

# **No Longer at Ease Study Guide**

## **No Longer at Ease by Chinua Achebe**

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# Plot Summary

No Longer at Ease by Chinua Achebe is the story of a young Ibo man educated on scholarship in England, whose fine civil service job with perks and a beautiful fiancé get him caught up in a system he loathes and swiftly causes him to lose all.

Twenty-six-year-old Obi Okonkwo is convicted of accepting bribes as a civil servant. His boss, who testifies against him, and another British colonial official wonder what it is in the African makeup causes such aberrations, while Obi's people in the Umuofia Progressive Union (UPU) see it being merely a case of an inexperienced young person not going about it in the established manner. How Obi comes to this end is examined.

Obi meets beautiful Clara Okeke at a dance in England where both are studying, but makes no impression on her. They meet again traveling home to Nigeria, and their first kiss is interrupted. Obi's first contact with the UPU upon arrival goes as poorly as his first dance with Clara: he dresses casually and fails to prepare a grand speech. He prefers to room with an old friend than to be put up in a shoddy Nigerian-run hotel. UPU officers discuss how bribery works but doubt someone like Obi who knows "book" will need to resort to it. Obi's job interview turns into a literary discussion, and he visits his village while waiting for the verdict. The offering of kola nuts to honor his homecoming becomes an occasion for conflict between his fundamentalist Christian father and "heathen" villagers. Old Isaac is ready to "depart in peace", having seen his son returned. Mother Hannah is waiting for Obi's first child before she leaves. Why Clara wants Obi not to mention her is a growing concern.

Obi's boss, Mr. Green, is a European frustrated by living in times when he cannot treat Africans as he pleases. Obi receives special allowances that make him feel financially flushed. He insists on buying Clara an engagement ring after she reveals she is a member of an untouchable caste, the "osu". Obi is confident that love conquers all, setting up conflict with his parents. He is first confronted by the UPU, which he asks for a four-month grace period before beginning to repay his loan. When Clara is mentioned, Obi loses his temper and proudly rescinds the request. Obi gradually befriends an English secretary, Marie Tomlinson, with whom he shares an office. He is proud of overcoming his first temptation to take a bribe, but finds it hard to live on his wages. Obi and Clara conflict over a bank overdraft he takes, and she gives him £50 to cancel it.

Obi's friend Christopher emerges as an icon of male chauvinism and an adaptation to Nigeria's double cultural heritage. Christopher joins Obi's parents in objecting to Clara. He goes home to visit his dying mother, argues from scripture with his father about there being no longer "slave and free", but has no answer to his mother's threat to commit suicide if he marries Clara. Returning to Lagos, Obi's finances worsen as Clara needs money for an abortion. Obi begins taking the bribes, monetary and sexual, that he has resisted so valiantly—and in Christopher's view stupidly. The novel concludes with Clara's disappearance and Obi's mother's death. He goes through the grieving process rapidly, accepting realities, and achieving unexpected peace. Obi gets stung by the

police on a small bribe, and the last paragraph refers back to the opening chapter: "an educated young man and so on and so forth".



# Chapters 1-2

## Chapters 1-2 Summary

Obi Okonkwo is prepared for Justice William Galloway's sentence in his trial before the High Court of Lagos and the Southern Cameroons, but feels tears in his eyes as the lecture comes: how could someone of his education and promise fall so far? The courtroom is packed with spectators, who have followed the case. On the morning of the verdict, Obi's workaholic boss, Mr. Green, plays tennis with a friend from the British Council and later in the club bar—theoretically desegregated, but in fact a European enclave — declares that Africans are thoroughly corrupt, sapped mentally and physically by the climate, disease, and given a Western education that they do not know how to use. That same morning, the Umuofia Progressive Union (Lagos Branch) meets again to discuss Obi's lost case. Earlier, some members oppose hiring a lawyer for a prodigal son after paying for his educating him in England. In the end, as a brother, he must be saved. Today, the men realize that Obi is foolish and strong-willed, but want to keep him out of prison over a £20 bribe that he is inexperienced enough to accept personally rather than through his houseboy. Over kola nuts, an old man prays defiantly about Umuofians' condition in the world and that their enemies not eliminate Obi, their "only palm fruit".

Obi's full name, Obiajulu—"the mind at last is at rest"—signifies his father's relief to have a son after four daughters, the last of whom he cheerfully names Nwanyidinma—"a girl is also good". As a Christian convert and a catechist, he cannot marry a second wife. Obi receives the UPU's first scholarship to study in England nearly five years earlier, using money poor Umuofians have taxed themselves heavily to provide. They want him to return a lawyer to help them with land cases, but he studies English, which suffices to get him a "European post" in the civil service. Obi is an obvious choice for the first scholarship, finishing top in Eastern Nigeria academically. A few days before his departure to Lagos, Obi's parents call a prayer meeting at their house in Umuofia, chaired by Rev. Samuel Ikedi, during which Mary, a friend of Obi's mother Hannah, wearies people with a lengthy prayer. The banquet given by Isaac Okonkwo outdoes modern wedding feasts. After dinner, Ikedi remarks that in olden times Obi would have fought wars and brought home human heads, but since their deliverance by the Lamb of God, he is instead off to pursue knowledge. He should fear the Lord and not fall into the temptations of other young Africans—some even marrying white women. Obi is to "learn book", not enjoy himself. Mary raises a song about Jesus not leaving Obi behind, and everyone says farewell.

Obi is in England for a little under four years, but it seems like a decade. He returns to a Nigeria he hardly recognizes. He first hears about Lagos as a boy from a soldier on leave, who tells of electricity and motorcars, and notes that Africans must be polite to white men. Before flying to the UK, he spends a few days with Joseph Okeke, a former classmate, who is a clerk in the Survey Department. Joseph stops his education because his parents are too poor. He lives in the Lagos Motor Park in the Obalende



section in a one-room flat separated by a blanket into the "Holy of Holies" (his bed), and the sitting area. He explains the social importance of dance and is sorry to report he has broken up with girlfriend Joy after five months. Next day, Joseph has a new woman in, so Obi walks around the city. Her appearance leaves a bad taste in Obi's mouth.

Years later, back from England, Obi parks in another Lagos slum, waiting for his girlfriend Clara. A dog is rotting in the open storm drain. When he is learning to drive, Obi asks about the many dead dogs here and is told that it is good luck to kill a dog with one's new car but bad luck to kill a duck. Near the drain, a woman grinds maize in an empty meat-seller's stall, and a boy appears to be sleeping while selling akara (bean cakes). He awakens to mock a passing night-soilman. This is the real Lagos, Obi thinks, a far cry from the sweet Nigeria about which he writes a nostalgic poem in England. He cannot believe that Clara chooses a dressmaker in the slums, but she ignores him. In heavy Saturday night traffic, they watch celebrations and nearly avoid a collision with a bicyclist whose bag announces him a "FUTURE MINISTER".

For the trickle of Africans obtaining "European posts" and lodging in luxurious Ikoyi, the former European reserve is a cultural wasteland. Obi thinks of the twin kernels in palm-nuts: one shiny black and alive and the other powdery white and dead. Clara hugs the passenger door moodily, her way of getting what she wants. She has mentioned "a good film" at the Capitol, but Obi hates "good films", which Clara has to explain to him. He is always amazed at how she delights in killing on-screen. She points out that she does not complain when he reads poetry to her, and earlier today did not refuse to come to lunch with his friend Christopher whom she dislikes. Christopher has a degree from the London School of Economics and argues the opposite side to anything Obi says about the civil service. Obi insists that Nigeria's problem is letting old men rise to the top by bribery and then expecting to be paid off for everything. They eat with their fingers, having thrown off the pretense that this is uncivilized. It simply tastes better. When Clara orders Zacchaeus, Obi's houseboy, to bring more soup, he obeys but vows to quit if the Master marries her.

