The Martyr Study Guide

The Martyr by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

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Introduction

The short story "The Martyr" by Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o, East Africa's leading writer, was first published in 1974, in his collection *Secret Lives and Other Stories*. "The Martyr" takes place in colonial Kenya, during a time of rebellion amongst the native Kikuyu people against the white European settlers and plantation owners. News of the murder of two white settlers by their own African "houseboy" initiates the events of the story. Mrs. Hill, a white plantation owner, is visited by her friends Mrs. Hardy and Mrs. Smiles to discuss the murder. Njoroge, an African man who works as the "houseboy" of Mrs. Hill, has plans to kill Mrs. Hill that night, with the help of the Ihii (Freedom Boys). While Mrs. Hill prides herself on her generosity to the Africans who work for her and the loyalty of her "houseboy," Njoroge in fact deeply resents her for her "smug liberalism" and her "paternalism" in these matters. In his small hut that night, Njoroge thinks of his own wives and children, and then of Mrs. Hill's children, who are away at school. Seeing her "humanized" in this light, he is unable to conceive of killing her. He runs to her house to warn her before the Freedom Boys arrive to murder her. Alarmed and suspicious, Mrs. Hill incorrectly believes he is knocking at her door to kill her—and she shoots him in what she believes is self-defense. Thus, "she had in fact killed her savior."

"The Martyr" addresses several concerns central to Ngugi's fiction and nonfiction writing. It takes place at a time of social and political upheaval in Kenyan history. The oppressive nature of the European colonial presence in Kenya is portrayed from the perspective of a native Kenyan. The typical colonial attitude in Africa—that the African people are "savages" who benefit from the "civilization" of the white colonists—is expressed through the opinions of the white characters in the story. The Christian imagery of the "martyr" draws on Ngugi's Christian upbringing and his later renunciation of Christianity as a tool of colonialism. Finally, Ngugi explores the complexity of African and European relations in the colonial era, thus "humanizing" both sides of the conflict.

Author Biography

East Africa's most prominent writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, was born James Thiong'o Ngugi, in Limuru, Kenya, on January 5, 1938. In order to shed his colonial Christian namesake, Ngugi dropped "James" from his name in favor of his traditional name. As a result of his eventual international recognition as a novelist, short-story writer, playwright, and essayist, he is often referred to simply as Ngugi. Ngugi was one of twenty-eight children; his father, a peasant farmer who could not own his own land, had four wives, and Ngugi was the fifth child of the third wife. Ngugi first received primary education beginning in 1946, in a school established by colonialist missionaries. Two years later, he was transferred to a school run by members of his native Kikuyu tribe, which provided a more Afrocentric education. Beginning in 1955, Ngugi attended Alliance High School at Kikuyu. He was strongly affected by the Mau Mau Rebellion, which lasted from 1952 to 1960. Returning to his village from his high school, Ngugi found that his home and village had been burned to the ground through government efforts at dissipating the rebellion. Ngugi attended Makerere University College in Kampala beginning in 1959, from which he earned a B.A. in English, with honors, in 1963. In 1964, he earned a second B.A. from Leeds University in Yorkshire, England. He began graduate work at Leeds, but chose not to pursue a master's degree, making his fiction-writing a priority. From 1964 to 1970, he taught at several schools in East Africa and was a lecturer in English literature at the University of Nairobi in Kenya from 1967 to 1969. During this time, he and other faculty transformed the English department into a Department of African Languages and Literature. It was about this time that he changed his name. From 1970 to 1971, he was a visiting lecturer at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. He served as department chair of literature at the University of Nairobi from 1972 to 1977.

In 1977, Ngugi decided to write in the African languages of Kikuyu or Swahili, rather than English. He co-wrote a play in his native Kikuyu language, entitled *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (*I Will Marry When I Want*), which was first performed in 1977. As a result of the political message of the play, Ngugi was arrested and imprisoned without trial for a year; his experience of imprisonment is recorded in *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* (1981). Upon release from prison in 1978, Ngugi had lost his position at the University of Nairobi. In 1982, his theater group was banned by the government in a time of social rebellion and government repression, and Ngugi chose to live in exile. He subsequently lived and worked primarily in England, and later in the U.S. as a professor at Yale University and New York University. His 1986 novel *Matigari ma Njiruungi*, written in Kikuyu and translated in 1989 as *Matigari*, inspired such social unrest in Kenya that it was banned by the government. Although in exile, with his work unavailable to the Kenyan audience he most cherishes, Ngugi is considered the foremost East African novelist of his time. He remains best known for his novels, set at various points in Kenyan colonial and post-colonial history, including *Weep Not, Child* (1964), *A River Between* (1965), *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), *Petals of Blood* (1977), and *Devil on the Cross* (1980).

Plot Summary

The story begins with the announcement of the murder of Mr. and Mrs. Garstone, European settlers in Kenya, by their own "houseboy," a native of Kenya who had worked for them. The news of this act of rebellion by "unknown gangsters" is widespread. Mrs. Hardy and Mrs. Smiles, European settlers in the area, visit Mrs. Hill, also a European settler, to discuss the news. Mrs. Hill, one of the first settlers to the area, owns vast tea plantations. Her husband has died, and her children are at school in England. She prides herself on her fair and generous treatment of the Africans whom she employs. She is especially proud of her generosity in building the huts of her employees with real bricks. Mrs. Hill believes that the Africans can be "civilized" with the proper patience and understanding. Mrs. Hardy and Mrs. Smiles, on the other hand, see the African people as "savages" who will never be civilized. Mrs. Hill calls for Njoroge, an African man who has been employed as her "houseboy" for over ten years, to bring tea to her guests. Mrs. Hill boasts of the loyalty and love Njoroge has for her. That evening, Njoroge finishes work at the house of Mrs. Hill and returns to his brick hut. He feels disdainful of the tiny brick hut Mrs. Hill is so proud of providing for him and his family; he has sent his two wives and several children to live elsewhere because they cannot all fit into the little hut. Njoroge has planned this night to kill Mrs. Hill as an act of rebellion, with the aid of the Ihii (Freedom Boys). As he sits in his hut, thinking of his own family, he begins to think of Mrs. Hill's family□her deceased husband and her children in England. Thinking of her as a mother, Njoroge loses the heart to kill her; as a member of a family, she is humanized in his mind. He decides to run to her house and warn her before the Freedom Boys come to kill her. Meanwhile, Mrs. Hill, influenced by the conversation with her friends earlier in the day, readies a gun in order to protect herself. When she hears Njoroge knocking at her door, she incorrectly assumes that he has come to kill her, and she shoots him in what she believes to be self-defense. Thus, Mrs. Hill has "in fact killed her savior." The news of Njoroge's death celebrates Mrs. Hill for her bravery in fighting "a gang fifty strong." Her friends, Mrs. Hardy and Mrs. Smiles, visit her to congratulate her for this act. Mrs. Hill, however, remains reserved in her reaction to the situation, for "the circumstances of Njoroge's death worried her. The more she thought about it, the more of a puzzle it was to her." Mrs. Hill concludes with a sigh, saying, "I don't know." Mrs. Hardy and Mrs. Smiles, however, agree with one another that "all of them should be whipped."

Summary

Mr. and Mrs. Garstone were murdered in their home, and everyone is talking about it. There is an increase in politically motivated violence around the country, and the Garstones are the first European settlers to be killed.

Mrs. Hill is a white settler, a widow, with a large house far from any neighbors. Her husband died of malaria while visiting Uganda. Her son and daughter are at school in England, which the settlers simply call "Home." Mrs. Hill owns a large and sprawling tea plantation, and though everyone respects her, they do not all like her because of her attitude to the "natives." She is too liberal.

Mrs. Smiles and Mrs. Hardy come to Mrs. Hill's house to talk about the murder. They are sad because two Europeans were killed and triumphant because this event has proven them right. The natives can't possibly be civilized! Mrs. Hill, though, persists in her liberal views that the natives will be obedient and well-mannered if you are kind to them, as she has been. She has built her "boys" brick houses, and she has built a school for their children, although they don't have enough teachers and can only study for half a day. They work the rest of the day on the plantation.

The three women talk about how terrible the murders are. After all, the Europeans brought civilization and peace to the African natives. How could they be so ungrateful? Mrs. Hill suggests that they should be more tolerant, but Mrs. Smiles discounts that idea. Mrs. Hardy suggests that all the squatters should be hanged.

Mr. and Mrs. Garstone's houseboy woke them up, and when they came to see what was wrong, a group of men killed them. The houseboy led the murderers to the unsuspecting couple. Mrs. Hill's own houseboy, Njoroge, gets the women tea. He has been a faithful servant for ten years.

After Mrs. Smiles and Mrs. Hardy are gone, Mrs. Hill becomes worried about the rising violence, especially since she lives alone so far from anyone else. She is comforted by the fact that she has a pistol.

After supper is over, Njoroge walks back to his quarters. As he walks through the darkness, he hears the cry of a bird in the night. He thinks of how demeaned he is by his employer. The bird, he believes, is a warning of death, and he is filled with anger against the white settlers that have come and taken his land.

Njoroge's father died in the 1923 Nairobi Massacre, when police shot at peaceful demonstrators. Since his father's death, Njoroge has had to make a living working for the European settlers. When he came to work for Mrs. Hill, Njoroge recognized the land. It was his family's land. During a famine, the family had moved temporarily, and when they returned, the white men had taken the land.

Njoroge hates and resents Mrs. Hill. She thinks that she is being kind to her workers, but she only patronizes them. He shouts out, "I hate them! I hate them!" He hates all white settlers. He comforts himself with the thought that tonight, Mrs. Hill will die.

When Njoroge gets to his room, all is quiet. There is no smoke from the other rooms, and some of the lights are out. He lights his lantern and sits on his bed. The room is tiny. From his place on the bed, he could almost touch all the corners of the room. He has lived in this room with his two wives and his children for five years. This cramped quarters is the brick housing that Mrs. Hill is so proud of. Whenever visitors come, Mrs. Hill proudly shows off the houses she has built.

Njoroge is expecting the Ihii, or Freedom Boys, to come. He will lead them to the house to kill Mrs. Hill. Njoroge thinks about her and her love for her husband and children. Then, suddenly, Njoroge realizes that he cannot kill her. He has been thinking of Mrs. Hill, not as a white settler, but as a woman and a mother. He hates all white settlers and has no compunction against killing them. However, he cannot kill a woman and a mother. He tries to change his frame of mind, to think of Mrs. Hill as merely a white settler, but hecannot. He knows, though, that she will continue to be the same patronizing, complacent woman. She will continue to treat the natives as she always has, perpetuating injustice and the division between black and white.

