Arrow of God Short Guide

Arrow of God by Chinua Achebe

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Contents

Characters

Characters are rendered not only through the eyes of the omniscient narrator, but through those of other chief characters, giving a rich multifaceted view of their motives and forces that have shaped them.

The central character of this novel is the chief priest of the god Ulu, who originated in reaction to the marauding of the neighboring tribe of Abame whose mercenaries raided the six villages now joined together as Umuaro in order to capture slaves. He has married three wives, one of whom has died, and tends to shift his affections from older sons onto younger ones. Seen through the eyes of his oldest son Edogo, he is single minded and expects all others to think as he does. Thus the growing isolation, contributed to heavily by the advance of colonialism, is seen to be partly his fault. As the novel opens, Ezuelu is unhappy with the escalation of a minor conflict with the nearby Okperi tribe whom he sees as entitled to a disputed piece of land. His arguments for not going to war are considered and reveal his knowledge of history. But a powerful speaker and a very wealthy leader, Nwaka, prevails. Unfortunately, the delegate sent to the Okperi gives in to his anger after being goaded about his virility and breaks the ikenga or ancestral image of the Okperi spokesman, who then kills him. The resulting war is crushed by the British District Officer, Winterbottom, who rules in favor of the Okperi.

(The choice of this name for him is humorous, as it appears to be a euphemism for "ashy buttocks," the undignified epithet hurled at the British in Things Fall Apart.)

Winterbottom is a chief foil for Ezuelu, as he is presented as colonial governor with superior sensitivity and certainly common sense. After the war, he breaks all the guns in Umuaro, and becomes known by an epithet that evokes this act. Winterbottom is also an idealist, however, who strongly believes in the mission of British colonialism. He had been promoted to Captain in the British campaign against the Germans in Cameroon in 1916, and he has become used to the Nigerian climate, although it often makes him sick. He is one of five male British officials in the area, the others being Tony Clarke, Roberts, Wade, and Wright. There is also the dedicated and severe missionary Dr. Mary Savage, who is at first secretly courted by Winterbottom and later marries him, and the Nigerian Anglican preacher John Goodcountry, who takes advantage of Umuaro's yam crisis to gain converts.

Clarke is Winterbottom's assistant and a replacement for "Poor John Macmillan" who has "died from cerebral malaria." Wright oversees the building of the road with little more humanity than a Simon Legree — he routinely beats the workers (his victims include Ezuelu's son Obika), and does not pay them, and Clarke sticks up for him by failing to investigate reports of abuse and then denying that they have happened in his reports. Less intelligent characters like Wright are more likely to use demeaning epithets for the Africans. Wade is a slightly sketched character who assists Clarke. He steals the coin from a sacrifice displayed on the side of the road, causing even Clarke to feel alarmed at the desecration. That Achebe sees important distinctions in quality and depth of character among these different supposed puppets of colonialism indicates that

he is not writing Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness (1902) in reverse, as some critics have maintained.

Significant relations of Ezuelu are his four sons Obika, the second son and heir apparent, Oduche, the lesser son sent to the Christian school, and Edogo, the oldest son. Obika drinks heavily, often with his friend Ofoedu, who is "never absent from the scene of a fight." He defends his half-sister, Akueke, after she is battered by her husband by humiliating and almost killing the batterer. He has a rash temperament, and is beaten for his insolence by Wright when he goes to work on the road. Yet his relationship with his wife, Okuata (a woman with the same name as Ezuelu's late wife) is sensitive and caring. He dies of a fever during a festival, contributing to the suffering that brings on Ezuelu's defeat and madness. Oduche's overzealous adherence to the literal rule of the Christian faith is comically dealt with (described above). Ezuelu has two wives, Matefi, the senior one, and Ugoye, the younger one; his first wife, Okuata, has died three years prior to the time of the novel and is the mother of daughters Adeze and Okueke, and the eldest son Edogo, who lives in a compound tangential to the father's house. Matefi's children are Obika and Ojiugo; Ugoye's are Obiageli and Nwafo, who has suffered from convulsions at night but has been cured by a sacred image or okposi. These children are young enough to be friends with, tease, and tell stories to Akueke's daughter Nkechi. Amoge is the wife of Edogo, whose first child has died and whose second one has turned very sickly. Ezuelu also has a younger brother Okeke Onenyi, who speaks up to ensure her safety when it appears that the battered Akueke's husband wants her back.