## Chapters 1-2 Analysis

The first two chapters introduces most of the major characters and, flashing backwards from the conclusion—Obi's sentencing for accepting a bribe—establishes the primary story line. How, in short order, Obi loses mother, fiancée, and job is what the rest of the novel must show; how such a bright boy gets caught up in a system he loathes. He believes firmly that only when his generation of educated Nigerians supplant the "old Africans" can things be remade. Urban life is quite different from life growing up in the bush. That Nigerians relate to colonialism in diverse ways is hinted at, and the complexity is left to be explored in later sections. The conflict of evangelical Christianity with native religious forms is also suggested and left to be developed. Obi's father is a rabid zealot. Folk wisdom, quotations from scripture, and allusions to English literature provide rich texture, which continues in the chapters ahead.



Note that the author is, according to the jacket notes, less than thirty years old when he writes this novel in 1960, making him only slightly older than his protagonist, and he writes only a few years after the events portrayed, with Nigerian independence on the horizon. The novel is not an old man's reminiscences or reflections on the errors of a callow youth. Achebe is voicing the views of educated youth.



# Chapters 3-4

## Chapters 3-4 Summary

Obi and Clara's affair is hardly love first sight. They meet in London; he is tongue-tied by her beauty and steps on her feet during their lone dance. Eighteen months later, he is surprised to see her taking the same boat home. Clara is talking with elderly Mrs. Wright, who is returning to Freetown, and a man named John Macmillan, an administrative officer in Northern Nigeria. Clara does not recall the NCNC dance. Awakening early on his first morning out, Obi stands by the rails to look at a sea gone overnight from placid to choppy. He recalls "They that go down to the sea in ships" and is moved, although he has little religion left. At breakfast, Obi sits between Macmillan and a Nigerian civil servant, Stephen Udom. Across from him is Mr. Jones of the United Africa Company. To Jones' left sits Clara, at whom Obi refuses to look.

Weather in the Bay of Biscay goes from calm to angry in the course of a day and few eat dinner. Clara brings seasickness tablets to Obi's cabin, saying that as a nurse she is distributing them to all. Obi is put off by her businesslike manner but intrigued that she says in Ibo that they belong together. In the morning, Obi nearly slips on the wet deck, and when Macmillan slips and falls, his good humor turns them into friends. They are hoping to reach Madeira Islands the next evening. Obi is anxious for a change. Approaching the island, Jones quotes, "Water, water everywhere but not a drop to drink", and Obi contemplates how the Sahara could flower if this were the best of all possible worlds. They anchor at Funchal, watch boys dive for coins, and Obi, Macmillan, and Clara go ashore for the evening. When they return and Macmillan retires, Obi kisses Clara and declares his loves. She kisses him violently, but they are interrupted by Mrs. Wright.

While mail boats dock in Lagos on a regular schedule and crowds greet travelers (sullen groups mean that a son has married a white woman), cargo boats like the MV Sasa cannot be predicted. Customs takes longer than in Liverpool, as a young man comes to Obi's cabin, assesses his radiogram at £5, and reduces it to £2 in exchange for no receipt. Realizing this is how "dear old Nigeria" works, Obi chases him off and is the last passenger ashore. The UPU arranges a big reception with press coverage for Saturday afternoon. Obi makes two big mistakes: dressing casually and answering the grand welcome address simply and idealistically. Umuofians like a good speech, and the Secretary's talks of the great honor this young scholar brings his town. He refers obliquely to the beneficiary's obligation to pay back the investment. As the women sing, the Chairman asks if "they"—the Nigerian government—have yet given Obi a job and debates with the Vice-President whether someone who knows book like Obi needs to "see" men beforehand. The Vice-President insists that white men "eat" more bribes than blacks.

After the reception, Joseph Okeke takes Obi to dinner at the Palm Grove, not one of Lagos' hot spots. Joseph insists that they drink beer and is shocked that after England,





Obi wants traditional Nigerian food. Decent restaurants do not prepare it. The restaurant's owner turns out to be not a Syrian as Joseph believes, but an English woman near eighty. She spills milk on herself and sits beneath a parrot's cage. Obi hopes to see a mess when it relieves itself, but she has set up a tray to catch excrement. The mixed grill is not bad. Obi wonders why Joseph has not put him up as he requests by letter, rather than having the UPU pay for a bad hotel room. Obi insists on moving in with him, to Joseph's pleasure. Joseph recalls a teacher once predicting that Obi, whose nickname in school is "Dictionary", would go to England. Then Obi writes to Hitler. Obi rarely laughs loudly, but he does as he recalls the embarrassing incident. He had resented being sent to the bush every day to pick palm-kernels as the children's part in winning the war and driving nails into Hitler's coffin. As they sit in the lounge, a handsome young man enters. Joseph identifies him as Sam Okoli, a popular politician and eligible bachelor. Obi's eyes are on his long De Soto, where Clara lounges.

## Chapters 3-4 Analysis

Chapters three through four show Obi and Clara's disappointing first meeting and interrupted first kiss within the context of a generally stormy Atlantic passage from Liverpool. The bribery system in Nigeria is introduced by comparing the difficulty of passing through customs in Lagos and in England. Obi's first contact with the UPU upon arrival goes as poorly as his first dance with Clara: he dresses casually and fails to prepare a grand speech. He prefers to room with an old friend than to be put up in a shoddy Nigerian-run hotel. UPU officers discuss how bribery works but doubt someone like Obi who knows "book" will need to resort to it. Obi's naivete points back to the UPU men's assessment after his trial that he is headstrong and unsophisticated and forward to how he mishandles his finances and relationship with Clara.

Literary allusions are particularly prominent in this section, with the no-longer religious Obi recalling Psalm 107 as they prepare to sail from England and another character quoting from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" as they near the Madeira Islands. Contemplating what a waste salt water is, Obi picks up the refrain in Voltaire's *Candide* about the best of all possible worlds.



# Chapters 5-6

## Chapters 5-6 Summary

Obi believes that Nigeria will remain corrupt until the "old Africans" are replaced by younger men with a university education. He first formulates this theory in a paper read to the Nigerian Students' Union in London and within a month of coming home sees it proven. When interviewed by the Public Service Commission for a job, Obi talks "learned nonsense" about modern poetry and novels with the Chairman, leaving the others lost or asleep. Obi holds that Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* is the best European novel about West Africa but is flawed by the "happy ending". Suicide ruins tragedy, which must take place in an "untidy spot". The commission member who had been sleeping asks if Obi intends to take bribes, which causes him to bristle and declare it an unuseful question. When Joseph says people needing jobs cannot afford to anger those who give them, Obi declares this "colonial mentality". Obi finds that Joseph has changed in four years, formerly being interested only in politics and women. Joseph reveals that he has paid the £130 "bride-price" and is getting married. Obi laughs about making up for the shortfall on his older sisters' marriages. Joseph insists that Obi will pay £500 as a member of the senior service—or become a Reverend Father. Obi insist he will not pay even £50.

Waiting for the results of his interview, Obi goes home for a short visit. Umuofia is five hundred miles from Lagos in the Eastern Region. He rides first-class in a "mammy wagon" named God's Case No Appeal, sitting up front between the driver and a woman with her newborn baby. The backseat passengers are heavily-laden traders who sit with legs drawn up like chickens and sing bawdy songs. The driver eats kola nuts and smokes to stay awake. Forty miles beyond Ibadan, policemen signal the lorry over and examine its "particulars". The policemen ignore the driver's pleadings and take down information, refusing to talk to the driver's mate. The lorry drives on a quarter mile and the driver's mate runs back, pays a ten shillings bribe rather than the two shillings it would have cost had the police not worried Obi is with "CID". The traders mock "too know" young men as they drive on. Obi wonders where to begin cleaning the "Augean stable", dismisses popular education, and concludes an "enlightened dictator" would be best.