Njoroge is divided. He cannot kill Mrs. Hill, and yet he is filled with hatred of her and her kind. He has a choice. He could save Mrs. Hill but only by betraying the Freedom Boys. He leaves his room and walks back to Mrs. Hill's house. He has decided to save her. Then, he will run away to fight against the whites.

As he walks toward the house, Njoroge hears the sound of the Freedom Boys approaching. He hurries toward the house. When he gets to the door, he knocks and calls out, "Memsahib! Memsahib!"

Mrs. Hill is sitting up, full of fear. Once Njoroge left for the night, she got out her gun, which she is holding. She sighs and remembers how she and her husband came to this country and tamed the wilderness. They created plantations where there was only unoccupied land. Natives now don't need to worry about wars between their tribes. They are contented. They have much to thank the settlers for.

She thinks that perhaps she should move to Nairobi or Kinangop to stay with friends because of the recent violence. What could she do with her boys, though? Suddenly, Mrs. Hill thinks about Njoroge. How many wives and children does he have? She realizes that she has never thought about his family life, and she is startled. She has never thought of him before as a father with a family. She resolves to change her way of thinking in the future.

Then, Mrs. Hill hears the knock on the door and Njoroge's voice calling to her. She breaks out in a sweat as she remembers how the Garstones were lured into a trap by their houseboy. She realizes that this is a trap for her. Suddenly, she gains her strength

and graps her pistol. She opens the door and fires, killing Njoroge. She never realizes that he was trying to save her.

Her brave act is in all the papers the next day, and Mrs. Smiles and Mrs. Hardy congratulate her. They impress upon her again that all the natives are bad. Mrs. Hill, though, is puzzled by Njoroge's death. "I don't know," she says. Mrs. Smiles and Mrs. Hardy twist the words to mean that the natives are "inscrutable." They both agree: "All of them should be whipped."

Analysis

Ngugi wa Thiong'o was born in Limuru, Kenya in 1938. He went on to become one of the most acclaimed novelists in East Africa. His story "The Martyr" is a tale of the conflicting perspectives and resulting tragedy inherent in the European colonization of African nations.

"The Martyr" is written in the third person limited point-of-view, which means that it conveys the thoughts and perspectives of a limited number of characters. The perspective of the story switches between two characters: Mrs. Hill, who represents the white settlers, and Njoroge, who represents the native people. Through exploring each of these people's thoughts, the author is able to show the cultural blindness that leads to racism and conflict.

Mrs. Hill wants to be kind and humane, but she has no perspective on the native people and their lives. She thinks of natives only as "boys" and not as human beings. She is proud of her brick houses, not realizing that in truth she is condemning her workers' families to live in impossibly small spaces. Not understanding the migrant nature of the native people's lives, she truly believes that she and her husband developed unoccupied land, improving the country. She believes that the Europeans brought peace and security. She believes that the Europeans stopped slavery, when in fact their black servants are just slaves under another name. The moment when Mrs. Hill suddenly realizes that Njoroge is a husband and a father is a moment of hope. It shows that, perhaps, Mrs. Hill can break through her preconceived notions and see Njoroge and other black people as human beings and not simply as obedient and docile servants.

Njoroge, on the other hand, quietly seethes with hatred toward Mrs. Hill and all of the white settlers. He sees Mrs. Hill, with her "liberal" attitude of kindness toward the natives, as worse than the other blatant racists. He does not trust her. He thinks that her kindness and condescension are merely a way to satisfy her own paternal instincts, a way to selfishly enjoy her own "kindness" and "generosity." Njoroge is willing to resort to killing because he cannot see the whites as human beings. He sees that they mistreat him, his family, and his people. He sees that the white settlers have taken his land, killed his father, and reduced him to servitude. He sees only injustice and feels only hatred - until he thinks of Mrs. Hill as a loving wife and mother. This sudden shift of perspective allows Njoroge to think of Mrs. Hill as a person, a human being. Afterward,

Njoroge sees both perspectives simultaneously, and he is divided in his feelings. He hates the white settlers. He hates Mrs. Hill's condescending attitude. But he also sees Mrs. Hill as a human being, and he cannot kill her.

In this exploration of racism and cultural misunderstanding, the main theme of this work is that cultural misunderstanding is the root of racism. It is only in viewing each other as human beings that the characters can break through hatred and racist attitudes. The idea of family becomes a binding, inherently human one. As Njoroge realizes, Mrs. Hill's children are much like his own children. Their similarities are purely human, crossing cultural boundaries and uniting their parents as human beings.

In the end of the story, Mrs. Hill is concerned about what has happened. "The circumstances of Njoroge's death worried her." When her friends tell her that all the natives are bad, she smiles and says that she doesn't know. This is an indication that perhaps, even though she has tragically killed the man who was coming to save her, she is beginning to see the truth. The title of this story is "the martyr," and Njoroge is the character who is killed, the martyr. For what cause was he martyred? It seems that his martyrdom was in the name of blacks and whites seeing each other as human beings, and perhaps, through his death, at least one other person (Mrs. Hill) begins to see the humanity in all people.

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Characters

Mr. and Mrs. Garstone

Mr. and Mrs. Garstone are white colonial settlers of Kenya, whose murder in their home by rebellious "unknown gangsters" initiates the events of the story. The news of this murder "was all on the front pages of the daily papers and figured importantly in the Radio Newsreel." Their murder is significant because of its political implications: "Perhaps this was so because they were the first European settlers to be killed in the increased wave of violence that had spread all over the country. The violence was said to have political motives." The widespread news and "talk" of their murder and betrayal by their own "houseboy" is significant because it creates an atmosphere in which Mrs. Hill becomes afraid of Njoroge, her own "houseboy." It is this suspicion that ultimately leads her to shoot and kill him in what she believes to be an act of selfdefense.

Mrs. Hardy

Mrs. Hardy is one of the white settlers who, along with Mrs. Smiles, visits Mrs. Hill to discuss the murder of Mr. and Mrs. Garstone. She is described as "of Boer descent and had early migrated into the country from South Africa. Having no opinions of her own about anything, she mostly found herself agreeing with any views that most approximated those of her husband and her race." Mrs. Hardy represents the closed-minded, ignorant white settler who does not bother to question the racism inherent to the European presence in Africa. Her tendency to adopt the opinions of those around her, and of her "race" in general, exemplifies the ways in which a racist social and economic system is perpetuated.

Mrs. Hill

Mrs. Hill is a white European settler. As her husband has died and her children are in school in England, she lives alone, without family. Mrs. Hill holds the social status among the white settlers of being one of the first, and most prominent, of the plantation owners in the region: "Being one of the earliest settlers and owning a lot of land with big tea plantations sprawling right across the country, she was much respected by the others if not liked by all." Mrs. Hill is a liberal, who takes pride in what she considers to be her generous and fair treatment of the African people who work on her plantation. Her "smug liberalism, her paternalism," however, is resented by Njoroge, her "houseboy." The limits of her self-perceived kindness toward Njoroge are tested when she assumes he has come to her house to kill her□and shoots him in what she believes to be her own self-defense. Although the reader knows that Njoroge has in fact come to rescue her from his fellow brethren, who themselves plan to kill her, Mrs. Hill remains ignorant of his true intentions in knocking on her door at night: "She did not know that she had in fact killed her savior." Nonetheless, her fellow white settlers perceive her act

of murder as one of bravery and heroism: "On the following day, it was all in the papers. That a single woman could fight a gang fifty strong was bravery unknown. And to think she had killed one too!" Mrs. Hill, however, seems to be disturbed by her own conscience in the matter; while her friends are congratulating her on her act of "bravery," "Mrs. Hill kept quiet. The circumstances of Njoroge's death worried her. The more she thought about it, the more of a puzzle it was to her."

Njoroge

Njoroge is the man who ultimately becomes the "martyr" of the story's title. He has worked as Mrs. Hill's "houseboy" for over ten years. He is described as "a tall, broad-shouldered man nearing middle age. . .He wore green trousers, with a red cloth-band round the waist and a red fez on his head." Njoroge first appears when Mrs. Hill calls him to bring tea. At the end of the day, Njoroge returns to his hut. Although he has two wives and several children, they have been sent to live elsewhere. He resents Mrs. Hill's "smug liberalism" and "paternalism" toward him. He has planned that night, with other Ihii (Freedom Boys), to kill Mrs. Hill as an act of rebellion against the settlers. However, as he awaits the arrival of his fellow rebels, he begins to think of Mrs. Hill's children; seeing her in the light of her role as mother to a family, Njoroge finds that he cannot bring himself to kill her. He decides instead to run to her house and warn her before the Freedom Boys arrive. Mrs. Hill, however, incorrectly interprets his knock at her door as an attempt to gain entrance and kill her-and she shoots him in what she believes is self defense. Njoroge, as Mrs. Hill's would-be "savior," thus symbolically becomes a "martyr" in the Christian sense of the word□he becomes a Christ figure who dies for the sins of the white settlers against the African people.

Mrs. Smiles

Mrs. Smiles is a European settler who, along with Mrs. Hardy, discusses the murder of the Garstones with Mrs. Hill at the beginning of the story. Mrs. Smiles is the most aggressively racist of the three women. The opinions she holds of the African population are associated with the "missionary" attitude most typically held by Europeans in Africa: "Mrs. Smiles was a lean, middle-aged woman whose tough, determined nose and tight lips reminded one so vividly of a missionary. In a sense she was. Convinced that she and her kind formed an oasis of civilization in a wild country of savage people, she considered it almost her calling to keep on reminding the natives and anyone else in fact, by her gait, talk and general bearing."

Themes

Colonialism

The most central theme in all of Ngugi's work is the effect of colonialism and post-colonialism on the African people. "The Martyr" takes place during a time of rebellion among Africans working on plantations against the European plantation owners. Through the characters of Mrs. Hardy, Mrs. Smiles, and Mrs. Hill, the narrator touches on widespread attitudes of the "settlers," or colonialists, regarding the African people who work for them. Mrs. Hardy is the most outspoken of the three women regarding her racist attitude toward the Africans. She considers them to be "savage," without hope of becoming "civilized." In the final lines of the story, both Mrs. Hardy and Mrs. Smiles agree that "all of them should be whipped." Mrs. Hill, on the other hand, holds "liberal" values in regard to her African employees. She prides herself on her generosity toward them, and adopts a patronizing attitude of patience toward them. Njoroge, an African man who works as Mrs. Hill's "houseboy," provides an African perspective on the European colonists. Njoroge resents Mrs. Hill's "smug liberalism" and her "paternalism" toward him. While he is described as "nearing middle age," Mrs. Hill still refers to him as "boy." Furthermore, the brick huts which she feels she has so generously provided her employees are regarded by Njoroge as so small as to be unfit to house his family. The atmosphere of violent rebellion in which the story is set is justified by the degree of oppression practiced by the European plantation owners against their African employees.

