In the Shadow of War Study Guide

In the Shadow of War by Ben Okri

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Ben Okri published an early version of "In the Shadow of War" in the London publication *West Africa*, in 1983. Subsequently, he included a rewritten version of the story in his 1988 collection, *Stars of the New Curfew*. Both the English and United States editions of *Stars of the New Curfew* were out of print as of 2004; however, the story was also anthologized in 1999 by Daniel Halpern in *The Art of the Story: An International Anthology of Contemporary Short Stories*.

Like much of Okri's writing, "In the Shadow of War" focuses on a young main character, who in this case is a Urhobo boy, age seven or eight, named Omovo. Omovo appears as the main character in two of Okri's other works, *The Landscapes Within* and *Dangerous Love*. Here, Omovo is forced to explore issues of morality against the landscape of the Nigerian Civil War. In question is his morality as well as that of his father and the soldiers who kill a woman whom they presume to be a spy. In fact, she may simply be aiding other women and children who are impoverished and displaced by the war.

"In the Shadow of War" marks a significant turning point in Okri's career. Most important, this story, as well as those that appear with it and those in Okri's earlier short fiction collection, *Incidents at the Shrine*, mark a shift away from realist writing to writing that skillfully incorporates the realm of the imagination and the fantastic. By incorporating fantastical elements into the work, Okri opens the story to a myriad of interpretations, all of which conspire to fortify his theme that, in the face of war, the distinctions between right and wrong become unclear.

Author Biography

Ben Okri was born on Sunday, March 15, 1959, in Minna, Nigeria, just sixteen months before the country gained its independence from the United Kingdom. Okri was born to Silver Oghenegueke Loloje Okri, an Urhobo man from Warri on the Niger delta, and to his Ibo wife, Grace. Okri spent his early life in Peckham, England, in the borough of Southwark and was one of four siblings, three boys and one girl. At the age of six, Okri returned to Nigeria, a country marked by military coups d'etat and ultimately a three-year civil war. Okri remained in Nigeria until 1978, when his failure to gain entry into the universities' science programs prompted him to return to London with the manuscript of his first novel in hand. In England, Okri attended the University of Essex while successfully publishing his first and second novels, *Flowers and Shadows* (1979) and *The Landscapes Within* (1981).

In 1983, Okri became the poetry editor for the weekly magazine *West Africa*, in which "In the Shadow of War" was first published during that same year. By the mid-eighties, Okri's talent began to be recognized, and he continued to publish. His subsequent publications included *Incidents at the Shrine* (1986), his first collection of short stories; *Stars of the New Curfew* (1988), in which a revised version of "In the Shadow of War" appeared; *The Famished Road* (1991), a novel; *An African Elegy* (1992), a poetry collection; *Songs of Enchantment* (1993), the second volume of *The Famished Road*; *Birds of Heaven* (1995), a brief nonfiction collection of his essays and speeches; *Astonishing the Gods* (1995); *Dangerous Love* (1996), which is a revision of his second novel, *The Landscapes Within*; *A Way of Being Free* (1997), a more extensive collection of his essays, reviews, and speeches; *Infinite Riches* (1998), the third volume in *The Famished Road* series; *Mental Fight* (1999), a poetry volume; and *In Arcadia* (2002).

In addition to winning the prestigious Booker McConnell Prize for Fiction in 1991 for *The Famished Road*, Okri has been distinguished by the following awards and recognition: an Arts Council of Great Britain scholarship (1984); the Commonwealth Prize for Fiction and the Paris Review Aga Khan Prize for Fiction (1987) for *Incidents at the Shrine*; a two-year Fellow Commonworship in Creative Arts at Trinity College, Cambridge (1991); the Chianti Rufino-Antico Fattore International Literary Prize (1993); the Premio Grinzane Cavour Prize (1994); and the Crystal Award from the World Economic Forum (1995). Additionally, Okri was awarded a Doctor of Letters *honoris causa* by the University of Westminster and elected as a vice president of the English Centre of the writers' association, International PEN, in 1997. In 1998, he was elected as a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and in 2000 he served as the chairman of the judges for the Caine Prize for African Fiction.

Plot Summary

"In the Shadow of War" begins in an unknown Nigerian village. Three soldiers arrive in the afternoon, disturbing the animals that roam the streets, as they proceed to the local bar to drink palm-wine "amidst the flies."

Next, the narration turns to a young boy and his father. The father and son are at their home, which from the window offers the son, Omovo, a view of the soldiers. As the father and son listen to their old Grundig radio, which they purchased inexpensively from a family who was escaping the war, they hear news of "bombings and air raids in the interior of the country." As the father grooms and then dresses himself in a coat that is "shabby" and too small for him, Omovo continues to peer out the window. He is "irritated" with his father and is focused on looking for a woman who has been passing his house every day for the past week. The woman wears a black veil over her face and is headed for the forest by way of the village paths and the Express road. While Omovo continues to watch for the woman, the war news finishes and the radio broadcaster announces that there will be an eclipse of the moon that night. Omovo's father chides bitterly, "As if an eclipse will stop this war." An exchange ensues in which the father tells Omovo that an eclipse is "when the world goes dark and strange things happen." He warns Omovo not to stay out late because "Heclipses hate children" and that "they eat them." Omovo does not believe his father, who smiles and gives him his allowance of ten kobo. Before leaving, Omovo's father instructs him to turn off the radio because "it's bad for a child to listen to news of war." After taking a drink and praying to his ancestors, Omovo's father picks up his briefcase and departs.

Omovo watches his father leave and board the bus before he turns the radio back on. With the radio on, Omovo continues to sit in the windowsill waiting for the woman, whom he remembers to have worn a yellow smock the last time she went by. He also remembers that the last time she went by the children stopped what they were doing and threw things at her. The children said that the woman had no shadow and that her feet never touched the ground. Unaffected by the children's efforts, the woman continued on her way without flinching, looking back, or walking any faster.

As the story continues, Okri describes the oppressive heat and the way in which the villagers continue with their daily activities "as if they were sleep-walking." The soldiers continue to drink palm-wine and play draughts. Still watching them from his upstairs window, Omovo notices that each time children pass the bar, the soldiers call them over and, after speaking with them briefly, give them some money. Omovo goes downstairs and passes the soldiers, but they do not call to him. On his return, they do call to him, however, by asking him his name. Omovo replies that his name is "Heclipse." As the soldier laughs at his reply, he sprays spit on Omovo's face. The other soldiers appear not to be interested in Omovo as they continue to play their game and swat flies. Standing so close to the soldiers, Omovo sees their guns and the numbers that appear on them. One of the soldiers asks Omovo about the name Heclipse, wondering if his father gave him that name because he had big lips. The other soldiers laugh at this inquiry and Omovo nods. The soldier then asks Omovo if he has seen the woman who

wears the black veil. When Omovo replies that he has not, they tell him that she is an enemy-helping spy. Giving Omovo ten kobo, the soldier tells Omovo to tell them if he sees her. Refusing the money, Omovo returns home to sit in the windowsill. The soldiers periodically look up at Omovo. In the oppressive heat, Omovo falls asleep sitting up. He awakes to the sound of cocks crowing and the hourly radio news. The soldiers sleep in the bar as Omovo listens "without comprehension to the day's casualties." Also affected by the heat, the radio announcer yawns, apologizes, and continues to catalog the day's fighting.