Obi wonders why Clara forbids him to tell his people about her. He believes she wants to get engaged as much as he and dismisses any guile in her. As night falls, the air cools and Obi appreciates the engine heat, which earlier had been uncomfortable. Getting sleepy, he thinks erotic thoughts in English, because his early training in Ibo censors such words. He is half asleep when the driver pulls over, announcing he has nodded off several times. He has not slept the night before either, but that is common. After a few minutes of conversation, they set off again but Obi stays awake. He considers the meaning of a song that the traders sing, delighting himself to see its theme is a "world turned upside down". He wants to perform such exegesis on other songs but cannot concentrate over the noise.



When Obi returns to his village it is a major event, because people going to England is not yet commonplace. Village elders send a "pleasure" car to meet Obi in Onitsha, fifty miles out. He has a few minutes to look at the great Onitsha market. To the sound of blaring local music, two men are selling "Long Life Mixture", and passing out leaflets to the illiterate locals, listing the diverse diseases it cures. Near the waterfront, a row of women sell garri, each contributing a handful to One Way, a beggar who dances for their entertainment. Six bands counting the CMS School band play along the last two miles before Umuofia and the whole village descends on the Okonkwo compound in a festive mood. Rain threatens, and the non-Christian elders are amazed that Isaac has refused to placate the chief rainmaker. Christianity is like palm-wine; it goes to some people's heads, destroying their sense. They argue about whether people can control thunder to use as a weapon while protecting their own.

Four years in England have made Obi homesick for his village. He speaks Ibo whenever possible there and feels shame when meeting a Nigerian from another tribe and having to communicate in English. He wishes haughty Englishmen could hear people engaged in Ibo conversation, enjoying life not killed by those who claim the right to teach others how to live. Hundred attend Obi's reception, including everyone from the CSM Central School, which shuts down for the occasion. A song reminds him of Empire Day when Protestants and Catholic compete in athletics and the Protestants sing mocking songs. After four hundred handshakes and one hundred embraces, Obi sits in his father's parlor with the older kinsmen. They listen to him talk about being at sea in the "white man's ship" for sixteen days—four "market weeks"—without seeing land. They declare that in accordance with Ibo folk stories, Obi has been to the "land of the spirits".

When an old man calls for a kola nut to break for Obi's return, Isaac declares that although kola nuts are eaten in his Christian house, they are not sacrificed to idols. Ogbuefi Odogwu calls for peace and adds a kola nut to the three Isaac fetches for hospitality's sake. As the youngest male, Obi shows the kola nut around and hands it to Odogwu, the eldest. Odogwu goes to church once a year, approves of the formula, "As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end", and offers a blessing in the name of "Jesu Kristi" that even Isaac cheers. Odogwu jokes that he might become a Christian if they make him a pastor.

The company is glad that Obi has not brought home a white wife, whose ill effects Matthew Ogbonna has seen in Onitsha. The tragedy is less in the white woman eventually leaving, but in turning the husband's face away from his kinsman while she remains. Obi is proud, hearing that men in Iguedo, his birth village, are not white with whites and black with blacks. Another theological argument breaks out when Odogwu declares that Obi is his grandfather Ogbuefi come back to life. Odogwu ignores Isaac and talks about the great man who dies fighting the white man single-handed, and about other giants of his youth. Today, Umuofia mimics the white man, among whom Obi has sojourned, but great men like great trees grow where they choose.

The happiness of homecoming is spoiled by Hannah Okonkwo's frail health. Isaac is also all bones, but not as badly. Obi is scandalized that they live on £2 a month, much



of which they donate back to the church. The last of the Okonkwo children are still in school, owing fees. Obi and Isaac sit together after the others go to sleep around the hurricane lamp that no one but Isaac tends. Isaac quotes, "Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace", remarking he has often worried he would not live to see Obi's return. Obi tries to avoid having to go to church in the morning, but Isaac has arranged a special service. Obi wonders what would happen if he announced he no longer believes in Isaac's God—just as he wonders in London what would happen if he shouts down a "bloody hypocrite" of an MP. He fibs about reading his Bible in England, never having been as good as his sisters in the daily scripture readings.

Father and the eight children sit around an enormous table for readings prescribed by the Scripture Union Card. Hannah never takes part, but listens with her grandchildren beside her. Hannah is very devout but seems to prefer the old folk stories, which she tells her daughters until Isaac forbids it when Obi is born. She joins the "people of the church" from the "people of nothing" along with her mother and siblings after Father's death. She marries a grave-minded catechist, Isaac, who impresses on her her own responsibility. In some ways she is more zealous than he. Hannah forbids her children to accept food in neighbors' homes because it is offered to idols. This sets them apart in Ibo society. In school, Obi loves "Oral" time, when the children tells favorite folk stories. Obi is mocked for knowing none. When Isaac is at prayer meeting, Hannah teaches him stories so he can face the class boldly. Obi adds a dramatic twist to the ending that makes everyone laugh.

Isaac is sad that Obi can spend only four days, but understands the need to secure a job. Obi assures him that he will pay brother John's school fees. Going to bed, Obi sees a pillow slip sewn by his sister Esther, whom as a child he is told to call Miss once she becomes a teacher. Growing up, Obi gets along well with Esther, Janet, and Agnes, but not with Charity, who is tough as any boy and feared in the neighborhood. Now, Obi worries about his infirm parents, who are still working to augment their pension. He vows to send them £10 per month, knowing this will be hard atop the £20 a month he owes the UPU and John's fees. He also knows that other young people would die for the opportunity he has.

Enjoying the prospects of rain, Obi forgets finances and wishes he were pressed against Clara's body. He wishes he could at least tell his mother, who has said she is ready to depart after seeing his firstborn. Esther now has three children, Janet two, and Agnes one, having lost a little girl while still practically a child herself. After the evening's prayer service, Hannah asks her to carry the sleeping grandchildren to bed, but to make sure they urinate first. Agnes grabs the first by the wrist and pulls, earning a rebuke, to which Obi adds: it can cause a child's soul to leave the body and not find its way back. Mother smiles without amusement. The heavy raindrops of a tropical storm drum on the roof before the sky lets loose a steady downpour. He has forgotten November rain. Thinking this may be some deity getting rid of excess water before the dry season, Obi falls asleep.



## Chapters 5-6 Analysis

Chapters five through six show Obi interviewing for a job and visiting home while he awaits the verdict. The interview with an official who enjoys literature allows Achebe to interweave a number of literary themes, mentioning the contemporary Nigerian poet Amos Tutuola, quoting the poet W. H. Auden, and then slipping into an analysis of the Auden-inspired Waugh novel, working in its handling of Charles Dickens.

Remembrances of Obi's childhood allow the insertion of an Ibo folk tale. First mention is made of "chi", which is later described as one's personal god, but wrestling with chi is never satisfactorily developed in the novel. Worried about corruption in the Nigerian civil service, Obi thinks of cleaning the "Augean stable", one of Heracles' tasks in Greek mythology.

Obi's visit to Umuofia centers on the conflict between Christianity and native religions. Theodicy (why God allows bad things to happen) and reincarnation are touched upon, with straight-backed Isaac insisting on orthodoxy. He quotes the Nunc Dimittis, declaring his readiness to die having seen his son returned. Hannah is waiting for Obi's first child before she leaves. The visit adds to Obi's monthly debt, which ultimately leads to his bribe-taking and downfall. He feels obliged to help his aged parents, whose poverty he blames on the miserly church, and he idealistically considers himself better off than most of his contemporaries. He believes he can handle things financially and romantically, although he wonders why Clara wants him not to mention her to his parents.



