn't it?'
'Ah, that is where you are wrong. Rain actually comes from water. It is because of the water that rain is caused.'
I was getting in deep waters. My early triumph had long dissipated; then I remembered the Bible. 'What happened in the Bible?' I asked, 'Didn't God create them both separately?'
'Well, let's see. Go and bring the Bible from the parlour.' [...]
'Mind you,' he continued, 'you will find that the Bible tells only one part of the story. After God created this and that, he still left them to react with one another in their own ways. There are what we call the laws of nature, that is where the question of how rain is formed comes in.'" (54-55)

"I would not read his response, feeling sufficiently crushed. That was my rock. My own very private rock. And now the Sunday School teacher had turned it into the common property of these lying, boastful, querulous others. She had intruded into a private abode, one of many. Different from that sleeping, eating, living place which belonged equally to Essay, Wild Christian, siblings, vague relations or omo odo - a vague expression for something between servant and family appendage - Jonah was my own very secret habitat. And now the Sunday School teacher had turned Jonah into something from the Bible." (64)

"Wild Christian lost no opportunity to show me off to her visitors and, at the beginning, I needed no prompting to begin showing off. But then she had to bring Tinu into the act, disparaging her comparative lack of attainment. In place of my delight at being invited to read came discomfort, then resentment. Tinu was the closet playmate I knew and a protective bond had grown between us which only showed when she was hurt or threatened. Helping her with her homework I regarded the same as doing my own; I could not see the difference nor understand that Essay found it necessary to ask questions which were so obviously designed to catch her out. Reducing her before strangers was, however, the ultimate crime." (80)

"Our parents spent hours in Essay's bedroom; we could hear them talking but could make out no words. They spoke very softly. The maid was sent for, questioned. Her voice was clear enough, whatever she was being asked, she denied. She was vehement, called on God to witness. She repeated over and over again 'Nothing happened, nothing happened at all sir.' She came out of the bedroom, her face set, aggrieved by false suspicion or accusation.
Folasade was taken to hospital. She went in the morning and did not return until late afternoon. Her little trunk was encased in plaster from beneath the arm-pits to her buttocks. Wild Christian carried her, not on her back, but in her arms, wrapped up in a shawl.
She still cried from time to time. But many nights she merely lay awake. I got up from the mat, knelt by the cot and looked into the silent pools of her eyes. She did not appear to acknowledge me. Day after day Folasade lay on her back, was brought out to be fed, changed, then returned to her cot or increasingly on to our mother's bed, propped with pillows on both sides. She was so still that the pillows seemed superfluous. Folasade simply lay still and stared at the ceiling." (96)

"Hitler monopolized the box [radio]. He had his own special programme and somehow, far off as this war of his whim appeared to be, we were drawn more and more into the expanding arena of menace. Hitler came nearer home every day. Before long the greeting, Win-The-War replaced some of the boisterous exchanges which took place between Essay and his friends. The local barbers invented a new style which joined the repertory of Bentigo, Girls-Follow-Me, Oju-Aba, Missionary Cut and others. The women also added Win-de-Woh to their hair-plaits, and those of them who presided over the

local food-stalls used it as a standard response to complaints of a shortage in the quantity they served. [...] Windows were blacked over, leaving just tiny spots to peep through, perhaps in order to obtain an early warning when Hitler came marching up the path." (109)

"Our Ijebu relations, it seemed, had a reputation for poisoning, or for a hundred and one forms of injuring an enemy through magical means. We were drilled in ways and means of avoiding a handshake, for various forms of injury could be operated through the hands. One would return home and simply wither away. Thus we perfected the technique of bowing with our hands at the back; the more persistently a chance acquaintance proffered his hands, the more resolutely we kept our hands behind, bowing respectfully and looking permanently on the ground. It became a game, Tinu and I would compare notes afterwards on evasion tactics." (130)