Public Opinion

The events of Ngugi's story are in part narrated through gossip, hearsay, and the news media, which collectively constitute the public opinions of the white European colonialist settlers. The alleged murder of Mr. and Mrs. Garstone by their "houseboy" is the news event with which the story begins, and which sets off the subsequent action of the story. The story begins by reporting a reputedly factual event in the language of newspaper journalism: "When Mr. and Mrs. Garstone were murdered in their home by unknown gangsters. . ." However, within the same sentence, the narrator states that "there was a lot of talk about it," implying that the "facts" of the incident, as reported, take on a life of their own within the realm of public opinion and gossip. The narrator continues, "It was all on the front pages of the daily papers and figured importantly in the Radio Newsreel." The implication is that the supposed murder of the European couple is a media event, regardless of whether or not the incident is accurately reported. The narrator goes on to mention the circulation of this news item through hearsay and rumor: "The violence was said to have political motives. And wherever you went, in the marketplaces, in the Indian bazaars, in a remote African duka, you were bound to hear something about the murder." Note that the narrator is careful to distance himself from any statement of fact about the incident; rather, the public opinion itself is reported in a tone of neutrality. This opening passage is important to an interpretation of the media event which occurs

toward the end of the story—the killing of Njoroge by Mrs. Hill. The death of Njoroge is reported by the narrator in a similar manner—through a statement of the media reportage and the public opinion expressed by the Europeans: "On the following day, it was all in the papers. That a single woman could fight a gang of fifty strong was bravery unknown. And to think she had killed one too!" The gross inaccuracy and distorted perception of the incident among the Europeans functions as a commentary on the workings of public opinion, and particularly the demonization of the Africans in the generally held opinion of European colonists.

Style

Narration and Tone

This story is narrated in the *third person*, meaning that the narrator is not a character in the story. However, this does not mean that the narrator's tone is completely objective. In fact, this particular narrator adopts a tone of almost exaggerated sarcasm in conveying the racist attitudes of the white European settlers. For instance, in describing Mrs. Hill's sense of herself as generous and kind toward the Africans who work for her, the narrator uses sarcasm to emphasize the self-congratulatory attitude of the "liberal" settlers, who felt themselves to be doing a favor for the Africans:

Not only had she built some brick quarters (*brick,* mind you) but had also put up a school for the children. It did not matter if the school had not enough teachers or if the children learnt only half a day and worked in the plantations for the other half; it was more than most other settlers had the courage to do!

The narrator's sarcasm is particularly apparent in the mocking tone of the parenthetical comment, "(*brick,* mind you)"; the emphasis on the word "brick" indicates the extent to which Mrs. Hill considers herself generous to her African employees above and beyond all duty. When Njoroge thinks with disdain of the inadequacy of his "brick" dwelling to house his family, the sarcasm of this earlier comment is justified. Thus, the narrator, though not a character in the story, adopts a perspective which is in keeping with Njoroge and other Africans□using sarcasm to mock and express disdain for the racist treatment of the white settlers toward the Africans.

Setting

Although it is not stated specifically in the story, it is clear to the reader familiar with Ngugi's background that it is set in Kenya during a time of rebellion among the Kikuyu people against the white plantation owners who exploit their labor. This is significant to the story because the Kikuyu were the first group of Africans in Kenya to launch an organized resistance against colonialism, beginning in the 1920s and 1930s. The Kikuyu were primarily concerned with the European ownership of land that was rightfully theirs; the Kikuyu were also the primary source of labor on the white plantations. Njoroge recalls that his father was killed for his participation in the "struggle" of the Kikuyu against the colonists: "He had died in the struggle□the struggle to rebuild the destroyed shrines. That was at the famous 1923 Nairobi Massacre when police fired on people peacefully demonstrating for their rights." Furthermore, the outright theft of land on the part of the colonists from the rightful Kikuyu owners is given direct reference; Njoroge recalls, "A big portion of the land now occupied by Mrs. Hill was the land his father had shown him as belonging to the family. They had found the land occupied

when his father and some of the others had temporarily retired to Muranga owing to famine." Thus, although the characters in this story are fictional, the historical and cultural circumstances of the story are based on actual historical conditions and events in the history of the Kikuyu people.

Christian Iconography

Indirect references to Christian iconography are central to the symbolic meaning of this story. Ngugi, though he later renounced Christianity, had originally been educated in schools run by missionaries. The influence is apparent in the references to Christian iconography and symbolism in many of his stories. In this story, the "martyr" of the story's title refers to the image of Christ as a martyr. The character of Njoroge is thus symbolically represented as a Christ figure. His decision to save, rather than kill, Mrs. Hill is an act of what could be considered Christian charity. Njoroge's death at the hands of Mrs. Hill thus renders him a martyr to the cause of the Kikuyu struggle against the colonists. The narrator makes clear the symbolic role of Njoroge as a Christ figure in the line stating that Mrs. Hill "did not know that she had in fact killed her savior." The word "savior" to describe Njoroge clearly connects him with the image of Christ as savior.

Historical Context

Kenya

The history of this region during the late 19th and the 20th centuries is characterized by European colonization and exploitation of members of the tribes native to the area, such as the Massai and the Kikuyu. Britain, Germany, and France all had a hand in colonizing the area. The Imperial British East Africa Company dominated these efforts, beginning in the 1880s. In 1894, the British government declared the area the East Africa Protectorate. In the 1890s, British military forces were employed in order to quell resistance by African tribes to European rule. A railway, built between 1895 and 1903, was a key factor in encouraging European settlement and cultivation of the East Africa Protectorate in the early 1900s. During this time, members of the native African tribes were restricted to reservations and forced into labor on European plantations. In 1920, the region was renamed the Kenya Colony, after the region's highest mountain. Throughout the 1920s, Africans, such as members of the Kikuyu tribe, organized to press for their rights. In the 1940s, a small number of Africans were allowed to sit on the Legislative Council. In 1960, a conference in London led to an African majority on the legislative council for the first time. In 1963, the Republic of Kenya was created, under a new constitution that allowed for self-rule and national independence.

The Mau Mau Rebellion

In the decade preceding Kenya's national independence, large-scale protest, organized by members of the Kikuyu tribe, referred to as the Mau Mau Rebellion, was waged between 1952 and 1960. The primary issue was European ownership of farming land and plantations, as well as colonial rule in Kenya. The government thus declared a state of emergency. Jomo Kenyatta was arrested in 1952 as an organizer and instigator of the rebellion and was not released from prison until 1961□after he had already been elected president of the newly independent Kenya in 1960.

The Kikuyu

Ngugi's ethnicity is Kikuyu, one of the most populous tribes in Eastern Africa, representing approximately 20 percent of the entire population of Kenya. The Kikuyu, also known as Giguyu, Gekoyo, or Agekoyo, were at the forefront of African rebellion against British colonialism beginning in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1921, the Young Kikuyu Association was formed (renamed the Kikuyu Central Association in 1925). It was the Kikuyu who organized the Mau-Mau Rebellion in 1952. The first prime minister (1963-64) and first president (1964-78) of the independent Republic of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, was also Kikuyu.

African Languages

In the 1970s, Ngugi announced that he would write only in Bantu or Swahili, his native languages, rather than English, which is the official language of Kenya. The Bantu language is widespread throughout the African continent. Swahili is a Bantu language and is still spoken in many African nations, including Uganda, the Congo, and Tanzania, as well as Kenya.

Literary Heritage

Kenya is a country of dramatic variety, both in terms of its varied topography and cultural makeup. The land itself includes tropical coastline, largely uninhabited inland desert areas, and high fertile farmland bordered by the two tallest mountains in Africa. While nearly ninety-nine percent of the people are black Africans, there are broad ethnic and linguistic divisions that divide the native population into more than forty ethnic groups. The largest of these groups, the Gikuyu, of which Ngugi is a member, makes up twenty percent of Kenya's population of 32 million people. Other large ethnic groups include the Kalenjin, Kamba, Luhya, and Luo, all of whom can be distinguished by their unique languages or dialects. The remaining one percent of the population is made up of East Indians, Europeans, and Arabs. Many Kenyans are able to overcome language barriers between groups by communicating in Swahili, the national language, or English, the official language.

Traditional Kenyan literary forms are largely oral. Oral stories, dramas, riddles, histories, myths, songs, proverbs, and other expressions are used to educate and entertain as well to remind the community of ancestors' heroic deeds, the past, and the precedents for customs and traditions. Folktale tellers often use call-response techniques in which a praise accompanies a narrative with music. In Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*, Nyakinyua is one of the keepers of the cultural heritage. She is the village bard who tells stories and leads the community in song. During the circumcision she sings a witty, ribald song with Nguguna, which is seen in contrast to the vulgar verses sung by Chui and his modern friends. In the novel, Ngugi's use of different points of view and the recounting of events in the form of stories may be seen as his acknowledgment of traditional oral literary practices. In a 1980 essay, the author remarks that although the African novel uses a borrowed form, its great debt to the native oral tradition is narrative. Ngugi's 1977 play *I Will Marry When I Want*, which led to his arrest, was apparently most offensive to the government because of its use of songs to emphasize its messages. The play struck a chord with the Gikuyu-speaking audience because of its use of traditional literary techniques. After his imprisonment, Ngugi made a conscious decision to switch to writing in his native Gikuyu. He felt he must do this in order to more effectively reach the people for whom his writings are concerned□the peasant and working classes in Kenya.

Critical Overview

Ngugi has achieved international recognition as East Africa's leading novelist. His stories address the struggles of Africans in Kenya during the colonial and post-colonial eras. Critics have focused primarily on the political impetus in Ngugi's novels, stories, plays, and essays. G. D. Killam asserts, "Ngugi felt from the outset of his career as a writer that writing should serve social and political purposes." Ngugi himself, in an introduction to the story collection *Secret Lives*, states that his writing is "an attempt to understand myself and my situation in society and history." Charles Cantalupe, calling Ngugi "East Africa's greatest novelist and essayist," notes that Ngugi is "the most widely discussed and foremost African writer today in understanding the problems of postcolonial Africa." Cantalupe has also pointed out the international impact of Ngugi's work, despite the fact that it has been banned in his own country: "Since his exile from Kenya in 1982, the eloquence of Ngugi's novels, essays, and plays has rung out and echoed in nearly all the geographical and intellectual centers in the world of arts and letters, with the tragic exception of Kenya itself." John Henrik Clarke refers to Ngugi as "a spokesman for African nationalism and for blacks and third world forces everywhere."