# Chapters 7-8

## Chapters 7-8 Summary

Obi's first day in the civil service is as memorable as his first day of school, when he sees Mr. Jones, the feared Inspector of Schools, ream out Headmaster Simeon Nduka in English. Years earlier it is said Jones throws a child out a window. A former wrestler, Nduka drops the white official and the students slink away. Twenty years later, few white men would dare slap a headmaster, but Obi's boss, Mr. Green, would like to. When Obi is introduced, Green mutters only that he should not be "bone-lazy" but should "use his loaf". He posts Obi to Mr. Omo's office for the day to learn a bit about office administration from a thirty-year veteran. When Green rushes in demanding a specified file, Omo jumps to his feet, grovels, and rebukes the junior clerk ostensibly responsible. Obi takes an instant dislike to Green and sees Omo as an "old African". Green phones to ask Obi about a formal offer of appointment and cautions him to say "sir".

When his letter arrives, Obi buys a Morris Oxford, using his car advance and receives £60 "outfit allowance". Clara is delighted and tells Sam Okoli not to send his car by to fetch them for drinks. Clara lives in Yaba with her cousin, has been offered a job as Assistant Nursing Sister, and plans to find better lodgings when she starts a week. Obi is still with Joseph but is to move into a flat in Ikoyi at the end of the week. Obi likes Okoli, Minister of State, as soon as he finds out he is engaged to Clara's best friend. Okoli greets them as old friends, offering Clara sherry (not squash!) and Obi beer, while he drinks whiskey and soda. Obi recalls the press criticizing the Government for building ministers' houses at £35,000 each. Knowing Obi's thoughts, Okoli says he pays £275 for the huge radiogram that Obi admires, and demonstrates how it also tapes and plays back conversations. Okoli catches himself speaking pidgin and turns on the radio. He wishes he could hire Obi and says Nigerians have a long way to go.

Obi has a driver, whom he hires for £4 a month take him and Clara to Ikeja for a special dinner in honor of the new car. Clara is depressed and neither eats. Obi does not want to see a movie. As they walk, Obi thinks about how, with earlier girls (Nigerian, West Indian, and English), he had always been aware of a superior part of himself watching the passion and dismissing the idea. With Clara it is different. He cannot understand when she suddenly announces that she cannot marry him. He is sure she is not being coy and demands an answer. He declares it nonsense that her being an osu could stand in their way.

When Obi tells Joseph the story, Joseph admits to wondering how so good and beautiful a girl could be unmarried. At least no harm has been done, he says. When Obi insists he will marry Clara, Joseph says this is "no matter for book". Obi's upbringing and education have made him a stranger in Nigeria. Joseph lets it drop and falls asleep, but Obi is defiant. He welcomes opponents, finding it scandalous in the mid-twentieth century that a distant ancestor being dedicated to a god makes all of his descendents members of a forbidden caste forever. Obi will not let even his mother interfere. The





next day, Obi dries Clara to Kingsway to buy a £20 engagement ring and traditional zippered Bible. They spend the afternoon shopping for kitchenware for Obi's new flat, but he soon loses interest and merely follows Clara around doggedly.

Joseph is waiting when Obi gets home, ready to resume the discussion. Obi wants to approach it gradually as he does cold baths as a boy. He complains about the cheeky police who hassle them on Victoria Beach Road when they park a while and the driver strolls away. An Ibo officer says many men are taking other men's wives to the beach. Insulted, they leave. Obi announces buying the ring and Joseph asks if they will follow English or Ibo customs. Obi is confident he can handle his parents, particularly his mother. Joseph asks Obi to consider the future generations that will be affected by this, but Obi insists they are pioneers, showing others the way. Joseph counters that Obi is the only Umuofian educated overseas; he must not be like a decayed tooth coming in. He must think about those who collect the money for him. Obi assures Joseph angrily that he will repay everything. Obi knows his family will oppose this marriage, but is determined to marry Clara or no one. He depends on his special relationship with his mother, with whom he has felt specially bonded since she cuts her hand on a rusty razor blade that he leaves in a pocket.

The Lagos branch of the UPU meets the first Saturday of each month. Obi misses the November meeting and agrees to pick Joseph up for the one 1 Dec. 1956. He shows up at 4:15 in his new car. To maximize the impact of their arrival—Joseph wanting to share in his friend's glory—Joseph delays their departure until 5 o'clock, caring nothing for the 1¢ late fine. Joseph dresses impeccably, but Obi again wears casual clothing. Obi is greeted enthusiastically, seated beside the President, and asked many questions about his job and car. The arrival interrupts discussion of whether to "borrow" £10 to Joshua Udo, who loses his postal position, ostensibly for sleeping on the job, because he fails to pay the agreed upon £10 bribe. One man observes that they come to Lagos for money, not work; there is plenty of that at home in the bush. Members should be on the lookout for job openings for Udo, particularly their son who is now in the senior service. The President agrees, but wants to give Obi time to adjust to his new life.

Young members next censure the President for spending public money on beer that the top leaders monopolize at Obi's reception before Obi rises to deliver a prepared but not over-rehearsed speech. He quotes scripture and says that if all snakes lived together no one would bother them. He thanks the UPU for its sacrifices and promises to justify its confidence. He begins speaking in Ibo, but gradually mixes in English as he reaches his main point: a request for a four-month grace period before beginning to repay his loan. Some grumble about his big salary, but most understand. The President is in favor but warns from experience that Lagos' "sweetness" causes many young people to perish. He worries that granting Obi's request will do him no good. The UPU cannot afford "bad ways"; as pioneers, they deny themselves pleasures like drinking or running with women. The President has heard that Obi is thinking about marrying a "girl of doubtful ancestry". Obi leaps to his feet, offended, refuses to listen, and takes back his request. He intends never to attend another meeting. Joseph follows him to the car, pleading with him to cool down, but Obi orders the driver to Clara's lodgings.



## Chapters 7-8 Analysis

Obi's boss, Mr. Green is shown as a European frustrated by living in times when one may not treat Africans as one pleases. Obi receives special allowances that make him feel financially flushed, but true opulence is reserved for the person of Sam Okoli, Minister of State. His state-provided flat offers perspective on Obi's spending on a new car and engagement ring, bought even after Clara reveals she is a member of an untouchable caste, the Osu. The rigidity with which this taboo is held comes out later, and the introduction of the concept is clouded. It is another case of Obi's naivete, believing that love conquers all, and his stubbornness. It sets up a dire conflict with his parents, seen later. First, however, he is confronted by the UPU, whom he asks for a four-month grace period before beginning to repay his loan. There are more moralistic speeches about his duty as the premier son of Umuofia and sidetrips into bureaucratic chicanery before the bombastic President works up to mentioning Clara. Obi loses his temper and proudly rescinds the request. As will be seen, pride does indeed come before the fall.





# Chapters 9-11

## Chapters 9-11 Summary

Working with Green and Omo proves better than Obi expects as he sees little of them but shares an office with Green's attractive English secretary, Marie Tomlinson. At first, Obi suspects she may be a spy, but slowly lets his guard down. Tomlinson watches closely as a Mr. Mark, dressed like a new arrival from England, visits Obi to talk confidentially. Seeing her, Mark switches to Ibo to ask assistance getting his sister, who has recently received a School Certificate in Grade One, a Federal Scholarship to study in England. Obi takes offense, terminates the interview, runs Mark's "forgotten" umbrella after him, and pretends to concentrate on a file to avoid talking with Tomlinson. Obi feels wonderful, having overcome his first temptation. It is almost on par with his first sexual experience in England. He recalls, however, the words of a Minister of State's drunken warning that refusing a bribe can cause more trouble than accepting it. In fact, Obi is finding it hard to live on what remains after paying the UPU and sending £10 to his parents. He does not know where John's fees will come from.