"Urchins thrust the new commodity, clean-wrapped, in plastic bags in faces of passengers whose vehicles pause even one moment along the route. The blare of motor-horns compete with a high-decibel outpouring of rock and funk and punk and other thunk-thunk from lands of instant-culture heroes. Eyes glazed, jaws in constant, automated motion, the new habituees mouth the confusion of lyrics belted out from every story, their arms flapping up and down like wounded bush-fowl. Singly, or in groups of identical twins, quad- or quintuplets they wander into the stereo stores, caress the latest record sleeves and sigh. A trio emerge with an outsize radio-cassette player in full blast, setting up mobile competition with the already noise-demented line of stores." (157)

"Daodu was manic in his treatment of music. When he conducted the school in one of many anthems we performed periodically, his massive frame was galvanized, and a patch of wetness emerged beneath the armpit of his jacket, widening its circle until it reached his chest. His ears picked up unerringly the source of a wrong sound. I was mystified however by his failure to simply weed out those who were obviously tone-deaf. Instead, he picked out the offending row, or class, and caned them after a faulty performance. The solution was obvious, very simple, but he never seemed to consider it. The school was required to sing; any portion of it which could not sing well had to be punished. [...] I had now assumed a definite position with regards to the rational shortcomings of grown-ups, marveling how, for instance, an educationist and experienced traveler like Daodu could behave like Wild Christian who obtained all her authority from that section of the Bible which said, 'Spare the rod. . . .'" (177)

"Undaunted by the sheer mass and mood of the gathering, indeed, probably provoked by it, he [Balogun] decided to assert his manhood authority, hissing as he strutted through the rear section of the crowd, accompanied by his retainers. In a voice as burly as his figure he hissed:
'Hm-hm-hm, pshee-aw! The world is spoilt, the world is coming to an end when these

women, these agb'eyin-to, can lay siege to the palace and disturb the peace.' And he raised his voice further, 'Go on, go home and mind your kitchens and feed your children. What do you know about the running of state affairs? Not pay tax indeed! What you need is a good kick on your idle rumps.'
What happened next constituted the second high point of the uprising on that day. After that, no one could doubt the collective psychic force of the women and, specifically, of the Beere. She was now rumoured to exert supernatural powers [...] For something happened to Balogun's thigh as he suited action to his threat and delivered a kick in the general direction of the women. As he set that leg down, it simply gave way under him and he collapsed. Embarrassed, he very quickly scrambled up, only half-collapse again as he attempted to set his weight on it." (212-213)

"When I came upstairs, Beere was at the telephone, one of the three or four telephones in the whole of Abeokuta. Her tone was angry, I had never seen her so furious with anyone.
'Let me tell you Mr. District Officer, we are not impressed. We are by no means impressed - no, not surprised either. I knew it was coming and when I heard it on the radio all I could think was, just like them, just like the white race. You had to drop it on Japan, didn't you? Why didn't you drop it on Germany? Tell me that. Answer my question honestly if you can - why not Germany?'
There was a pause while she listened to what the other speaker had to reply.
She laughed - a dry, bitter sound. 'I give you credit for intelligence, but not for honesty. That was a merely clever answer, it was not honest. You know bloody well why. Because Germany is a white race, the Germans are your kinsmen while the Japanese are just a dirty yellow people. Yes, that is right, that is the truth, don't deny it! You dropped that inhuman weapon on human beings, on densely populated cities. . . .'" (223-224)

Topics for Discussion

How does Wole Soyinka characterize his generation versus the contemporary young generation (early-1980s)? What advantages or disadvantages did his generation have over future generations?

What does Wole think of the various superstitions and primitive beliefs of his people? Is Christianity "better" or just different, or, can the two religions co-exist?

What aspects of the adult world don't make sense to Wole? Is this a simple matter of a child's lack of comprehension, or is there more to learn with Wole's judgments?

What is the Tax Protest and women's movement, for Wole? Is it simple excitement? Is he doing it for his mother? Does he politically agree with their stance? In short, why does he find it so fascinating?

There are a couple of unfortunate stories Wole relates, including the tales of Paa Adatan and Sorowanke. What are the points of these stories? What does Wole intend by relating them?

Wole's world, especially with Wild Christian, is one of frequent punishment. What does Wole think of punishment, and how does he deal with it? Does it deter him from committing mischief? What does it accomplish, for the punisher and for the punished?

What is Father's (Essay's father) role in the story, as a non-Christian? What does Wole take away from him that is unique?