Civil Peace Study Guide

Civil Peace by Chinua Achebe

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Contents

Introduction

One of Africa's foremost contemporary authors and spokespeople, Chinua Achebe, has always taken as a primary concern understanding and accurately depicting the African people. In 1964, he wrote that the writer's duty "is to explore *in depth* the human condition." In his pre-civil war novels, Achebe focused on the culture of his people and their emergence from colonial powers. However, with the outbreak of the Nigerian civil war, Achebe embraced the revolutionary spirit. Not only did he serve as a diplomat, bringing eastern Nigeria's message overseas, and write radio programs about the cause, he also found himself unable to work on long fictional works during this period. Even two years after the war ended, he felt no urge to work on a novel. He did, however, write three short stories concerning the civil war, all of which were collected in the short fiction volume, *Girls at War and Other Stories.*

"Civil Peace," which first appeared in print in 1971, takes place in the immediate post-war period. Focusing not on the hardships and devastation of the war but on the new opportunities to rebuild, the story has struck many critics for its optimism and positive outlook. At the same time, "Civil Peace" insidiously demonstrates the similarities between Nigeria during the war *and* after the war—during both periods, violence and corruption can emerge at any time. Achebe believes that the African writer must function as a social critic, and in "Civil Peace," he shares two co-existing views of the postwar Nigerian state.

Author Biography

Achebe was born in 1930 in the village of Ogidi in eastern Nigeria. His father worked for the Church Missionary Society, and his early education was through the society's school. At the age of eight, Achebe began to learn English. When he was fourteen, he was one of a few boys selected to attend the government college at Umuahia, which was one of the best schools in west Africa. In 1948, Achebe enrolled at University College, Ibadan, which was a new school. He intended to study medicine, but he soon switched to English literary studies. The college at Ibadan was affiliated with the University of London, and Achebe's course of study was very similar to that required by the University of London's honors degree program. While at school, he contributed stories, essays, and sketches to the *University Herald;* these pieces were collected in *Girls at War and Other Stories.*

After he graduated in 1953, Achebe decided to make writing his life's work. He made as his goal effectively and realistically communicating the stories of the African people, particularly the Igbo civilization. Achebe worked as a teacher in his first year out of school. Then he began a career as a producer for the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation. He remained there for twelve years, and was appointed director of the external broadcasting show, *Voice of Nigeria.* In 1957, he went to London to attend the British Broadcasting Corporation staff school where one of his teachers was novelist and literary critic, Gilbert Phelps. Phelps recommended for publication Achebe's first novel, *Things Fall Apart,* which presents an account of colonial history from the point of view of the colonized, and it appeared in the following year, 1958. His writing also encouraged Achebe to learn about his native culture to accurately depict it with his words. He did so by interviewing older people and reading the writings of colonial administrators and missionaries.

In 1967, civil war broke out in Nigeria. The eastern region declared itself the independent state of Biafra. Over the next thirty months, Achebe traveled to Europe and North America on Biafran affairs. During this period, Achebe retreated from long fiction, instead choosing to work on poetry and several short stories, including "Civil Peace."

Achebe's two follow-up novels to *Things Fall Apart* continue the story the first novel began. Together, these three novels span the pre-colonial Africa to colonial times to the days before Nigeria's independence from Britain. In works published since then, Achebe has continued to explore twentieth-century Nigerian life. Achebe has also published essay collections on literary and political subjects, particularly focusing on the role of the African writer in society.

In 1994, Achebe fled to Europe from the repressive Nigerian regime, which threatened to jail him. He moved to the United States, becoming a professor at Bard College in New York. In 1999, he was named a goodwill ambassador to the world by the United Nations Population Fund.

Plot Summary

"Civil Peace" opens in eastern Nigeria after the civil war has ended. Jonathan Iwegbu considers himself and his family lucky. He, his wife, Maria, and three of their four children are alive. He even has maintained possession of his old bicycle, which he puts to use as a taxi. His taxi service allows him to make money, and within two weeks, he has earned £150.

Jonathan then travels to Enugu, the capital city, and finds to his great surprise and delight his house still standing, even though some nearby structures are reduced to a pile of rubble from the war. The house needs some repairs, so Jonathan immediately collects available materials: zinc, wood, and cardboard. He hires a carpenter to complete the work and soon moves his family back home.

The entire family works hard to earn money and rebuild their lives. The children pick mangoes and Maria makes akara balls to sell. After he finds that he cannot return to his job as a coal miner, Jonathan opens up a bar for the soldiers, which he runs out of his home. Jonathan is thankful that he has a home and a job, unlike many of his fellow ex-miners.

Jonathan's family does well, and then they get an added bonus when the government starts handing out egg-rashers—payments of twenty pounds in exchange for the Biafran money Nigerians turn over. Jonathan leaves the office with his money in his pocket, taking care so no thief should get it. At home that evening, Jonathan has trouble falling asleep. He finally does so, only to be awakened by violent pounding on the front door. He calls out to ask who is knocking, and the reply comes that thieves are here. Jonathan's family calls out for help from the police and the neighbors but no one comes. Eventually, they stop calling.

The thieves call out then, repeating the family's pleas for help. Jonathan and his family are in terror. The children and Maria are crying, Jonathan is groaning. The leader of the thieves speaks again, mockingly asking if he should call for the soldiers, but Jonathan says not to do so. Now the thief wants to get down to business. Jonathan asks what they want and tells them that he is a poor man who lost everything in the war. The thief demands £100, or else they will come inside the house. The voice trails off, and a volley of automatic rifle fire bursts through the air. Maria and the children start crying again. The leader tells them not to cry, that they just want some money and then they will go away.

Jonathan says that although he does not have £100 he does have twenty pounds from his egg-rasher. He swears that this is all the money he has, and the thief agrees to accept the money. Some of the thieves mumble that he has more money and they should come inside and look, but the leader tells them to shut up. Jonathan goes to get the twenty pounds out of his locked box to give to the thieves.

The next morning, the neighbors come over to commiserate with Jonathan, but he and his family are already setting about their day's work. Jonathan tells his sympathizers that the loss is nothing; the week before he did not have the egg-rasher money, and he does not depend on it. It has gone easily, as did many other things in the war.

Paragraph 1 (Page 1)

Paragraph 1 (Page 1) Summary

Jonathan Iwegbu, his wife Maria, and his three children survive the brutalities of a civil war and return to their home in a large city. Jonathan and his family industriously set about to improve their living conditions and earn a meager income. As normalcy returns the government issues monetary payments to survivors. Jonathan accepts his payment happily but that very night is robbed. The next morning finds Jonathan preparing to continue to work to support his family, and he vocally praises the wisdom of God.

Jonathan Iwegbu has survived four years of bloody civil war. On the opening day of the story Jonathan expresses his happiness and gratitude that not only has he survived, but so have his wife Maria and three of their four children. In addition to his family, he has also emerged from the war with his bicycle intact. He feels that the survival of his children and wife is a miracle.

Paragraph 1 (Page 1) Analysis

The initial paragraph of the story is clearly the most important statement within the narrative. It introduces the protagonist, Jonathan Iwegbu, and establishes his geography, situation, and mental outlook. In addition, the social atmosphere is characterized. Jonathan emerges from the Nigerian Civil War relatively unscathed. That war, raging from mid-1967 to early 1970, is caused when the southern provinces of Nigeria secede as the independent Republic of Biafra. The war ends in the re-annexation of the disputed territories at the cost of some three million civilian casualties and massive destruction of property and real estate. The violent times are perhaps best encapsulated by the note that "Happy survival!" (Paragraph 1, p. 1) is a greeting commonly used by old friends upon first becoming reacquainted. Rather than dwelling on the terrible past and the loss of a child, Jonathan is characterized as essentially positive, and he looks toward the future with hope and accepts the present with joy.

Paragraph 2 (Page 1)

Paragraph 2 (Page 1) Summary

The narrator recalls the curious history of Jonathan's bicycle. Around 1968 or 1969 a man purporting to be a military officer on an anxious military errand attempts to commandeer Jonathan's bicycle. Jonathan quickly appraises the man, noting his shabby clothing and inked-in military insignia of rank—surprisingly, these details all appear to pass muster. But Jonathan also notes the man's lack of grip and uncertainty of manner, and concludes that he is no valid military officer. Jonathan therefore takes a risk and bribes the man, giving him two Biafran pounds; Jonathan thus retains his bicycle. Realizing that the local situation is rapidly deteriorating, that night Jonathan buries the bicycle in the camp's cemetery, next to the grave of his youngest son. After the inevitable surrender and cessation of military hostilities Jonathan digs the bike up and finds it to be in excellent condition; he then admits God's supremacy and receives his fortune with joy.

Paragraph 2 (Page 1) Analysis

The events described in this paragraph transpire c. January 1969, one year before the cease-fire. As the bicycle is not buried in Enugu, we learn that Jonathan abandons his traditional home city, probably fleeing south, with millions of other refugees, prior to the fall of Enugu in September 1967 and lives in a southern refugee camp for about three years prior to the beginning of the story. The officer that attempts to commandeer Jonathan's bike during the civil war does not inspire confidence. Jonathan notes that his two stars of rank have been hurriedly done in biro; e.g., drawn on his clothing in pen (biro is a common global term for a pen, after the name of the ballpoint pen's inventor, Lbszlu Josef Bnru). It is also interesting to note how little the currency used is worth—Jonathan notes that two Biafran pounds pays the price of some firewood, about the amount that could be hauled on a single bicycle trip. In other words, two Biafran pounds is not particularly valuable. This contrasts interestingly with the enormous value of twenty Nigerian pounds later in the story, as well as the value of Biafran pounds only a year or so later. The story also indicates the industriousness of Jonathan and Maria. Jonathan uses his bicycle to obtain loads of firewood which Maria then trades to camp officials for extra food. Realizing the bicycle is in danger of forfeit, Jonathan plans for his personal future and hides it.

