

Girls at War, and Other Stories Study Guide

Girls at War, and Other Stories by Chinua Achebe

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The Madman, The Voter

The Madman, The Voter Summary

Chinua Achebe's collection *Girls at War and Other Stories* is a selection of 13 stories dealing with life in post-colonial Nigeria. Major themes that recur in the collection are official corruption and the resilience of the old gods in a new Christian and secular era.

The first story in the collection is *The Madman*. It concerns Nwibe, a rising pillar of his community whose star is on the rise. At the beginning of the story, Nwibe approaches the ozo men of his village, the most powerful body. He has a proposal that he be admitted into their hierarchy. They tell him they must wait to see now his fortunes progress. Nwibe is not concerned, knowing that he will follow up on his business plans.

On Eke day, however, Nwibe has to mediate a dispute between his elder wife Mgboye and his contentious younger wife Udenkwo. Udenkwo is angry at Mgboye for smacking her puppy. Evidently the puppy was sniffing in Mgboye's soup pot, which Udenkwo claims was Mgboye's own fault. Nwibe grows tired of the shouting and silences them both, telling them to keep their disputes private. Later, he goes to collect water from a nearby stream. In doing so, he removes his cloth and wades out into the water naked. A madman from the village happens upon the naked Nwibe. In the past, this madman had been abused by Nwibe in the marketplace, and he begins to mock Nwibe. Then the madman steals his cloth. Nwibe runs to pursue the madman. As he runs nude down the road, onlookers think Nwibe is mad. Nwibe follows the madman into the sacred market, two of his colleagues following to stop further embarrassment. They subdue him, but Nwibe's defilement of the market draws curses from others. By the time they return him to his home, Nwibe is grief-stricken and refuses to speak.

A doctor is brought in to cure Nwibe's madness. He declares that Nwibe is beyond help. Another doctor finally coerces Nwibe to speak and becomes the most celebrated physician of the region. Nwibe lives from then on in the shadow of his supposed madness. Two years later, he returns to the ozo men, who politely reject his request to join them.

In *The Voter*, Rufus Okeke or Roof is a young man who is well-liked throughout his village. Roof is one of the trusted political advisers to the Minister of Culture Marcus Ibe. Ibe's reelection in the upcoming election seems a fate accomplished. He is a local boy with a powerful political machine at his disposal. Roof's primary job is to approach the leaders of tribes and pay them to throw their support behind Ibe. Of late, however, a somewhat strong adversary has emerged in Maduka, but even this strong opponent is unlikely to overtake Ibe.

The night before the election, an adviser to Maduka comes to Roof and offers him a substantial sum of money to vote for Maduka. Roof tells the adviser that Maduka has no chance, and the adviser responds that even if they do not win they want to win



some important votes. After thinking for a time, Roof accepts the money and swears on an iyi. The next day, when Ibe orders Roof to vote, the young man freezes in the booth. Eventually, he tears his ballot and puts on half in either box.

The Madman, The Voter Analysis

Chinua Achebe's work often involves proud individuals facing the divine or universal. When these individuals submit to the infinite, they end will. When they strike against it, they are punished. In the first story of the collection, Nwibe arrogantly assumes that he will be allowed into the ozo hierarchy. In the end, he is undone by the machinations of a madman who tempt him nude onto sacred ground. This fall from grace reduces the humbled man to a removed, defeated figure.

On the other side of the spectrum is Roof, the protagonist of The Voter. He swears an oath on a sacred totem to vote for a politician that is not his employer. Roof freezes in the booth, uncertain whether he can betray Marcus Ibe. In the end, however, he drops part of his ballot in each man's box, keeping his oath and maintaining his loyalty to Ibe.

This story also illustrates how the new democratic system of Nigeria is deeply infected with institutional corruption. Marcus Ibe's government machine pays off tribal leaders to win their voting blocks. But even Maduka's upstart reform party relies on graft to grab votes. By comparison, the old gods that guide life in Nigeria are pure. Their system is intact.



Marriage is a Private Affair, Akueke

Marriage is a Private Affair, Akueke Summary

Marriage is a Private Affair begins with Nnaemeka's decision to marry his beloved Nene. The two live in the city of Lagos, but Nnaemeka is from the country. He knows that his father will not approve of the courtship. Nnaemeka's father is a traditional Nigerian, one that believes marriage should be an arrangement within a tribe, and the girl should be verified by the groom's parent. Nene is hopeful that the father will be supportive, but Nnaemeka continues to fret.

One day, Nnaemeka returns home and sits with his father under a tree. He apologizes, saying that he cannot marry the bride of his father's choice. His father is shocked that his son wants to marry for love, and no attempt to assuage his concerns works. Nnaemeka tells him that Nene, a teacher, is a good Christian girl, but the father declares that he will never meet his son's betrothed. Later, Nnaemeka's father sits with his fellow elders, who believe he should give Nnaemeka herbs to cure his madness. The father refuses, saying he will never see his son again.

For years later, the separation continues. Nnaemeka sends a wedding photo to his father, and his father sends the section with Nene back. Nene is deeply hurt by this, but Nnaemeka continues to try to change his father's mind. This is compounded by the fact that even in Lagos they are treated with deep distrust because of the manner of their marriage. Eight years after their wedding, Nnaemeka and Nene have a child, and Nnaemeka sends word to his father. Immediately, all of the father's antipathy melts away. He lies awake that night, wondering if he can ever make up his behavior to them.

The title character of Akueke is the young sister of six older brothers. As the story begins, Akueke is sick in bed. She hears her brothers talking about her in the next room and quietly hates them for their power over her.

Akueke's father died soon after her birth, and her brothers had to take over many of the duties around the house. Meanwhile, Akueke becomes attached to her maternal grandfather. He is a dignified, wise man with a long white beard, and he loves her in particular because of her resemblance to his dead wife. Others say Akueke is that woman returned to earth through the cycle of life. Akueke's mother died two years before the beginning of the story, as Akueke was becoming a woman. Her brothers became concerned about her interactions with boys. They wanted her to choose a single boy to marry and stop flirting. Soon, Akueke became pregnant and took to bed sick.

The brothers worry that she has a belly-swelling disease. They know the house will be cursed if she dies there. So, they quietly take her to a tent in the woods to die. When they return later to check on her, they find that she has disappeared. They send word that Akueke is dead. One day, their grandfather summons them to his dwelling. When



they arrive, the grandfather asks them to relate the circumstances surrounding Akueke's death. They tell him the story, as he listens patiently. When they finish, the grandfather produces Akueke. The brothers are shocked, thinking at first that she is a ghost. He questions why they did not consult him when she got ill. He informs them that she is now his ward, and when she marries, the payment will be his and not theirs.