As described by Killam, the stories collected in *Secret Lives* "deal with the mature and moral worth of various aspects of original Gikuyu culture; of the effect of Christian teaching both in schools and the churches on the quality of African life; of the development of capitalism, class-consciousness, and human alienation as a new Kenya develops out of the independence struggle." Killam notes that in these stories, Ngugi "exploits the similarities between Gikuyu and Christian legends. . .Drawing on legends from the past to make a comment on the present Ngugi offers implicitly a plea for a return to basic human values." *Secret Lives* is divided into three sections: "Of Mothers and Children" (3 stories), "Fighters and Martyrs" (6 stories), and "Secret Lives" (4 stories). Killam explains that the stories in the second section, in which "The Martyr" appears, deal with "events in the period de- fined by the coming of the white man through his departure from Kenya," and with "aspects of the contact between Christianity and Gikuyu religions." In portraying these two cultures "in collision," Ngugi demonstrates that "decent values, usually associated with original African values, suffer as a result of coming into contact with imported ones." Killam asserts that "The Martyr" is "perhaps the best in the collection." He explains, "The story is centred in the human losses the independence struggle provoked. There was death and suffering and ultimately everyone is made into a kind of martyr." Kimani Njogu points to the element of storytelling itself in the political implications of the stories in *Secret Lives*: "At whatever vantage point these stories are told or received, they have throughout a combination of sharp social commentary with storytelling as a way for characters to represent their inner sufferings and anxieties. Apparently, storytelling is for Ngugi not an addition to the spirit of narrative, but an integral part of it."

Ngugi has received the highest critical acclaim for his novels. Killam notes that Ngugi's "purposes for writing are plain in the novels: each examines the consequences of public, political events as they affect the lives of individual members of the community." Killam adds that Ngugi "can wed his public vision to his artistic capacity and produce

novels which show how the lives of individuals are given impetus, shape, direction, and area of concern by the social, political and economic forces in the society." His first published novel, *Weep Not, Child* (1964), takes place during the Mau Mau Rebellion against the European colonial presence in Kenya and centers on a Kikuyu family. *A River Between* (1965) is a love story about two people whose relationship is doomed by the cultural divide between traditional and Christian beliefs. In *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), the stories of four characters are told in a series of flashbacks during and after the fight for national independence for Kenya. *Petals of Blood* (1977) is set in the era after Kenya achieved national independence and offers a class-based critique of the conditions of peasants in Kenya due to capitalist exploitation at the hands of foreign investors and the upper classes within Kenya. *Petals of Blood* is Ngugi's most noteworthy, as well as his most political, novel to date. *Devil on the Cross* (1980) was written in both Kikuyu and English, and takes an allegorical form in which the Devil is a central character.

Ngugi's plays have received attention in part due to their political impact in Kenya. Critics generally agree that his best play, co-written with Micere Githae Mugo, is *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976). Ngugi was arrested and imprisoned for a year upon the production of the play *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (1977; *I Will Marry When I Want*), which criticizes the economic elite in Kenya.

Criticism

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

BOOKRAGS

Critical Essay #1

Brent has a Ph.D. in American culture, specializing in film studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in the history of American cinema. In the following essay, Brent discusses the themes of family and betrayal in Ngugi's story.

In Ngugi's story, the themes of family loyalty and betrayal function as antitheses, or competing sets of values between which Njoroge, the main character, is caught. Njoroge works as the "houseboy" of Mrs. Hill, a white European colonial plantation owner. Njoroge is involved in an organized rebellion that involves the murder of individual white plantation owners by the Africans whose land they have stolen, and who have been forced to work for them. The historical significance of this setting is that the white European colonial settlers had first forced the Kikuyu (or Gekoyo) people of Africa off of their own land, and then forced them to work in slavery-like conditions for the profits of the Europeans on the very land which had been stolen from them.

Ngugi's fictional stories, often set in the historically real conditions of Kikuyu revolt against European colonialism, focus on the dilemmas and sacri- fices of the individual in the face of the overwhelming forces of colonial racism and oppression. Ngugi's short story "The Martyr" is a strong example of this thematic focus. In exploring the themes of family loyalty and betrayal, Ngugi paints a landscape of colonial racism that dehumanizes both the oppressor and the oppressed.

The tensions created by European colonial dominance over African people are explored in this story through the theme of family. Family becomes the common denominator that "humanizes" Mrs. Hill in the eyes of Njoroge. At the same time, however, it is his concern for his family that causes Njoroge to particularly resent the insufficient housing Mrs. Hill has provided him; with two wives and many children, Njoroge is not able to house his family in the tiny hut in which he lives. Furthermore, Njoroge's sense of the displacement of his people from their rightful land combines themes of family and religion, as tied to the land. As he walks home at night and contemplates Mrs. Hill's house, the house represents for him the theft of land from his people: "Njoroge wanted to shout to the house all this and many other things that had long accumulated in his heart. The house would not respond." The image of "the immense silhouette of Memsahib's houselarge, imposing" functions as a metaphor for the "imposing" and seemingly all-powerful white colonial domination over the Gekoyo people and land. Njoroge's anger at the theft of land by whites, and the subsequent effect on God-given familial rights, ties themes of family and spiritual belief to the land itself. Njoroge finds that "his whole soul rose in anger□anger against those with a white skin, those foreign elements that had displaced the true sons of the land from their God-given place. Had God not promised Gekoyo all this land, he and his children, forever and ever? Now the land had been taken away." The fact that Njoroge is literally employed on the very land that rightfully belongs to his family makes concrete the injustice of the historical conditions of colonialism: "A big portion of the land now occupied by Mrs. Hill was the land his father had shown him as belonging to the family. They had found the land

occupied when his father and some of the others had temporarily retired to Muranga owing to famine. They had come back and *Nj'o!* the land was gone."

The "imposing" image of Mrs. Hill's house on the hill is contrasted with the tiny brick hut in which Njoroge is housed. The inadequacy of the housing is directly related for Njoroge to his ability to accommodate his family: "It was a very small room. . .Yet it was here, here, that he with two wives and a number of children had to live, had in fact lived for more than five years. So crammed! Yet Mrs. Hill thought she had done enough by just having the houses built with brick." It is in fact for the sake of family that Njoroge feels compelled to plot against Mrs. Hill's life, in order to "strike a blow for the occupied family land."

However, it is the thought of his own family that leads Njoroge to consider Mrs. Hill's family. She is a widow whose children are away at school in England. Imagining Mrs. Hill as the mother of children "humanizes" her in Njoroge's eyes, and he loses the will to kill her.

He knew that she had loved her husband. Of that he was sure. She almost died of grief when she had learnt of his death. In that moment her settlerism had been shorn off. In that naked moment, Njoroge had been able to pity her. Then the children! He had known them. He had seen them grow up like any other children. Almost like his own. They loved their parents, and Mrs. Hill had always been so tender with them, so loving. He thought of them in England, wherever that was, fatherless and motherless.

In fact, Njoroge comes to the conclusion that he wants to save her from murder by his fellow rebels. Mrs. Hill, by contrast, knows nothing about Njoroge's family, although he has worked for her for over ten years.

She thought of Njoroge. A queer boy. Had he many wives? Had he a large family? It was surprising even to her to find that she had lived with him so long, yet had never though of these things. This reflection shocked her a little. It was the first time she had ever thought of him as a man with a family.

The theme of betrayal runs throughout the story as an antithesis to the theme of family loyalty. The three European women who discuss the murder of Mr. and Mrs. Garstone are particularly disturbed by the fact that the couple were betrayed by their own "houseboy." In discussing the matter, Mrs. Hill assures her friends that her "houseboy," Njoroge, is "Very faithful. Likes me very much." Njoroge, in fact, does not like Mrs. Hill, and "had never liked" her. Mrs. Hill's perception that Njoroge is "very loyal" to her is thus shown to be another symptom of her paternalistic, colonial attitude. Mrs. Hill additionally claims of her other African workers, "They all love me. They would do anything I asked

them to!" Within the same conversation, Mrs. Smiles asserts the opinion that while "they look so innocent," they are in fact inherently treacherous, meaning full of betrayal. Mrs. Smiles utilizes a metaphor for betrayal in her comment: "Quite the innocent flower but the serpent under it." The mention of the "serpent" as symbolic of evil and betrayal hiding under the "innocent flower" invokes biblical implications of the serpent in the Garden of Eden.

Yet, Njoroge himself even sees his plan to murder Mrs. Hill that night, no matter how justified, as "treacherous." In thinking of Mrs. Hill, Njoroge finds that he cannot bring himself to see her in any other than human terms. This realization leads him to a decision that in fact betrays his fellow rebels; he ultimately acts "loyal" toward Mrs. Hill, and "treacherous" to his fellow Freedom Boys. "What was he to do now?" he asks himself. "Would he betray the 'Boys'?" Although he decides to betray the "Boys" and save Mrs. Hill, he must wrestle with his conscience over this new betrayal. He decides that, after saving her, he will go into the forest to fight as a rebel: "It would serve as a propitiation for his betrayal of the other 'Boys.'" Yet, on his way to her house to save her, he finds that "Again he hated himself for this betrayal" to the 'Boys'; he is also worried about the fact that "if the 'Boys' discovered his betrayal he would surely meet death."

When he knocks at Mrs. Hill's door, she believes that he has betrayed her and led the gang to her house to kill her. Ultimately, however, it is Mrs. Hill who betrays Njoroge, by underestimating his loyalty to her as a fellow human being and member of a family, and thus assuming that his intentions are guilty and murderous—the result of which is her spontaneous decision to shoot him before finding out why he has come. Having killed him, the narration implies just a hint of guilt or remorse on the part of Mrs. Hill: "The circumstances of Njoroge's death worried her. The more she thought about it, the more of a puzzle it was to her." However, Mrs. Hill's worry and puzzlement do not lead her to seriously contemplate the possibility that Njoroge had come to save, rather than kill, her. She merely concludes these reflections with "a slow enigmatic sigh" and the words "I don't know."

Through juxtaposition of the opposing themes of family loyalty and betrayal, Ngugi explores the effects of colonialism and racist oppression on individuals and individual relationships. Njoroge comes to realize that, because of his conflicting loyalties to Mrs. Hill, as a fellow human being and member of a family, and to "The Boys," as a fellow Kikuyu organizing against racial oppression, he is, and will probably always be, "a divided man." Njoroge comes to hate this oppression not just because of its effect on the oppressed, but because of the ways in which it corrupts individual human relationships, such as that between Njoroge and Mrs. Hill. Njoroge comes to feel that, "For now it seemed an impossible thing to snap just like that ten years of relationship, though to him they had been years of pain and shame. He prayed and wished there had never been injustices. Then there would never have been this rift—the rift between white and black. Then he would never have been in this painful situation." This story ultimately suggests that family is a universal human concern which has the potential to "humanize" the relationship between clashing cultures.

Source: Liz Brent, in an essay for *Literature of Developing Nations for Students*, Gale, 2000.