Digesting a heavy lunch, Obi sprawls on his sofa when a taxi pulls up. Knowing that Clara is on duty and suspecting it could be Joseph trying again to make up for confiding in the President of the UPU about the engagement, Obi is surprised to see an attractive stranger, Elsie Mark, and gallantly invites her in. He connects her with his earlier visitor, her brother. Knowing people with Grade One certificates who are sometimes left out, Elsie intends to see all the Board members at home. Her father, who spends all his money on her brother's failed education in England, has died and they lack money. Obi cannot blame her for wanting a degree, which works like the "philosopher's stone" to turning clerks who earn £150 a year into a senior civil servant at £570 plus amenities—the next best thing to being European. Still, Obi cannot make promises. Clara arrives, reacts stiffly to Elsie, and helps herself to a ginger beer. They drive Elsie to Tinubu Square, where taxis are more plentiful, and drop in on Sam Okoli, but find he is at a Cabinet meeting. Back at Obi's flat, he tells Clara about the attempted bribe. Clara believes offering money is better than offering one's body and laughs.

Because the educated rarely think about tomorrow, Green reminds Obi that he will have to "cough up" to insure his new car, and when the £42 bill arrives, Obi has £13 in the bank. He rereads a letter from Charles Ibe, a messenger who has been avoiding him lately. It is a promise to repay a thirty-shilling loan by 26 Nov. 1957, needed because his wife has given birth to a fifth child. Obi sends for Ibe, reminds him of his debt in Ibo, and threatens to report him to Green if he fails to pay up by the end of December. Obi sees no alternative to asking for a £50 overdraft from his bank, a procedure he understands is easy for senior civil servants. Obi does not consider himself extravagant. Had he not sent £35 for his mother's treatments in a private hospital, he would be above water, and he should have accepted the UPU's renewed offer of a grace period during their "reconciliation meeting". The members do not realize their stake in keeping Obi in the élite club; they would be shamed if his insurance lapsed and he could not drive his car.



Obi obtains the overdraft, pays off the insurance company, and finds on his desk an electric bill for £5, 7s., 3d . Seeing him near tears, Tomlinson asks if he is alright, and commiserates over the high prices in Nigeria vis-a-vis England. Obi looks forward to alarming prospects: renewing his vehicle license, replacing worn tires (or at least retreading them one by one), and income tax. Obi introduces sweeping economic measures in his flat, ordering his steward, Sebastian, to cut back on meat in soup, eliminates half the light bulbs, shuts off the water heater, and allows the fridge to run only from noon until 7 PM. Sebastian warns that meat will spoil, but is ordered to buy in small increments. That evening, Clara gets Obi to tell her about the overdraft and is angry that he does not come to her for the money. He leaves when she refuses to talk. Coming home, Obi refuses dinner and looks for something to read. He finds A. E. Houseman's Collected Poems, containing a browned paper on which he had written his poem, "Nigeria" in London in July of 1955. He smiles, puts it back, and reads a favorite, "Easter Hymn".

Obi and Tomlinson are on a first-name basis and speak frankly about many things. Often Green is the subject—or an excuse for starting one. Tomlinson finds Green different at home, a devout Christian, and notes he says outrageous things about educated Africans. Obi has to admit that Green has admirable qualities, like keeping Charles Ibe from being sacked for sleeping on the job. Obi cannot understand why a man who does not believe in Nigeria works so hard. Green submits a resignation to coincide with Nigerian independence, but withdraws it when that does not come about. He clearly loves the Africa of 1900, when he could have been a great missionary, wiping out human sacrifices—or even of 1935, when headmasters could still be slapped. In 1957, he can only curse. Obi compares Green to Kurtz in Conrad's Heart of Darkness, and considers writing a tragic novel.

A parcel comes from the General Hospital, which Obi fears is his ring. He is relieved to find £50 cash and a note asking him to cancel the overdraft. His eyes mist as he wonders where Clara gets such money. She is well paid and has no school debts, but this is a lot of money. He is determined not to accept it, but does not know how not to offend her. Whenever he faces a difficult discussion with Clara, Obi plans the dialog carefully, even though it never works out as planned. Clara reminds him of the proverb about digging a new pit to fill an old one. When he admits not going to the bank, she tells him simply to hand it over.

They visit Christopher, whom Clara has learned to like, although she fears his womanizing will rub off on Obi. A new girlfriend, Bisi, is with him. The men decide to take the women dancing and take two cars. Outside the Imperial, little urchins offer to watch the cars. Obi reminds Clara to lock her door. He intends not to pay their threepence "dash", but does not risk telling them up front. Christopher finds a table and two chairs, augmented when the waltz ends and everyone takes to the floor for a "high-life". Bisi wriggles and sings along. There are three styles of dancing the high-life: European, intimate, and ecstatic. Slow dances are opportunities to drink and cool off. A loud woman at the next table tells men who ask her to dance, "No petrol, no fire"; she expects a beer first. Over Bisi's objections, they leave at 2 AM. Seeing the passenger door unlocked, Obi panics, looks in the glove box, and sees that Clara's money is gone.



## Chapters 9-11 Analysis

Chapters nine through eleven introduce a new character, the beautiful English secretary Marie Tomlinson, who witnesses Obi proudly overcoming his first temptation to take a bribe. Note the use of Ibo to cloak the conversation from Tomlinson, and Obi's reverting to English to close the conversation. Afterwards, Obi finds it hard to live on his wages. New bills appear when the last is paid. Obi and Clara conflict over the overdraft he takes, as she gives him £50 to cancel it. Pride prevents Obi from accepting it (like the postponement of UPU repayments, which the Union offer again, but he proudly refuses).

Green's character is filled in, showing him as a typical European in Africa, a half a century too late to convert the "heathen". Obi, the litterateur, naturally seeks parallels in a famous Conrad novel, *The Heart of Darkness*, and considers writing up his thoughts. Christopher emerges as an icon of male chauvinism and adaptation to Nigeria's double cultural heritage. The allusion to the ancient legend about the transmutation of metals into gold is carefully crafted and the reference to the Prophet Joel's "day of the Lord" is subtly ironic when applied to something as banal as a pending insurance payment. Obi's economizing measures are tragic-comedic, with his "boy" listening incredulously and offering sane objections. Note that Obi is now forcing himself to take the cold baths he has always hated. Retaining a servant and driver under such circumstances is never asked; it must be an expected part of life for Nigerians of his status. Their greatest economic blow comes when Obi, Clara, Christopher, and Bisi go to dance the "high-life" and Clara's £50 is stolen from Obi's car, plunging him further into debt, because he feels beholden to repay her.



# Chapters 12-14

## Chapters 12-14 Summary

Obi's father writes that his mother is hospitalized again and that he needs to discuss an urgent matter. Obi realizes word has reached him about Clara being an osu. As Obi tries to concentrate on work, Green dictates a letter to Tomlinson and tells him that after fifteen years in Nigeria, he cannot understand how a student could expect the Government to support not just himself but his girlfriend. He does not expect Obi to agree with his condemnation of greed.

Obi and Christopher go to the Roman Catholic convent in Apapa to play tennis with two Irish teachers, Nora and Pat. Weeks earlier, they teach the girls to dance the high-life and have dinner in Christopher's apartment. Obi is paired with Nora, the less attractive of the two. She rebuffs a passionate kiss, saying for Catholics it is a sin. Since that meeting, they have played tennis twice. When Obi and Christopher arrive, they are watched closely by a hostile Mother and over tea are asked not to visit again. The girls do not want to be sent back to Ireland for going around with African men, but promise to visit Ikoyi. Christopher remarks it is not very missionary. The boys stop to see Florence, whom Christopher has considered marrying, were she not going to England to study nursing. Bisi is also not at home.