Marriage is a Private Affair, Akueke Analysis

The two stories in this section offer a window into the old ways involved in marriage in Nigeria. Indeed, the arrangement seems to be similar to that in Renaissance Europe in which marriages were arranged advantageously, as matters of business. As such, individuals like Akueke and Nnaemeka become commodities to be dealt with as bargaining chips by parents and brothers.

In *Marriage is a Private Affair*, Nnaemeka's father is dragged painfully into the twentieth century, a process that takes eight years and leaves the old man fearing that he has lost his son forever. In this story, the reader is also informed that young people that marry for love are treated with distrust and wariness by Nigerian society at large. The defiance of parental will is a societal crime that seems to leave a mark that remains indefinitely.

In *Akueke*, Achebe dramatizes the utter helplessness a woman faces even in modern Nigeria. She is a live spirit, one that enraptures her grandfather, but when she becomes pregnant Akueke is essentially held prisoner and then left in the woods to die by her brothers. At the end of the story, Akueke is not saved by some empowering turn of events. Indeed, her grandfather still represents the patriarchal society in which she is held captive. His last word is not so much about her as her dowry.



Chike's School Days, The Sacrificial Egg

Chike's School Days, The Sacrificial Egg Summary

In Chike's School Days, Chike is the first son born to a family of daughters. His parents raise him, as the narrator puts it, in the manner of the white man, shunning old-style Nigerian religious and cultural practices. One day, the young Chike tells a friend's mother that he will not "eat heathen food" (pg. 38.) This enrages the mother, who cannot believe that an Osu child has the airs of an old white colonist. Chike's father, a Christian, became an Osu when he married Chike's mother, an unusual conversion. He was encouraged by the head of a Christian dispensary, but the shock of this conversion nearly kills his mother.

Chike takes well to the Christian primary school he attends, though as he grows older he detests mathematics and begin to develop a deep love for literature and words in general. He loves the shape of words and over time develops an expansive vocabulary. This new world of white man's learning makes him very happy.

The Sacrificial Egg concerns Julius Obi, a clerk who works near the Great Market in Umura, near the Niger River. The marketplace is called Nkwo, because the diety of the market still blesses it on her feast, entering in the form of an old woman. Julius's mother used to tell him that Nkwo was a strange and sacred place where some people are not real people but spirits. As clerk, he accounts for the many boats that come up the river to do business in the market.

Umura has grown in recent years, becoming dirty and unkempt, and its people are praying regularly for it to repair itself. Still, wild gangs roam the streets in the night. One day, the evil spirit Kitikpa demands a sacrifice to the soil. Until it is made, no citizen of the town is safe. Kitikpa does not kill his victims though. He marks them.

One night, Julius goes to visit his betrothed, Janet. Janet's mother insists that, as long as Kitikpa is in the village, he and Janet should sleep apart. Julius wanders the Umura streets awhile, unconcerned with Kitikpa. Suddenly, in the darken he hears the dangerous night-mask marauding beginning. Knowing he could well be killed, Julius begins to run for cover. In doing this, he steps on an egg offered in sacrifice to Kltipka. Julius escapes the masks, but after that day Janet and her mother bear the mark of Kitipka.

Chike's School Days, The Sacrificial Egg Analysis

Chike's School Day's is one of the more compellingly enigmatic stories in the collection. Nothing happens in it that could constitute a traditional plot. It is a profile of change in Nigeria, in which native citizens convert to Christianity and take on Western manners. In the character of Chike, Achebe presents a figure who revels in the white man's proclivities, from refusing food of non-Christians to learning English in school. Figures



like his father's mother and his friend's mother think the world is going mad, when Osu boys act like white men. They remember the colonial era, and they are saddened to see the lingering institutional effects of European subjugation.

Julius Obi in *The Sacrificial Egg* is yet another figure who does not respect the old gods of his homeland. He wanders the streets of Umura while Kitikpa is demanding sacrifice, certain that no such god could exist. What is most compelling about the story, though, is the way Achebe uses a modern instrument, the gangs that rule Umura's nighttime, to catalyze Julius's downfall. He would not have crushed the sacrificial egg and cursed his betrothed if the gangs did not chase him down in the street.



Vengeful Creditor

Vengeful Creditor Summary

Vengeful Creditor begins with Mrs. Emenike, the wife of a prominent government official, shopping. As she checks out, Mrs. Emenike discovers that there are no bag boys to deliver her goods to her car since the government has begun providing free primary school education to all citizens. As a crippled old man takes her groceries to her car, Mrs. Emenike privately fumes at the new socialism in Nigeria. At home, Mr. Emenike reads the morning paper and complains that not enough public officials are speaking out against free primary, which he thinks reeks of Communism. At this time, not even America is providing free education. The annoyance compounds when over the course of a week, the Emenikes lose both their house boy, who leaves claiming his father is ill at home, their gardener, and their nanny. Mrs. Emenike cannot stand the words "free primary." Mr. Emenike blames the whole situation on liberal Westerners.

The government of Nigeria is shocked by the number of children who take advantage of the free primary education. After only one term, the system is nearly bankrupt, and the Minister of Education insists that taxes must be raised to keep it afloat. The rest of the legislature balks. People will riot over high taxes, not school fees. Besides, they declare, if a parent really wants his or her child educated, that parent will work to pay the fees. Free primary is suspended until the budgeting issues can be resolved.

Veronica, or Vero, is a ten year old girl and is deeply saddened when she cannot go to school after free primary is suspended. Her mother, Martha, was married to a carpenter who died young, and now the family is very poor. One day, Mr. Emenike comes to Martha's house and offers five pounds plus room and board for Vero to take care of their youngest until the little boy is able to go to school. Martha is concerned: she wants Vero to get an education. Mr. Emenike implies that if Vero does a good job, he will pay for her education. Martha does not believe this. Vero, eavesdropping, does. Martha reluctantly agrees.

Mr. and Mrs. Emenike are very pleased with Vero as a nanny. The young girl is diligent, wanting the boy to grow up healthy so that she can go to school. She makes up a song about Mr. Emenike driving his children to school. The children love it, and when their parents hear it, they love it too. They decide that Vero is unusually clever for her age. Over time, Vero worries that the young boy is growing up too slowly. She makes up another song admonishing him to grow up faster so she can go to school. One day Mrs. Emenike comes home to find that Vero has painted her nails and lips with Mr. Emenike's red ink. She admonishes Vero not to mess with her husband's things and warns her that red ink is poisonous.

Days later, Mrs. Emenike notices after returning home that her boy is wearing a different outfit than he was when she left. Vero tries to explain, but she is clearly lying. Eventually, Vero admits that she tried to make the boy drink ink. Mr. Emenike is



appalled and beats Vero savagely. Then she drives her to Martha's house and leaves her there.