BOOKRAGS

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay on Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Theodore Pelton discusses the Kenyan author's controversial use of his regional language, Gikuyu, as part of his active resistance against Western imperialism (an action which lead to his imprisonment in 1978). Pelton cautions that in order to properly approach Thiong'o's written work, the reader must also approach not only the man as activist and anti-imperialist, but also the mythic presence Thiong'o's actions have created.

I am concerned with moving the
centre . . . from its assumed
location in the West to a multi-plicity
of spheres in an the cultures
of the world. [This] will
contribute to the freeing of world cultures from the
restrictive ways of nationalism, class, race,
and gender.
In this sense I am an unrepentant universalist. For
I believe that whlee retaining its roots in
regional and
national individuality, true humanism with its
universal
reaching out, can flower among the peoples of
the earth. . . .
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Moving the Centre: the
Struggle for Cultural Freedoms

The name Ngugi wa Thiong'o may be less recognizable to American audiences than those of Nobel Prize-winning African writers Nadine Gordimer and Wole Soyinka or even Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe. And yet, the life and work of Ngugi provide an excellent starting point for people who wish to achieve some awareness of the many inter-related dilemmas□cultural, political, linguistic, developmental□that beset an entire continent of people and yet remain obscure even for the vast majority of educated Americans. In fact, Ngugi□ the author of 19 books of fiction, nonfiction, drama, and children's literature□is as important today as any other single literary figure in understanding the problems of post, colonial Africa.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o was born James Ngugi in 1938 in Limuru, Kenya. In 1967, at the age of 29, Ngugi□already the author of three critically ac claimed novels□began an address to the Fifth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa by shocking his audience. "I am not a man of the church," he stated. "I am not even a Christian." Ngugi went on to censure the church for its role in the colonizing of his native land. At the end of the speech, a quavering old man approached the front of the auditorium, shaking a cane and denouncing Ngugi for blasphemy. "And you are a Christian," the man rather absurdly insisted. "Your name, James, is a Christian name." Perhaps as a result of this encounter, the next novel James Ngugi published bore his new Africanized name, Ngugi

wa Thiong'o, formed by joining his mother's and father's family names. It is the name he has used ever since.

Thus, to approach Ngugi the writer, one must also confront this carefully cultivated mythic presence. Ngugi sees himself not just as a writer but also as a revolutionary continuing the fight against Western imperialism□particularly the sophisticated form of economic imperialsm that, he argues, has replaced traditional colonialism in his country. In his first three novels, *Weep Not, Child* (1964), *The River Between* (1965), and *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), he set out to develop a national literature for Kenya in the immediate wake of that nation's liberation from British rule. Setting his novels' plots against such historic events as the Mau Mau uprising and the subsequent day of Kenyan independence (or Uhuru) in 1963, Ngugi sought to create and establish historical legends for a nation less than half a decade old.

Ngugi was firm in his denunciation of any compromise with British colonialism□so much so, in fact, that his personality and radicalism have become as important to his stature among African writers as his works. Stories of Ngugi's fiery literary and political activism now form a kind of oral literature among students of contemporary African culture. Ngugi himself has launched a second career telling these stories in subsequent nonfiction books, as well as in lectures and readings across Europe and North America.

One of the most famous of these stories concerns his experiences with the Kamiriithu theater project. Ngugi had been persuaded by the villagers in Kamiriithu, where he lived while teaching at the nearby University of Nairobi, to begin working with the local theater group on literacy projects. Since many of the villagers didn't speak English□the language of the former colonial administration, in which Ngugi had written his first four novels□and since he had an interest in exploring the traditions of pre-colonial African expression, Ngugi decided to write and produce a play in his own regional language, Gikuyu.

This was a bold initiative. Until 1970, theater in Kenya had been monopolized by the Kenyan National Theatre, a British-based company that produced largely Western plays, in English, with British actors. The Kenyan National Theatre had also altered the traditional "space" of African theater from a less formalized outdoor setting to a more formal and Westernized indoor one. Ngugi was interested in opening up the theater to the peasantry again; he wanted to make it not just an isolated aesthetic event for the cultural elite but "part and parcel of the . . . daily and seasonal life of the community," as song and ritual had once been in the Kenyan countryside.

The play which resulted from Ngugi's experiments with the Kamiriithu Theatre, Ngaahika Ndeenda (*I Will Marry When I Want*), was wildly popular. Drawing from the experiences of theater participants who had been involved in the events of the time depicted□one man who made fake guns for the play had actually made real guns for the rebels□Ngugi allowed the audience themselves to feel a vital part of the artistic creation. The Kenyan government, however, was not as enthusiastic; it withdrew the license that allowed the "gathering" at the theater. Ngugi was arrested at the end of 1977 and "spent the whole of 1978 in a maximum security prison, detained without even

the doubtful benefit of a trial," as he noted in his book *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature.* Later attempts by others to resurrect the theater led first to a government ban on theatrical activities in the area and later to the razing of the open-air theater itself.

In cell 16 of Kamiti Maximum Security Prison, Ngugi began to write his fifth novelߞand his first in Gikuyu. He had been raised as a speaker of the language despite attempts by the British colonial administration to install English as its language of instruction in Kenya (in the schools Ngugi attended, children were punished if they were caught speaking Gikuyu on the grounds). Until 1978, all of Ngugi's works had been written in English, but now he desired not the international audience English afforded but the local one reachable only through Gikuyu. This proved to be a formidable challenge; although British missionaries had developed a written form of the language in order to make the Bible more widely available to this audience, there was no formal literature written in Gikuyu, and native speakers were punished for attempts to write secular works in the language. By writing a novel, Ngugi was now stretching this written language system beyond any previous test, especially since it required him to standardize written Gikuyu and make it more accurately reflect the way native speakers practiced it.

As it turned out, an even more immediate challenge for Ngugi was how to actually write a book in prison when he was denied access to writing paper except for the purpose of making a confession. Ngugi solved this problem by writing on toilet paperߞa seemingly impossible undertaking, but as Ngugi explained in *Decolonizing the Mind:* "Toilet paper at Kamiti was meant to punish prisoners. So it was very coarse. But what was bad for the body was good for the pen."

This novel, *Caitaani Mutharabainin* (*Devil on the Cross*), was hugely popular, finding an audience even among the illiterate; it led, among other things, to the development of "professional readers," who sat in bars and read aloud to the clientele until a key passage, at which point they would stop and make sure their glasses were refilled before they continued the story. But after selling as well as any English-language novel ever published in Kenya, *Devil on the Cross* was banned by the government. A subsequent novel written in Gikuyu, Matigari, was published in that language by Heinemann of London but was seized upon arrival in Kenya; in fact, Ngugi's translation of this novel into English is the only version legally available in Kenya today. Ngugi now lives in exile; he has taught at Yale University and Amherst College and was recently appointed professor of comparative literature and performance studies at New York University.

Why, the reader may be wondering at this point, did Ngugi's work so consistently run afoul of the Kenyan government? Ngugi contends that it was his choice of Gikuyu, more than any other single factor, which led both to his imprisonment and to his subsequent exile. A reader unfamiliar with African literature might be puzzled by this. Why wouldn't the Kenyan authorities wish to permit literary works written in an indigenous African language? One would think that the government of an independent African state, nearly 30 years after Uhuru, would seek both to champion its own languages as evidence of its cultural independence from the West and to celebrate its successful struggle against

tyranny— in this case, the Mau Mau uprising which began its guerrilla war against Britain in 1952.

It is important to remember here that Kenya, like many other African states, is a nation whose boundaries were artificially drawn in Europe. Although the Kenyan government has never officially explained why Ngugi was detained, we can see in this an initial reason for its actions. Kenya relies upon English as a unifying force; the citizens of that country are in the paradoxical position of having as their only common language the one spoken by their former oppressors. Nor is this situation peculiar to Kenya; Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe has written of this problem in Africa in general, and in his article "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation," published in a 1964 issue of *Nigeria Magazine,* he made clear his own opposition to the use of African languages for African literature:

It is not that I underrate their importance. But since I am considering the role of the writer in building a new nation I wish to concentrate on those who write for the whole nation whose audience cuts across tribe or clan. And these, for good or ill, are writers in English.

Achebe has since modified his position, saying that he admires those writers who use African languages for their works but remains adamant about the use of English in his own. And it is important to remember that Achebe's credentials as a champion of literary Africanicity are impeccable. His first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, is probably the best-known African novel in the United States, and one that consciously seeks to show, in Achebe's words, that "African peoples did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry, and, above all, they had dignity." Moreover, Achebe's position on the use of European languages is more in keeping with the feelings of most African writers than Ngugi's.

Thus, the issue of which language should be used to compose a truly African contemporary literature is murky at best. Ngugi steadfastly maintains that writing in African languages is a necessary step toward cultural identity and independence from centuries of European exploitation. But, as critic David Westley has noted, the problem is historically complex: as a strategy to maintain apartheid— by definition the separation of defined racial groups—south Africa for many years encouraged African, language manuscripts, under the theory that the resulting problems of communication would make it harder for various groups to band together and collectively protest government policies.

Of course, discussions of language alone neglect the all-important issue of class, an issue to which Ngugi continually returns. The masses of peasants and workers in Kenya are largely illiterate in English, and it is precisely these people from whom the government wishes to keep Ngugi's writings. The reason is a simple one: Ngugi is an explicit and unabashed Marxist, and his works recall the revolutionary spirit of the Mau Mau rebellion which convinced the English to relinquish control of Kenya.

A little history is necessary here. While the origins of the term are controversial, Mau Mau seems to have originally been a British term to describe the small bands of guerrillas which sought to resist the domination of British settlers in the 1950s. At that time, the Mau Maus did not constitute an actual national movement. The British settlers, however, grew increasingly worried about their tenuous hold on the country; only 1 percent of the population, they nonetheless controlled all the best farmland in Kenya. Taking advantage of a change in colonial administration, the settlers began spreading horror stories of a nationwide revolution in the offing. The authorities responded with a crackdown; gradually, however, the measures taken□ illegal detentions, the razing of villages, and the imposition of a 24-hour curfew had the ironic effect of provoking more and more people, particularly Gikuyu, to join the guerrilla bands.

Soon, the tiny force that the British tried to extinguish became a substantial guerrilla army (in Gikuyu, "The Land and Freedom Army"). The national state of emergency that was supposed to last several weeks lasted for seven years; for four of these years, the so-called Mau Mau rebels fought a guerrilla war against British rule. Eventually, the British defeated this army, killing its leader, Dedan Kimathi, and establishing prison camps to "rehabilitate" captured rebels. In their attempts to make these prisoners confess their allegiance to Mau Mau (a step in the rehabilitation process), prison officials practiced horrible tortures□twisting mens' testicles, punching prisoners into incoherence, sometimes whipping them to death. When the British government itself, thousands of miles away, learned what was being carried out in its name, it decided to follow a new policy in Kenya and readied the country for independence.