Obi tells Christopher about an old catechist in Umuofia during his childhood whose wife is a friend of Obi's mother. He hears them talking about how the catechist twenty years before is in such a hurry to marry that she cuts short her education and is bitter. Next morning, Obi's father has to substitute leading the service because the old catechist's wife breaks his head with a pestle. Obi next tells Christopher about turning down Elsie Mark. She gets her scholarship and is in England. Christopher calls him "the biggest ass in Nigeria", and says such girls are not innocent. Elsie probably goes to bed with all members of the Board and probably figures Obi is impotent. Bribery, Christopher declares, is "the use of improper influence". Taking willing Elsie to bed when she has already the interview does not qualify. It would cause no harm. They argue over dinner and late into the night. Obi's thoughts then return to his father's letter.

Obi receives two weeks' "local leave", 10-24 February. Clara helps him pack and spends the last night with him. Clara weeps in bed and wants not to explain herself. When Obi pushes, she declares it in everyone's best interest to break the engagement. Obi refrains from commenting on her not wanting to be with someone who cannot make ends meet and realizes he is being theatrical, pacing. Clara declares she does not want to ruin Obi's life by coming between him and his family. Obi calls this "bunk" and blurts out his unfair accusation about monetary concerns. They kiss passionately and make up.

Obi sets out at 6 AM after a hated cold bath. He knows that his homecoming will bring neighbors wanting to share his good fortune, and he has only £34, 9s., 3d to his name,



including £25 granted as a local leave allowance. He owes £16, 10s. on John's school fees and knows if he does not pay up now he will not have it in April. At home, Obi learns that Mother is home a week. The Okonkwo parents' room cannot be compared. Isaac's is filled with printed materials while Hannah's is full of "mundane" things: clothes, soapmaking supplies, and preserves. Isaac has deep feelings about the "mystery of the written word," pointing out that they do not fade like women's uli juice body markings. As Pilate says, "What is written". He never throws a piece of paper away. Obi's eyes are full of tears as he stands by his emaciated mother's bed. She laughs about how badly she looked weeks ago and makes small talk as Obi's heart bursts with grief. Isaac backs down too easily when a passing group of singers want to salute Obi's return. Hannah enjoys even "heathen" music. Obi knows some of the singers, but not the leader of "The Song of the Heart".

After prayers, in which the works of the devil figure prominently, making Obi suspicious that the intent is Clara, the family goes to bed, leaving Obi and his father to talk seriously. Obi insists he is not too tired. Isaac has trouble filling the kerosene lamp, but Obi knows better than to offer to help. He asks about Umuofians in Lagos and UPU meetings, and says people must stay near their kinsmen. Isaac asks where things stand with the girl Obi has mentioned. Obi says he wants to meet her people and start negotiations, even though he lacks money. His father agrees this is the best way and asks if Obi knows anything about her. Isaac knows Clara's father, Josiah Okeke. His laugh vanishes as he forbids Obi to marry her. Obi admits he knows she is osu, but insists that the Bible says in Christ "there are no bond or free". Isaac insists this is deeper than Obi thinks. Obi uses an argument he figures his father would use on heathen kinsmen, asking how ignorant people long ago declaring someone an outcast can go on forever, in light of the Gospel. Isaac admits that Josiah Okeke is a good man and great Christian, but this does not change things. Being osu is like leprosy in the minds of the people—like Namaan, captain of the host of Syria. If Obi and Clara marry, their descendants for generations will curse their memory and live in sorrow. They will have no one to marry. Obi is certain that in ten years things will change. Obi sleeps little that night, surprised and happy that his father is less difficult than feared. This is the first time he has talked to him man-to-man rather than as to a remote patriarch.

Obi gropes through the darkness to his mother's room at 6 AM. She has not slept much because of belly pain and is considering trying a native doctor. The family gathers for morning prayers. Eunice is the last of the children living at home. Distant relations, Joy and Mercy, live there to learn housekeeping from Hannah. The others have scattered in search of money. After prayers, Hannah listens to Obi's arguments and then tells of a recent bad dream: termites eat the bed out from under her. She tells no one about it, but when Joseph's letter arrives, saying Obi intends to marry an osu, she knows the dream foretells her death. Hannah declares that if Obi marries while she is still alive, she will kill herself. She sinks down in her bed, exhausted.

Obi spends the day in his room, sleeping occasionally. Eunice lies to neighbors that he is sick from traveling. Obi hears some of them taking offense at the bad excuse and one offers a cure. Obi skips evening prayers but hears his father's booming voice. Afterwards, Isaac sits with his son, whose mind is filled with irrelevant thoughts. Obi



waits for his father to speak first, knowing rationally that he is right. Obi's objections are like the jerking of a dead frog's leg when jolted with electricity. He believes he can beat his father in a fight, but Isaac refuses to fight. When Obi announces he will return to Lagos early, Isaac tells about being taken by missionaries as a boy and having his father place a curse on him. Obi has never heard this before and the darkness makes him feel sorry for his father. When word comes to the school that he hangs himself, Isaac declares that "those who live by the sword must perish by the sword", which Mr. Braddeley, the teacher, says is the wrong reaction. Isaac refuses to attend the burial. Braddeley does not realize that Isaac is speaking about Ikemefuna, a boy with whom he grows up. Obi knows that story: Ikemefuna is given to the Umuofians in appeasement and becomes inseparable from Isaac; one day the "Oracle of the Hills and the Caves" orders the boy killed and Isaac's father does it personally. Even then, some elders feel it is wrong to kill someone who calls one father.

## Chapters 12-14 Analysis

When Obi is summoned home, he realizes his parents must know about Clara. Clara worries earlier that the womanizer Christopher might be a bad influence on Obi, and Obi is shown having fun with two Irish teachers, allowing racism among missionaries to be depicted. Obi finds it odd to be defending Catholicism to Christopher. Although engaged to Clara, he makes sexual advances that are rebuffed by the pious girl. When Christopher talks about a fiancée who plans on going to England to study, Obi recalls how another woman's pent-up bitterness over lost potential beats her catechist husband over the head. Whether Christopher takes the warning is not shown, and in the end Obi does as Christopher recommends in accepting sexual bribes.

Obi's disregard for Christopher's advice about Clara is shown as Obi goes home. He sets out, knowing it will be expensive, because villagers expect well-to-do city boys to spread the wealth when they return. His debts are mounting, but he believes the Government is paying for his holiday. When the inevitable subject comes up, Obi cites Christian proof texts as his father would addressing pagans to thwart his father's arguments against marrying an osu. The power of taboo is shown in this vehement Christian not being able to yield to the "truth" of the Gospel. Obi cannot stand up against his mother's threat to commit suicide if he goes through with it. The father's childhood reminiscences and tale of Ikemefuna are as dark as they are confusing, meant, the old man says, to show how hard it is to be a Christian in the old days. Mother is left a more complex, reclusive character, vehement only about Obi's marriage. Note Obi's growing insomnia and the way the villagers react to his rudeness. As Joseph and Christopher have said, he is out of touch with Nigeria.

The tense scene between Obi and Clara before the trip leaves it unclear whether they have yet had sex—or if indeed they have it that night. Obviously they have, because in the next chapter, Clara is pregnant.