When Martha returns, she is surprised to find her weeping daughter home. Vero tries to explain that she tried to poison the child, but Martha doesn't believe her. She takes Vero back to the Emenike's, where Mrs. Emenike confirms the poisoning, shouting that Martha is raising murderers in her house. Martha shouts back that Vero was not a murderer until she came to the Emenike house. As Martha leaves with Vero, Mrs. Emenike declares that all the craze in education has brought is murder. Martha tells Vero that she will kill her when they get home, but she stops suddenly. She realizes that the "craze" for education is only a craze when poor folk want it. The rich do not need to barter for an education, even to the point of trying to kill their wards. Martha comforts Vero.

Vengeful Creditor Analysis

Vengeful Creditor is perhaps the most accessible of the stories in the collection since, as a social parable, its themes seem modern and universal. Like Medicare, Social Security, and the weekend, public education was met at its inception with accusations of Communism. Providing free education to everyone was tantamount to redistributing wealth. An education was something to be earned through hard work. So it was in Nigeria as well.

Chinua Achebe creates an interesting trick by shifting protagonists midway through Vengeful Creditor. At first, the events surrounding free primary are experienced through the Emenikes, wealthy Nigerians who are dreadfully inconvenienced. At home, Mrs. Emenike loses her entire household staff. Mr. Emenike, as a member of the government, is shocked to see his government bankrupted by the rash scheme. In these passages, the whole notion of free primary seems ill conceived. Surely, it is an honorable pursuit, but Nigeria does not have the infrastructure to pursue it. Then, Achebe shifts to Vero.

Vero is an innocent, one who wants nothing more than the opportunity to learn and improve herself. In the employ of the Emenikes, she chases the false promise of an education when her work is done. This chase twists her psyche and turns her into a sociopath, willing to take another's life in order to earn the reward she feels she is being denied. Whereas the opening passages of Vengeful Creditor seemed like satire, the Vero passages are pitiable and disturbing.

Achebe pulls another sharp trick in the final moments of the story by granting the catharsis not to Vero or the Emenikes, but to Martha. Her realization that the events that twisted her daughter were not a matter of good and evil but of class, is the central lesson of the story. Most murderers are not created by the devil: they are created by want and marginalizing.



Dead Men's Path, Uncle Ben's Choice, Civil Peace

Dead Men's Path, Uncle Ben's Choice, Civil Peace Summary

Dead Men's Path begins with Michael Obi's being named headmaster of the school at which he has worked. Obi is young and excited about the prospect of coaxing his school at last into modern times. His young wife is somewhat apprehensive at first because none of the other teachers will be married. She resolves, however, to dedicate herself unreservedly to the assistance of her forward-thinking husband. As term begins, Michael is pleased to see his wife tending the grounds, planting flowers and hedges to repair the school's rundown appearance. One day, Michael notices an old man trudging through the newly landscaped compound, trampling hedges in her path. Inspecting the damage, he notices a faded path the woman was following. A teacher explains to Michael that the path has been used by local for ages to connect the village shrine with the burial grounds. Michael is unimpressed and erects a fence to block the path. Soon, a village elder comes to Michael and explains that the path is the only means dead men have to journey from their graves to the village. Michael refuses to hear this nonsense, and the elder leaves. Two days later, a woman in the village dies in childbirth. The next day, the day of a school inspection, Michael awakes to find the grounds completely ransacked by the locals, who are trying to appease their dead ancestors. School officials give Michael Obi a scathing review.

Uncle Ben's Choice is told in the first person. Uncle Ben was a young clerk in Umura who prided himself on his good cheer and his self control. He could drink any man under the table but stop whenever he liked. He avoided the grasps of lascivious women, but he was in the process of courting a lovely girl called Margaret. Though he doted on her, Uncle Ben was careful to keep her at arm's length. One night, he was at the tavern drinking and laughing. He returned home to find Margaret in his bed naked. Shocked, he apologized to her for not inviting her to drink, and she invited him into bed. As he touched her in the dark, Uncle Ben realized the woman was not Margaret. He could not tell if she was white or dark, and he insisted on turning on the light to find out her identity. She begged him not to, but he persisted. He was shocked to find that the woman was Mami Wota, a goddess who would have bestowed great wealth on her lover. In leaving her, as Uncle Ben did, he forsook great prosperity in exchange for a family. Now he jokes that he made the wrong choice. He says that after he left her, Mami Wota went to the bed of Dr. JM Stuart-Young, who became the richest man in the country.

As Civil Peace begins, the war has ended, and Jonathan Iwegbu is pleased to find his wife and children have survived it. This is not the only blessing he has been given. The bicycle he buried during the war to prevent its being stolen has survived underground without any major damage. Moreover, Jonathan's house has survived the bombing with



only minor damage. Jonathan begins a makeshift taxi service for soldiers with his bicycle that pays far better than his Coal Corporation job did in the past. Soon, he is able to purchase wine at wholesale prices, dilute it, and sell it to soldiers at a bar he constructs. Jonathan seems truly blessed, with a family that survived the hardships and a steady income. One day, he goes to town to collect his twenty pounds ex-gratia for his leftover rebel money. He stuffs it carefully into his pocket and briskly walks home, wary of thieves. That night, Jonathan and his family are awoken by a group of thieves at his door, demanding a hundred pounds. Jonathan says he has no money, but the thieves persist. They fire guns into the air and threaten to raid the house. Jonathan agrees to give them his twenty pounds ex-gratia if they leave his family alone. They agree. The next day, neighbors commiserate with Jonathan. He says that the twenty pounds is nothing: he is most blessed already.

Dead Men's Path, Uncle Ben's Choice, Civil Peace Analysis

In *Dead Men's Path*, Michael Obi is perhaps the most arrogant of Achebe's modern, post-spiritual pragmatists. In seeking to prove himself an able and forward-thinking, Obi accomplishes the opposite. He insults the local population and precipitates the demolition of his work to modernize the school. In this sense, *Dead Men's Path* is a tragedy in the classic sense. Obi wants to accomplish one goal, puts all of his energy toward this end, but his monomania leaves him defeated. He realizes that one cannot control the course of events and one is foolish to try.

Uncle Ben's Choice, unlike the rest of the stories thus far, takes the form of a monologue. It is significantly more comedic than the preceding passages, but it relates a fantastical tale of old gods like many of the other stories. Uncle Ben, however, is more self-aware than the previous protagonists. He believes Mami Wota, understands the decision he has made, and accepts the loss of wealth that results.

Also self-aware is Jonathan in *Civil Peace*. He understands the blessing of having a family survive the unnamed war that just ended, and he experiences something approaching prosperity in the post-war era. Frequently, the narrator states some variation on the adage that anything is possible through God. This faith allows Jonathan to accept the loss of his ex-gratia to thieves at the end of the story. He knows he has been blessed besides.