When Omovo looks up again, the woman has already passed, and the soldiers are following her. Omovo runs to catch up with the men, one of whom has removed his shirt. The other soldier, Omovo notices, has such large buttocks that he has split his pants. Omovo follows the men across the Express road and into the forest. Once in the forest, the soldiers take a different route than the woman, but Omovo continues to follow her through "dense vegetation." The woman wears "faded wrappers and a grey shawl" with her black veil and a red basket on top of her head. While in pursuit of the woman, Omovo fails to notice if her feet are touching the ground. As he continues through the forest, Omovo passes "unfinished estates" with "ostentatious signboards" and "collapsing fences," a cement factory in disrepair, and a tree with a large animal skeleton under it. A snake descends from a tree, and up ahead he hears "loud music and people singing war slogans." Finally, they come upon an encampment, where the woman stops to give "children with kwashiorkor stomachs and women wearing rags" her basket and its contents. The people thank her, and she leaves, heading back to a muddy river. At the river, Omovo sees what he thinks are "capsized canoes and trailing waterlogged clothes" and floating sacrificial items such as bread, gourds filled with food, and Coca-Cola cans. Looking more closely, he sees that the canoes look to have changed into "swollen dead animals" and that there is outdated money along the riverbank. He then hears the voice of one of the soldiers and hides in the shadow of a tree. After the soldiers pass, Omovo hears a scream as they come upon the woman. They demand that she tell them where "the others" are, and when she remains silent, they call her a witch and ask her if she wants to die. She still does not answer. One of the soldiers removes her veil and tosses it to the ground. As she bends to pick it up, her bald and disfigured head is exposed. She also has a "livid gash" across her face. The bare-chested soldier pushes her down and falling onto her face, she remains still.

The lighting in the forest changes, and Omovo sees that the things floating in the river are actually corpses of men. After another scream, the woman gets up, spits in the fat soldier's face, and with the veil waving in her hand, she begins to "howl dementedly." Two of the soldiers step back, but the fat soldier pulls out his gun. Just before the gunshot, Omovo hears "the beating of wings" above him. He runs through the forest screaming, the soldiers following him. He sees an owl, trips over a tree root, and blacks out as his head hits the ground. When Omovo awakes, he fears he is blind because he cannot see his hand move in front of his face. He runs into a door and then begins to hear voices and a radio broadcast about the war. He finds himself on his balcony and sees his father drinking palm-wine with the three soldiers in the bar. He rushes down to tell his father what happened in the forest, but his father first tells him that he should thank the soldiers for bringing him back from the forest. Omovo again tries to tell his

father what happened, but "smiling apologetically," his father picks him up and takes him back to bed.

Characters

Heclipse

See Omovo

Omovo

Omovo is the main character of "In the Shadow of War." He is a young Urhobo boy who is about seven or eight years old. In the story, he acts primarily as an observer. He watches as his father gets ready and leaves for work, as well as for a woman in a veil who has been passing his house every day for the past week. He also watches as three soldiers, who have newly arrived in town, talk to the village children and give them money. Intrigued, Omovo invites an exchange with the soldiers by walking past them. After telling them that his name is Heclipse, he turns down the ten kobo that they offer him in exchange for information about the woman in the veil. He lies to the soldiers, telling them that he has not seen her. Omovo then returns to his home to watch for the woman in the veil again. After the woman passes, Omovo dashes off to the forest, where he watches the woman give a basket of goods to some women and children. When the woman then sets off again, Omovo continues to follow her. Ultimately, the soldiers also catch up with the woman and murder her. While this happens, Omovo hides in the shadow of a tree. Horrified by what has transpired, Omovo attempts to run out of the forest, but he falls and blacks out. He awakes to find himself at home, where just below his window, he sees his father drinking palm-wine with the soldiers. Omovo tries to tell his father what happened in the forest, but his father simply asks him to thank the soldiers for bringing him home and takes Omovo off to bed.

Although the narrator at one point mentions that Omovo does not understand the news of war that he hears on the radio, Omovo seems to have an instinctive humanitarian side that prompts him not to disclose information about the woman in the veil. When he tries to tell his father what the soldiers have done, Omovo reveals an allegiance to the woman in the veil rather than to the soldiers, who claim that she is a spy who is helping their enemies. As a young boy, Omovo may not understand the political implications of his loyalty; however, for readers, such fidelity points out how war makes human beings do terrible things to each other. It is inconsequential to Omovo whether the woman in the veil is a spy□or a witch, for that matter. For him, her murder is wrong because it is a crime against another human being. Having seen the woman give her basket of goods to starving children and obviously needy women, Omovo likely feels even more strongly that the soldiers' actions are wrong. Omovo's youthful perspective confirms Okri's belief that, in war, morality and ethical behavior are not the norm.

Omovo's Father

Omovo's father appears only in the beginning and the end of the story. In the beginning, he is getting ready for work and teases his son about the coming lunar eclipse. He works in a professional capacity of some sort, yet he is not a man of substantial means, as indicated by the "shabby coat" he wears that no longer fits him. He believes that there is something inherently bad about war, and he does not want his son listening to news of it on the radio. In the end, Omovo finds his father drinking palm-wine with the soldiers, and when he tries to tell his father about the day's events, his father smiles "apologetically" and takes Omovo off to bed. If one reads this story as a dream that Omovo has, the father's presence can be read as a reflection of the boy's earlier irritation with him. If, however, one reads the story as an actual series of events, the father's presence with the soldiers demonstrates either his allegiance to the national war effort or his way of protecting his son, should the boy's sympathy toward the veiled woman be revealed.

Radio Announcer

The radio announcer provides details about the war and broadcasts the news that an eclipse of the moon is expected. While reporting the news about the day's fighting, the announcer yawns, indicating that, to a certain extent, he has become desensitized to the horrors of war.

Three Soldiers

The three soldiers are responsible for the death of the veiled woman. In the story, they remain nameless and are only recognizable by their physical traits and actions. One soldier speaks to Omovo from the bar and tries to bribe him with ten kobo to tell them if he sees the woman in the veil. Another soldier removes his shirt, and the third soldier is described as fat with large buttocks that split his pants. The soldiers believe that the woman is a spy who is helping the Biafrans. When the soldiers find the veiled woman in the forest, the bare-chested soldier pushes her down, and the fat soldier shoots her after she spits in his face. The soldiers are not portrayed as admirable, hardworking men. They spend their day in the village bar, drinking and playing draughts while they bribe the children to help them find the veiled woman. After napping at the bar, they pursue the veiled woman, who they see has sustained injuries to her face and head, and kill her.