However, the independence Britain had in mind was not the same as that which the Land and Freedom Army had fought for. If independence was to be granted, the British wished to yield control to a government they had themselves trained and installed□ one that could be counted on to protect the landed interests in the nation. Thus, the colonial administration stepped down and a neocolonial administration□answerable not to the Kenyan people but to the economic interests that still retained actual control of the country□took its place. The Kenyan rebels returning from jail found, in the words of Anthony Howarth and David Koff in their 1973 documentary *Black Man's Country*, a nation that "they had helped create, but which they had no place in."

Ngugi asserts that the Kenyan government□ and other neocolonial administrations like it in Africa□are fronts for "U.S., led imperialism," a phrase he returns to again and again. He continually reminds us that the world is and always has been a linked unit, that the rich□be they nations or individuals□ did not get that way on their own, but profited by the labor of the poor. "Over the last 400 years," Ngugi said at a recent conference at Yale University, "the developments in the West have not just been the result of internal social dynamics but also of the West's relationship with Africa, Asia, and South America." The so-called First World's privileged position did not come about simply by means of superior technical ingenuity or managerial skills (much as we like to laud ourselves for these things); it began with the stolen labor of slavery and continued with the enforced labor of colonial governments, working hand in hand with multinational corporations.

In sum, Ngugi argues, if today a nation enjoys wealth□particularly great wealth, as we do in the United States□it is directly linked to exploitation somewhere else in the world. This is why the Kenyan government, acting as the proxy of Western investment, will not tolerate the widespread dissemination of a revolutionary message by a fiercely committed Marxist who is also national hero (in 1964, Ngugi published the first novel in English by an East African), through a populist medium like drama or through structures designed to empower workers (written literature read aloud to the illiterate). In *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngugi describes a revealing example of the type of selfdiscovery which occurred during his rehearsals of *Ngaahica Ndeenda* :

I remember for instance how one group who worked in a particular department at the nearby Bata shoe factory sat down to work out the process and quantity of their exploitation in order to explain it all to those of us who had never worked in a factory. Within a single day, they would make shoes to the value of all the monthly wages for the entire work force of three thousand. . . . For whom were they working for the other twenty-nine days? They calculated what of what they produced went to wear and tear of the machinery and for the repayment initial capital, and because the company had been there since 1938 they assumed that the initial investment had been repaid a long time ago. To whom did the rest go? To the owners in Canada.

At a time when African governments do not wish to alienate large lender nations, such rhetoric represents a real threat to any neocolonialist regime. As Ngugi himself puts it:

A writer who tries to communicate the message of revolutionary unity and hope in the languages of the people becomes a subversive character. It is then that writing in African languages becomes a subversive or treasonable offence with such a writer facing possibilities of prison, exile, or even death. For him there are no "national" accolades, no new year honors, only abuse and slander and innumerable lies from the mouths of the armed power of a ruling minority.

Ngugi's ear of imprisonment seems to have a marked impact on his writing. As he notes in *Detained: A Prison Writer's Diary*, he found himself analyzing the purposes of detention itself:

Political detention, not disregarding its punitive aspects, serves a deeper, exemplary ritual symbolism. If they can break such patriot, if they can make him come out of detention crying "I am sorry for all my sins," such an unprincipled about-turn would confirm

the wisdom of the ruling clique in its division of the
populace into the passive innocent millions and the
disgruntled subversive few. The "confession" and its
corollary, "Father, forgive us our sins," becomes a
cleansing ritual for all the past and current repressive
deeds of such neocolonial regime.

But Ngugi abjured the "cleansing ritual." He is determined to keep the past alive, and *Detained* is ascrupulous record of the wrongs done against the Kenyan people: massacres, betrayals, abuses at the hands of the settlers (one of whom, incidentally, was Karen Blixen, whose own account of her time in Kenya, *Out of Africa*, would later become an Academy Award-winning movie starring Meryl Streep and Robert Redford), arrests and interrogations, including that of the author himself. Given the systematic attempt to break his will, the energy of Ngugi's response is astonishing. In *Detained*, he writes:

I would remind myself that the . . . ruling class had
sent me here so my brain would turn into a mess of rot.
The defiance of this bestial purpose always charged
me with new energy and determination: I would cheat
them out of the last laugh by letting my imagination
loose over the kind of society this class, in naked
treacherous alliance with imperialist foreigners, were
building in Kenya in total cynical disregard of the
wishes of over fourteen million Kenyans.

When Ngugi emerged from jail, literature had a different purpose; since then, his works have had much less room for subtlety. It is as if the concentrated anger and moral outrage built up during his incarceration exploded upon his release□the blast revealing, in flood of sudden bright light, a stark vision in which all the ambiguity or shadowing we tend to value in creative works has been forever banished.

Take, for instance, *A Grain of Wheat* , Ngugi's last novel before his prison term. Published in 1967, this is a novel which cannily embraces ambiguity; at the moment of Uhuru, the Kenyans of a certain village seek out a hero to speak to them. Little by little, however, they realize that all the living have somehow been compromised, that war makes a person choose between life and heroism but rarely, if ever, allows both. When Mugo, the novel's central character, is finally forced to make a speech because the assembled masses think he is a hero, he instead tells them that he is the worst of all traitors, having sold out the village leader of the Mau Mau himself. He had wished only one thing, to be left alone; in war, this is a luxury.

Published 20 years later, Ngugi's most recent novel *Matigari* begins with Matigari ma Njiruungi, whose name in Gikuyu means "the patriot who survived the bullets," emerging from the forest, having finally killed Settler Williams and his assistant John Boy. The allegory is not subtle, nor is it meant to be: Settler Williams is the English oppressor; John Boy his aptly named Kenyan collaborator. Matigari roams the land

seeking "truth and justice" and wishing also to reclaim the home he fought for against Williams and Boy. But Williams' and Boy's sons now own the house; they are Kenyan captains of industry who openly bribe the nation's leader, His Excellency Ole Excellence; the three of them constitute the nation's ruling authorities, who work to smash workers' strikes and suppress all dissent. Matigari's act of emerging from "the forest" recalls the Mau Mau rebels who emerged from colonial prisons; but his questions reveal him to be different from the contemporary citizens of his country, who bow silently to the friendly faced neocolonial oppression. Matigari had sworn himself to peace upon leaving the forest but begins to see that he must again pick up arms to fight for what is right.

A Grain of Wheat was a novel about a war that was presumed over. The final image of Matigari shows a young boy, Muriuki, arming himself with Matigari's weapons, readying to fight a war that is just beginning. If the earlier novel is more subtle, it must be remembered that Ngugi imagined it serving an evaluative function; a work that seeks to stir people to revolt has much less room for subtlety.

Nonetheless, such a purpose may be argued as creating not literature but propaganda. Writing in Gikuyu has undoubtedly changed the forms of Ngugi's fiction□there is more concentration on folk traditions, and the appeal is intended to be simpler and more direct. But there is a sense as well that the quality of Ngugi's fiction may have suffered. Ngugi's long, time readers were largely disappointed with Matigari; having become a political figure, some have argued, Ngugi has become less effective, perhaps even lazier, as a creative artist. Moreover, even Marxists have criticized Ngugi's politics; to many, the intellectual level at which he makes his pitch for socialism in Matagari is too simplistic, savoring too much of mere propaganda. Others have criticized his project as too naive and have accused Ngugi of willfully refusing to acknowledge the complexity of the African, languages controversy. At a conference in England, South African author Lewis Nkosi once responded to Ngugi's call for writers to use indigenous languages by shouting him down in Zulu; the point, of course, was that Ngugi could not understand what Nkosi was saying. Committed to the use of Gikuyu for his fiction, Ngugi has continued to use English for his books of "explanatory" prose, of which there were four in the last decade: *Detained: A Prison Writer's Diary* (1981); a series of lectures published as *Writers in Politics* (1981); *Barrel of a Pen: Resistance to Oppression in Neo-Colonial Kenya* (1983); and *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986). This seeming need to legitimate himself to his English, language readership (practically his entire readership), combined with the unfortunate fact that his novels, written in Gikuyu, do not usually get read in that language, renders Ngugi's choice of Gikuyu more a quixotic political gesture than an actual condition of existence for his fiction. This decision has led to some strange twists of fate: having declared himself a Gikuyu, language novelist, Ngugi has been required to become an even more prolific Englishlanguage essayist, turning out nonfiction in his colonial language faster than fiction in his native one.

Ngugi has also become the leading interpreter of his own works. Now all of his fiction is fringed with the author's own marginalia: "This is how I should be read"; "These are the conditions which produced this text"; "These are the issues my texts are concerned

with." in this way, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the writer, has become inseparable from Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the figure of the unfinished revolution. Mau Mauwhich Ngugi was too young to join but which his older brother joined and died serving has always been a constant presence in his works. Now the struggle which the rebels fought and lost, gaining independence yet finding themselves shut out of the government, has been picked up again by Ngugi. This time, each of his works seems to proclaim, we will be the victors in our struggle; this time we will get back what is rightfully oursthe land and wealth taken from us by foreign exploiters.

The five years since the publication of Matigari have been one of the longest periods of publishing inactivity in Ngugi's career. In many ways, the publication of that novel seemed to end a stage in Ngugi's careerone which began with his release from prison and saw the publication of two novels in Gikuyu and several works of nonfiction in English. According to Ngugi him, self, he said farewell for good to English six years ago with the publication of *Decolonizing the Mind.* "I have lost interest in the use of the English language," he remarked in a recent interview in Transition.

On January 18, 1993Martin Luther King DayJames Curry/Heinemann published Ngugi's new collection, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedom.* The essays range from Ngugi's celebrated (some would say notorious) 1980 ad dress to the Danish Library Association, *"Her Cook, Her Dog: Karen Blixen's Africa,"* to his 1990 salute to Nelson Mandela, *"Many Years Walk to Freedom,"* written in (and translated from) Gikuyu. Ngugi has also appeared in print as a spokes, person for Mwakenya, an underground movement which openly seeks "the establishment of a national economy, where all the resources of the land will go to the benefit of all Kenyans." The recent political news from Kenya, however, has not been good. On Wednesday, December 20, 1992, the nation held its first democratic elections in 26 yearsand, as many people had predicted, the voting was marred by widespread irregularities and abuses. The election pitted President Daniel arap Moi and his Kenya African National Union against three main rivals: Oginga Odinga of the Forum for the Restoration of Democracy (FORD)/Kenya; Kenneth Matiba of FORD/Asili; and Mwai Kibaki of the Democratic Party. Moi, "who fought tooth and nail against multiparty democracy" (in the words of Canadian journalist Jonathan Manthorpe), won a bare plurality of the votesnearly two million out of 7.9 million registered votersbut irregularities were reported at every polling station visited by journalists or international observers. (Even worse, three million Kenyans who had recently attained the age of majority were left off the rolls of eligible voters entirely; this, according to Manthorpe, in a country of 25 million people.) The victorious Moi has explained these irregularities as merely "administrative" glitches occasioned by a massive voter turnout, but it is unlikely that this election win quiet dissent against his government.