Paragraph 3 (Page 1)

Paragraph 3 (Page 1) Summary

Having recovered his bicycle, Jonathan begins a modest taxi service, ferrying camp officials across a four-mile stretch of land. He charges six Biafran pounds for each trip and accumulates 115 Biafran pounds in two weeks.

Paragraph 3 (Page 1) Analysis

Jonathan's industriousness is again revealed as he uses his bicycle to run a modest taxi service. The numbers indicate that Jonathan ferries about twenty passengers over the four-mile stretch, or slightly more than one trip per day. The value of the Biafran pound of course plummets with the cessation of hostilities and the formal surrender of the Republic of Biafra. Just a few months ago two Biafran pounds would purchase a load of firewood—now three times that amount secures only a moment of convenience.

Paragraph 4 (Pages 1-2)

Paragraph 4 (Pages 1-2) Summary

Sometime probably in February of 1970 Jonathan returns to his home-town of Enugu and discovers the astonishing fact that his tiny zinc house is still standing. He wonders at the massive devastation surrounding his house and praises God that he has been so fortunate. Jonathan returns to Enugu in advance of the hundreds of thousands of other refugees, and is thus able to scavenge through piles of debris to locate many additional building supplies at no cost. He pays a local carpenter fifty Biafran pounds to repair his home to a livable standard, and then brings his wife Maria and three children into the home.

Paragraph 4 (Pages 1-2) Analysis

From the description of the carpenter one gets the distinct feeling that Jonathan hires him not so much for his skills as for his meager supply of hand-tools. In other words, Jonathan would perform the work himself had he the tools to accomplish the repairs. Jonathan specifies that one Nigerian shilling is the equivalent of ten Biafran pounds; at twenty shillings to the pound, the unofficial exchange rate is thus one Nigerian pound for two hundred Biafran pounds. Obviously the political collapse of the issuing Republic of Biafra has made the Biafran pound practically worthless, even within the locale where it was issued.

This paragraph marks a paradigm shift in the story—Jonathan and his family cease being war refugees living in some forest camp, and move home into a solid structure in their old city of Enugu. They are now officially war survivors and must look forward to reconstruction.

Paragraphs 5-6 (Page 2)

Paragraphs 5-6 (Page 2) Summary

Jonathan's children pick mangoes and sell them; Maria makes breakfast foods and sells them. Using these earnings and his bicycle, Jonathan purchases and transports wine. As the water system is once again functional Jonathan freely waters the wine and opens a simple bar. His family thus begins to accumulate Nigerian coin. In the meantime, Jonathan makes increasingly less frequent trips to the local Coal Corporation office where people gather to exchange news, rumor, and gossip. He learns that he has indeed been fortunate—many are homeless, and many are starving. Eventually Jonathan entirely abandons his trips to the Coal Corporation office.

Paragraphs 5-6 (Page 2) Analysis

As thousands return to Enugu to resume their old lives Jonathan and his family engage in industrious behavior and accumulate a small collection of Nigerian coin—Jonathan refers to it as 'real pennies' or 'good money' to differentiate it from the demonetized Biafran pounds. Life gradually returns to some semblance of normal for some, though many are homeless and on the brink of starvation. Many people gather daily at the offices of the Coal Corporation to exchange what news and gossip is available. At first Jonathan goes daily; eventually he ceases his visits altogether preferring to instead focus on the business of making money by selling watered wine.

Paragraphs 7-9 (Page 2)

Paragraphs 7-9 (Page 2) Summary

Eventually an official recall of Biafran pounds is issued; the Nigerian government will accept the demonetized Biafran monies in exchange for legal Nigerian pounds in an attempt to stabilize and rehabilitate the national economy. Jonathan spends five days standing in lines with crowds near rioting, but finally exchanges his Biafran pounds for twenty Nigerian pounds in what is referred to as an ex-gratia award for sacrificing rebel money. Since most locals cannot pronounce ex-gratia, a newly exchanged note is referred to by the slang term 'egg-rasher'.

Recalling that the previous day a man receives his payment only to be robbed within moments, Jonathan is very cautious. He recalls that most people witnessing the thievery blamed the victim for being wantonly careless with his money. Jonathan closes his fist over the money and places his hand in his pocket. He makes sure he holds his money in his left hand so that his right hand remains free for greeting others, should the need arise. He is cautious to avoid meeting anyone and fixes his gaze in concentration on the long walk home. He is grateful to arrive home with his twenty Nigerian pounds intact.

Paragraphs 7-9 (Page 2) Analysis

An *ex gratia* payment is one not compelled by legal rights; in other words, the victorious Nigerian government exchanges Biafran monies for Nigerian pounds (regardless of unofficial exchange rates) in a show of benevolent good faith but is not bound to do so in the future. Unable to pronounce *ex gratia*, the locals generally refer to a new Nigerian pound as an 'egg-rasher', as the two terms sound alike. Note that 'rasher' is common British slang for a strip of bacon and thus the equivalent Americanized slang term would be something akin to 'bacon n' eggs'. These payments are widespread and although the exact remuneration mechanism is not related in the story, it is apparent that nearly every male citizen of age is doled out twenty Nigerian pounds—many view it as similar to Christmastime.

Recalling that the previous day a man received his payment only to be robbed within moments, Jonathan is very cautious. The victim of the previous day's robbery was largely blamed for his own misfortune—most onlookers felt he should have been far more cautious with his funds. The implied siding with the thief reminds the reader that post-war Nigeria is not a normal society; greed exists, as does rampant need, and although the *ex gratia* payments are helpful they are certainly not sufficient to satisfy the need nor the greed of most citizens. Furthermore, it is obvious that law enforcement is nearly non-existent as a man is robbed in front of literally thousands of witnesses and the thief walks away without complication.

Paragraphs 10-14 (Pages 2-3)

Paragraphs 10-14 (Pages 2-3) Summary

That night Jonathan is unable to sleep soundly. Normally a heavy sleeper, he lies awake listening to the night sounds gradually dying away. He remembers hearing the night watchmen call one o'clock somewhere in the distance and finally drifts off to a fitful slumber from which he is suddenly awakened. Maria also awakens and asks Jonathan who is knocking; he does not know. A second knock, loud and persistent, thunders on the rickety door. Jonathan fearfully asks who has come knocking in the early hours of the passing night.

Paragraphs 10-14 (Pages 2-3) Analysis

Jonathan is so fearful of being robbed of his twenty Nigerian pounds that he is unable to sleep soundly. Instead he listens to the various night sounds with fear in his heart, finally drifting off to sleep after one o'clock in the morning. Paragraph 10 (p. 2) marks another turning point in the story as it prefaces the central conflict that Jonathan will face in the immediate aftermath of the civil war during the so-called first hazy days of peace which inform the story's title. Coupled with the earlier mention of a man being robbed, Jonathan's fears provide a heavy foreshadowing of the action which will occur during the next few hours of the night. Paragraphs 11 through 14 (pp. 2-3) detail Jonathan and Maria's fearful realization that something awful is about to happen—someone is pounding insistently upon their front door at some time between one o'clock and dawn.

Paragraphs 15-22 (Page 3)

Paragraphs 15-22 (Page 3) Summary

A man's voice replies from beyond the door, informing Jonathan that his visitor is a thief come in the night, accompanied by other thieves. The thief instructs Jonathan to open the door. Maria begins to call loudly for the police. Jonathan and the children join her, and they call for the police and raise the hue and cry, begging their neighbors to come to their assistance. After a while they stop yelling and listen to the silent night—no one is coming. The thief asks if they have finished calling out, and sarcastically offers to help them. He instructs his companions to assist Jonathan in summoning aid and all of the thief cry out loudly in a mockery of Maria and Jonathan. Jonathan counts at least six voices of thieves and is paralyzed with fear. The thieves stop calling out and Maria and the children sob in fear.

Paragraphs 15-22 (Page 3) Analysis

The central conflict of the novel is presented—a gang of thieves, numbering at least six, has come calling in the early night hours. They politely knock on the door and ask for admittance. Jonathan and Maria shout for the police or their neighbors, but it is obvious no one will come. The thieves mock their attempt to summon aid by calling out as a body for the police or other assistance. Obviously, no one will respond and Jonathan and Maria are paralyzed with fear. The thieves have them in their entire power.

Paragraphs 23-27 (Page 3)

Paragraphs 23-27 (Page 3) Summary

The thief continues to make fun of Jonathan, noting that even with many men calling out loudly for assistance, the police are not coming. Jonathan realizes that he is on his own. The thief offers to call once again, this time requesting soldiers (i.e., "soja", paragraph 24, p. 3). Jonathan realizes assistance in any form is not forthcoming and declines the thief's sarcastically polite request to call out for soldiers.

Paragraphs 23-27 (Page 3) Analysis

Jonathan and Maria attempt to summon aid and raise the alarm. Clearly the frightened neighbors will not come to their assistance and local law enforcement is not interested in challenging the thieves. Jonathan realizes he is entirely within the power of the thieves and surrenders himself to this distasteful fact. The dialogue between Jonathan and the thieves now begins as they negotiate for advantage.

It is possible to interpret the thief's offer of calling for soldiers in a more sinister way; he may be inferring that the Nigerian soldiers would arrive quickly enough but that their presence would prove far more destructive than their possible assistance, hence the phrase "Soja better pass police. No be so?" (Paragraph 24, p. 3). This is supported by Jonathan's quick response declining the thief's offer to attempt to summon the soldiers.

Paragraphs 28-36 (Pages 3-4)

Paragraphs 28-36 (Pages 3-4) Summary

The thief again asserts that he is a good thief and does not want to make any trouble. He does not want to return to the Civil War but wants to enjoy what he calls the Civil Peace. Jonathan asks him what, then, he has come for. The thief demands that Jonathan deliver one hundred Nigerian pounds; if he refuses then he will be killed with his family. An automatic weapon shoots into the sky to emphasize the threat. At the sound of the weapon Maria begins to cry aloud.