Sugar Baby

Sugar Baby Summary

Sugar Baby is told in the first person, from the point of view of Mike, a soldier in the war. As the story begins, Mike is sitting with Cletus and several other soldiers. Cletus is bombastically announcing that he has defeated sugar at long last, and he demands Mike tell the story of his struggles with sugar. Mike demurs, making a quip about Cletus's sweet tooth. He privately recalls his initial struggles in the war.

Cletus was a good soldier, but he could not adapt to life without sugar. One day, he secured a packet of artificial sweetener, but it was so bitter that Cletus ended up vomiting. Mike promised Cletus to secure him sugar, eventually settling on a Father Doherty, who is supposed to be able to secure anything. When Cletus and Mike went to him, the polite priest gave Mike some antihistamine pills, but when Cletus asked for sugar, Doherty went mad. He attacked Cletus, shouting that people were dying in the war.

One day, Mike was assigned to make a sojourn to the island of Sao Tome. As always happens, everyone around him placed orders for goods that could not be found in war-torn Nigeria. Mike managed to secure two bags of sugar cubes for Cletus, but he lost one in customs. When Cletus received the sugar, he invited his girlfriend Mercy to join him. She took a handful of sugar, and Cletus went mad, throwing her out and declaring that he sees her true face now.

As Cletus continues to go prod Mike to tell the sugar story, Mike, annoyed, makes a nasty comment about his losing a girl over sugar. Cletus is clearly hurt. So Mike makes a good-natured jibe to satisfy Cletus's desire for self-aggrandizement.

Sugar Baby Analysis

Like Akueke, Sugar Baby is framed in medias res. It begins near the end of the story, with Cletus demanding that Mike tell the story that will comprise the body of piece. Mike refuses to tell the story, but the reader hears the story nonetheless, since Sugar Daddy is told in the first person. As Mike recalls Cletus and his struggles with sugar, the reader experiences it as if he were telling the story.

Cletus' journey in Sugar Baby is a comically Sisyphean struggle. Be it the sweetener, Father Doherty, or the grasping Mercy, the world and war seem to be conspiring to ensure that Cletus cannot slake his sugar addiction. This struggle illuminates Cletus's character. He is a blowhard and self-aggrandizer. He is also childish in his weakness and lack of self-control. Mike, consequently, takes on a paternal role with him, attempting to comfort him. This relationship is a nonviolent manifestation of the bond between enlisted man and commanding officer. Instead of protecting him in combat, Mike is protecting Cletus from sugar withdrawal.



Girls at War

Girls at War Summary

Girls at War begins with the narrator explaining the first time that Reginald Nwankwo, a high-ranking Nigerian official, and Gladys, an attractive young woman, met. She is attempting to volunteer to fight in the war, and he is rejecting her.

The second time they meet is when Reginald is passing through a roadblock during the war. Normally, he can pass through these impediments without issue, but this time the agent, Gladys, insists on searching his vehicle. He submits begrudgingly, eventually recognizing the young woman. Her diligence reinvigorates his desire for victory in the war.

Eighteen months later, Reginald is intercepting some food aid at an air strip to deliver to his family. He feels bad about taking food intended for refugees, but his family must eat. As he is being driven away from the strip, Reginald notices Gladys standing by the side of the road and picks her up. She is heading the same direction. Reginald offers to drive her the rest of the way, but he recommends they stop at his residence first. He also invites her to a party with government luminaries. He is ashamed, though, as Gladys suspects he may be another fat, corrupt official. He spends the rest of the day proving his commitment to supporting his suffering country. Then he kisses her. At one point they hear a plane fly over and worry that it is a bomber. It is not, but Gladys and Reginald huddle in his shelter and make love.

That night, Gladys and Reginald go to the party, where Gladys dances and has a grand time. At one point, a couple drunken Red Cross men show up with whiskey. One man has recently lost a friend who died in a plane crash delivering refugee aid. The drunken man rails against Nigeria, calling all Nigerian women prostitutes, until he is thrown from the party. Reginald silently believes the man has a point. He wonders if Gladys is a prostitute. After some thought, he decides to help her and gives her one half of the food he intercepted early that day. She cries with gratitude.

The next day, Reginald and Gladys are driving down the road. It is raining, and Reginald notices a wounded soldier on a crutch. He picks him up. Immediately after he does this, a bomber flies over. Reginald, Gladys, and the soldier run, and Reginald is knocked unconscious in the bomb blast. When he comes to, his car is on fire and Gladys and the soldier are dead.

Girls at War Analysis

Throughout the previous stories of the collection, the war for independence has existed in references. Only in the final two stories does Achebe actually dramatize life in war-torn Nigeria. In Sugar Baby, this struggle is parodied. In Girls at War, it is presented in pathetic nihilist detail. It is strange that Girls at War is the title story of the collection as it

is the most atypical. In the other stories of the collection, the ancient gods guide the affairs of men. Misfortune comes to individuals that try to function outside of their ordered reasoning. There is a dramatic logic to the arc of these stories.

Girls at War has no logic. It is a vision of hell. The two sympathetic characters are thieves and prostitutes, and characters do not die for a reason. Gladys struggles, and Reginald bends the rules of decency to get by. The end is pitiless and without hope. Achebe has shown a gift for playfully toying with reader expectations, but in his final story he subverts the expectation of surprise by presenting bleak fatalism.



Characters

Nwibe appears in The Madman

Nwibe is a pillar of his community with two wives who are forever at each other's throats. At the beginning of *The Madman*, Nwibe approaches the ozo men of his village with a proposal that he should be admitted into their hierarchy. They tell him they must wait to see how his fortunes progress. Nwibe knows that he will follow up on his business plans.

On Eke day, Nwibe goes to collect water from a nearby stream. He removes his cloth and wades out into the water naked. A madman from the village happens upon the naked Nwibe. He begins to mock Nwibe, who once threw him from the market. The madman steals Nwibe's cloth, and Nwibe runs to pursue the madman. As he runs nude down the road, onlookers think Nwibe is mad. Nwibe follows the madman into the sacred market, where two of his friends subdue him. Nwibe's defilement of the market draws curses from others, and he is grief-stricken and refuses to speak.

Two doctors are consulted and eventually Nwibe speaks, but he lives from then on in the shadow of his supposed madness. Two years later, he returns to the ozo men who politely reject his request to join them.

Rufus Okeke appears in The Voter

Rufus Okeke Roof is one of the trusted political advisors to the Minister of Culture Marcus Ibe, a powerful lifelong politician. Roof's primary job is to approach the leaders of tribes and pay them to throw their support behind Ibe. The night before the election, however, an adviser to Ibe's main opponent comes to Roof and offers him a substantial sum of money to vote against Ibe. Roof tells the adviser that Ibe is sure to win, regardless. Still the advisor prods him. After thinking for a time, Roof accepts the money and swears on an *iyi* to vote for Ibe's opponent. The next day, Roof goes to the voting booth and freezes. Eventually, he tears his ballot and puts one half in either box.