One wonders what the future has in store for Kenya. Although it appears to be one of the most stable nations in sub-Saharan Africa, Kenya is precariously situated. Famine and political chaos brought international military intervention in Somalia, its northeastern neighbor, and bands of Soma;i guninen have already been reported fleeing into Kenya. in Sudan, on the northwestern border, civil war and famine continue; in Angola, on the continent's western coast, free elections have been held after a 16-year civil war, but the

new representative government is by no means stable; in the south, 1.5 million Mozambicans have fled that strife-ridden country during its civil war; and South Africa continues its own painful, convulsive transition from an apartheid nation.

One also wonders what the future has in store for Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Will he continue to write critical prose in that largely unread language, Gikuyu? Will he write another novel in that language or in the more widely spoken Kiswahili (a language whose linguistic boundaries extend beyond Kenya)? Will he return to the theater? And, most poignantly, will he ever be able to return to Kenya?

Ngugi, as Kenya's leading cultural spokesperson, is a man dedicated to making the world aware of the oppressive regime that still rules his nation. But he is also committed to healing the continent itself of the long,standing injuries of colonization, and he believes that this healing can only come through cultural autonomy and self-determination. "I think the dividing line is really the issue of language," he repeats endlessly, tirelessly. He does not consider it an oversimplification to suggest that European languages themselves are the final, pervasive colonizing army that will not leave his homeland. So he repeats it again:

We must avoid the destruction that English has wrought on other languages and cultures in its march to the position it now occupies in the world. The death of many languages should never be the condition for the life of a few. . . . A language for the world? A world of languages! The two concepts are not mutually exclusive, provided there is independence, equality, democracy, and peace among nations. Ngugi wa Thiong'o on cultural imperlalism:

Today the USA and the West in general control nearly all the news to and from Third World countries. . . . Most of the images on the cinema and television screens of the Third World are actuaffy manufactured in the USA. This dominance is likely to continue with the vast US investment in information technology. With the satellite TV, Cable TV, and the USA-based video productions, these images "made in the USA" will be received directly by many Third World families. We have already seen the devastating use of this technology in religious propaganda by the USA-based millionaire foundations who now promote idiotic illusions about the pleasures of the heaven to come on a mass hypnotic scale. Even such publicly discredited characters as [Jimmy] Swaggart and Oral Roberts will occupy regular spots running into prime television time in a number of African and Third World countries. . . .

The 1990s will therefore see even greater battles for the control of the minds and hearts of the exploited and the oppressed of the world, trying to mould them in the image of the neo-colonial father in the American heaven. The aim will still be what it has always been: to divide, weaken and scatter resistance. For how a people view themselves will affect how they view their values, their culture, their politics, their economics, and ultimately their relationship to nature and to the entire universe.

Source: Theodore Pelton, "Nagugi wa Thiong'o and the Politics of Language," in *The Humanist,* Vol. 53, No. 2, March-April, 1993, p. 15.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay on Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Joseph Mbele discusses how the Kenyan author's controversial use of his regional language, Gikuyu, raises questions and problems around the relationship of language to culture, questioning whether the author's use of his regional language functions as he intends to "decolonize" the African mind.

The subject of language is now central in discussions of African literature. Many issues have been raised. Is language the determining feature of African literature? Is it acceptable for the African writer to write in non-African languages? In the process of asking such questions, Ngugi wa Thiong'o has emerged as a key advocate of writing in African languages, and it has become almost unfashionable to challenge his views on the subject, but I believe it is necessary to examine what Ngugi has been saying and to consider the possibility of looking at the language question in new ways. Developments in literary theory enable us to pose new questions about the nature of language and the ways in which language mediates writing, authorial intentions, the reading process, and literary meaning. Such questions invite broader considerations of a political nature, involving the relationship among the social classes and the respective demands of nationalism and internationalism.

Ngugi has expressed his views rather forcefully: An African writer should write in a language that will allow him to communicate effectively with peasants and workers in Africa; in other words, he should write in an African language. . . . Literature published in African languages will have to be meaningful to the masses and therefore much closer to the realities of their situation. ("On Writing")

This statement is significant both for what it reveals and for what it conceals. It demonstrates great faith in the capacity of language to communicate ideas and sentiments intended by the writer. But we need to ask whether language is really such an efficient instrument of communication or if it is a more stubborn medium.

In discussing the nature of the word, Jurij Tynjanov illuminates the problematic nature of language in the following terms:

A word does not have just one definite meaning. It is a chameleon and every time it occurs there appear not only various shadings but even various colors.

If the meanings of words are so indeterminate, the use of language poses serious problems for writers as well as readers. For writers, the essential problem is whether they can say, through language, what they desire to say. No matter how optimistic we might be about the power of language, we must concede that there are moments, as

Heidegger explains, "when we cannot find the right word for something that concerns us, carries us away, oppresses or encourages us. Then we leave unspoken what we have in mind. . . ." Lewis Nkosi has suggested that, whatever language writers use, they cannot escape this problem:

In a way, any writer always falls short of his true ideal:
his struggle with his materials, the attempt to wrestle
from language the true meaning of the world he seeks
to depict, is always endless and incomplete. Incomplete,
because in describing the true lineaments of
what the writer sees with his inner eye language can
only approximate the shapes and figures of his imagination.
In this respect, therefore, the situation of the
African writer is not unique. It is the same struggle
with language.

The other problem concerns the reader. Like writing, reading is an active process. It is a dialogue, a struggle with language, and its outcome is far from certain. Even assuming that writers could say exactly what they intended to say, it is never certain that readers will receive the intended message. In proclaiming the need to "communicate effectively with peasants and workers in Africa," Ngugi fails to recognize that the reading process is problematical. In discussing his experience in writing *Ngaahika Ndeenda* with the villagers, he clearly states his opinion about the transparency of language:

And because there was no language barrier, the villagers
could also comment on the content of the play.
There was no mystification of the play's message. . . .
They could now participate in correcting the content
of the script. ("On Writing")

But the reception of language is never so unproblematic that everyone agrees about its meaning.

Ngugi himself remains content to note the popularity of his Gikuyu-language works among the Gikuyu masses without asking himself what meaning they attach to these works. Concerning the reception of *Caitaani Muthara-ba-ini*, for example, he observes:

The novel had an interesting kind of reception. At first
it was read in families. When families gathered together
in the evening, they would get one of their
literate members to read for them. In this way the
novel was appropriated and became part of the community's
oral tradition. It was also read in buses and
matutus (sic) (small, crowded public transport vehicles);
people would read for passengers between
stops. Another example of the community's collective
appropriation of the novel was the emergence of

professional readers in bars. Someone would start
reading the novel aloud while drinking his beer, and
when the beer was finished, he would just put the
novel down. And of course the other customers would
have to offer him another round to get him started
again. So he would read and drink, read and drink,
until the glass was again empty and again refilled, and
so on, through the evening. ("On Writing")

Concerned about conveying what he regards as a revolutionary message, Ngugi assumes that the Gikuyu masses enjoy his works because they understand the message he intended to communicate. But if we can never be sure what readers see in a text, his assumption becomes even more dubious when we consider the probable responses of readers and audiences who are drinking beer.

Jonathan Culler has remarked that:
None would deny that literary works, like most other
objects of human attention, can be enjoyed for reasons
that have little to do with understanding and mastery
the texts can be quite blatantly misunderstood and
still be appreciated for a variety of personal reasons.

Culler's point can be corroborated in the African context, where epics, folktales, and other oral genres often contain segments that neither performers nor audiences understand; nevertheless, this lack of understanding does not hamper their enjoyment of the performances. Thus, many of the Swahili who listen to the popular epic Rasi' LGhuli enjoy it without understanding what it is all about (Ridhiwani).

Under such circumstances, Ngugi's insistence that the African writer should write for peasants and workers is not as unproblematic as he assumes. Furthermore, African society is also comprised of other social groups, including intellectuals. Mao Tse Tung, one of the most influential champions of the peasants and workers, had a more realistic perspective on this question. While stressing that literature and art should be for the masses, he also pointed out that they are:

. . . needed by the cadres. The cadres are the advanced
elements of the masses and generally have received
more education; literature and art of a higher level are
entirely necessary for them. To ignore this would be
a mistake.

In other words, Mao recognized the importance of a literature that might be inaccessible to peasants and workers on account of its complexity or its existence in a foreign language. Not only Ngugi but also scholars such as Abiola Irele and Emmanuel Ngara, who rail against what they call elitist literature, are vulnerable to criticism on these grounds (Irele and Ngugi).

Mao was also ahead of Ngugi in another way. Although he recognized that the cultural level of the peasants and workers was low, he advocated that it should be continually raised. He would certainly have argued in favor of encouraging the peasants and workers to learn foreign languages. In contrast, Ngugi seems to assume that Gikuyu peasants will forever speak, write, and read only in Gikuyu. What benefits might Gikuyu peasants gain by learning English, French, or Russian? Anybody who espouses revolutionary causes, as Ngugi does, ought to address the question of foreign languages in a dialectical and forward-looking manner. The example of Karl Marx is worth noting in this respect. As Paul Lafargue points out:

Marx could read all European languages and write in three: German, French, and English, to the admiration of language experts. He liked to repeat the saying: "A foreign language is a weapon in the struggle of life.

It would be neither accurate nor fair to charge Ngugi with having ignored internationalism. Although he champions writing in African languages and now writes only in Gikuyu, he has considered the question of how to reach readers outside. His answer has always been that they will be reached through translations:

Writing in Gikuyu does not cut me off from other language communities because there are always opportunities for translation. My Gikuyu novel, for example, has been translated not only into English and Kiswahili but also directly from Gikuyu into Swedish. A German edition is planned, and a translation directly from Gikuyu into Japanese may appear later. In other words, there is already a dialogue emerging with the rest of the world due to the translation of a piece of Gikuyu literature into foreign languages. This kind of dialogue has also occurred within East Africa with the publication of a translation into Kiswahili. Hopefully a situation will arise where this novel is translated directly into other African languages within and outside Kenya, so that once again there will be direct communication between two African language communities rather than indirect communication through an intermediary language such as English or French. ("On Writing")

But something is always changed, added, or lost in translation. For this reason, there really can be no true translation; in fact, a translation is actually a new work of art. Ideally, works should be read in the original languages, and if we must have translations, we should acknowlege them as a necessary evil.