Ezuelu's best friend is Okbuefi Akuebue, who is of the same age group and one of few "whose words gain[ed] entrance into Ezuelu's ear," and he can even tell Ezeulu he is wrong. They have wonderful dryly witty dialogues when not speaking about totally serious subjects, and they take snuff together. Akuebue goes to see the priest after Obika has been whipped, and with Edogo the two discuss the matter, Edogo and Akuebue arguing that the son has been badly treated, while Ezuelu attributes the trouble to Obika's fondness for palm wine and his ne'er do well friend Ofoedu.

There are also numerous citizens of Umuaro, who give advice, debate precedents, or outright disagree with Ezuelu. These are the very rich Nwaka, who has five wives; the foul-mouthed warmonger Akukelia, killed after he desecrates the Okperi man's household god; and Egonwanne, one of the oldest men in the village, who also counsels war with the Okperi. Another vividly drawn character is Moses Unachukwu, a Christian carpenter who although much older than the young men who work on the road, knows English well and serves as the interpreter between them and Wright, at one point preventing Obika from attacking him. Nweke Ukpaka is a witty road worker who actually fans the flames for this fight by his irreverent jokes. Yet he defends keeping the carpenter around (despite his age) because of his knowledge of English and the white man. Another man supports this decision, citing the importance of asking the white man why they have not been paid for working on the road. The most important gathering of the citizens occurs when they try to persuade Ezulu to hurry up and eat the yams; the powerful Nwaka is omitted from the ten-man delegation to appease Ezuelu, and other dignitaries, including Ezekwesili, Egonwanne, Anichebe Udeozo, Onnenyi Nnanyelugo,

and Ofoka try to persuade him to change his mind. Each of these characters is vividly drawn and given his own approach and style of speaking.

Social Concerns

The clash between the civilization of the Igbo and the British bringing colonialism and their Christian religion to West Africa is reenacted in this novel through the perspective of Ezeulu, the Chief Priest of Ulu in Umuaro, a god who had originated from the need to fight the slave traders of neighboring Abame. A land dispute between the Okperi people and the Umuaro that results in a brief war is forcibly stopped by the British District Commissioner, Captain Winterbottom, and sets the stage for further British intrusion into Umuaro. The British master-plan for governing the Igbo, a plan with which Winterbottom, a seasoned colonial ruler, vehemently opposes because it invites exploitation and corruption, is to set up certain African leaders as British toadies. Conflict resolution, both British style and as the Igbo do it is thus a major concern, and it is often undermined by illconceived practices on both sides. The war starts because one of the delegates sent from Umuaro to resolve the dispute violates the ancestral shrine of an Okperi man by breaking his ikenga, or symbol of his ancestors. In retaliation the Okperi man murders the Umuaro delegate and the body is sent back with no explanation. It is this lack of mediation, not the murder itself, that precipitates the war. As the novel progresses, Ezeulu is imprisoned for refusing to take the position of Warrant Chief offered by Winterbottom at the behest of his superiors.

Colonialism is seen as a complex web that prevents even the best people from acting for the common good. Chapters in which the British officials confer with one another reveal that while they are not the worst of their type, racism and ignorant condescension more or less come with the territory. Their actions result in far more harm than they anticipate. Stuck in prison for his refusal to be a Warrant Chief during the time that he should have started eating one sacred yam per month to mark the time before the harvest, Ezeulu upon release refuses to eat them in multiples to catch up, and he thus incurs the enmity of his people and the demise of the worship of Ulu in favor of the Christian faith, so that he ironically becomes the chief martyr of Ulu.

Achebe is concerned with the toll taken on Igbo people by the supplanting of their old beliefs. A lesser son of Ezeulu, Oduchi, is chosen to go a Christian school more or less as a mole to keep his father informed. In a literal and misguided interpretation of scripture, he decides he must crush the head of one of the pythons who are sacred creatures to the Igbo. Straddling the fence between the two beliefs, his courage fails, and he locks the smaller of two possible pythons in a box so that it can die passively of suffocation. The dampened effort to crush the serpent results in a public display as the box starts to move rather like an enlarged Mexican jumping bean, and Ezeulu himself opens it with his spear revealing the abomination and dealing another blow to his reputation.