Nnaemeka appears in Marriage Is a Private Affair

Nnaemeka is a young man from the country who now lives in Lagos. Separated from his strict father, Nnaemeka decides to marry his beloved Nene. He knows that his father will not approve of the courtship since he did not arrange it. One day, Nnaemeka returns home and sits with his father under a tree. He tells his father that he intends to marry Nene. His father is shocked that his son wants to marry for love and declares that he will never meet his son's betrothed. For years later, the separation continues.

Nnaemeka sends a wedding photo to his father, and his father sends the section with Nene back. Nene is deeply hurt by this, but Nnaemeka continues to try to change his



father's mind. Eight years after their wedding, Nnaemeka and Nene have a child, and Nnaemeka sends word to his father.

Nnaemeka's Father appears in Marriage Is a Private Affair

Nnaemeka's father is a traditional Nigerian man who believes that marriage should be an arrangement within a tribe, and the girl should be verified by the groom's parent. One day, his son Nnaemeka returns home and sits with his father under a tree. Nnaemeka tells his father that he intends to marry a woman of his choosing in Lagos. Nnaemeka's father is scandalized, and declares that he will never meet his son's betrothed. Later, Nnaemeka's father sits with his fellow elders, who believe he should give Nnaemeka herbs to cure his madness. The father refuses, saying he will never see his son again.

For years later, Nnaemeka's father refuses to see his son. Nnaemeka sends him a wedding photo and his father sends the section with Nene back. Eight years later, Nnaemeka and Nene have a child and Nnaemeka sends word to his father. Immediately, all of the father's antipathy melts away. He lies awake that night, wondering if he can ever make up his behavior to them.

Akueke appears in Akueke

Akueke is the young sister of six older brothers. Her father died after her birth, and Akueke becomes attached to her maternal grandfather, who loves her in particular because of her resemblance to his wife. Akueke's mother died as Akueke was becoming a woman. Her brothers became concerned about her interactions with boys. They wanted her to choose a single boy to marry and stop flirting. Soon, Akueke became pregnant and took to bed sick.

As the story begins, Akueke's brothers worry that she has a belly-swelling disease. They know the house will be cursed if she dies there. They quietly take her to a tent in the woods to die. When they return later to check on her, they find that she has disappeared. They send word that Akueke is dead. Akueke is saved by her grandfather, though, takes her in as his ward and forbids her brothers from contacting her.

Chike appears in Chike's School Days

Chike is the first son born to a family of daughters. His parents raise him in a European tradition, shunning old-style Nigerian religious and cultural practices. As such, he begins to regard his fellow Osus as heathens. Chike takes well to the Christian primary school he attends, though as he grows older he detests mathematics and begins to develop a deep love for literature and words in general. He loves the shape of words and over time develops an expansive vocabulary. Words become a constant source of pleasure for him.



Julius Obi appears in The Sacrificial Egg

Julius Obi is a clerk who works near the Great Market in Umura, near the Niger River. The town is still beholden to the stories of spirits and gods that walk among men, but Julius considers himself too well educated to believe them. One day, the evil spirit Kitikpa demands a sacrifice to the soil. Until it is made, no citizen of the town is safe. Kitikpa does not kill his victims though; he marks them. That night, Julius visits his betrothed, Janet, but her mother insists that, as long as Kitikpa is in the village, he and Janet should sleep apart. Julius wanders the Umura streets awhile, unconcerned with Kitikpa. Suddenly, in the darkness he hears the dangerous night-mask marauding beginning. Knowing he could well be killed, Julius begins to run for cover. In doing this, he steps on an egg offered in sacrifice to Kitikpa. Julius escapes the masks, but after that day Janet and her mother bear the mark of Kitikpa.

Mr. Emenike appears in Vengeful Creditor

Mr. Emenike is a wealthy conservative politician in Nigeria. He opposes the recent government initiative to provide free primary education for all children in the country. He believes any parent who wants his child to go to school will pay the fees. Mr. Emenike is even more aggrieved when the help of his household begin leaving to attend school. When his child's nanny departs, Mr. Emenike goes to Martha's house and offers money for her daughter Veronica. He implies that after his children no longer need a nanny, he will pay for Veronica's education. It is a promise he has no intention of keeping. Mr. Emenike is initially pleased with Veronica's work, especially enjoying the songs she makes up for the children.

Mrs. Emenike appears in Vengeful Creditor

Mrs. Emenike is the wife of a wealthy Nigerian politician. Like her husband, Mrs. Emenike opposes free primary school education for all Nigerian children. In particular, she is annoyed by the lack of cheap labor once the poor begin schooling. She is spiteful to her household servants as they leave, one by one, for school. When Veronica begins as her nanny, Mrs. Emenike is initially relieved and very pleased with the girl. One time, she sees Vero wearing red ink as lipstick and warns her that the ink is poisonous. The next day, she finds that Vero has tried to make her young son drink ink and beats her before sending her back to her mother. Martha returns with the despondent Vero and confronts Mrs. Emenika. Mrs. Emenike accuses her of raising a murderer and again laments the experiment in free education.

Veronica appears in Vengeful Creditor

Veronica or Vero is a poor Nigerian girl who loves primary school for the one term she attends before the government runs out of money to subsidize education. Her mother Martha eventually hires her out as a nanny to the Emenikes, who imply they will send



her back to school when their child not longer needs care. Vero clings to this promise for months as she takes care of the children, singing them songs about school. Mr. and Mrs. Emenike are charmed by her.

After a time, Vero becomes impatient with the young boy she is tending, convinced he is growing too slowly. Learning that ink is poisonous, Vero tries to force feel it to the little boy. Mrs. Emenike beats Vero and sends her home. Martha does not believe Vero tried to poison the child and confronts Mrs. Emenike. After Mrs. Emenike convinces Martha of Vero's guilt, Martha resolves to kill Vero. She changes her mind when she realizes that Vero's mind was twisted by her desire to learn like wealthier children.

Michael Obi appears in Dead Men's Path

Michael Obi is a young teacher who becomes headmaster of his country school and resolves to modernize it. He has his wife tend the grounds and plant lovely new hedgerows. One day, he notices villagers trampling the hedges, which were planted atop an old path connecting the burial grounds with the religious shrine. Michael blocks the path with a fence. An elder of the village comes to him and explains that the path is necessary for souls' travel. Michael balks and sends the man away. The next day, a woman dies in childbirth, and the villagers raze the hedges to appease angry souls. Michael Obi receives a scathing performance review as a result.