Since Ngugi appears to believe that the work remains the same in translation, why is it essential for him to write in Gikuyu first? If translation offers such an efficient bridge

between languages, he could just as easily write in English and then have his work translated into Gikuyu. Irele is undoubtedly right when he argues that "the literary artist will produce his best work in the medium that he most confidently controls." In light of this fact it is quite possible that Ngugi is capable of producing better work in English than in Gikuyu. By his own admission, he lacks the mastery of Gikuyu that would enable him to write his best work in it:

And when we scripted the play in Gikuyu called *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (or *I Will Marry When I Want*), something happened which was very interesting. The people in the village of course knew their language much better than we did; so they began to offer their comments on the script. They would say, 'Oh, this image is wrong here, or that type of language is inappropriate there. An old man doesn't speak like this; if you want him to have dignity, he must use a different kind of speech. Oh my God, you are making him speak like a child! You university people, what kind of learning have you had?' (" On Writing")

Perhaps Ngugi can improve his mastery of Gikuyu, but he might also have abandoned English too soon.

In criticizing what he calls "petty-bourgeois African writers" who, while writing in foreign languages, misrepresent the African peasants, Ngugi actually undermines his own views on translation:

Often the African peasant characters were made to appear naive and simple minded because of the kind of simplistic, distorted foreign languages through which they were made to articulate their feelings and world outlook. More often the peasant/worker characters were given the vacillating mentality and pessimistic world outlook of the petty bourgeois. But the final indignity was that even where the peasant/ worker characters were given their due in terms of dignity and world outlook, they were made to express these awkwardly in foreign languages. Thus the tongues of millions of peasants were mutilated in the works of African writers, and in their stead the peasants were given plastic surgery in the literary laboratories of Africa and emerged with English, French and Portuguese tongues. (*Writers*)

However, he fails to cite a single work of African fiction in which peasants are portrayed in this way. Furthermore, one is tempted to ask what happens to Ngugi's own novels when they are translated into European languages. Do his Gikuyu peasants and

workers escape the simple-mindedness and awkwardness that emerge when they are made to speak in an alien tongue? To save his peasants and workers from such indignities, Ngugi should perhaps refuse to allow any of his Gikuyu works to be translated into foreign languages.

Ngugi's decision to abandon English as a medium for expression for his creative work and to use only Gikuyu is intriguing because it seems to be based on a non-dialectical view of English and, for that matter, of other European languages as well. For him, these languages are simply the languages of the former colonial masters. Any African writer who uses them today thus becomes a victim of neocolonialism. Ngugi himself explains:

> There are other contradictions of a writer in a neocolonial state. For whom does he write? For the people? But then what language does he use? It is a fact that the African writers who emerged after the Second World War opted for European languages. All the major African writers wrote in English, French, and Portuguese. But by and large, all the peasants and a majority of the workers—the masses—have their own languages. Isn't the writer perpetuating, at the level of cultural practice, the very neo-colonialism he is condemning at the level of economic and political practice? For whom a writer writes is a question which has not been satisfactorily resolved by the writers in a neocolonial state. (*Writing Against Neocolonialism*)

However, if English, French, and Portuguese are the main languages of the former colonizers, they are also the languages of the working masses in England, France, and Portugal, and elsewhere. These languages were created by the masses and reflect their creative genius; they were not created by the imperialists, who only came onto the scene much later. It is an historical accident that they were used as the languages of colonialism, and this fact alone does not detract from their significance and value. Similarly, although Gikuyu is the language of Gikuyu peasants and workers, it is also the language of Gikuyu landlords and capitalists. If these capitalists and landlords had the power, they could easily use Gikuyu to dominate people of other language groups.

Ngugi has consistently argued that the colonialists downgraded African languages and promoted European languages; however, his views on this subject are rather simplistic. The colonialists' policies on African languages were not uniform throughout the continent, nor were they entirely negative. In fact, the colonialists and missionaries whom Ngugi castigates were instrumental in promoting many African languages. Even in Kenya, Ngugi's own country, they produced the orthographies, dictionaries, grammars, and readers that enabled large numbers of Africans to become literate in these languages. In many places in Africa, colonialists and missionaries started newspapers and publishing enterprises that enabled indigenous writers such as

Thomas Mofolo of Lesotho and Shaaban Robert from Tanganyika to make names for themselves. That Ngugi can now write in Gikuyu and that he can be read by an appreciative Gikuyu audience result largely from the good work done by the colonialists and the missionaries.

In many ways, Ngugi's struggle against English appears to be fueled by psychological conflicts, anxieties, and guilt feelings. His situation is a variation on the Oedipal theme of the father-son conflict, for he is bent on killing the father, the former colonial master, who, through a process of displacement, is represented by the colonizer's language. But this language begot Ngugi as a writer. His struggle is all the more intense because the father is perceived as being intent upon emasculating and obliterating the son, by subjecting him to cultural institutions such as the language and the school. In this respect, Ngugi resembles all of us who were formerly colonized. Okot p'Bitek's Lawino has characterized our predicament quite well, embodying it in the metaphor of castration:

Bile bums my inside!
I feel like vomiting!
For all our young men
Were finished in the forest,
Their manhood was finished
In the classrooms,
Their testicles were smashed
With large books!

Ngugi's struggle to kill the father is at the same time a struggle to possess the mother, represented in this case as the mother tongue. The African writer who champions the mother tongue is haunted by a feeling of guilt at having betrayed her, as Chinua Achebe admits:

Is it right that a man should abandon his mother
tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful
betrayal and produces a guilty feeling.

But whereas Achebe has forged ahead and continued to use a European language, Ngugi criticizes this choice, calling it a manifestation of weakness:

How did we arrive at this acceptance of the fatalistic
logic of the unassailable position of English in our
literature; [a phrase Achebe had used] in our culture
and in our politics? . . . How did we, as African
writers, come to be so feeble towards the claims of our
languages on us and so aggressive in our claims on
other languages, particularly the languages of our
colonization? (*Decolonising*)

References to aggressiveness and feebleness provide further proof, from a psychoanalytical perspective, that Ngugi is subject to a deep-seated anxiety. Feebleness is just another term for the condition that Lawino names, without mincing words, in the quotation cited above.

Ngugi's pronouncements about the use of languages in African literature are not completely unacceptable. Much of what he says is valid, but the subject is a complex one, and there are no easy solutions to the theoretical and practical problems that it implies. By pointing out the gaps and weak links in Ngugi's arguments, I hope to stimulate a rethinking of the crucial issues to which Ngugi has drawn our attention.

Source: Joseph Mbele, "Language in African Literature: an Aside to Ngugi," in *Research in African Literatures,* Vol. 23, No. 1, Spring, 1992, p. 145.

Topics for Further Study

Ngugi's life has spanned both colonial and postcolonial Kenyan history.Learn more about Kenya during the period of British colonization. What were the conditions of the people native to Kenya during the colonial period? During the postcolonial period (after gaining national independence in 1963)?

Ngugi was deeply affected by the events of the Mau Mau Rebellion in Kenya, which lasted from 1952 to 1956.Learn more about the events of the Mau Mau Rebellion. How was the region affected by these events? What were the results of the rebellion?

Kenya is located in the region of the African continent known as East Africa. Find a map of Africa. Where is Kenya located? What nations surround Kenya in East Africa?Learn more about the history of other nations in East Africa. In what ways has the development of these nations mirrored or differed from Kenya's development?

Learn more about recent history and current events in Kenya over the past 5 to 10 years. How have the social, political, and economic conditions of the nation changed since the 1970s, when "The Martyr" was written?

Compare and Contrast

Early 20th Century: Kenya is a Protectorate of Great Britain until 1963.

Late 20th Century: After 1963, the Republic of Kenya is an independent, democratic nation.

1960s and 1970s: When Ngugi's short story "The Martyr" is first published in the 1970s, Kenya's president is Jomo Kenyatta.

1980s and 1990s: After Kenyatta's death in 1978, Daniel arap Moi becomes president of the Republic of Kenya.

1960s and 1970s: When Ngugi's story "The Martyr" is first published, he is living and working in the Republic of Kenya, where his books are sold and read.

1980s and 1990s: As a result of political repression, Ngugi lives in exile from Kenya, where his works are banned.

Early 20th Century: The typical Kikuyu man's household consists of a homestead surrounded by a hedge or stockade, with a separate hut for each wife.

Late 20th Century: As a result of the Mau-Mau Rebellion, beginning in 1952, many Kikuyu are moved from their homes by government forces. The resulting village settlement and land consolidation present economic advantages to the Kikuyu and are maintained in many cases even after the emergency ends.

What Do I Read Next?

Secret Lives and Other Stories (1974) is Ngugi's first collection of short stories and includes "The Martyr".

Petals of Blood (1977) is considered one of Ngugi's best, as well as most political, novels.

Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary (1981) is Ngugi's memoir of his time spent in prison between 1977 and 1978.

An Introduction to the Writings of Ngugi (1980) by G. D. Killam contains essays on key novels and stories by Ngugi and includes a biographical outline of Ngugi's life.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o: Texts and Contexts (1995), edited by Charles Cantalupe, is a collection of essays that place Ngugi's work in social, political, and historical context.

The World of Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1995), edited by Charles Cantalupe, is a comprehensive collection of essays covering a wide spectrum of literary and historical themes in Ngugi's work

Further Study

Booker, M. Keith, *The African Novel in English*, Heinemann, 1998.

Includes the chapter, "A Brief Historical Survey of the African Novel" as well as discussion of Ngugi's *Devil on the Cross* and works by Chinua Achebe, Ama Ata Aidoo, and Nadime Gordimer.

Jussawalla, Feroza, and Reed Way Dasenbrock, eds., *Interviews with Writers of the Post-Colonial World*, University Press of Mississippi, 1992.

Includes interviews with such prominent writers as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, Anita Desai, and Sandra Cisneros.

Larson, Charles R., ed., *Under African Skies: Modern African Stories*, Farrar, Straus, 1997.

A collection of short stories by writers from a wide range of national and regional locales throughout Africa. Includes "A Meeting in the Dark" by Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

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Clarke, John Henrik, "Introduction," in *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics*, by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Lawrence Hill, 1972, p. viii.

Killam, G. D., *An Introduction to the Writings of Ngugi*, Heinemann, 1980, pp. 5, 17, 73-6, 78-9.

Njogu, Kimani, "Living Secretly and Spinning Tales: Ngugi's 'Secret Lives and Other Stories,'" in *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: Texts and Contexts*, Africa World Press, 1995, p. 340.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Literature of Developing Nations for Students (LDNfS) 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, LDNfS 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 LDNfS 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 LDNfS 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 LDNfS 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 LDNfS 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

LDNfS 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 Literature of Developing Nations 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 LDNfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS 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 Literature of Developing Nations for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Literature of Developing Nations 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 LDNfS 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.□ Literature of Developing Nations for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Literature of Developing Nations 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 LDNfS, 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 Literature of Developing Nations 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 LDNfS, 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 Literature of Developing Nations 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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