The Veiled Woman

The veiled woman is a mysterious character who is figured as a spy, as a witch, and as a humanitarian. The soldiers believe that she is a spy for the Biafrans, and they ultimately kill her. The children in the village believe that she is a witch. They say that she has no shadow and that her feet never touch the ground. Readers may believe that

the woman is simply a humanitarian who values human life regardless of political designations. The woman passes through Omovo's village every day for a week on her way to a Biafran encampment where, on the day that she is killed, she gives a basket of goods to malnourished children and impoverished women. By aiding the non-national side of the war, the woman exposes herself to the danger of being caught by the Nigerian soldiers who are monitoring her efforts. The woman, whose face and head are disfigured, demonstrates a clear dislike for the soldiers who confront her in the forest; however, it remains uncertain whether she is a spy, or a benevolent soul, or a witch.

Themes

Truth

One of the overriding themes in "In the Shadow of War" is truth and the absence of it. On more than one occasion, Omovo is dishonest. First, he does not tell the soldiers his real name. Second, he lies when he tells them that he has not seen the woman in the veil. The fact that Omovo has the propensity to lie and that his initial perceptions are sometimes proved wrong, as with the corpses that he at first believes are capsized canoes, makes it possible to read his account of the events in the forest as somehow less than true. Another way to read Omovo's dishonesty, however, is that he is acting morally by protecting the woman in the veil. The narrator in the story makes the claim that Omovo is listening to things on the radio about the war that he does not necessarily understand; however, Omovo's dishonesty suggests that there are some aspects of war that are not lost on him. He seems to understand that telling the soldiers about the woman would place her in danger. By showing how telling a lie can be seen as a moral act, Okri points out one of the ways in which war creates ambiguities in issues of right and wrong.

The theme of honesty is first introduced in the story when Omovo's father tells him that "Heclipses hate children. They eat them." The father's smile suggests that he does not intend for Omovo to believe this statement, which Omovo indeed does not. While this is a small, harmless untruth that can be read as a playful joke between a father and his precocious son, the exchange also functions as an introduction to the notion that not everything that is said or stated as fact can be believed as true. At the same time, Omovo's father's statement that an eclipse is "when the world goes dark" shows readers that some information can actually be true. In addition to suggesting that honesty and dishonesty often go hand in hand, this opening scene prompts readers to be mindful that some factual elements of the story may be true, whereas others may not. For example, in the end, readers are left to wonder if the veiled woman is a spy or a witch. Perhaps more important, readers must also determine if they believe that all of the events in the forest really take place or if they are a dream or the product of Omovo's fanciful imagination.

War and Morality

"In the Shadow of War" is set during the Nigerian Civil War. Using this backdrop, Okri explores morality and the ways in which war breaks down the usually clear distinctions between what constitutes moral behavior and what does not. As mentioned in the earlier section on the theme of truth, Omovo's dishonesty is one way that Okri points out how a normally immoral act can be moral in wartime. Omovo's lie about not having seen the veiled woman prevents him from having to tell the soldiers that he has seen her going into the forest via the village paths and the Express road and thus shields her route from the soldiers, at least in the short term. Earlier, Omovo disobeys his father by turning the

radio back on after his father leaves for work. Under normal circumstances, such behavior would demonstrate willful disobedience; however, to the extent that what Omovo learns on the radio informs his decision to lie to the soldiers and reject their bribe, his disobedience can be seen as a path to rightful living and informed decisions when it comes to protecting the veiled woman. While Okri explores ambiguities around moral behavior, he also clearly points out the injustices of war, the most obvious of which is perhaps that the veiled woman is killed by the soldiers for coming to the aid of malnourished children and women. In the end, readers do not know if the veiled woman is indeed a spy or if she is simply helping some unfortunate casualties of the war; however, the lack of resolution on this point only reinforces Okri's perspective that murdering anyone is wrong.

Loyalty

One of the most prominent themes in "In the Shadow of War" is that of loyalty. The theme manifests itself in many ways: loyalty to country, loyalty to humanity, and loyalty to family. The soldiers' pursuit of the veiled woman demonstrates their loyalty to the national cause. They are fighting to unite Nigeria once again and to prevent Biafra from becoming an independent republic. In contrast, the veiled woman does not demonstrate loyalty to the national cause. Instead, she shows clear disdain for the soldiers when she spits in the face of one of them. By bringing the basket of goods to the impoverished and displaced Biafran women and children, the veiled woman demonstrates loyalty, perhaps to the Biafran cause but most definitely to her fellow human beings. Whether the woman is a spy is not clearly resolved before her death; however, her commitment to helping people who are suffering despite their political affiliations is readily apparent. Omovo also demonstrates loyalty to humanity when he lies to the soldiers about whether he has seen the veiled woman. The theme of loyalty as it pertains to family is brought out in the end of the story when Omovo's father tells him to thank the soldiers and then takes Omovo back to bed after "smiling apologetically" to the soldiers. Read in one way, this scene suggests that the father's loyalty lies with the soldiers and that he somewhat hushes his son's excited tale of the day's events. Read in another way, however, Omovo's father can be seen as protecting his son from the harm the soldiers might do to him if Omovo appears to defend the veiled woman's actions in any way. Ironically, by taking his son home, Omovo's father is showing the greatest loyalty because he is protecting his son from a political and violent world that he may be too young to understand.

Style

African Literature

Okri's work belongs to the ever-growing canon of African literature, which in the United States and Europe refers to literature written in English or French by writers from Africa. Africa has a long history of oral literature and literature written in indigenous languages; however, as African nations began to achieve independence in the 1950s and 1960s, a collection of writing began to emerge that was written in the languages of nations who had colonized the continent. West Africans, especially Nigerian writers, have been particularly prolific. First-generation-African writers, like Chinua Achebe, wrote in response to the stereotypes that colonial nations had long created about Africans. While these efforts were effective in redefining Africa and its people and cultures, early African writing, which was largely written by men, has been criticized for failing to accurately represent women. Hence, in the 1960s and beyond, female African writers, including Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, and Ama Ata Aidoo, began to write literature that exposed not only colonial repression and oppression but oppression of African women by African men. Okri belongs to the second generation of African writers. As a group, these writers have focused not only on the social, cultural, and political ramifications of colonization but also on post-independence challenges, failures, and opportunities for change throughout the continent.

Magic Realism

As its name suggests, magic realism is a genre of literature that includes both realistic and magical elements. Unlike fantasy writing, literature written in this genre is not wholly fantastical. Instead, the world in which stories unfold is both fantasy and reality. German art critic Franz Roh originally coined the term "magic realism" in 1925; however, the term is largely associated with literature written in the 1980s and afterward. Magic realism is most often associated with Latin American writers because authors such as Gabriel García Márquez and Isabel Allende popularized this form. Despite this association, magic realism appears in fiction outside of Latin America. "In the Shadow of War" is one example. In this story, Okri incorporates elements that seem to be other-worldly like the veiled woman who the children say walks without touching the ground.