# Chapters 15-16

## Chapters 15-16 Summary

Obi drives the five hundred miles from Umuofia to Lagos in a daze; just before Ibadan he avoids a head-on collision with one mammy-wagon passing another. The passengers of the one that stops help get him back on the road and remind him how lucky he is. They advise him to his God when he gets home. The rest of the trip is uneventful, and Obi pulls in towards dark. He begins to panic about what to tell Clara. On the way to Clara's, Obi does not mind being delayed by a long, noisy procession of the "Eternal Sacred Order of Cherubim and Seraphim". He trivializes the situation to Clara, saying all will be well if they "lie quiet" a while, but Clara removes her ring and threatens to throw it away if Obi will not take it back. She settles for putting it in his glove box. She does not take well be asked not to be childish and sits in silence. Obi can find no words. Suggesting that Obi leave, Clara says there is something she had wanted to tell him, but it does not matter, and she should be able to take care of it herself. Obi is alarmed. She tells him to forget it. She will find "a way out".

Christopher takes the story uncharitably, agreeing with Obi's parents and telling how he has lost a friend after offering marital advice, so he has held his peace about Clara. Customs cannot be ignored. He could never marry an osu. Hannah's talk of suicide scares Obi. Laughing, Christopher tells about a woman at home whose two children drown in a well and neighbors have to restrain her to keep her from jumping in. Finally they get tired of it. She runs to the well, but backs away. Obi reveals his suspicion that Clara is pregnant. Christopher will ask his friend James for the addresses of doctors he has seen about getting out of trouble. It will be expensive. At least with Clara, Obi does not have to wonder if he is the father.

The old doctor that Clara and Obi see seems sympathetic but then declares he cannot risk his practice and reputation on an abortion. Obi should marry the pretty girl. Clara declares sullenly she does not want to marry and rushes out without explaining why. They drive in silence to the second doctor, young, businesslike, who demands £30 cash up front and reminds them they are all three criminals. They are to return at 2 PM tomorrow with the money; Clara must not eat.

Obi would kill himself before going to a moneylender, and finds he has only £12 at home, having given his parents very little. Christopher never has enough money to live on and would starve if his "boy" (twice his age) did not handle the "chop money" so expertly. Obi considers going to the UPU President, but decides that would be worse than going to a moneylender. Finally, he decides to ask Sam Okoli. Remembering that he has not asked Christopher to be discrete, he calls him.

The doctor counts the wad of bills carefully and puts them away. He dismisses Obi until 5 PM. Obi watches them drive away, fears he will never see Clara again, and want to marry her immediately. He tries to follow the doctor's car, but gets lost and nearly killed



going the wrong way in traffic. Obi feels like lead sitting in his hot car. Returning to the clinic at 5 PM, Obi is told the doctor is out. He waits an hour and a half, sweating, for the doctor's return, only to learn there are complications and Clara is in a colleague's hospital under observation. The doctor warns him that she may not want to see Obi. Women are "funny creatures".

Obi does not eat, but pulls down Houseman's aptly pessimistic volume. He rereads "Nigeria" before balling it up and throwing it away. He reads no poems. In the morning, patients are queued up in the clinic waiting to see the doctor. An attendant mocks Obi for saying he must see the doctor. Women laugh. Obi cuts in when the current patient leaves, and learns she is in a private hospital. As he leaves, the women mock him for thinking a big Government car gives him privileges. Reaching the hospital, Obi learns Clara is ill and cannot have visitors.

## Chapters 15-16 Analysis

Chapters fifteen through sixteen examine Obi and Clara's break-up and the risks and expense of obtaining an illegal abortion. The older doctor finds something about Obi suspicious—recalling the reaction of a policeman when Obi is riding on the mammy wagon that gets stopped earlier. Apparently "book" sets one apart physically, although this is not described. Christopher is again the great sophisticate who knows people who can help and claims to have respected Obi's privacy in not discussing Clara earlier, in order to preserve their friendship. He warns that it will be expensive—another blow to Obi's remaining above board with regard to bribery. Obi's mad drive around town trying to find the doctor's car—after Clara has made it clear that she will not marry him—shows him losing control. He could easily have been killed and had no hopes of finding her. His rudeness in the clinic is called by a lady who says just because the Government gives him a fancy car, he should not expect privileges. He is inching closer to the mentality that accepts bribes.





# Chapters 17-19

## Chapters 17-19 Summary

Obi does not expect Green to ask about his leave, and says nothing to the lecture about "local leave" being used by Africans to "go on a swan", when it is intended originally to let Europeans cool off. Green believes no Nigerian will forgo privilege in the interests of his country. How can they, then, govern themselves? When Green leaves to take a phone call, Tomlinson has to agree: in Nigeria one gets four months leave a year rather than two weeks in England. Obi says that the Europeans set the rules back when no Nigerians are in the senior service. She wants at least the Muslim holidays done away with. They argue a while longer and Tomlinson changes the subject, saying Obi looks run down. He claims a touch of malaria. Later in the morning, Obi asks Omo about a salary advance, being determined to return Clara's £50 to her bank account, whether or not they get past this crisis. He manages to see her, but she turns her face to the wall in front of all the patients. Obi has never felt so embarrassed. Omo explains the special conditions for an advance and reminds him to submit an expense account on the £25 travel allowance he receives for his leave. Having not been told it was "on an actuality basis", Obi is angry that he must refund £10 based on mileage and decides to say he has gone to the Cameroons.

For the first time in his life, Obi examines the "mainspring of his actions". Payments to the UPU are the root of his troubles and he is making them because of pride. He resolves to stop until it is convenient. He will explain only when asked and is sure they will understand "family commitments". At any rate, they will not take a kinsman to court. A messenger's arrival startles Obi. It is his unopened letter to Clara, written when he realizes how justified she is in being bitter. She does not know about his anxious times—and if she did, would she be impressed? Obi spends much of his time in bed. Writing does not come easily to him, and he works hard before admitting that he has wronged Clara terribly, but begs for another chance. He had not dared enter the hospital ward, but gives the envelop to a nurse.

After five weeks in the hospital, Clara takes seventy days leave and disappears. Obi's plan to put £50 in Clara's bank account fails when he gets a registered letter from the Commissioner of Income Tax demanding £32. On top of that, Obi's mother dies and he sends what money he can for the funeral. People criticize how the mother of a senior civil servant and seven other children could have so paltry a funeral. Obi is called a "beast", running after "sweet things" and forgetting his kin. The osu woman must have put a spell on him. A pompous elderly UPU man tells about Isaac Okonkwo refuses to attend his father's funeral. One can go to England but cannot change his blood.

Obi is shocked by his mother's death. Green offers him a weeks' leave, but Obi uses only two days. He knows his mother will be buried by the time he reaches home. He locks himself in his bedroom and cries like a child. Amazingly, he sleeps through the night for the first time in years and feels guilty about not keeping vigil for his mother as



she is put underground. He thinks about how lost his father will be once Obi's married sisters return home. Esther will be left alone. Joseph arrives at 3 PM in a taxi with a dozen bottles of beer, which he has Sebastian put in the fridge, in anticipation of delegations of UPU mourners dropping by. Obi prefers they not sing hymns. Obi accepts condolences quietly and talk turns to politics. A Minister challenging the national hero is beaten in Abame and his women supporters have their head ties seized, since it is not proper to beat women. A small group holds a different conversation in a corner. Nathaniel tells about a tortoise going on a long journey ordering his people not to bother him unless "something new under the sun" happens. They send word when his mother dies, but that is not new, so someone sends word that his father's palm tree has borne fruit at the end of a leaf. That is worth seeing—so he comes back in time for his mother's funeral. There is an embarrassed silence as the group realizes everyone is listening.

Obi feels guilty to sleep through the night again, but less intensely. He realizes his mother's memory is fading after just three days. He tries to manipulate his feelings, but feels only peace. Later he catches himself humming a dance tune. Recalling King David fasting while his son is sick but obtaining "the peace that passeth all understanding" when he dies, Obi feels better.