Uncle Ben appears in Uncle Ben's Choice

Uncle Ben is a bombastic man who relates the most astonishing event of his life in Uncle Ben's Choice. When he was young, Ben was renowned for his good cheer and self-discipline. He never drank too much or made his desires known to loose women. One night, though, he returns home to find a naked woman in his bed. He assumes in the dark that it is her beloved Margaret but soon discovers that it is the goddess Mami Wota. She tries to seduce him, but her refuses. In doing this, he chooses a family over wealth and prosperity. He does not regret his choice, though supposedly the wealthiest man in Nigeria took Mami Wota up on her offer after Ben refused.

Uncle Ben is one of two characters in the collection who narrates his own story.

Jonathan Iwegbu appears in Civil Peace

Jonathan Iwegbu is a father and husband who feels blessed to have survived the war with his family and house intact. Jonathan begins a bicycle taxi service for soldiers with extra cash and makes enough money to begin a makeshift cantina. Soon thereafter, Jonathan receives twenty pounds ex-gratia from the government. He considers himself blessed many times over. That night, however, a band of thieves comes to his house and demands money. After much negotiation, Jonathan gives them is ex-gratia. The next day, neighbors commiserate with Jonathan, but he is not upset. He still has many other blessings.



Cletus appears in Sugar Baby

Cletus is a bombastic soldier in the war for Nigerian independence. Entering military life, he cannot adapt to life without sugar. One day, he secures a packet of artificial sweetener, but it is so bitter that Cletus ends up vomiting. He goes to a Father Doherty, who is supposed to be able to secure anything. When Cletus and his friend Mike go to him, Doherty goes mad at the sugar request. He attacks Cletus, shouting that people are dying in the war. One day, Mike is assigned to make a sojourn to the island of Sao Tome, where he secures a bag of sugar cubes for Cletus. Cletus invites his girlfriend Mercy to join him, and when she sees the sugar she takes a handful of it. Cletus goes mad, throwing her out and declaring that he sees her true face now.

Reginald Nwankwo appears in Girls at War

Reginald Nwankwo is a high-ranking Nigerian official who, at the beginning of *Girls at War*, is intercepting some food aid at an air strip to deliver to his family. He feels bad about taking food intended for war refugees, but his family must eat. As he is being driven away from the strip, Reginald notices Gladys, a woman he has crossed paths with in the past, standing by the side of the road and picks her up. Reginald offers to drive her the rest of her way, but he recommends they stop at his residence first. At one point they hear a plane fly over and worry that it is a bomber. It is not, but Gladys and Reginald huddle in his shelter and make love.

That night, Gladys and Reginald go to a party of Nigerian official, where Gladys dances and has a grand time. After a drunken incident at the party, Reginald silently wonders if Gladys is a prostitute. After some thought, he decides to help her and gives her one half of the food he intercepted early that day. She cries with gratitude. The next day, Reginald and Gladys are driving down the road. It is raining, and Reginald notices a wounded soldier on a crutch. He picks him up. Immediately after he does this, a bomber flies over. Reginald, Gladys, and the soldier run, and Reginald is knocked unconscious in the bomb blast. When he comes to, his car is on fire and Gladys and the soldier are dead.

Gladys appears in Girls at War

Gladys is a beautiful young woman eager to join the war effort for Nigerian independence. She crosses paths with the high ranking official Reginald Nwankwo several times. The third time, Gladys is walking to a friend's house, and Reginald notices her standing by the side. He picks her up and offers to drive her the rest of the way. They stop by his residence first, where they hear a plane fly over. Gladys and Reginald huddle in his shelter and make love.

That night, Gladys and Reginald go to the party, where Gladys dances and has a grand time. After the party, Reginald gives her one half of the food he intercepted early that day from an air strip. She cries with gratitude. The next day, Reginald and Gladys are

driving down the road. It is raining, and Reginald notices a wounded soldier on a crutch. He picks him up. Immediately after he does this, a bomber flies over. Reginald, Gladys, and the soldier run, but Gladys is killed by a bomb blast.



Objects/Places

The Market appears in The Madman, The Sacrificial Egg

The market, as presented in *The Madman* and *The Sacrificial Egg*, is the thriving center of Umura. It is also a sacred place overseen by the goddess Nkwo. She regularly enters the market in the form of an old woman and blesses it on her feast. Julius Obi's mother claims that spirits in the form of lovely women walk through the market. In *The Madman*, Nwibe is dishonored completely when he enters the sacred market while nude.

Iyi appears in The Voter

The Iyi is a totem on which Roof is told to swear that he will keep his promise to vote for Maduka. It is a "fearsome little affair" in a clay dish adorned with feathers (pg. 18.) It is covered with a red cloth when not being implemented. Clearly the Iyi contains such power as to terrify even the young and strong Roof.

Nnaemeka's Wedding Photo appears in Marriage Is a Private Affair

Nnaemeka sends this photo of himself and Nene on their wedding day to his father, who has vowed never to meet his son's bride, since he did not choose her for him. Nnaemeka hopes that the photo will melt his father's chilly disposition. Nnaemeka's father tears the photo in two and sends the half with Nene back, saying he will consider it a nice photo of his son alone.

The Egg appears in The Sacrificial Egg

The titular egg of the story is left in the street at night as an offering to the fearsome spirit Kitikpa. Kitikpa demands a sacrifice, and until it is given all citizens of Umura risk being marked by him. After leaving his betrothed's house at night, Julius Obi inadvertently crushes the sacrificial egg. After this, his betrothed and her mother are marked by Kitikpa.

Red Ink appears in Vengeful Creditor

In *Vengeful Creditor*, the young Veronica paints her nails and lips with Mr. Emenike's red ink. Mrs. Emenike admonishes her that she should not paint herself and that red ink is poisonous. After Veronica realizes that the Emenikes will not send her to school, she



tries to murder their toddler son by feeding him red ink. Mrs. Emenike discovers this when she finds the ink-stained clothes of the child. She beats and fires Veronica.

The Hedgerows appears in Dead Men's Path

When Michael Obi becomes headmaster of his village school, he charges his wife with updating the grounds. She plants new hedgerows on the grounds, but they cover over a path that the souls of dead men are said to take to the village. Michael tries to protect the hedgerows a fence, but the locals eventually tear them up, fearing their dead ancestors are displeased.

White Horse appears in Uncle Ben's Choice

White Horse is a British whiskey that is popular in Nigeria. The night that Uncle Ben is nearly seduced by Mami Wota, he spends a few hours in a public house drinking White Horse but stops drinking when he feels himself getting drunk.

The Ex-Gratia appears in Civil Peace

After the war, Jonathan Iwegbu is given twenty pounds ex-gratia for rebel money he turns in. He is excited for the money, which he plans to use to expand his cantina business. He is careful to keep it close in his pocket while getting it home, but that night a band of thieves rob him of it. He does not consider the loss too painful, since the ex-gratia was not money he worked for.