Setting

When authors sit down to write literature, whether it be a novel, a short story, or a play, they must decide where their story should take place. The place in which a story takes place is called its setting. In some cases, authors intentionally make the setting of their work unknown or vague. In other cases, however, the setting of the work plays an integral role in the development of the author's themes. The latter is true with "In the Shadow of War." This story takes place during Nigeria's civil war, which continued from

1967 to 1970. Using this as his setting, Okri was able to explore the impact that war has on people and the moral predicaments that they find themselves in during civil strife.

Historical Context

Okri and Nigeria

Okri was born in Nigeria and spent much of his childhood as well as his adult life living in England. Despite his predominantly western residency, Okri's writing has been deeply informed by the years he spent in Nigeria during the country's three-year civil war and the subsequent, highly turbulent postwar years. Writing for the *South African Literary Review* in September 1992, Carolyn Newton writes that Okri's novel *The Famished Road* "could not have been born of England's green and pleasant land; his is a heady cocktail of African legend and western classicism." The same can be said of his short stories, which served as the testing ground for the writing style that he popularized with *The Famished Road*.

From 1967 to 1970, Nigeria was embroiled in a bloody civil war, also known as the Nigerian-Biafran War or the Biafran War, during which an estimated 1 million people were killed. Okri lived in Nigeria during the violent war and postwar years up until 1978. After this time, he remained deeply connected with his country's ongoing political and social struggles.

Okri has been and continues to be deeply affected and engaged in the issues, challenges, and injustices faced by his countrymen. In 1985, following a visit home, he published several essays about Nigerian political concerns and the state of the nation. Ten years later, Okri remained active in Nigerian events, including those surrounding Nigerian author Ken Saro-Wiwa's imprisonment and subsequent trial for treason. Despite pleas from around the world, including those from Okri and South African president Nelson Mandela, Saro-Wiwa was ultimately hanged along with several others who were detained with him.

The Civil War Years and Beyond

The Nigerian Civil War began in 1967; however, seeds of discontent and destabilization date back to 1963 when Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the first premier of the newly created Mid-Western Region of Nigeria, was accused of and imprisoned for working against the national leadership. During 1966, Nigeria lost civilian administration of the country during two successful military coups d'etat in January and July. The latter coup d'etat left Lieutenant-General (later General) Yakubu Gowon at the helm of the country. He quickly divided the country into twelve states, which prompted Lieutenant-Colonel (later General) Odumegwu Ojukwu to announce the secession of the three easternmost states. The three states were to become the autonomous Republic of Biafra, and thus began the war. Literary figures, like Christopher Okigbo, one of Nigeria's best poets and someone Okri admired, joined the fight for Biafra. Others like Wole Soyinka, who is a well-known and respected novelist and playwright, opposed the war. By 1970, the

Biafran resistance had diminished considerably, and on January 15, 1970, a delegation from Biafra surrendered and ended the war.

Despite the end of the war, Nigeria's political landscape continued to be marked by leadership assassinations, multiple military coups d'etat, and the ongoing division of the country into numerous states. In 1979, a reprieve seemed possible when civilian ruler Sheu Shagari was elected president of the Second Republic. In 1983, however, Major-General Mohammed Butari deposed Shagari in yet another military coup and gained control of the country. Butari created the Supreme Military Council that was aimed at curbing all democratic rights. In 1985, General Ibrahim Babangida overthrew Butari and pledged to return the country to civilian rule within the next decade. On the economic front, the eighties were challenging years for Nigeria. The country's real gross national product (GNP) declined so significantly that Nigeria was reclassified by the World Bank as a low-income country for the first time since 1978. In the face of a collapsing economy, the internal ethnic tensions continued to build, and despite successfully forming a transitional government in 1993 comprised of a military National Defense and Security Council and a council of civilian ministers, Babangida was unable to fulfill his pledge. He eventually stepped down, but not until 1999 did Nigeria experience its first peaceful transition to civilian leadership.

Critical Overview

Stars of the New Curfew received less attention than Okri's more well-known work, *The Famished Road*; however, the work did not go unnoticed in 1988, when it was released in England, or the following year, when it was published in the United States. In "Beneath the Waves," which Sylvester Ike Onwordi wrote for the *Times Literary Supplement* in August 1988, Onwordi commends *Stars of the New Curfew* as some of Okri's "finest writing to date." He notes that Okri "appears now to have come into his own stylistically and creatively." In addition to saying that Okri writes without "self-indulgence," Onwordi praised Okri's writing as "concise without being arid." Writing for the *New York Times Book Review* in August 1989, Neil Bissoondath seems to agree. Taking special note of the first paragraph of "In the Shadow of War," Bissoondath writes that Okri's "language is simple" and that his details are "striking."

Okri has been praised for the ways in which his fiction accurately reflects Nigerian culture. Onwordi notes of *Stars of the New Curfew*, "this is a book on Nigerian life which perfectly captures the emotional temperature of that turbulent country." At the same time, Okri has also been recognized by critics for the universality of his themes, particularly as they apply to Africa's greater continental experience of colonization and subsequent independence. In his review of *Stars of the New Curfew* in *World Literature Today* in the spring of 1990, Michael Thorpe notes that:

Okri's fabular and allegorical journeys, three of which are excursions into the forest, are more patently linked with the life Africans endure and struggle through in the here and now. Everywhere images of sudden violence and random, cruel power erupt.

Bissoondath concurs and calls Okri a "natural storyteller" who writes "tales that resonate well beyond their immediate settings, striking chords of recognition in anyone with more than a nodding acquaintance with underdeveloped countries."

Critics have also remarked that *Stars of the New Curfew* as well as Okri's preceding short fiction collection, *Incidents at the Shrine*, signal a transition in his writing. *Postcolonial African Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook*, which is edited by Pushpa Naidu Parekh and Siga Fatima Jagne, takes note that the stories found in these collections

mark a turning point in [his] aesthetic development because they increasingly use African narrative techniques as an essential aspect of their narrative strategy. *Stars of the New Curfew* particularly develops the rich imagination, complex mythical imagery, and episodic adventures that are found [in the writings of Okri's predecessors].

Okri's predecessors include Amos Tutuola, Gabriel Okara, and D. O. Fangunwa. This same source also states that "critics have praised Okri for his ability to creatively experiment with new literary forms." One such critic is Robert Fraser. Writing in the April 1989 issue of the *Third World Quarterly*, Fraser calls attention to Okri's particular strength in drawing on the traditions of oral storytelling without "compromising anything

of his fractious modernity." Stylistically, *Stars of the New Curfew* is also known by critics as some of Okri's earliest use of magic realism. In his early review of *Stars of the New Curfew*, Onwordi reflects that Okri's "work will probably be described as magic realism because, dealing with fable and the collision of dream and reality, he takes liberties with perceived notions of time and place."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Robeson is a freelance writer with a master of arts degree in English. In this essay, Robeson explores the issue of morality as figured in Okri's "In the Shadow of War."