The thief again asserts that he is a good thief who does not intend to molest anyone; he simply wants his ransom money and he will be on his way. His accomplices yell out their agreement with his oxymoronic statement about not causing any trouble. Jonathan feebly protests that he does not have one hundred Nigerian pounds. The thief man repeats his threat—if Jonathan does not deliver the ransom money, the thieves will enter the house with decidedly unpleasant results.

Paragraphs 28-36 (Pages 3-4) Analysis

The dialogue between the thief and Jonathan continues. The thief announces that they are not interested in molesting the children or raping Maria—they have simply come for money. He sets Jonathan's ransom at an impossibly high one hundred Nigerian pounds and demands immediate payment. Jonathan feebly protests that he does not have such an amount, and the thief repeats his threats. The thieves are so obviously unworried about intervention from law enforcement that they even discharge automatic weapon fire into the sky—the sound would be heard for miles and unmistakably be a sign of trouble.

The scene is ominous and clearly Jonathan and his family are in serious and imminent danger of murder, or worse. Jonathan is tortured by the knowledge that having survived years of blood civil war his family may now be eradicated by a band of common scum, and the thought is unpalatable—nevertheless, he cannot pay the ransom because he does not have it. Jonathan must therefore rely on the ironically imposed 'good' nature of the thieves to only take what they came for. However, as Jonathan is so fond of pointing out, nothing puzzles God and a resolution of sorts is next presented within the narrative.

Paragraphs 37-41 (Page 4)

Paragraphs 37-41 (Page 4) Summary

Jonathan now appeals to God as his witness. He bluntly states that he does not have one hundred pounds; he only possesses twenty Nigerian pounds. He swears this is so by God and challenges the thieves to prove him wrong, telling them that if they find one hundred pounds within they have his unneeded permission to execute the entire family. His bold statement convinces the thief that he is telling the truth and the thief states that if Jonathan will surrender his twenty Nigerian pounds the thieves will leave.

The thief's partners balk at this agreement, and suggest they should simply execute the entire family and perform a thorough search of the house. The thief, in obvious command, tells them bluntly to shut-up and commands Jonathan to quickly surrender the money. Jonathan realizes the best bargain he is likely to get and retrieves a hidden key and opens his wooden strongbox.

Paragraphs 37-41 (Page 4) Analysis

The dialogue presented in the story is compelling and convincing—particularly so when Jonathan claims God as his witness to the truth he speaks. The theme of trust in God runs throughout the story and is, here, most strongly manifested. The leader of the gang of thieves is convinced by Jonathan's strong statement and demands the twenty Nigerian pounds.

The thief's technique of instilling fear and then making outrageous demands is a well-known routine designed to cause the victim to surrender the truth without compromise. Here the routine works fairly well and Jonathan yields up his money. Note, however, that Jonathan's family has been working for quite some time earning pennies and shillings from various sources. His surrender of 'egg-rasher' monies is therefore somewhat shy of his total available savings: small recompense for a robbed man, however. In the final analysis, Jonathan has negotiated with violent thieves for the safety of his wife and children for a ransom he can afford.

It is noteworthy that the surrendering of the money itself is not actually described in the story. Paragraph 41 (p. 4) has Jonathan fumbling with the strongbox and the next paragraph skips several hours until the next morning light. Presumably, Jonathan takes the twenty Nigerian pounds and surrenders them to the thief, meeting him face-to-face at the front door.

Paragraph 42 (Page 4)

Paragraph 42 (Page 4) Summary

Morning arrives and neighbors assemble to review the results of the night's unfortunate disturbance. They discover Jonathan already up and about, readying his bicycle for another trip to fetch wine and water. Maria is already sweating over an open fire, cooking breakfast items for sale. Jonathan's oldest son is cleaning bottles and preparing for the day's sale of watered wine. Everything appears calm and normal.

Paragraph 42 (Page 4) Analysis

Like many of the paragraphs in the story, this paragraph marks another radical transition. Jonathan returns to the life he experienced when he first returned to Enugu, working at small jobs to earn what he can, using his bicycle to perform transportation jobs beyond the easy ability of most. Maria is similarly dedicated to using her skills and available resources to better the family. The parents' example is obviously having a positive effect on their oldest boy who rises early to assist in the day's businesses. It is obvious that the Iwegbu family will continue to succeed even after experiencing the night robbery.

One might at first assume the neighbors would be ashamed to assemble after failing to assist the previous night. The situation is not so simple, however. Recall that the thieves were assembled as a body of at least six men, probably more, and led by a determined individual who was clearly in command. Finally, at least one of the men, and therefore probably more, had an automatic weapon. As made obvious, no police or other law enforcement could be summoned. Thus, any neighbor who attempted to assist the Iwegbu family would likely find himself or herself the immediate target of weapons fire and subsequent robbery. Jonathan's acceptance of his neighbors' commiseration is indicative of his implicit acknowledgement that their help was not possible.

Paragraph 43 (Page 4)

Paragraph 43 (Page 4) Summary

Jonathan speaks to the assembled crowd while he continues to work. He states that he counts the robbery as nothing, noting that he did not depend on his twenty Nigerian pounds the previous week, and all was well, and he will not need it or depend on it in the future, and all will be well. He condemns the Nigerian money to imaginary flames, noting that is has now joined nearly everything else in his life as being lost to the war. Jonathan finally concludes, ending the story, with the statement that "Nothing puzzles God" (Paragraph 43, p. 4).

Paragraph 43 (Page 4) Analysis

The story concludes with the touching and profound summary delivered by Jonathan Iwegbu as he continues to ready for the day's work. In essence, he announces that the robbery was meaningless, while obviously unfortunate. He has lived for many years without the money, he survived without it just fine during the previous week; it was in his possession only a few hours. Clearly, he has no need of it beyond desire or greed. His hard work and his family's support entitle him to a secure future. He compares the money to "other things that went with the war" (Paragraph 43, p. 4) and notes that the money is, in relative terms, insignificant. Jonathan is clearly referring to his lost child who was without price to the honest father. He concludes by condemning the money to imaginary flames, saying that it can go where all things go because God, in His infinite wisdom, will continue to provide the necessities of life.

Characters

Jonathan Iwegbu

Jonathan Iwegbu has survived the Nigerian civil war, along with his wife and three of his four children, and now he faces the uncertain future with optimism. He gives thanks for what he does have rather than regret what he has lost. He counts all the blessings he has been given, chief among them his family, and after that, his scant material possessions, his bicycle and his home. He uses these possessions to immediately begin rebuilding his life; the bicycle becomes a taxi, and the house becomes a bar. The one thing that Jonathan cannot cast a positive light on is the thieves' assault; however, he still never complains about losing twenty pounds, a significant sum. Instead, the next morning finds Jonathan, and his family, hard at work again, already looking ahead to the future.

Maria Iwegbu

Maria is Jonathan's wife. Like her husband, she works hard to rebuild their family's life after the war.

Leader of the Thieves

The leader of the thieves mocks Jonathan's family's efforts to rouse help. He understands that the neighbors and even the police are too frightened to come to the family's aid. The leader of the thieves, who is well armed, threatens violence against the Iwegbus to get Jonathan to turn over his money.

Objects/Places

Federal Republic of Nigeria

Nigeria is the most populous country on the African continent and is located in West Africa. Nigeria was established in 1960 after declaring independence from British rule. In 1967 several states attempted to secede as the Republic of Biafra. The civil war claimed approximately three million civilian lives and lasted until early 1970. Nigeria is the setting for the short story.

Republic of Biafra

The Republic of Biafra was a short-lived political entity composed of several states which attempted to secede from Nigeria. The republic was established in mid 1967 and lasted until early 1970. Its original capital was Enugu, but that city quickly fell to the loyalist government forces. The Republic of Biafra suffered heavy initial losses and many millions of displaced persons lived in refugee camps for prolonged periods of time. The Republic of Biafra issued Biafran pounds; the money was considered viable for only a short period of time and then became worthless due to hyperinflation around the time of the conclusion of the civil war.

Enugu

Enugu is a large city in southern Nigeria and the home of Jonathan Iwegbu. Enugu was established in July 1967 as the original capital city of the secessionist southern states. It was sacked by Nigerian governmental forces in September 1967 and thereafter held by the loyalist forces. Jonathan presumably fled the city prior to its capture, and then returned to his home there after the January 1970 ceasefire.

Forest Refugee Camp

After Jonathan and his family evacuate from Enugu they live in at least one refugee camp which is described as a "forest hole" (Paragraph 4, pp. 1-2). The camp is not well described but does have a large central graveyard where Jonathan buries his youngest son and, later, his bicycle.

Bicycle

Jonathan owns a bicycle that represents a considerable ability to transport heavy loads of goods or cover long distances with relative ease. Jonathan uses his bicycle to make small amounts of money transporting things for other people. In early 1969 he realizes that his bicycle will eventually be stolen because of the civil unrest accompanying the

civil war. He therefore buries his bicycle in a camp graveyard where it stays for about one year. After the end of the war Jonathan digs up his bicycle and finds it no worse for the wear.

Iwegbu House

Jonathan and Maria Iwegbu own a small house in Enugu prior to the civil war. The house is constructed primarily of mud bricks and zinc sheet roofing. It has a door and several windows. The house survives the war and is reclaimed by Jonathan in February 1970. He repairs the house and once again the family makes it a home.

Palm Wine, Mangoes, and Akara Balls

After the war Jonathan makes money by selling watered-down palm wine, his children make money by gathering and selling mangoes, and Maria makes money by cooking and selling akara balls, a type of breakfast food. These items are indicative of the industriousness of the Iwegbu family in that any family could pursue similar sources of income, though very few actually do.