Sugar appears in Sugar Baby

In the war, Cletus is unable to overcome his desire for sugar. He vomits when he tries to put artificial sweetener. With the help of his friend Mike, Cletus tries to get sugar from a Father Dogherty, who attacks him for asking for a luxury when so many are dying. After doing business in Sao Tome, Mike brings Cletus a bag of sugar cubes. When Cletus's girlfriend takes some of the sugar, Cletus casts her out. In the frame of the story, Cletus claims he has overcome the craving for sugar.

Rations appears in Girls at War

In Girls at War, the official Reginald Nwankwo intercepts some food rations intended for refugees. He feels bad for taking them, but his family needs to eat too. Later in the story, Reginald wonders if Gladys is a prostitute and gives her one half of the rations. The next day, Gladys is killed in a bombing and the rations are destroyed.



Themes

The Gods of the Past Do Not Die

As a country enters a secular era, the populace has the sensation that the spirits of the past disappear. They become academic topics rather than sources of spiritual enlightenment. The work of Chinua Achebe, however, does not share this viewpoint. The stories are set in the immediate aftermath of the struggle for Nigerian independence, around 1960, but the characters are still beholden to the gods of old.

The spirits of such stories as *The Sacrificial Egg* and *Dead Men's Path* are antique at the present of the narratives. Educated men like Julius Obi and Michael Obi consider belief in them to be nothing more than superstition. Julius is bold remain on the street at night when Kitikpa demands sacrifice, and Michael blocks the way for dead souls to access the village. Whether the means of these men's undoing be earthly or ethereal, they suffer the tragedy of a proud nonbeliever.

Ben of *Uncle Ben's Choice*, conversely, believes wholeheartedly in the old gods. When Mami Wota appears in his bed and attempts to seduce him, he knows exactly what is at stake with his decision. By refusing her, Ben loses out on fortune and prosperity, but he is allowed a happy family. His understanding of the old gods means that he does not regret his decision and his story is not a tragic one.

A Young Country Is a Corrupt Country

The country of Nigeria is in its infancy when these stories take place. Chinua Achebe makes no indication that the colonization that preceded its inception was appropriate, but he makes clear that the young country is also a corrupt one, susceptible to the failings of leaders who want power in a new democracy.

This corruption is best illustrated in *The Voter*, a short piece in which a popular local man, Roof, works as a political operative for the Minister of Culture, Marcus Ibe. Ibe is the type of politician that gains infamy for new being defeated, and Achebe illustrates his tactics for winning by showing Roof bribing tribal leaders to direct their people to vote Ibe. The shattering event of the story comes when Roof is bribed exorbitantly to vote for Ibe's main opponent. Even challengers to entrenched interests persevere through subterfuge.

Nigeria society is also deeply stratified by classes and the rich undoubtedly hold all of the power. This is most sadly illustrated in *Vengeful Creditor*. Politicians in that story rankle over the wisdom of provide free education to the poorest citizens. Aspersions regarding Communism and fiscal responsibility are tossed about, but the author makes clear by the end of the story the reason they oppose free education: an uneducated working class will work cheap. In *Girls at War*, Achebe presents the character of Reginald, a high-ranking official during the war. He likes to think of himself as a good



Nigerian, one that cares for country more than self. Still, over the course of the story, he steals food rations for his family and uses his position to seduce a young woman. Clearly even a man who understands the dangers of corruption can be corrupted by power.

Happiness and Sorrow are Different for Everyone

The character of Chinua Achebe's stories, though all form the same time period and country, have widely divergent concepts of happiness and sorrow. This subjectivity indicates a shift in the culture in which these stories take place. In this shifting society, old and young, rich and poor, men and women all find themselves in conflict in the search for happiness.

In matters of love and family, *Akueke* and *Marriage Is a Private Affair* illustrate the conflict between genders and generations. In the old way of things, marriage was a process of consolidating power within a village and a means for controlling women. Fathers chose mates for their children. In *Akueke*, the title character, having no parent to speak of, chooses to flirt with many men. She becomes pregnant and finds herself returning to the home of her beloved grandfather, who protects her against brothers that tried to leave her to die in the woods. Nnaemeka in *Marriage Is a Private Affair*, too, chooses to marry without his father's consent. The two are estranged until Nnaemeka has a son. Only then does the father understand the validity of his son's happiness.

In a political sense, Achebe shows how the search for happiness can destroy a person's psyche. Veronica in *Vengeful Creditor* has a simple conception of happiness: education. She is willing to enter service at the Emenike residence for a chance that she will go to school after the service ends. When Vero realizes she has been tricked, she attempts to kill her charge.

Conversely, in the characters of *Uncle Ben* and *Jonathan Iwegbu* Achebe shows how individuals can face misfortune with a smile if they value family. Uncle Ben gives up great prosperity in exchange for a family in *Uncle Ben's Choice*. Jonathan is robbed of his government ex-gratia by a band of thieves. Neither man regrets his loss though. He has a family and a reason to feel blessed.

Style

Point of View

Most of the stories in this collection are told from the third-person and omniscient point-of-view. These stories have a narrator that is able to access the interior lives of the characters in the stories. What is notable about this is that in almost all of these stories, Achebe provides the reader with the thoughts and emotional reactions of numerous parties at the same time. For example, Akueke exists both in the title character's mind and in her brothers'. Chike's School Days chronicles both Chike's education and others' reaction to him. Perhaps most astonishing is Vengeful Creditor, with its narrator bounding from one individual to another. The first half of the story involves the Emenikes, with a brief sojourn to the Minister of Education. The second half switches to Veronica, with the final pages belonging to her mother Martha.

Only Girls at War is a third-person story told with only one character's interior life in focus. Reginald is one of two main characters in the story, but the reader experiences all events through his eyes. Indeed, Reginald's lack of understanding regarding Gladys is key to the progression of events. To involve the reader in Gladys's intentions would weaken Achebe's narrative.

The two stories that are told in the first person are Uncle Ben's Choice and Sugar Baby. Uncle Ben's Choice takes the form of a soliloquy. There is nothing interior about the words; an actor could perform the full story as a dramatic monologue. Sugar Baby, on the other hand, is entirely thought. The story is told in the mind of Mike, who actively does not want to speak the story aloud.

Setting

The stories of Girls at War and Other Stories by Chinua Achebe all take place in Nigeria in the aftermath or its war from independence from European colonization. This would be around 1960. Achebe never states outright that this is the setting, but the author is Nigerian and lived through these events. He indicates obliquely that these are the circumstances.

Particularly in the latter stories - Civil Peace, Sugar Baby, and Girls at War - the specter of the war informs the narrative. In Civil Peace, Jonathan is astonished that his family, house, and bicycle have survived the conflict. Sugar Baby is an absurd satire on the sacrifices of war. Girls at war actually takes place during the conflict and dramatizes the madness and meaninglessness of war. Some stories, like The Voter and Vengeful Creditor, take place in the infancy of Nigerian democracy. This democracy is highlighted by corruption and social inequality. Charlatans like Marcus Ibe and nouveau riche officials like the Emenikes subjugate all those below them.