In the Spring 1990 issue of *World Literature Today*, Michael Thorpe notes that in *Stars of the New Curfew*, Okri "probe[s] unsparingly the self-inflicted wounds of 'freedom.'" In this statement, Thorpe refers to the irony that in the wake of colonial independence, Nigeria found itself embroiled in a violent civil war. Instead of fulfilling the promise of freedom in a united state of empowerment, Nigerians turned on themselves and were bitterly divided in a bloody, three-year conflict.

Thorpe continues by noting that in the wartime worlds depicted in *Stars of the New Curfew*, "No virtues have scope to thrive, whether love, loyalty, or integrity." Indeed, love, loyalty, and integrity are often compromised by war, and Okri skillfully exposes this fact throughout his works of short fiction. In *The Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literatures in English*, Bruce King states that the "underlying theme [of Okri's work] is the failure to find love and caring relationships in a society that has become brutalized through the harshness needed to survive." King concludes with the observation that Okri also expresses what he perceives to be a "lack of communal morality" in Nigeria "through images of excrement, disease, and poverty, spiritual disorder finding its physical counterpart in filth, stink, clogged sewage, electricity failures, and rotting bodies." Social and familial relationships, communal morality, as well as the need to survive, are all explored in "In the Shadow of War." More specifically, Okri uses this story to examine the ways in which families and society grapple with the issues of morality, humanity, selflessness, and self-preservation against the backdrop of war.

In the beginning of the story, Omovo's father tells him that during eclipses "strange things happen." Okri suggests that the same can be said of war, by naming the story "In the Shadow of War," thus creating a parallel between an eclipse, during which "the world goes dark," and shadows. Omovo's father warns him that "the dead start to walk about and sing," two events not normally associated with the dead. Likewise, during wartime, people do not always act as they normally might. It is likely not a coincidence then that Omovo faces his most challenging moment while hidden "in the shadow of a tree." From this shaded vantage point, Omovo must decide if he should attempt to help the veiled woman and expose himself as a friend of the "enemy" or if he should remain hidden. In the shadow, Omovo is symbolically encased in the shadow of war, or the place where his behavior may be inconsistent with what it would be during non-wartime situations. In this one scene, Okri reveals how, in the shadow of war, individuals may sometimes place their own safety above their moral convictions about violence.

Okri explores Omovo's individual dilemma around the issues of survival and morality in a broader social context through the character development of Omovo's father, the soldiers, and the veiled woman. He does so by setting up oppositional relationships within the story that mirror the social divisions that occurred during the civil war between Biafra sympathizers and those who supported the national Nigerian position.

Symbolically, the soldiers and Omovo's father represent the Nigerian national side of the war, whereas Omovo and the veiled woman represent the Biafran side.

The associations between Omovo's father, the soldiers, and the Nigerian national cause are quite clear. As soldiers, the three village newcomers obviously are representative of and are fighting for the reunification of Nigeria. Their primary occupation is to prevent the successful separation of the nation's three easternmost states. Though Omovo's father never clearly states his political position, Okri draws subtle likenesses between him and the soldiers that create a link between these patriarchal authority figures. For example, Omovo's father drinks "a libation" before going to work, just as the soldiers, who are presumably always on duty, order "a calabash of palm-wine" at the "palm-frond bar." Physically, Omovo's father wears a "shabby coat that he had long outgrown," while one of the soldiers has "buttocks so big they had begun to split his pants." In addition, like Omovo's father, the soldiers try to give Omovo ten kobo. Omovo seems equally displeased with his father and the soldiers throughout the story. In the beginning, Okri writes that Omovo is "irritated with his father," and he seems to display equal annoyance with the soldiers when he lies to them and rejects their bribe. Further, with both the soldiers and his father, Omovo demonstrates disobedience. He turns the radio back on when his father leaves for work, even though his father had told him to turn it off because "it's bad for a child to listen to news of war." And later, despite the soldier's instruction, Omovo fails to alert the threesome about seeing the veiled woman.

Although these linkages exist, they can be read as tenuous. Okri makes these parallels apparent and yet understated in an effort to make more than one reading of the story possible. On the one hand, the story can be read in such a way that the father supports the soldiers' activities. This reading is supported by the fact that he asks Omovo to thank the soldiers for bringing him back from the forest and that he smiles "apologetically" at them for his son's behavior. Another interpretation of this same scene, however, is that Omovo's father is actually protecting his son by carrying him back to bed. If one favors the second reading, then Omovo's father's actions, though they seem on the surface to be disloyal to his family, are actually quite loyal. He protects his son from the danger of appearing to be loyal to the Biafran side of the war. Ironically, Okri uses the relationship between the soldiers and Omovo's father to suggest that to befriend people who murder humanitarians can in some ways be seen as justifiable and thus moral during war.

Okri continues to explore the issues of self-preservation and morality through the connections he creates among the veiled woman, Omovo, and Biafra. At the outset, the veiled woman's allegiance to the Biafran people is evident. In addition to being thought of as a spy by the soldiers, she is seen giving her basket of goods to "children with kwashiorkor stomachs." The word *kwashiorkor* describes the distension of the stomach that results from severe malnutrition. During the civil war, this was a life-threatening yet common experience for Biafran children. By the end of the story, readers do not know whether the woman is indeed a spy or simply a humanitarian. What is apparent, however, is her faithfulness to the Biafrans who are suffering as a result of the war, as well as her contentious anger toward the soldiers and, by extension, the Nigerian national cause for its part in the marginalization of the Biafran people. The veiled

woman's anger is clearest during the scene just prior to her death when, having had her veil torn off, she picks it up and then stops "in the attitude of kneeling, her head still bowed." Her feigned deference lasts only shortly and is soon followed by a demonstration of pride and power. Okri writes, "she drew herself to her fullest height, and spat" in the soldier's face. Okri complicates the character of the veiled woman by creating questions around whether she is a witch; however, although her identity is less than clear, readers never have any doubts about where she focuses her compassion and loyalty.

As someone who may be too young to have strong political affiliations, Omovo cannot necessarily be said to be a Biafran supporter. Nevertheless, Okri writes Omovo as sympathetic to and seemingly aligned with the veiled woman. The linkages between the two are both overt and symbolic. On the overt side, Omovo's loyalty to the veiled woman is clearest when he lies to the soldiers about never having seen her, despite the fact that he had been watching her pass by his house at the same time for a week. Okri makes another one of the more obvious connections between the two when Omovo follows the veiled woman and the soldiers into the forest. He writes:

When they got into the forest the men stopped following the woman, and took a different route. They seemed to know what they were doing. Omovo hurried to keep the woman in view. He followed her through dense vegetation.

Despite the perception that the soldiers know what they are doing, Omovo elects to follow the veiled woman's path into the forest. This suggests an allegiance to her rather than to the soldiers. One of the perhaps less obvious parallels between Omovo and the veiled woman surrounds their identities. Because she wears a black veil, the woman has an obscured identity. She cannot be easily recognized. In a different but somewhat similar vein, Omovo also has an obscured identity. Instead of telling the soldiers his real name when they ask him, Omovo tells them that his name is "Heclipse."