The building of a road between Umuaro and Okperi is another attempt by the British to bring "progress," and men from both villages are hired — or rather impressed into service — to work on it for low wages or none. A minor dispute results in not only racist epithets but also in the whipping of Ezeulu's most favored son, Obika, whose alcoholic tendencies may be in part a reaction to the incursions of colonialism.

The position of women within Igbo society is seen as compromised by polygamy — older wives often express jealousy of new ones — but worse possibilities occur because of the corruption of colonialism. One African elevated to a position of status by the British is said to take any woman he wants without paying the bride price. Within the Igbo culture, women are at least protected. Achebe is careful to note in the descriptions of most marriages between characters he cares about that genuine love exists between the husband and the favored wife, as in the tenderly drawn marriage between Obika and Okuata. On the other hand, the wealthy, greedy Nwaka who opposes Ezeulu at the outset of the book has acquired five wives by the book's end.

Techniques

Arrow of God can be viewed as instrumental in establishing Achebe's style for he extensively revised it ten years after its first publication. In it he refined techniques used in his earlier work Things Fall Apart. Bruce King sees Achebe's so-called "structural" revisions as refinements that unify the novel through the vision of the main character. According to other critics, the novel has also become less concerned with explaining Igbo culture to westerners. Yet vivid scenes that depict Igbo life and customs, especially those centering on marriage, the harvest, and healing, give the novel a marvelously immediate sense of place.

With the exception of some flashbacks and shifts of scene to the outpost of the British officials, the narrative follows a fairly straight chronological line. But throughout the fairly simple arrangement of plot and scene, the actions and reactions of the characters are put to the test by interpretations of individual characters and by the constant interplay of the sometimes conflicting, frequently limited, conventional wisdoms of both British and Igbo culture, their laws and their religions. All but the worst of the British characters are aware that their behavior toward the Africans has to be reasonable so as not to arouse undue reaction from the Igbo. Clarke is so worried about the repercussions of keeping Ezuelu in prison that he consults Winterbottom in the hospital when he is almost too ill to think. Winterbottom gives the answer that he must continue Ezuelu's sentence until he "learns to cooperate with the administration." Clarke is then greatly relieved, as much because he has the right wording for his report as that he has Winterbottom's approval.

The reader is constantly invited to evaluate the characters' choices. Ezue-lu's political enemy, Nwaka, interprets his refusal to take the Warrant Chief position as owing to hereditary madness, even though he has in the past tried to smear Ezuelu as politically ambitious. Even here, however, the narrator interpolates his view that Nwaka's malicious statements often have a basis in truth, and offers the information that Ezuelu's mother has been given to mad fits, but they have been greatly assuaged by his father, "a powerful man with herbs." This insight foreshadows what turns out to be a real susceptibility for Ezuelu, whose many setbacks, isolation from his people, and consequent loss of power, keep him from saving himself from madness.

Ezuelu's refusal to eat the sacred yams in multiples causes extensive debate among the people that enlarges our view of his predicament, the predicament of the people, and the inevitable movement of history. The people point out precedents for change and flexibility, but Ezuelu refuses because he has received no sanctioning message from Ulu. His explanation that "the gods sometimes use us as a whip" does not persuade the men, but helps explain the title, and echoes his speculation slightly earlier in the novel that his own son Oduchi is "an arrow in the hand of Ulu." Ironically, it may be that Ezuelu himself is the arrow. Used not by Ulu but the Christian god, he conveniently makes way for the Christian solution to the problem of the unharvested yams.

The role of proverbs and the characters' use of them has been noted by several critics. African characters are more likely to cite proverbs from both religions and act on them.

Oduche's ludicrous attempt to crush the python has its parallels in more serious appropriations, like the African Anglican priest Goodcountry's use of the yam crisis to win converts. Proverbs are used for consolation, justification for decisions, and persuasion in group meetings. Obika's death scene is full of mostly cautionary proverbs, all in italics, and "he felt like two separate persons, one running above the other." They seem to suggest that advice for behavior has become so conflicting that no clear decisions can be made. The British are more likely to cite precedents, common sense reasoning, and the mission of colonialism to save the African as justification for their actions. Both groups of characters are concerned with historical precedent and such concern often seems to distinguish the more intelligent characters on both sides. Winterbottom has a certain integrity gained partly from his long experience in the region, however misguided and insensitive he can sometimes be. In the case of the peo-ple's rationalizations about Ezuelu at the end of the book, however, history seems misappropriated: "Their god had taken sides with them against this headstrong and ambitious priest and thus upheld the wisdom of their ancestors — that no man however great was greater than his people; that no one ever won judgment against his clan."