Biafran Pounds

After seceding from Nigeria, the Republic of Biafra issues paper money and aluminum coins on the familiar pounds-shilling-pence system; the primary unit available is the printed pound note. The money circulates throughout the civil war period though it is plagued by inflation and limited availability. By late 1969 two pounds purchase a load of firewood, by early 1970 six pounds purchase a four-mile taxi ride on a bicycle, and only a few months later fifty pounds secure semi-skilled carpenter labor for a few hours. Eventually nearly all Biafran money is surrendered to the Nigerian government in exchange for *ex gratia* payments of Nigerian pounds.

Nigerian Pounds

During the period discussed in the story the official Nigerian monetary system is based on the familiar pounds-shilling-pence system. Nigerian money is severely restricted in the Republic of Biafra and virtually unavailable to common people. Whereas the Biafran pound loses nearly all value to inflation, the Nigerian pound retains its value and is highly desirable.

Ex Gratia Payments

After the end of the war the Nigerian government sponsors an *ex gratia* payment of twenty Nigerian pounds to all who surrender their stock of Biafran pounds. Because most of the local populace have difficulty pronouncing *ex gratia*, the Nigerian pounds

are routinely referred to as "egg-rasher" money. Note that 'rasher' is British slang for a slice of bacon and thus the slang term could be Americanized as "bacon n' eggs".

Themes

War

"Civil Peace" takes place in the year after the Nigerian civil war has ended. Nigerians such as Jonathan feel fortunate simply to still be alive, as evidenced by the "current fashion" of greeting people with the words "Happy survival!" Now they face the monumental task of rebuilding both their country and their lives. Their difficulties are described throughout the story, both through the plight of Jonathan's family and that of his neighbors and acquaintances. A wealthy neighbor's home has been reduced to a "mountain of rubble," and many other poor Nigerians are also rendered homeless. The tools of the "destitute" carpenter who Jonathan hires consist merely of "one old hammer, a blunt plane and a few bent and rusty nails." The coal mine in Enugu does not reopen, leaving many men with no means of support. Meanwhile, in the midst of this economic chaos, bands of thieves roam the region, stealing money without fear that anyone—even the police—will stop them. The difficulties of this post-war period are also obliquely referenced in Jonathan's gratefulness at what he does retain: the house that is standing even though it lacks doors, windows, and part of the roof; and his old bicycle, which he places into service as a taxi.

Law and Justice

During the war, lawlessness prevailed, as demonstrated by Jonathan's recollection of the requisition of his bicycle. A man, who was falsely masquerading as a military officer, commandeered the bicycle and then accepted a bribe of two pounds for its return; in reality, he was a thief.

In the aftermath of the war, this lawlessness continues, and institutions of justice are unable to— or choose not to—perform their duties. The watchman has fallen silent, failing to alert the residents to potential danger. The police do not respond to the Iwegbu family's pleas for help, failing in their duty to protect Nigeria's citizens. The thieves, armed with automatic weapons and threatening to enter the flimsy house, pose a possibility of real violence, which the family must thwart without help from anyone else. Additionally, the band of thieves who attack the home are likely soldiers or former soldiers themselves, as was often the case in post-civil war Nigeria. Jonathan's negative response when the leader asks, "[Y]ou wan make we call soja?" provides justification for making such an assumption.

Work Ethic

One of the themes of "Civil Peace" is the work ethic and its positive results. Jonathan makes use of everything at his disposal to achieve economic gain in the lean post-war year. He transforms his bicycle into a taxi, and in the course of two weeks, he pedals approximately eighty miles to earn money. His ability to return his home to a livable

condition is also reliant on his work ethic. Because Jonathan goes back to Enugu before his neighbors do so, he is able to collect the zinc, wood, and cardboard that is needed to repair the damage the war has inflicted on the structure. Once resettled in their home, all members of the Iwegbu family set to work. The children pick mangoes to sell to soldiers' wives and Maria makes breakfast balls to sell to the neighbors. Jonathan uses these earnings to open a bar. While embarking upon this business, Jonathan still continues to regularly check in at the offices of the coal company, where he formerly worked as a miner, to see if it will reopen. The reader can assume that if returning to his former profession would earn him more money, Jonathan would do so. Even the day after the thieves' terrifying visit finds Jonathan and his family up before dawn already hard at work as if nothing had happened. The descriptors Achebe chooses in these last paragraphs underscore the family's work ethic; Jonathan is "strapping" a five-gallon container to his back; his wife is "sweating in the open fire."

Family Is Significant

Jonathan's entire focus is on his family and their needs. He is a remarkably selfless man and spends all of his time trying to provide for his family under difficult circumstances. The story opens with his joyful consideration that God has preserved his wife and three of his four children; the five family members will be together. The story closes with his joyful consideration that God will continue to provide for his family's needs. Jonathan is complemented by his wife Maria who also puts family values first and remains loyal to the family at all costs. Together, Jonathan and Maria work constantly and hard at what small jobs are available to garner additional foods and benefits for their children. Their constant example is noted by their children and by the conclusion of the story the oldest son is waking early in the morning and assisting his parents with the day's work.

The family is described only in general terms; the couple has four children. One child, the youngest son, dies during the civil war from unspecified causes—military violence or disease are the most-likely culprits. One other child is referred to as the oldest son. As Jonathan specifies two children as being sons, it is reasonable to assume that at least one of the other children is a daughter though this must be inferred. It is possible that the oldest and youngest children are both daughters due to the references to the two sons noted in the story, but this is far from certain.

Perhaps the scene that most clearly identifies the family as the central unit and basic theme is the moment during the night robbery when the entire family huddles in abject terror and calls out repeatedly for police assistance which is not forthcoming. None of the family members attempts escape or separate negotiation, and they all act together as a cohesive unit throughout this, their most difficult circumstance. They are clearly and metaphorically isolated from everyone else, including their neighbors, by the weapon-bearing thieves. Finally, the entire family respond to the tragedy in the same way, with a positive outlook and a faith in God.

Nothing Puzzles God

In the short short story the phrase "nothing puzzles God" appears four times, and Jonathan apparently routinely uses the expression to indicate pleasure in God's attentive care or to indicate that God will always watch out for his children. There are several additional religious references in the story—Jonathan feels the survival of his family is a miracle and refers to their lives as blessings; he feels that God has preserved the integrity of his Enugu home; he compares receiving a monetary payment as being like Christmas; he states that God is his personal maker; and he calls upon God as his personal witness, twice, that he is telling the truth to the thieves.

Although the idiom 'nothing puzzles' is not typical of Americanized worship, the sentiment is clearly that God is all-knowing and all-powerful, and will provide life's necessities to those in need in accordance with his plan of divine providence. Although Jonathan might be surprised by his bicycles' preservation, or his house's preservation, or even his family's preservation, certainly God is not so surprised because He has caused these events to occur in accordance with Divine grace. Jonathan does not appear to be a religious man *per se*; that is, he is not noted for attending any formalized religious services and he does not discuss religion or even divinity with his friends or family. Instead, he is a faithful man who regards God as a personally-interested Divinity who will provide for his family after Jonathan's abilities so to do are exhausted. Jonathan's casual reliance on God's grace is refreshing, transparent, and also successful, and the nature of this theme makes the story set in a time of woe exciting, challenging, and energizing.

Work Yields Results

The story presents two broad classes of people—those who organize their efforts and routinely work for their own betterment, and those who do not. The second class of people is symbolically represented by the unemployed coal miners who, after the civil war ends, return to the Coal Company's office and simply lie about in the street apparently waiting for the Coal Company to be re-established and subsequently tell them what to do with their lives. Jonathan notes with dismay that many of his fellow ex-miners "just slept outside the doors of the offices and cooked what meal they could scrounge together in Bournvita tins" (Paragraph 6, p. 2). Clearly, their lives were not improving. Another example of the inactive group is found in the hapless man who is robbed in plain sight—apparently not even determined enough to retain his money to place it in a pocket without giant holes.

On the other hand Jonathan and Maria exemplify and symbolize that class of people which works hard to make a personal difference. Whether in a forest refugee camp or living amid the post-war destruction of Enugu, both characters find ways to make small improvements in their living conditions. Jonathan makes trifling amounts of money through hard work, as does Maria, and this seed capital is then invested in other processes and made into more significant monies. Even the children participate by

gathering and selling mangoes, simple tasks. Thus, the Iwegbu family is self-assured in its ability to provide for the future.

The end result of self-reliance can be found in the disparate responses to robbery exhibited between Jonathan and the hapless victim; the latter man collapses in near-madness and writhes upon the ground damning his ill fortune and considering a bleak and hopeless future. On the other hand, Jonathan emerges from his horrible nighttime experience with a determination to continue to work as usual, trusting in God's providence for his future.

Style

Setting

The setting of "Civil Peace" is Enugu, the former capital of Biafra (eastern Nigeria) and the surrounding countryside. The most important aspects that define both settings are not the physical geography but the human geography. Both settings are populated with official functionaries and neighbors. These two groups provide a sort of economic protection—for the Iwegbu family makes their living from them—but fail to provide any physical protection. In both the countryside and the city, the Iwegbus carry out business dealings. While living in the countryside outside of Enugu, Maria barters with camp officials for needed goods, and Jonathan is able to earn money by taxiing them and their families to the nearest tarred road. Soldiers and other "lucky people" are some of the few Nigerians with money, and in Enugu, the family is able to earn money by selling mangoes to the soldiers' wives and homemade food to neighbors "in a hurry to start life again," and by opening a bar that caters primarily to soldiers.