The connections between the black veil and the name Heclipse as well as the characters that these images represent continue. Both a veil and an eclipse create a shadow or darkness. In the Nigerian flag, which consists of a central, vertical white band flanked on the left and right by two vertical green bands, the color white symbolizes national unity. In that a veil and an eclipse are associated with darkness, or the opposite of white, both Omovo and the veiled woman can be symbolically linked to the concept of disunity, which in this case refers to the formation of a new Republic of Biafra. At the same time, if light can be read as a symbol of truth, then Omovo's and the veiled woman's actions can be associated with the obstruction of truth. Just as Omovo is not always honest, the veiled woman appears to withhold information from the soldiers when they confront her in the forest. She refuses to tell them where "the others" are. Whether "the others" are the Biafra soldiers or the women and children with whom she left her basket, readers do not know. Regardless, the woman remains silent. Ironically, Omovo and the veiled woman's shared dishonesty can be seen as admirable. Both Omovo and the veiled woman make decisions that compromise their own safety in an effort to ensure the safety of others. If one reads this story altruistically, this loyalty can

be seen as loyalty to fellow human beings who are suffering because of the politics and injustices of war.

Through the development of these main characters, Okri aptly points out that war has an impact not only upon the soldiers who occupy the front lines but on society at large, including children. When Okri writes that Omovo calls himself Heclipse, he figuratively suggests that Omovo himself is an eclipse, or that which darkens the world in shadow. Taken a step further, this symbolism suggests that as the one who creates the shadow of war, Omovo is complicit in creating the moral dilemma in which he finds himself. This is perhaps what Thorpe means by the "self inflicted wounds of freedom." In the newly independent and war torn Nigeria, the cost of freedom for Biafrans, as well as for those caught in the crossfire of the conflict, was their own morality. Yet, in an ironic twist, Okri suggests that perhaps such lack of morality is in fact the very basis of that freedom. In the context of war, siding with murderers and being dishonest proves to have moral currency. Ironically, in the case of war, it is sometimes true that acting in less than moral ways is the most moral thing one can do. It is in such moral ambiguity that people free themselves from the destructive nature of violence and war. As symbolized by his upstairs perch in the window, Omovo, like the veiled woman and perhaps like his father, observe the world from a moral high ground. In the end, Okri thus asserts that both the selfishness and selflessness of these characters express moral positions that demonstrate an admirable concern for family and humanity at large.

Source: Dustie Robeson, Critical Essay on "In the Shadow of War," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 2005.

Critical Essay #2

Brent holds a Ph.D. in American culture from the University of Michigan. In this essay, Brent discusses the motif of vision in Okri's "In the Shadow of War."

Ben Okri utilizes vision as a recurring motif in "In the Shadow of War," contrasting images of light, vision, and visibility with images of darkness (or shadow), blindness, and invisibility. Light, vision, and visibility function as metaphors for truth, knowledge, and understanding, while darkness, invisibility, and blindness function as metaphors for lack of knowledge, comprehension, or a clear perception of the truth.

Okri in "In the Shadow of War" represents the experience of war from the limited and uncomprehending perspective of a young child. The narrative is thus restricted to the sights, sounds, and smells that the boy perceives. In representing the boy's limited understanding of what he sees in the war-torn world around him, Okri refrains from explaining to the reader the broader meaning or context of Omovo's observations and perceptions. As a child, Omovo lives "in the shadow of war." His lack of understanding of the war is indicated by the narrator's statement that he "listened without comprehension to the day's casualties" announced on the radio. Omovo's understanding of the war is limited to his perceptions as a child.

"In the Shadow of War" opens with Omovo's perspective as he gazes from the window balcony of his home, looking down onto the street. This thematically places Omovo in the position of an observer, who watches the world around him, as figures "appear" and "disappear" from his sight. For example, as the story opens, Omovo is waiting for the woman in the black veil to "appear" on his street, recalling that every day she has walked past his window then "disappeared" into the forest.

The title "In the Shadow of War" clues the reader into the story's recurring motif of shadows, light, and darkness. This motif is emphasized when the radio announcer states that an eclipse of the moon will occur that night. An eclipse of the moon, or lunar eclipse, occurs when the Earth passes between the sun and the moon, and the shadow of the Earth blocks the sunlight from reaching the moon. This phenomenon causes the moon to go dark, from the perspective of a person looking up at the night sky from Earth. Hearing the announcement of the eclipse, Omovo's father comments, "As if an eclipse will stop this war." When Omovo asks his father what an eclipse is, his father responds enigmatically, "That's when the world goes dark and strange things happen." This statement could also describe the effect war has on a society. Metaphorically, one might say that war eclipses human understanding and human experience by casting a shadow over an entire society.

The motif of the shadow occurs again in reference to the black veil worn by the mysterious woman. The narrator explains the children's superstitious belief that the woman in the black veil has no shadow. While to the children this suggests something supernatural and perhaps evil, it symbolically functions in the story to resonate with the motif of shadows and light. Omovo's concern with watching and vision is again indicated

when he follows the woman in the black veil into the woods, hurrying after her in order to "keep the woman in view." The black veil worn by the woman connects the story's motifs of darkness and shadow, as it conceals her face for most of the story, in effect keeping her face in shadow.

The actions of the woman with the veil are further described in terms of shadows, darkness, and invisibility. Omovo sees the woman enter a cave in the woods where "shadowy figures moved about in the half-light." After the woman leaves the cave, where she has apparently brought food to the starving people living there, Omovo follows her to a dark, muddy river. The dark, muddy water of the river suggests the obscured and muddied perceptions of Omovo's level of understanding of the war at this point. Omovo's visual perceptions are further described by the impression that the woman "moved as if an invisible force were trying to blow her away." From Omovo's perspective, "invisible forces" seem to be determining the course of events, because he lacks a full understanding of the circumstances of war that affect the woman's actions.

When he realizes that the soldiers are following the woman too, Omovo hides in the shadow of a tree. The soldiers stop the woman and one of them removes the dark veil from her head and throws it to the ground, revealing that her head and face have been mutilated. At this point, after the woman's veil is removed, Omovo's perception of the bodies floating in the river suddenly changes. Whereas he thought he had seen the carcasses of dead animals in the river, he now realizes that they are the corpses of men. The removal of the veil, and the revelation that the woman has been mutilated, probably in the course of the war, occurs along with the removal of the veil or shadow of incomprehension that shrouds Omovo's perceptions of the war. Thus, at the moment when the veil is removed from the woman's head, Omovo sees the contents of the river clearly for the first time. He further notices that the eyes of the corpses are bloated. This detail describing the misshapen eyes of the corpses conveys the notion that war destroys the human capacity for clarity of vision and distorts human perceptions of the world around them.