Though the stories of the collection take place in the modern era, they are distinctly in tune with the spiritual past of Nigeria. The country is ruled by powerful men like Marcus Ibe and Reginald Nwankwo, but the spirits of old still hold dominion over the events of men. Throughout these modern tales, Achebe involves such godlike figures as Mami Wota and Kitikpa. Achebe's Nigeria, in short, is both modern and timeless.

Language and Meaning

The narration of all of the stories in the collection is spoken in the Queen's English. Indeed, the tenor of this narration reflects a British colonization. The words are precise and understated, and consequently the narratives progress with the sensation of an outsider's explanation. There is a definite disconnect between the dialogue spoken in scenes from the text and the narration that frames this dialogue. In this regard, the reader becomes a traveler who is receiving a calm explanation of the events.

The dialogue, too, can have the air of colonialism to it, in cases such as Michael Obi or Mr. and Mrs. Emenike who have taken on the role of dominance. On the other side of the coin are the uneducated classes, and Achebe makes these characters apparent in the broken mix of native tongue and English that they speak. For instance, the thieves in *Civil Peace* warn Jonathan, "We no bad tief. We no like for make trouble. Trouble done finish. War done finish and all the katakata wey de for inside" (pg. 87.)

In this wide chasm between the narration and much of the dialogue, Achebe accomplishes two things. Firstly, he delineates the class system, brought over from Europe and entrenched in Nigeria. This stratified society makes the have-nots apparent from the second they open their mouths. Moreover, the dialogue dramatizes the interplay of Europe and Africa that Nigeria is. The reader understands how one culture imprinted itself indelibly on another and never faded completely.

Structure

Girls at War and Other Stories consists of 12 stories ranging in length from four to 21 pages in length. Each of these stories is written by Chinua Achebe, and each takes place in Nigeria in the mid- to late-twentieth century. Only length, theme, and tone separates these stories from each other in a substantive way.

As often happens in short story collections, the longer stories in the oeuvre emerge as the tent-poles for the entire collection. In this instance, those stories are *Vengeful Creditor* and *Girls at War*. Not only the heftiest in terms of size, these pieces are among the most politically engaged of the collection. *Vengeful Creditor* is a socialist parable focusing on the need to provide education for all citizens. It ends with one character's realization that the rich wish to control knowledge by denying it to the poor. Tonally, *Girls at War* is different from the other stories. Focusing on the moral equivocations individuals must make in wartime, the story is markedly nihilistic, with as bleak an ending as anything in the book.

With these two stories as the centerpieces of the collection, the rest take on the role of vignettes. Midsize stories like *The Madman*, *Akueke*, and *Civil Peace* take on an episodic quality. They are quick slices of Nigerian life, and a reader could be forgiven for imagining all the characters from them live in the same town. Similar rhythms of life recur throughout the narratives. The smaller stories become satiric trifles: *Chike's School Days*, *Dead Men's Path*, and *Uncle Ben's Choice*. These pieces become quick sketches on single issues such as European assimilation, scholarly arrogance, and wealth.



Quotes

"They led and he followed blindly, his heavy chest heaving up and down in silent weeping ... it was the worst kind of madness, deep and tongue-tied" (The Madman, pg. 10.)

"We did not ask him for money yesterday; we shall not ask him tomorrow. But today is our day; we have climbed the iroko tree and would be foolish not to take down all the firewood we need" (The Voter, pg. 16.)

"I don't believe anybody will be so unlike other people that they will be unhappy when their sons are engaged to marry" (Marriage Is a Private Affair, pg. 22.)

"Akueke did not listen. And now her protective spirit despairing of her had taken a hand in the matter and she was stricken with this disease. At first people pretended not to notice her swelling stomach" (Akueke, pg. 33.)

"Now all that had changed, or had begun to change. So that an Osu child could look down his nose at a free-born, and talk about heathen food!" (Chike's School Days, pg. 38.)

"All [Mr. Emenike's] children go to school, even the one that is only two years; but that is no craze. Rich people have no craze. It is only when the children of the poor widows like me want to go with the rest that it becomes a craze. What is this life? To God, what is it?" (Vengeful Creditor, pg. 69.)

"It depends on what you want in life. If it is wealth you want then you made a great mistake today, but if you are a true son of your father then take my hand" (Uncle Ben's Choice, pg. 80.)

"What is egg-rasher? Did I depend on it last week? Or is it greater than other things that went in the war? I say, let egg-rasher perish in the flames! Let it go where everything else has gone. Nothing puzzles God" (Civil peace, pg. 88.)

"Cletus got more obsessively hinged to his sugar and tea every single day was a deprivation, a dangerous case of an appetite growing on what it did not feed on" (Sugar Baby, pg. 91.)

"That's right, the militia girl. You've changed, Gladys. you were always beautiful of course, but now you are a beauty queen" (Girls at War, pg. 106.)

"Gladys, he thought, was just a mirror reflecting a society that had gone completely rotten and maggoty at the centre. The mirror itself was intact; a lot of smudge but no more" (Girls at War, pg. 116.)

"The whole purpose of our school," he said finally, " is to eradicate just such beliefs as that. Dead men do not require footpaths" (Dead Men's Path, pg. 73.)



Topics for Discussion

Discuss corruption in Nigeria. What imperfections does Chinua Achebe illustrate about his home nation in the stories of this collection? How do individuals subvert the ideal standards of democracy? What is Achebe's attitude toward this corruption?

How are women treated in the world of Chinua Achebe's stories? Discuss what restrictions are put upon them and what recourse they have, particularly in times of war. Who are the most resilient female characters of the collection and what actions make them so?

Discuss old and new beliefs in the collection. Which characters from the stories consider themselves modern and secular? What old beliefs do these educated men and women reject? What happens to these characters over the course of the story?

Many characters in the collection's stories face incredible hardships or misfortunes and do not complain. Discuss the notion that good and bad fortune is created in the mind? Does the class think it would react to misfortune in as good of humor as Jonathan Iwegbu or Uncle Ben?

A classical tragic structure for a narrative involves a character doggedly trying to accomplish an objective and succeeding in accomplishing its opposite. Which stories in the collection are tragic in the classic sense? What do characters try to accomplish and what do they and the reader learn from failure?

Discuss the role of the war for independence in Chinua Achebe's story collection. How is the war referenced in the text? How are its effects different on young and old, rich and poor? Are the stories about the war universally dour?

Discuss the shift in tone and theme that occurs when the point of view shifts to first person in Uncle Ben's Choice and Sugar Daddy. What has the narration evoked in previous stories? How does the narrative change when the reader experiences it from a character's vantage point?