The Iwegbus live within a community where people know each other but fail to care about its welfare. On the morning after the robbery, the "neighbours and others assembled to commiserate" with the family, and Jonathan regards them as his "sympathizers." Still, these people failed to respond to the alarm the night before. Clearly, they heard the commotion, for only hours earlier Jonathan was able to hear "all the neighbourhood noises die down one after another." In their selfish actions, these neighbors define the setting of the Iwegbu's home in Enugu, which is most likely representative of the settings in other communities within the city.

Dialogue and Dialect

Achebe uses dialogue with great discretion in "Civil Peace." In the early sections of the story, only two phrases of dialogue are presented, both of which support Jonathan's optimism: "Happy survival!" and "Nothing puzzles God." Much of the scene with the thieves, however, is rendered through dialogue that emphasizes the negative aspects of post-war Nigeria. The verbal exchanges between Jonathan and the thieves, concerning physical threats and demands for money, focus on the potential for violence.

The verbal exchange also starkly contrasts the broken English spoken by the thieves and the proper English spoken by Jonathan. The thieves' mocking of the family's call for help only reinforces these differences. For example, the family cries out, *"We are lost!"* but in broken English, this plea becomes *"we done loss-o!"* Achebe employs broken English for three reasons. The differences between these manners of speech implies that Jonathan is better educated than the thieves are. Also, the use of broken English accurately reflects eastern Nigerian society. Lastly, Achebe often used broken English for comedic affect. So in the robbery scene, the thieves' role as an instrument of

violence is downplayed, which heightens the tension; despite how ineffectual the thieves may sound, they pose a serious danger.

Point of View

The story is told from the third-person point of view. All the events in the story are filtered through Jonathan's eyes and thoughts. Because of this point of view, the reader is better able to comprehend the unfailing optimism with which Jonathan regards the world and his circumstances. The story's opening line—"Jonathan Iwegbu counted himself extraordinarily lucky"—also emphasizes this positive frame of mind. This limited point of view, however, does not share how the rest of the Iwegbu family regard their new life and the hard work that it requires. Rather, Maria and the children only exist in the story as an extension of Jonathan, feeling what he feels and valuing what he values.

Drama

In *Chinua Achebe,* C. L. Innes suggested, "The second half of this story, the account of the robbery, suggests that Achebe might well, if he so wished, prove a dramatist." Innes found that the "episode mingles fear, suspense and hilariously grim comedy." The thieves never appear "on stage," that is, the unfolding of the action remains inside the Iwegbu house at all times; the leader of the thieves becomes an off-stage actor and his band of thieves a "horrible chorus." This section also relies almost primarily on dialogue. The descriptions that are included are generally auditory. "Maria and the children sobbed," "Jonathan groaned," "automatic fire rang through the sky"—these are a few examples of descriptions that most resemble play directions.

Point of View

The short story is related in the third-person, omniscient, point of view. The unnamed narrator is completely effaced, as is typical in short fiction, and the narrative focus is entirely devoted to the experiences of the protagonist Jonathan Iwegbu. The inner thoughts of some characters are revealed, but this is nearly entirely limited to Jonathan and, to a far lesser extent, his wife and children. The third-person point of view is entirely appropriate and satisfactory, and materially aids in presenting Jonathan as a positive, hopeful, and humble man who truly puts the needs of his family before his own desires. Indeed, the point of view utilized allows the story to present an unusually refreshing glimpse into the mind of a positive character that is nearly completely devoid of selfishness in behavior, desire, and thought. As such, the point of view is highly appropriate and, indeed, required for the success of the story.

The story's setting is in a foreign land during a time of upheaval. As such, there are many elements within the narrative that are difficult to understand. For example, the phrases biro and egg-rasher are foreign slang, and their strangeness is compounded by the pidgin phrases used such as tief-man, soja, and anini. The masterfully crafted story utilizes the third person point of view to accurately portray the setting while

simultaneously wrapping it in enough supporting documentation and familiar territory that the piece is enormously successful and fully accessible to Western readers.

Setting

The story is set in southern Nigeria in a period of civil war, namely from July 1967 through January 1970; most of the action of the story occurs somewhere in the January-February 1970 timeframe, though one notable scene involving Jonathan's bicycle occurs around January 1969. Ordinarily, such minor variances in time as one or two months would not make a particular difference in short fiction. However, the backdrop of ephemeral civil war makes differences of paramount importance in this story. For example, in early January 1970 Jonathan is a refugee without any civil rights; by late January 1970 he is once again a civilian and citizen of Nigeria, possessed of as many civil rights as anyone of that time and place could assume to claim and hold. The historical setting of this short fiction is of paramount importance to a complex understanding of the narrative's subtle layers of meaning. Those desiring a more comprehensive background of the story's setting should consult external resources; such an investment would be well worth the effort.

Within the historical framework the story has two principle geographical settings. The first is an unnamed forest refugee camp probably located somewhere in the southeast Nigerian countryside within a few days' travel of Enugu. A surprising amount of detail about the camp can be gleaned from the very few sentences which discuss it. For example, it is run by officials who are wealthy and can be presumed to be governmental or international in character. It is separated from a navigable road by four miles of relatively open country. Its sources of food include fish and corn meal, and firewood is in demand. The camp is frequented by military officers and personnel. Finally, the camp features a large, cleared, central field which acts as a graveyard for the many who have died.

The second primary setting is the city of Enugu, specifically the neighborhood around Ogui Overside. The neighborhood houses the defunct Coal Company's offices, many small shack-type houses, some larger concrete structures which were demolished during the war, and a Treasury office. The area has a public water supply which works and the streets are cleared from rubble at least enough to allow easy and effective bicycle travel. Order has been largely established during daylight hours and many thousands have returned to the city, hoping to resume their prior lives. During the night, the city does not feature any law enforcement presence and appears to be quite dangerous. In general, the rich texture provided by the setting is one of the most enjoyable aspects of the story.

Language and Meaning

The narrative is presented in English with a very few words in a pidgin language included—words, generally, that have been adapted to English. All of the characters

speak English. The language used to construct the narrative is accessible and simple and allows the story to be told without being cluttered with excessive descriptions or overly-complex constructions. Indeed, the simple and intelligible narrative structure contributes materially to the enduring nature of the story.

Dialogue is particularly strong and well-crafted to fit the individual speaker. For example, Jonathan usually speaks using a formal structure free of slang or incorrect structure, whereas the thief speaks using a light-hearted structure full of slang expressions and incomplete or incorrect structure. Several minor characters speak using a commonplace vocabulary and typically simple construction. Interestingly, Jonathan's dialogue construction remains consistent even through the frightening ordeal of a nighttime robbery.

Structure

The four-page short story has a simple construction and includes a single unit of text composed of forty-three distinct paragraphs. Approximately one-forth of these paragraphs consist of a single sentence, and nearly half of them represent dialogue. The story presents a comprehensive history of Jonathan Iwegbu, the protagonist, through several narrative paragraphs delivered by the narrator. The principle 'here-and-now' action of the story is delivered in brief exchanges of colorful and highly enjoyable dialogue interspersed with infrequent statements of action delivered by the narrator.

Given the story's simple construction, a surprisingly complicated timeline is presented. The story spans a period of several months time in the principle timeline, and several narrative flashbacks directly span a period of at least one year, with inferred references trailing back for as much as three years. Considering the brevity of the piece, the breadth of vision and scope of action are carried off amazingly well and the story's structure bears up well under critical examination. The simple structure contributes materially to the story's success and enduring nature.

Historical Context

The First Governments

Nigeria, a British colony, gained its independence in 1960. Each of Nigeria's regions was the center of one of the major ethnic groups—the Muslim Hausa and Fulani in the north, the Christian Ibo in the southeast, and the Yoruba, who were Muslim or Christian, in the west. The new country's first government was a parliamentary system, with each region represented in the federal government. The northern region, however, with its large population, soon dominated the entire country politically. Friction increased, particularly between the Hausa/Fulani and the Ibo in the southeast. In January 1966, an Ibo-dominated group of eastern army officers, hoping to rid the country of political corruption, led a coup that toppled the government. They handed over control of Nigeria to the commander-in-chief of the army, Maj. Gen. Johnson T. U. Aguiyi-Ironsi, who abolished the federal constitution and established a military government.

As Aguiyi-Ironsi attempted to promote national unity by doing away with the traditional regional power structure, political tensions led to tribal conflict. In July 1966, a group of northern army personnel launched another coup, placing Lt. Col. Yakubu Danjuma Go won in power. He restored the federal system of government in August.

The Civil War

Since the first coup, the Ibo, now living in the north, had experienced violent persecution. Many Ibo were killed, and hundreds of thousands of others fled to their traditional homeland in the south. They began to fear that the July coup was an attempt by the north to gain control of all of Nigeria. These concerns led Lt. Col. Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the military governor of eastern Nigeria, to boycott the constitutional talks held in October 1966. He pressed for a loosening of the bonds of the federation. Negotiations broke down, however, and in March 1967, eastern Nigeria announced that it no longer recognized Gowon as its head of government. In May 1967, the Ibo declared their secession and the formation of the Republic of Biafra.

A bloody civil war broke out in July as the federal government attempted to reclaim its territory. The Ibo experienced initial military victories, but soon the momentum was swinging in favor of Nigeria. The Biafran capital of Enugu fell to federal troops in October 1967. By April of the following year, the Nigerian army had reconquered most of the eastern territory. In May 1968, federal forces occupied Port Harcourt, Biafra's last remaining supply link with the outside world. Although the Biafran forces were surrounded, the rebellion continued until January 1970, when they surrendered. Along with heavy military casualties, perhaps as many as one million civilians died during the war, many the result of severe malnutrition.