After Omovo experiences this brief moment of clarity, when the veil is lifted from his perception, he runs out of his hiding place in the shadow of a tree and runs into the woods "through a mist which seemed to have risen from the rocks." As he runs, he notices an owl staring at him, and then he trips and blacks out after his head hits the ground. Mist obscures the ability to see clearly, and so suggests that Omovo's moment of clarity and understanding will be once again obscured. The owl staring at him represents his moment of clarity about war, for the owl is able to see at night□that is, symbolically, to see clearly the truth of war that is normally hidden in the shadow and darkness of ignorance. The owl thus symbolizes the true perception of war that has been revealed to Omovo by the removal of the veil from the woman's face. Just as the veil has been removed, revealing the ravages of war on the woman's face, so metaphorically the veil, or shadow, of ignorance has been removed from Omovo's eyes, and the true horror of war is revealed to him.

When Omovo regains consciousness after falling and blacking out in the forest, he is in his home and it is dark. He at first thinks that he has gone blind. When he goes to the

balcony and is able to look out he is "full of wonder that his sight had returned." Omovo's adventure, as related in "In the Shadow of War," takes him through an allegorical journey from a level of ignorance and incomprehension of the realities of war to a moment of revelation in which he perceives the true nature of war with a new level of clarity. Omovo thus passes through a symbolic experience of blindness and restored vision that parallels his original blindness to the horrors of war and sudden vision of the true nature of war and the human devastation it causes.

Source: Liz Brent, Critical Essay on "In the Shadow of War," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 2005.

Critical Essay #3

Carter is currently employed as a freelance writer. In this essay, Carter considers the transformative powers of light and shadow in Okri's work.

The title of Ben Okri's childhood recollection of a war-torn Nigeria, "In the Shadow of War," is reflective of the climate he describes, a nation whose collective conscience is overshadowed by the carnage and violence of conflict. Okri uses the events of an eclipse to flesh out his work. Through shifting shape and changing shadow, Okri reveals first hand the power of war to gravely impact the conscience of an entire nation.

At the outset of the story, Omovo asks his father what an eclipse is. He tells him that it is "When the world goes dark and strange things happen." Omovo wishes to know what to expect; in response his father claims, "The dead start to walk around and sing." The eclipse in Okri's work is a powerful metaphor that resonates throughout the story. The contrast between light and shadow that permeates Okri's work plays tricks on Omovo's perception of reality, giving the eclipse transformative powers. With this play of light and shadow is a discernable shifting. Omovo's visual reality is not static; it is ever-changing, mirroring his father's own words.

A cloaked figure passing by at a certain hour for the past seven days, in grey with a black veil covering her face, piques Omovo's interest. In a short time this figure has reached mythic proportions, called an enemy by soldiers, viewed as supernatural by others. The neighborhood children claim "that she had no shadow . . . that her feet never touched the ground." And although the children persist in throwing things at her, as she passes by, Omovo observes that "she didn't quicken her pace, and didn't look back." Omovo is to discover the magic of the eclipse, which, through shifting light and shadows has transformative powers. For instance, the light reveals that the "spy that helps our enemies" is merely an old woman, a balding and beaten woman.

Similarly, enemies initially Omovo perceives to be "shadowy figures" moving about "in the half-light of the cave, appear in the light to be children with kwashiorkor stomachs and women wearing rags. In the changing light of the riverbed, Omovo also witnesses canoes changing to swollen dead animals, and eventually, to discarded bodies: "The lights change over the forest and for the first time Omovo saw that the dead animals on the river were the corpses of grown men." He is not a witness to supernatural events, rather, his attempts to focus in on or adjust to the changing light reveal the carnage at the riverbank. The woman is not an enemy, she is one of many victims.

Perception, the ability to see, is a precious commodity. At the story's climax, Omovo is alarmed by the loss of his vision. He is literally terrified by the darkness of his own home. In the story, "He found his way to the balcony, full of wonder that his sight had returned." When he approaches his father, Omovo is overcome with delirium and "frantically" attempts to tell his father what the soldiers had heard. Omovo challenges, he questions, he tries to make sense of the unspeakable horrors he has witnessed. His father simply carries him away. At this point it could be argued that the reader really

"sees" the implications of wartime for Omovo and his father. The kind of censorship that leads to his father's ultimate conformity is not only implied, it is profoundly understood. The climax is not dictated by the events in the forest. The terror is not so much what is revealed by the light, visions of eerie grotesques floating in the river, or the leveling of a pistol at the stomach of a badly beaten woman, but what lurks in the shadows of the collective conscience.

In her work on Okri, Felicia Alu Moh discusses the short story's economy of form in relation to Okri's work. Because the short story is used to relay Okri's childhood experiences, the economy of the genre leaves no room for bias. The events are witnessed without judgment, magnifying the horror. Characters are undeveloped, their actions impulsive rather than explained. Moh builds on her assessment of Okri's chosen literary medium, asserting that by the very nature of its form, the short story reveals a sense of urgency on the part of the writer to record an event, feeling, phenomenon, or slice of life. Consequently, says Moh, the subject matters of the West African short stories are most often "urbanity, war (especially the Nigerian Civil war), conflict and cultural assertion, coupe d'etat and the world of children." Okri relies heavily on the issues of urbanity and the Nigerian Civil War to flesh out his work.

The short story, the medium Okri chooses for recalling his childhood experiences in a war torn Nigeria, exposes the cultural malaise of which he so adamantly speaks. In a lecture entitled "The True Issue of this Century Is Not Terrorism, or Religion. It Is Freedom. We Need to De-Censor Our Minds," Okri speaks of the censorship of self. Specifically, "In the Shadow of War," examined in relation to Okri's own writings, draws some rather striking parallels, illuminating the ramifications of absorbing, without thought, the terrors of war. Self-censorship, says Okri, renders humankind easily manipulated and bullied. Failing to question the atrocities surrounding our circumstances, then, means that "we collude in the great outrages and follies and injustices of our age" when we do not actively refute our tendencies to censor "our own minds, our fears, our doubts, our anxieties."

Silent consent has consequences, says Okri, who asserts "our children are horrified to learn that we were present and adult and alive when unacceptable outrages against humanity are perpetrated under our very noses, and we did nothing. And so we implicate whole generations; and, in extreme cases, a whole nation." Consequently, the stifling of thoughts, of the impulse to translate our sense of outrage into action, become part of a matrix of self-censorship:

When we do not let ourselves think the thought which our flesh recoils from, when we do not let conscience speak that which the heart screams as unacceptable, when we give ourselves many excellent reasons for refusing to participate in some way in this grand drama of our interconnected lives, then we are victims of censorship within.