In addition to proverbs and other utterances of conventional wisdom, there is a sense created by Ezuelu that the particular lives played out by the characters are part of a longer continuum which ancestors can view from their abode in Ani-Mmo. This is buttressed by the author's use of irony and, gives a longer and broader view of the novel's action. This view helps to convince the non-African audience for Achebe's work that we ignore the human catastrophes, the achievements, and perhaps even the gods of Africans at our own peril. As the British officials debate the practical pros and cons of their decisions, or weigh them against their view of the "mission" of colonialism, and as Ezuelu deliberates about his allegiance to Ulu and the demands of his role vis a vis his people, the reader feels the need to evaluate actively all that goes on.

Themes

Ezeulu, the chief priest of Ulu, watches his authority slowly erode both from within and without. While the British, through Christianity and road building, try to solidify their rule over the Igbo, the people themselves, through petty rivalries, aid and abet them, as when Ezeulu's efforts to maintain peace with the Okperi are overridden by the militant and powerful Nwafo and the British come in and settle the dispute in favor of the Okperi. Yet colonialism has brought forces to bear that men on neither side have much control over. Ezeulu has learned how to deal amicably with Captain Winterbottom, but with advancing age and the onset of illness, this relatively benign Englishman delegates his duties increasingly to the less insightful Clarke and Wright who drink late into the night and make fun of him. Among other things, they ridicule Winterbottom for his scruples about sleeping with "native" women. On both sides shallower, amoral men are seen to take over for wiser, more circumspect older men. It seems to be no accident that Winterbottom becomes severely ill and requires hospitalization just before Ezeulu is arrested.

As he has done so powerfully in his earlier novel Things Fall Apart (1958), Achebe here shows how the conventional wisdom of both Igbo belief and British Christianity yield to the pressure of experience. Oduchi's cruelty to the python is a parody of Christian doctrine that has repercussions beyond what anyone expects. On the other hand, Ezeulu's use of this lesser son to be a mole in the Christian camp backfires because of Oduchi's unanticipated and single-minded zeal. Still, the character of Ezeulu on the whole shows a remarkable integrity (as does Captain Winterbottom's in a more limited way). His harshness in sticking to the literal rule in the eating of the yams is not occasioned by mere ego concerns, but by loyalty to Ulu and a profound desire to be steadfast when dissolution is all around him. The ultimate betrayal, in part manifested by the death of his favored son Obiko, by the same god he has served so steadfastly, occasions his madness at the end of the novel. The narrator considers the madness in some sense fortunate, as it provides Ezeulu the opportunity to live undisturbed by his people, most of whom have become Christians. The contrasting condition of the recuperated and unscathed Winterbottom, who has not intervened to help Ezuelu, reminds one of the toll exacted mainly from Africans by colonial rule.

The opportunism that may not have been always intentional on the part of Christian missionaries is a recurrent theme in Achebe's work that here finds expression in the efforts of John Goodcountry, the African Anglican Christian priest who seizes the opportunity of the delayed yam harvest to undermine Ulu and Ezeulu. When it appears the yams will rot in the ground unharvested while the people go hungry, Goodcountry offers Christian dispensation to those who ignore Ezeulu's command and harvest the yams anyway. Most do so. The book ends with the statement: "Thereafter any yam harvested in his fields was harvested in the name of the son." The statement ostensibly signals the ironic triumph of the Christian religion, but it also resounds with the idea of the betrayal of the father, and the tone of the ending seems echoed in Achebe's dedication of his book to his own father.

Key Questions

Arrow of God is considered a more complex, more troubling work than Things Fall Apart, as the reader sees the action primarily through the chief character's eyes, and he is constantly experiencing the tensions of being caught in the middle of two colliding cultures. Readers will be interested in evaluating the issue of colonialism in general and the interaction of the Igbo with British domination in particular. They will also be interested in the universal themes and issues treated in this complex work, such as the tension between individual and collective needs, the seemingly arbitrary demands of traditional belief, and the cross-cultural comparisons that question practices in both African and European cultures, especially as they pertain to marriage and the family. The role of religious belief and human pain caused for characters who find themselves relinquishing traditional beliefs is also a riveting topic for discussion. Aside from the serious subject matter, the reader will also note the many opportunities for irony and humor in this book.