Post-Civil War Nigeria

Col. Gowon remained in control of the Nigerian government. He initiated a policy of reconciliation with the Biafran rebels and announced his intention to stay in power until 1976, which he set as his target year for the country's return to an elected civilian government. Many Nigerians criticized this six-year plan, worrying that the military would retain power indefinitely. The Gowon regime also was attacked for its widespread, blatant corruption. Graft (illegal or unfair gain, such as in money), bribery, and nepotism were an integral part of all levels of government. In 1973, the federal government established a special anticorruption police force, known as the X-Squad, whose investigations revealed ingenious forms of extortion and fraud among private businesses and professions, as well as in the government and public corporations. Crime also posed a serious threat to internal security. Armed gangs, often composed of former soldiers, roamed the countryside, robbing, extorting, and kidnapping Nigerians. Sometimes the gangs operated with the approval of the local police or included moonlighting soldiers. Although punishment for these crimes was severe, including public executions, the government was unable to curb the crime rate.

In the face of such difficulties, Gowon came to increasingly depend on a small group of advisers. He also backed off from the 1976 date to return to civilian rule, declaring that it would only worsen the nation's plight. Protests staged in May and June brought essential services to a standstill. In July 1975, Gowon was deposed in a bloodless military coup, and a new government emerged.

Critical Overview

"Civil Peace" was first published in the Nigerian journal *Okike* in 1971, and it was collected in the volume *Girls at War and Other Stories,* published the following year. *Girls at War* brought together all of the short stories Achebe had written over the past twenty years. As such, the twelve pieces dealt with a wide range of the Nigerian experience, most notably, custom and religious beliefs, the contrast between traditional and contemporary society, as well as the Nigerian civil war. "Civil Peace" is one of the latter, and takes place after the war has ended.

At the time that the collection was published, most contemporary critics responded favorably. The *New Yorker* extolled Achebe's short pieces as "worldly, intelligent, absorbing." I. A. Menkiti wrote in *Library Journal* that "the stories are a delight . . . Achebe deals deftly and with unforgettable wit." The *Saturday Review* complimented Achebe's prose as "masterfully simple and concise without ever being mannered." The reviewer for *Choice* prophesied two audiences for *Girls at War:* "people who already admire Achebe's work [who] will want to discover a new dimension of his talent; [and] others [who] will find a series of engaging African tales." The war stories, "impressive and moving for dealing so obliquely with the actual carnage," according to *Choice,* demonstrated Achebe's ongoing involvement with the political situation. The *Saturday Review* lauded them as "the most effective in the book."

Because Achebe even then was known primarily for his novels (by 1972, four novels had already been published), many contemporary critics compared *Girls at War* to his longer works. *Choice* noted that the individual stories were "somewhat slender" and bemoaned the

brevity of the short story form [which] does not allow Achebe to demonstrate his major skill—the contrivance of an inexorably intensifying series of circumstances that produce human disaster for the characters and a rich catharsis for the reader.

The *Saturday Review* noted a similarity in the "underlying theme" of Achebe's stories and his longer pieces while Menkiti found that the "collection yields valuable insight into the development of the author's narrative style as well as the thematic concerns which were later to shape his major works."

In the decades following initial publication of "Civil Peace," literary scholars also analyzed the relationship of the stories to the novels. Whereas G. D. Killam concluded in *The Writings of Chinua Achebe* that the short stories in *Girls at War* "reveal the same interests as the longer fiction" thematically, C. L. Innes carried this comparison further in *Chinua Achebe.* Wrote Innes,

Whereas the novels have told the stories of those who aspired to be central to their communities or the nation, these stories dwell on the perspectives and situations of those who have never seen themselves as holders of power—for the most part they are concerned with physical and psychological survival.

Like Jonathan Iwegbu in "Civil Peace," Innes writes, "they generally see themselves as more or less lucky rather than good or clever."

Readers have also responded to and questioned other aspects of "Civil Peace." In his essay "Politics and the African Writer," Kolawole Ogungbesan stated his belief that while Achebe's war stories "minutely recapitulated the ugly facts of life in Biafra" during the war period, they were not "good work[s] of art." Ogungbesan compared Achebe's efforts to those of a journalist: "A work of art should create, not just copy," he declared. Innes, however, found that the story surpassed even the boundaries of short fiction, suggesting that the second half of the story showed that Achebe "might well, if he wished prove a dramatist. The episode mingles fear, suspense and hilariously grim comedy." Innes did raise one possible point of disputation: the reader's response. Wrote Innes, the

reader might well view the wit, energy, compassion and muted optimism of this story in the aftermath of the civil war with something of the admiring incredulity with which he or she responds to Jonathan Iwegbu's unfailing optimism as he counts his blessings after the devastation of the war.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses the optimism and pessimism in Achebe's short story.

Achebe's "Civil Peace" shares one man's experience in a tumultuous post-civil war period. Published in 1971, only a short time after the war in Nigeria ended, the story chronicles a perilous era at the same time that Nigerians were still undergoing the sort of trials that it describes. As in his other short stories focusing on the war, Achebe does not attempt to maintain an authorial sense of detachment. "Civil Peace" represents Achebe's ongoing social commitment to his culture, his people, and the fight against injustice.

"Civil Peace" captures a spirit of optimism. After three years, the bloody, deadly war is finally over. Though the people of eastern Nigeria, the former Biafra, have lost their bid for independence, with the end of the conflict, they can refocus their attention. Now, instead of funneling their energies into either the war effort or merely getting by, they can work for better, more prosperous times. The story opens on an extremely positive note:

Jonathan Iwegbu counted himself extraordinarily lucky. 'Happy survival!' meant so much more to him than just a current fashion of greeting old friends in the first hazy days of peace. It went deep to his heart.

Jonathan is sensitive to his plight and that of other Biafrans. He knows he is lucky to have escaped the war with "five inestimable blessings— his head, his wife Maria's head and the heads of three out of their four children."

After the war ends, wherever Jonathan goes he encounters yet "another miracle waiting for him." He digs up the bicycle that he buried for safekeeping during the war, and he is able to put it into service as a taxi after only a little greasing with palm oil. Thus, at a time when many people had few material possessions at their disposal or lacked the means to make a living, Jonathan is able to embark on building his new life. His occupational success, which he deems good fortune, is later contrasted to the occupational disarray that his former colleagues at the coal mine experience. Whereas, he has created the job of running his bar, many of them are unemployed and spend their days and weeks waiting outside the mining offices, hoping to hear news of its reopening.

Upon his first trip back to Enugu, another "monumental blessing" stands before Jonathan: his "little zinc house." While other people might bemoan its loss of doors, windows, and five sheets off the roof, Jonathan brushes any concerns aside. Again, he chooses to spend his time and energy being grateful for what he still retains, not regretful for what he has lost because of the war. He also rationalizes any misfortune. For instance, with regard to his house, since he is one of the early returnees to Enugu,

he is able to readily collect enough materials to repair it. Soon, the "overjoyed" family is able to move back in. The house even becomes a "greater blessing" as it allows Jonathan to open a bar, which turns out to be his primary source of income.

"Nothing puzzles God," is Jonathan's favorite saying to express his wonder as he encounters all of these miracles. Writes C. L. Innes in *Chinua Achebe,* "[f]or Jonathan, every small act of recovery—even the money earned by the hard work of his wife and himself is *ex gratia,* an act of grace bestowed upon the lucky by the unfathomable gods." Indeed, when he receives his "egg-rasher" payment from the government, even after waiting in lines for five days, he compares the egg-rasher to a "windfall" and the day to Christmas. In his eyes, the twenty pounds is a gift from the government, not personal earnings. He thus denies the hard work that he performed in the past, which led him to possess the Biafran rebel money that he then exchanged for the ex-gratia payment.

Even after losing this enormous sum of money to the band of thieves, Jonathan does not forsake his optimistic outlook. In this respect, he stands in stark contrast to another man who lost his egg-rasher money and then "collapse[d] into near-madness in an instant." When Jonathan's neighbors come over to sympathize with his loss, Jonathan displays composure. He has neither the inclination, nor the time, to share their regret. Significantly, as they are speaking their words of commiseration, Jonathan has mentally and physically already moved on. "'I count it as nothing,' he told his sympathizers, his eyes on the rope he was tying." His eyes are fixed on the future—the rope that represents the earnings that will come his way through his hard work and that of his family. Also significantly, Jonathan imputes no blame on his neighbors or manifests any bitterness toward them for not coming to the aid of his family. The story closes with Jonathan's oft-repeated expression of hope: "Nothing puzzles God."

Despite the many notes of optimism that ring throughout the story, a darker undercurrent runs through it, which is discernible from the very first paragraph. When the narration enumerates Jonathan' s most important blessings as the lives of three of his four children, no regret for the little boy who was lost is evident. In the second paragraph, the narrative style turns even grimmer as the boy is obliquely compared to the bicycle, which Jonathan buried during the war "in the little clearing in the bush where the dead of the camp, including his own youngest son, were buried." After the war had ended, the bicycle is metaphorically and physically brought back from the dead, becoming a "miracle," but the boy is never mentioned again. Another dark note is tacitly raised by the Iwegbu children's mango-selling business. They collect the fruit near the military cemetery, and with this minor detail, the narration implies that any present success of Nigeria will be based only upon the deaths of those who suffered during the war.

Similarly, while Jonathan downplays the psychological effect of the thieves' visit, the menace posed by this band alludes to the dangers inherent in contemporary Nigerian society. The house is hardly a miracle anymore, for behind "its rickety old door [that] could have fallen down," Jonathan and his family can find no true safety. The thieves represent modern devices of carnage. They are armed with automatic weapons that

"rang through the sky." Their leader's voice carries "like a lone shot in the sky." They make threats to enter the house if they don't get the money they demand. To keep them out, Jonathan is forced to swear on the lives of his wife and children, his "inestimable blessings," that he only has twenty pounds. With this declaration, Jonathan shows the close linkage between life and death in post-civil war Nigeria.