The end result of self-censorship for Okri is a bland existence. Potential lies dormant; emptiness prevails. Self-censorship results in a nation devoid of creativity, dreams, or genius. Consider the backdrop of Okri's story□it is characterized by an oppressive heat, flies, and zombie-like villagers. Life drones on: "The heat was stupefying. Noises

dimmed and lost their edges. The villagers stumbled about their various tasks as if they were sleep-walking." The reader observes evidence of another Nigeria, as Omovo follows the mysterious woman past a crumbling cement factory, unfinished estates "with their flaking ostentatious signboards and their collapsing fences," and a skeleton of a large animal under a tree. The war has stymied the growth of Omovo's country, an eclipse overshadowing a sleeping nation. Omovo's father also discounts the fact that there are soldiers and, as the reader comes to discover, extreme violence in their midst. "Turn off the radio. It's bad for a child to listen to news of war." The rationale for this command stands in stark contrast to what horrors await Omovo at the river. It is nonsensical.

So too is his father's response to Omovo's hysteria over the events at the river. Omovo dares to rise above the din of his everyday existence. By following the shadowy figure of the woman rather than share the information of her whereabouts with the soldiers, he chooses to question the chaos around him rather than comply with it and witnesses the murder not of a spy but of a humanitarian among his own people. Consequently, the horror of finding his father drinking with men who, moments ago, have murdered an innocent woman overwhelms him. To compound matters, his father responds to Omovo's terror by asserting only that his son has been "saved" by the soldiers, then by whisking Omovo away to bed before he can mention the bloody episode.

Omovo is discounted, treated as if the entire episode was a dream, and is returned to a world of shifting shadows. His father is pressed to discount the horrors witnessed by his son, engaging in censorship without guile, in order to protect Omovo, but, in doing so, he succumbs to the weight of oppressive forces which serve to psychically destroy him. The scene is anticlimactic, the real criminals vindicated of what is probably one of many horrific war crimes. "In the Shadow of War," matters of conscience, or consciousness, ultimately determine the legacy one leaves behind.

Source: Laura Carter, Critical Essay on "In the Shadow of War," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 2005.

Adaptations

The BBC maintains a Web page about Okri (http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/books/author/okri/index.shtml) that contains a brief overview of his work and life. The site also includes a link to an article about one of Okri's poems, as well as information about other postcolonial authors, including Chinua Achebe.

Topics for Further Study

Locate a copy of the first version of "In the Shadow of War" that appeared in the magazine *West Africa* in 1983. Compare and contrast this version with the one that appeared in the 1989 collection, *Stars of the New Curfew*. What are the most noticeable changes? Why do you think that Okri made these changes? Do you think Okri was trying to communicate the same things in both versions? If not, what is different about the two versions, and how do those differences make you arrive at different readings?

Have a debate about whether Omovo behaved admirably in this story. Consider whether he should have taken the ten kobo from the soldiers, whether he should have told them the truth about seeing the woman in the veil, whether he should have alerted the woman to danger, and whether he should have protested more as his father took him back to bed.

Civil war is a reoccurring event in world history. Aside from researching the Nigerian Civil War, choose another country that has been involved in a civil war in the last one hundred years, and prepare an overview of the conflict for your classmates. How did the causes of the Nigerian Civil War and those of the country you chose differ? In what ways were they similar? How does each of these events compare and contrast to the American Civil War?

Do you think that the soldiers or Omovo believed that the woman with the veil was a witch? Research the Salem witch trials, which occurred during the late 1600s in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Do you think that everyone believed that the women who were killed in Salem were really witches? What other motivating factors might have contributed to the deaths of the Salem women and the woman in this story?

Compare and Contrast

Late 1960s: There are fewer than ten Nigerian novels published per year.

1980s: There are approximately fifty Nigerian novels published per year.

Today: There are approximately twenty Nigerian novels published per year.

Late 1960s: Civilian administration in Nigeria ends following two successive military coups d'etat.

1980s: General Ibrahim Babangida overthrows Major General Mohammed Butari, stating his intention to return Nigeria to civilian rule in the 1990s.

Today: The Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo issues a press statement about his unwillingness to accept any actions aimed at destabilizing his democratically elected presidential administration.

Late 1960s: Famous Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo resigns from the Cambridge University Press and enlists as a major in the Biafran army.

1980s: Because of governmental changes in Nigeria, Okri's Nigerian-sponsored scholarship at the University of Essex ends. Okri leaves for London, where he is homeless before finding a flat in Seven Sisters.

Today: Author Ken Saro-Wiwa is taken into custody by the government, charged with treason, and hanged despite protests and appeals by Okri and South African president Nelson Mandela.

What Do I Read Next?

The Famished Road, which was first published in 1991, is one of Okri's best-known works. He earned the Booker McConnell Prize for Fiction for this novel, and in 1993 and 1998 respectively he published sequels to the work titled *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches*.

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is known as one of the founding novels of African fiction in English. In this novel, Achebe considers the social realities faced by his people in the wake of colonialism. Published in 1959, *Things Fall Apart* is a must read for anyone interested in becoming more familiar with African fiction, specifically that which is written by Nigerian authors.

War Stories: A Memoir of Nigeria and Biafra (2002), by John Sherman, is a first-person account of the author's time in Nigeria as a Peace Corp volunteer in 1966 and later, during the country's civil war, as a member of the International Committee of the Red Cross. Sherman's story provides a graphic account of the impact of the Nigerian Civil War on children.

Flora Nwapa is the first Nigerian woman to be published in Nigeria and the first black African woman to be published in England. *Efuru* (1966) is about a woman who, despite failure in marriage and child rearing, is an example of female independence and spiritual transcendence.

Tsitsi Dangarembga, who is from Zimbabwe (formerly part of Rhodesia), is another African writer who writes about a young main character. In *Nervous Conditions* (1988), Dangarembga explores the coming of age of a young woman in colonial Rhodesia during the 1960s. In the novel, Tambu faces issues surrounding gender, cultural identity, colonialism, wealth, education, and eating disorders.

Further Study

Boehmer, Elleke, ed., *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, Oxford Press, 1995.

In this collection, Boehmer explores colonial and postcolonial writing in English from 1770 to the present, tracing its development and comparing it to western writing.

Martin, Phyllis M., and Patrick O'Meara, eds., *Africa*, Indiana University Press, 1995.

This collection includes a host of articles about the continent's history, art, music, social customs, economics, and politics. Of particular interest are the following articles: "African Literature" by Eileen Julien; "The Colonial Era" by Sheldon Gellar; and "Decolonization, Independence, and the Failure of Politics" by Edmond J. Keller.

Oliver, Roland, and J. D. Fage, *A Short History of Africa*, Penguin Books, 1990.

Oliver and Fage's book provides a concise overview of the continent's history, including chapters on the colonial period and the early years of independence.

Parekh, Pushpa Naidu, and Siga Fatima Jagne, eds., *Postcolonial African Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook*, Greenwood Press, 1998.

This source provides readers with an overview of Okri's life, his works and major themes, and the critical reception that his work has received over the years.

Soyinka, Wole, *The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis*, Oxford University Press, 1996.

In this collection of his previous speeches, Nobel Prize laureate and well-known Nigerian playwright and novelist Wole Soyinka offers a critical overview of Nigeria's political history and the country's future.

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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.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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