1. Evaluate Ezuelu's role as a priest. How does he function in relation to the community and what personal strengths and weaknesses does he bring to the task?

2. What are Ezuelu's qualities as a parent? Is he right about Obika's friendship with Ofoedu, that the latter is like a "vulture after a corpse?"

3.Evaluate Ezuelu's decision, after his release from prison, not to eat the sacred yams in multiples to catch up for lost time. What prompts his decision? How does he treat the elders of the villages who come to ask him to change his mind?

4. What special advantages are gained by unifying this book through the central character of Ezuelu? Do you think this is a less successful novel than the very popular Things Fall Apart?

5. Look closely at the British characters in the novel, especially Winterbottom, Clarke, and Wade. Do you believe that Achebe is depicting the white man fairly?

6. Igbo custom and belief is often dismissed by Christian and European characters as full of superstition and ignorance. Evaluate the assessments of religious belief by Goodcountry, Winterbottom, Wade and Clarke. Which do you think has the fairest view? What does the author appear to think of the Igbo customs described in the book, such as the keeping of the ikenga, the counting of the months by eating yams, the practice of polygamy and the marriage ritual, and reverence for ancestral spirits?

7. Does the author ever criticize or evaluate Christian belief? Where? Do you think that his work affirms or denies a spiritual dimension in life?

8. Compare Ezuelu to Oedipus. Oedipus tries to alleviate famine and pestilence which he doesn't know he has created. Ezuelu appears to want to start a famine by not allowing the harvest of yams. What motivations and exigencies prompt each to behave

as he does? Note especially those passages, as on pp. 191-192, where Ulu is shown communicating with Ezeulu.

9. How does the children's conundrum about Christians scaring away pythons (205) affirm Ezuelu's speculation about how even the white man's religion may be used "as an arrow in the hand of Ulu?" Why does Ezeulu laugh?

10. Ezuelu's friend Akuebue quotes the ancient Igbo proverb "When brothers fight to death a stranger inherits their father's estate." To what extent does the action of the novel bear out this ancient wisdom?

11. Ulu is a god who has been invented to fulfill the need for protection against African slave traders. Do you find it odd that people can believe they have invented their chief deity?

Literary Precedents

Joyce Cary's Mr. Johnson and Con-rad's Heart of Darkness discussed at length below in relation to Things Fall Apart (1958) also apply here; the theme of road building and its connection to the British "mission" and destruction of the African find expression in Mr. Wright's enslavement of and brutality to the workers. There are of course other writers on Africa, both of African and European descent who try to give a realistic view of the clash of colonialism with the indigenous cultures of Africa, and the abuse by tyrants on both sides of the people under their control. His Nigerian contemporary, Wole Soyinka, is one of them, and he and Achebe are really the giants of present day Nigerian literary accomplishment. Amos Tutuola, whose first book The Palm-wine Drinkard Achebe has reviewed, may have aided Achebe's awareness of the resources of his own Igbo oral tradition.

Other writers recounting the debilitating effect of colonialism in Africa on both the perpetrators and the victims of it must include Graham Greene, Doris Lessing, and Nadine Gordimer. George Orwell, who exposed the problems of British colonialism in Myanmar (formerly Burma), also deserves mention.

The central figure of Ezuelu, his selfdefeating efforts to remedy very real problems, and above all his stature as a tragic hero evoke Greek tragic heroes like Oedipus as other critics have noted: next to the mad Ezuelu, the supposedly healthy Winterbottom and his steady African ally John Goodcountry surely pale, simply because they have not felt or known the conflicting insights and pressures Ezeulu has.

Related Titles

The novel, No Longer at Ease (1960), a sequel to Things Fall Apart, dramatizes the predicament of a young Igbo man caught between the demands of the two cultures. Obi, a grandson of Okonkwo, is educated in England and appointed secretary of the Nigerian scholarship board. Trying at first to follow the rules, he lives beyond his means and falls into debt. He dates a beautiful woman, Clara, but his plans to marry are thwarted because she is an osn, or member of an outcast tribe. She finally suffers from a botched abortion that he helps arrange, and he is caught taking a bribe. As a hero, Obi lacks the stature of either his grandfather or Ezuelu; the character is enveloped and crushed by conflicts and circumstances, rather than ennobled by his efforts to cope with them.

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