Jonathan also explains to his neighbors why he does not care about the loss of his "egg-rasher" payment. As he points out, he did not "depend on it last week" and instead relied on his own labor to rebuild his life. However, the words that he uses to express the insignificance of this loss actually shows that Jonathan—and Nigerians like him—have experienced terrible losses solely because of the war. He compares the "egg-rasher" to "other things that went with the war." But the reader knows that Nigerians lost precious, irreplaceable possessions in the war: children, homes, the ability to earn a living, a sense of security and safety. Therefore, despite Jonathan's disavowal, the egg-rasher *must* be a serious loss. "I say, let *egg-rasher* perish in the flames! Let it go where everything else has gone," Jonathan declares, but likening the theft of the money to its immolation in fire acknowledges that the war has actually brought about useless, devastating destruction, the kind that cannot be so easily forgotten or mended. G. D. Killam points out the discrepancy between what Jonathan claims to feel and what he must be feeling in *The Writings of Chinua Achebe:* "And though he says that he can accept his losses in peacetime as he has accepted those in war . . . there is really faint consolation for him and little to distinguish 'civil peace' from civil war."

The words of the leader of the thieves also supports Killam's assertion. "Trouble done finish," the leader tells Jonathan. "War done finish. . . . No Civil War again. This time na Civil Peace. No be so?" Jonathan and his family lost almost everything during the civil war. Now, when the war is over and the country should be at peace, they once again lose their most valuable possessions. The implication seems to be that there is really little difference in Nigeria during the civil war and after the civil war. In both times, lawlessness prevails with little hope for substantial improvement.

That a reader can find both optimistic and pessimistic, both earnest and cynical, messages within the text of a story as brief as "Civil Peace" should come as little surprise. The instability of a post-war period may easily engender ambiguity within all aspects of society and generate vastly different responses from those who live through it. Jonathan Iwegbu and the energetic hope with which he approaches the reconstruction of his life, combined with the undercurrent of insecurity inherent in Nigeria, represent a wide gamut of that country's experience. In a 1969 interview, Achebe declared, "I believe it's impossible to write anything in Africa without some kind of commitment, some kind of message, some kind of protest." "Civil Peace" is Achebe's protest against the anguish the Nigerian civil war has brought and his message of brighter hopes for the future.

Source: Rena Korb, Critical Essay on "Civil Peace," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Sanderson holds a master of fine arts degree in fiction writing and is an independent writer. In this essay, she examines how Chinua Achebe's ideas about the roles of the story and the storyteller in society are reflected in his short story.

At first blush, Achebe's short story "Civil Peace" appears to be a sad tale of one man's failure to cash in on the meager rewards of post-civil war Nigeria.

Jonathan's windfall of twenty Nigerian pounds is taken from him in a midnight scene filled with portents of violence and bloodshed. But, if the reader examines Achebe's own words about the storyteller's responsibility in society, "Civil Peace" can be construed as a story that teaches its readers about survival and about the merits of a never-say-die attitude.

In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, aired in January 1994 on the Canadian Broadcasting System's show *Writers and Company* and later reprinted in *The Malahat Review,* Achebe talked about the writer's role:

I don't think the world needs to be told stories of despair; there is enough despair as it is without anyone adding to it. If we have any role at all, I think it's the role of optimism, not blind or stupid optimism but the kind which is meaningful, one that is rather close to that notion of the world which is not perfect, but which can be improved. In other words, we don't just sit and hope that things will work out; we have a role to play to make that come about. That seems to me to be the reason for the existence of the writer.

As with many of his stories, Achebe presents "Civil Peace" in the form of fable or a traditional tale—a story that teaches a lesson and culminates in a moral. In his interview with Wachtel, Achebe noted that he grew up fascinated with the tales of the Ibo, Achebe's tribe of origin in Nigeria, and remembers choosing to listen to the Ibo storytellers even while being reared as a Christian to reject many of the indigenous ways of his ancestors. Like a traditional tale, "Civil Peace" is told in the third person, and Achebe tells readers little about his main character except the information critical to the telling of the tale. This makes for a lean and clear account proceeding directly to the message Achebe wishes to deliver, the importance of making right choices in the face of challenges. "I think good stories attract us and good stories are also moral stories . . . and I think there is something in us which impels us towards good stories," said Achebe.

The tone Achebe uses for his story of Jonathan and his experiences after the civil war between Nigeria and the state of Biafra, which declared its independence in 1967, is that of a man who understands the limitations of his position but seeks to function as successfully as he can within those limitations. Jonathan never complains but is cautious and careful in his dealings and always looks toward what he has been able to save from the years of bloody conflict in which hundreds of thousands of his countrymen have died. This is not a man who is blind to the great tragedy around him, so whatever he has gives him strength to push on.

At the same time, Jonathan does not operate with the blind optimism of the philosopher Pangloss, a character in Voltaire's play *Candide* who embraces the attitude that he lives in "the best of possible worlds," despite the numerous misfortunes and calamities that befall him. The greeting of the day after the civil war, "Happy survival," is Jonathan's doctrine, indicating his willingness to surmount almost any calamity with endurance and hard work. As well, this greeting makes clear that Jonathan understands the circumstances in which he and his neighbors find themselves.

Achebe presents Jonathan immediately as a confidently resourceful man, despite the loss of one of his four children, ready to put his family's life back together again. Instead of fighting with the soldier for his bicycle, Jonathan "suspecting that he might be amenable to influence," gives the soldier money in exchange for the bicycle. Even though this costs him money that was meant for his family's immediate provisions, Jonathan's quick thinking and pragmatism pays off in the end because he is able to use the bicycle a year later to make money. In fact, Achebe uses this scene to illustrate a moment of post-war rebirth: after burying the bicycle to prevent any further challenges to its ownership, Jonathan unearths it, giving the valuable machine a new and lucrative life as a taxi.

Jonathan sees any good fortune that comes his way as a miracle, a gift from God. In fact, his response to much of what happens in the story— both good and bad—is to say in amazement "nothing puzzles God." But these are not the words of a man giving in to circumstance; rather the phrase echoes Achebe's belief that the world is not meant to be perfect, but a work in progress, with humanity's participation. The Ibo people have a different notion of creation than do most Western societies. In his interview with Wachtel, Achebe acknowledged that, in the Ibo view, "God is constantly having a conversation with humanity on how to improve the environment. It was not finished in six days; we have a role to play." He adds that the Ibo do not struggle against the fact of imperfection, but believe that it is their duty to make the world a better place through their work. Evil is to be expected and recognized—this is the only way to proceed in the world.

Readers who come to "Civil Peace" without at least a brief acquaintance with Achebe's ideas about the roles of writing and writers in the development of a nation and its people might find themselves confused. Why doesn't Jonathan fight the injustice occurring amid the breakdown of civil society? Why doesn't he fight off the criminal gang at his door? Why isn' t he angry that his neighbors, as well as the police, are so unresponsive to his cries for help? But in the Ibo setting, Jonathan's responses to the events around him are perfectly reasonable. A close examination of those characters in the story who do call out for revenge or expect assistance against wrongdoers makes clear that those who recognize the power of evil and, instead of ranting against it, move toward a practical solution, are the most successful. For example, Jonathan recounts the story of a man who received his post-war *ex gratia* payment (or "egg-rasher" payment, as "few could manage its proper official name"), only to have it stolen almost immediately. The unlucky man's response was to "collapse into near-madness," a reaction that the unsympathetic surrounding crowd, as well as Jonathan, thinks unnecessary and unproductive.

Jonathan makes sure that when he receives his payment, it is deposited into his pocket and protected by his hand.

Nevertheless, despite his precautions, Jonathan later loses the money to a gang that robs him at his house. He calls out to his neighbors and to the police for help, but soon realizes that the situation's outcome is entirely up to him. Jonathan is upset but practical in his response: "What is egg-rasher? Did I depend on it last week? . . . Nothing puzzles God." The morning after the robbery, his family is back to their usual activities, trying to survive in the harsh post-war economy, as the egg-rasher was no greater than "the other things that went with the war," according to Jonathan. Achebe's words are echoed here: the world is a progres sive effort, and man's j ob is to work with God to make it a better place. Crying over the lost money would not bring it back, but getting on with the day's efforts would soon bring more wealth to his family.

Jonathan, with his practicality, is also contrasted to his neighbors, who insist on endlessly waiting at the Coal Corporation, expecting to be hired back to their pre-war jobs. Jonathan checks back with the company a few times, just in case work does become available, but after a period he decides that what he has now is far better than what could be at the mining company. He takes matters into his own hands and "faced his palm wine bar" and his family' s other entrepreneurial efforts. While he could have given in to anger at not getting his old job back, he believes that a successful person cannot rely on capricious events.

In Charles H. Rowell's 1989 interview with Achebe, published in *Conversations With Chinua Achebe,* the author stressed the educational responsibility of his fellow African writers. "The story of today has to do with raising the standards of education of the country, you see," remarked Achebe. This sentiment is a guiding force for Jonathan's actions in "Civil Peace." To have Jonathan violently strike out against those who do him harm— whether it is the government of the army or a group of thieves—would run counter to Achebe's understanding of the power of writing and storytelling. Achebe feels a great responsibility in the telling of his tales and expects his readers to see the morality in his protagonists' actions and decisions. To allow Jonathan the possible satisfaction of reprisal, in Achebe's mind, would be negligent and in blatant disregard of the influence a storyteller traditionally holds in the Nigerian and Ibo societies. Speaking of his readers, Achebe commented to Rowell, "They are not expecting frivolity. They are expecting literature to say something important to help them in their struggle with life."

Achebe places Jonathan in the midst of this struggle—the same one faced by many of his fellow Nigerians after the Biafran civil war. After a war, when the rules of civil society have been bent and broken, each person must daily make decisions that impact the survival of his or her family. The temptation to join others who simply wait around for help, to fall to larcenous behavior, or to become bitter at the sight of so much unpunished wrongdoing, can be especially great. In "Civil Peace," Achebe celebrates the uncelebrated heroes of a war, the ones who come back to their homes and try to pick up the pieces of a shattered nation, one small affirmative act at a time.

Source: Susan Sanderson, Critical Essay on "Civil Peace," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Quotes

"Jonathan Iwegbu counted himself extraordinarily lucky. 'Happy survival!' meant so much more to him than just a current fashion of greeting old friends in the first hazy days of peace. It went deep to his heart. He had come out of the war with five inestimable blessings—his head, his wife Maria's head, and the heads of three out of four of their children. As a bonus he also had his old bicycle—a miracle too but naturally not to be compared to the safety of five human heads." (Paragraph 1, p. 1).

"Then he made the journey to Enugu and found another miracle waiting for him. It was unbelievable. He rubbed his eyes and looked again and it was still standing there before him. But, needless to say, even that monumental blessing must be accounted as totally inferior to the five heads in the family. This newest miracle was his little house in Ogui Overside. Indeed nothing puzzles God! Only two houses away a huge concrete edifice some wealth contractor had put up just before the war was a mountain of rubble. And here was Jonathan's little zinc house of no regrets built with mud blocks quite intact! Of course the doors and windows were missing and five sheets off the roof. But what of that? And anyhow he had returned to Enugu early enough to pick up bits of old zinc and wood and soggy sheets of cardboard lying around the neighborhood before thousands more came out of their forest holes looking for the same things. He got a destitute carpenter with one old hammer, a blunt plane, and a few bent and rusty nails in his tool bag to turn this assortment of wood, paper, and metal into door and window shutters for five Nigerian shillings or fifty Biafran pounds. He paid the pounds, and moved in with his overjoyed family carrying five heads on their shoulders." (Paragraph 4, pp. 1-2).

"But nothing puzzles God. Came the day of the windfall when after five days of endless scuffles in queues and counter-queues in the sun outside the Treasury he had twenty pounds counted into his palms as ex-gratia award for the rebel money he had turned in. It was like Christmas for him and for many others like him when the payments began. They called it (since few could manages its proper official name) 'egg-rasher.'" (Paragraph 7, p. 2).

"As soon as the pound notes were placed in his palm Jonathan simply closed it tight over them and buried fist and money inside his trouser pocket. He had to be extra careful because he had seen a man a couple of days earlier collapse into near-madness in an instant before that oceanic crowd because no sooner had he got his twenty pounds than some heartless ruffian picked it off him. Though it was not right that a many in such extremity of agony should be blamed yet many in the queues that day were able to remark quietly on the victim's carelessness, especially after he pulled out the innards of his pocket and revealed a hole in it big enough to pass a thief's head. But of course he had insisted that the money had been in the other pocket, pulling it too out to show its comparative wholeness. So one had to be careful." (Paragraph 8, p. 2).

"He was normally a heavy sleeper but that night he heard all the neighborhood noises die down one after another. Even the night watchman who knocked the hour on some metal somewhere in the distance had fallen silent after knocking one o'clock. That must

have been the last thought in Jonathan's mind before he was finally carried away himself. He couldn't have been gone long, though, when he was violently awakened again." (Paragraph 10, p. 2).

"'Who is knocking?' he asked then, his voice parched and trembling.

"'Na tief-man and him people,' came the cool reply. 'Make you hopen de door.' This was followed by the heaviest knocking of all.

"Maria was the first to raise the alarm, then he followed and all their children.

"'Police-o! Thieves-o! Neighbors-o! Police-o! We are lost! We are dead! Neighbors are you asleep? Wake up! Police-o!'

"This went on for a long time and then stopped suddenly. Perhaps they had scared the thief away. There was total silence. But only for a short while.

"'You done finish?' asked the voice outside. 'Make we help you small. Oya, everybody!'

"'Police-o! Tief-man-o! Neighbors-o! we done loss-o! Police-o!...'

"There were at least five other voices besides the leader's.

"Jonathan and his family were now completely paralyzed by terror. Maria and the children sobbed inaudibly like lost souls. Jonathan groaned continuously." (Paragraphs 14-22, p. 3).

"'My frien,' he said at long last, 'we don try our best for call dem but I tink say dem all done sleep-o... So wetin we go do now? Sometaim you wan call soja? Or you wan make we call dem for you? Soja better pass police. No be so?

"'Na so!' replied his men. Jonathan thought he heard even more voices now than before and groaned heavily. His legs were sagging under him and his throat felt like sandpaper.

"'My frien, why you no de talk again. I de ask you say you wan make we call soja?'

"'No.'" (Paragraphs 24-27, p. 3).

"'Awrighto. Now make we talk business. We no be bad tief. We no like for make trouble. Trouble done finish. War done finish and all the katakata wey de for inside. No Civil War again. This time na Civil Peace. No be so?'" (Paragraph 28, p. 3).

"'Awright! We know say you no get plenty money. But we sef no get even anini. So derefore make you open dis window and give us one hundred pound and we go commot. Orderwise we do come for inside now to show you guitar-boy like dis...'

"A volley of automatic fire rang through the sky. Maria and the children began to weep aloud again.

"'Ah, missisi de cry again. No need for dat. We done talk say we na good tief. We just take our small money and go nwayorly. No molest. Abi we de molest?'

"'At all!' sang the chorus." (Paragraphs 31-34, pp. 3-4).

"'To God who made me; if you come inside and find one hundred pounds, take it and shoot me and shoot my wife and children. I swear to God. The only money I have in this life is this twenty pounds egg-rasher they gave me today...'" (Paragraph 37, p. 4).

"'OK. Time de go, make you open dis window and bring the twenty pound. We go manage am like that.'" (Paragraph 38, p. 4).

"'Shurrup!' rand the leader's voice like a lone shot in the sky and silenced the murmuring at once. 'Are you dere? Bring the money quick!'

"'I am coming,' said Jonathan fumbling in the darkness with they key of the small wooden box he kept by his side on the mat." (Paragraphs 40-41, p. 4).

"'I count it as nothing,' he told his sympathizers, his eyes on the rope he was tying. 'What is "egg-rasher"? Did I depend on it last week? Or is it greater than other things that went with the war? I say, let egg-rasher perish in the flames! Let it go where everything else has gone. Nothing puzzles God.'" (Paragraph 43, p. 4).

Topics for Further Study

Pick a scene from the story, other than the robbery. Rewrite it as a short dramatic piece. Do you need to lessen Jonathon's optimism to make the piece more dramatic? How could you expand on Jonathon's optimistic outlook through his dialogues with other characters?

Research the Nigerian civil war and its aftermath, and then compare your findings to Jonathan Iwegbu's experience. Do you think his character accurately portrays what life was like during this period?

Research Achebe' s role in Biafra during the civil war. What were your findings?

Whose attitude do you think is healthier: Jonathan's or that shared by most of his neighbors? Explain your answer.

Imagine that you are a Nigerian visual artist. What might one of your works of art look like? Describe it or create it yourself.

Compare and Contrast

1970s: The population, according to the official 1963 Nigerian census (which has many inconsistencies), is about 56 million.

Today: Nigeria's population is about 123 million.

1970s: In 1965, about 152 babies per 1,000 live births in Nigeria die.

Today: In 2000, about 74 babies per 1,000 live births in Nigeria die.

1970s: In 1970, life expectancy averages 40 years in Nigeria.

Today: In 2000, life expectancy averages 52 years in Nigeria.

1970s: A military government retains power in Nigeria.

Today: In 1999, a new constitution is adopted in Nigeria after nearly sixteen years of military rule, and a civilian government begins to be installed.

1960s: Ethnic conflicts lead to the bloody Nigerian civil war, which takes place from 1967 through 1970.

Today: Although ethnic conflict remains in Nigeria, the federal government carefully controls it, bringing a quick end to any serious outbreaks of violence.

What Do I Read Next?

Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart,* first published in 1958, is one of the most widely read African novels and is considered an international classic. It chronicles the life of an Ibo community leader in colonial Nigeria.

Wole Soyinka is a Nobel Prize-winning writer. His 1965 play, *The Strong Breed,* reveals his disillusionment with African authoritarian leadership and Nigerian society.

Destination Biafra (1982) is Nigerian writer Buchi Emecheta's novel about the Nigerian civil war.

Ngugi wa Thiongo' s (also known as James Ngugi) novel, *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), focuses on the social, moral, and racial issues of the Kenyan struggle for independence from its colonial rulers and its aftermath.

Further Study

Achebe, Chinua, *Conversations with Chinua Achebe,* edited by Bernth Lindfors, University Press of Mississippi, 1997.

The collected interviews span from 1962 through 1995 and offer a representative sample of Achebe's public views.

—,*Home and Exile,* Oxford University Press, 2000.

Based on three of Achebe's lectures, this work examines the Nigerian culture and Europe's influence on its development.

—,*Trouble With Nigeria,* Heinemann, 1984.

Achebe discusses the problems faced by contemporary Nigeria, including tribalism, political corruption, and prejudice.

Lyons, Robert, and Chinua Achebe, *Another Africa,* Doubleday, 1998.

This work fuses Lyons' photographs with Achebe's poetry and an essay to create a view of present-day Africa and the issues it faces.

Ohaeto, Ezenwa, *Chinua Achebe,* Indiana University Press,1997.

Written by a former student of Achebe's, this biography pays special attention to Nigerian history and Achebe's support of human rights in the country.

Palmer, Eustace, *An Introduction to the African Novel,* Heinemann, 1972.

Palmer examines the works of twelve African novelists for their literary significance.

Petersen, Kirsten Holst, and Anna Rutherford, eds., *ChinuaAchebe,* Heinemann, 1991.

To honor Achebe's sixtieth birthday, writers and academics from around the world contributed essays to this collection examining his role as a writer, editor, and literary spokesperson.

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Review in *Saturday Review,* April 1973, p. 95.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

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