Obi feels like metal that passes through fire or a snake that has just sloughed its old skin. Rather than seeing the woman who cuts her hand washing his laundry, he sees a woman who gets things done. His father is not a man of action but of thought. He relies on his wife for weighty decisions. She, after all, cuts the cake first at their wedding—the Ibos' dramatic adaptation of the missionaries' rituals. Obi most cherishes the story of the sacred he-goat. When Isaac and Hannah are married just two years and he is working as a catechist in Aninta, the local god Udo has a goat dedicated to him. It leaves droppings in church and eats Isaac's crops, and Isaac complains to the priest, who lets the goat do whatever he wants. When the goat invades Hannah's kitchen and eats a yam (rare that time of year), she cuts off its head. For this she is threatened and shunned. Fifteen years earlier, the men of Aninta go to war over such things, but the white men order all firearms surrendered. The children born that year are still called the "Age Group of the Breaking of the Guns". Such thoughts give Obi pleasure and release his spirit, banishing guilt.

As scholarship season begins, Obi takes home files at night. One evening a prosperous Lagos businessman hands him £50 to get his son to England on scholarship. Obi objects that it is not his decision, but the man wants his recommendation. The wad of bills lies covered with a newspaper for days, bothering Obi, who again cannot sleep. Obi dances the high-life with a girl on the scholarship short-list before steering her to his bedroom. Obi is disappointed in himself afterwards, takes her home, visits Christopher to tell him and laugh it off, but does not manage to tell the story. Others follow and Obi takes their money, refusing, however, to consider anyone who fails to meet the minimum requirements. He pays off his overdraft and debt to Okoli, and feels like he should be happy but is not. One day, someone brings him £20 and he is paralyzed looking at it on the table. The visitor then returns with a complete stranger whose voice makes Obi's head spin. He finds the marked bills on Obi's person, reads him the Riot



Act, and summons a police van. Everyone wonders why an educated young man would do this. No one has an answer.

## Chapters 17-19 Analysis

The novel concludes with Clara's disappearance and Obi's mother's death. He goes through the grieving process rapidly, accepting realities, and achieving unexpected peace. He finds a fond memory of his mother as a woman of action to replace his bonding memory of her as a victim of his blade. Obi is chagrined that he cannot send more for her funeral, knowing he will be reviled as the supposedly rich prodigal son. The allusion to King David fasting while newborn son is sick but obtaining "the peace that passeth all understanding" when he dies, is immensely rich. David has impregnated Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12) whom he steals from another man. Obi has impregnated Clara, who through a distant ancestor belongs to a god. The peace he feels (a quotation from Phil. 7:7) stands at odds with his formally lost faith.

While his spirit is at peace, Obi's finances are on a downward spiral. He learns that "local leave" funds pay only actual mileage, and he has already used the extra money. This revelation allows another discussion of how European privileges are causing problems when Africans come to occupy European positions. Obi stops making his UPU payments, which are the heaviest but also morally the top priority, not asking that they be suspended—still being too proud—but simply renegeing, confident that they will not throw a compatriot in jail. Obi manages to pay off rich Okoli, who finances the abortion, and wants to repay Clara.

Achebe then states that another scholarship season begins, and Obi's fate is sealed. A rich man gives Obi a bribe in a way that he cannot refuse it. Having been bribed once, it becomes easy to be bribed more, monetarily and sexually, although he never enjoys it and insists on never advocating anyone who is not a viable candidate for a scholarship. He gets stung by the police on an inconsequential bribe, and the last paragraph refers back to the opening chapter: "an educated young man and so on and so forth".



# Characters

## Michael Obiajulu Okonkwo

As the novel starts, Obi, a twenty-six-year-old Oxford University educated Ibo man, sits in court in Lagos, Nigeria, being sentenced for taking a £20 bribe. Lectured about wasting his potential, Obi sheds—and hides—a tear. Obi is born in Iguedo, one of the nine villages in Umuofia, where his father is a hard-minded Christian catechist. Obi finishes at the top academically in middle and secondary school, earning the nickname "Dictionary". At eleven, he writes an indiscreet letter to Hitler, for which he receives a caning. When the Umuofia Progressive Union (UPU) establishes a scholarship to educate one of its own in England, Obi is an obvious choice. He majors in English rather than law, but this gets him a "European post" in the civil service and a luxury flat in Ikoyi.

While still a student, Obi decides that Nigeria's problem is letting old men rise to the top by bribery who then expect to be paid off for everything. En route home, aboard the MV Sasa, Obi meets a beautiful nurse, Clara Okeke, with whom he falls in love. The UPU arranges a big reception with press coverage for Obi's homecoming, during which he makes two mistakes, dressing casually and failing to speak grandiloquently. When Obi goes home for a visit before starting work, he wonders why Clara forbids him to tell his people about her. Four years in England have made Obi homesick for his village, but have cost him his faith. He is sad to see his beloved mother in frail health. Obi vows to send his parents £10 per month, knowing this will be hard atop the £20 a month he owes the UPU and brother John's school fees. He also knows that other young people would die for the opportunity he has.

Obi takes an instant dislike to his boss, Mr. Green, and sees colleague Mr. Omo as a typical "old African". Obi buys a car, hires a driver, and cannot understand when Clara refuses to marry him because she is an osu. Obi sees no validity for such a taboo in the mid-twentieth century. At a meeting, Obi thanks the UPU for its sacrifices, promises to justify its confidence, but asks a four-month grace period before beginning to repay his loan. When the President mentions his consorting with a "girl of doubtful ancestry", Obi stalks out. As the scholarship season begins, bribes appear, which Obi proudly turns away. His finances decline, however, and he obtains a bank overdraft to pay his unexpected car insurance. Obi cannot accept the £50 cash that Clara sends. She takes it back gracefully, but it is stolen from Obi's car during a dance.

When Obi's father summons him to see his dying mother, Obi knows they have learned about Clara, who declares it in everyone's best interest to break the engagement. When his father forbids him to marry an osu, Obi uses the biblical arguments against slavery and believes all will work out. He is shaken when his mother says she will commit suicide if he goes ahead. Back in Lagos, Obi learns that Clara is pregnant and refuses to marry him. He helps her obtain an illegal abortion, borrowing the £30 cash from politician Sam Okoli. Clara suffers complications and is hospitalized five weeks, refusing



to see Obi or accept a note asking for another chance. The tax man demands £32, and Obi's mother dies and Obi can afford to send so little money for the funeral that people call him a "beast" running after "sweet things" and forgetting his kin. As his mother's memory fades, Obi feels peace, and insomnia passes. As scholarship season begins, he gives in and accepts monetary and sexual bribes, insisting that candidates meet the minimum educational requirements. He pays off his debts but is still unhappy. One day, someone gives him £20 and returns with a policeman, who takes Obi into custody.

## Clara Okeke

The primary female character in the novel, Clara Obi is from Mbaino, the neighboring village to Obi Okonkwo's Iguedo. Obi first meets Clara at a dance in London where she is studying nursing and he English. He is struck by her beauty, but when he finally finds the nerve to ask her to dance, he steps on her feet. Eighteen months later, she has forgotten him and the dance as they travel home aboard the small HV Sasa. Obi is instantly infatuated, but Clara treats him like one of her seasick patients. They warm during a stopover in Madeira and share a first kiss. Clara moves in with a cousin in the Yaba section of Lagos, Nigeria, but obtains better lodging soon and a good paying job as Assistant Nursing Sister.

In a short time, Obi proposes marriage, but Clara tells him tearfully that it is impossible: she is an osu, a member of an untouchable caste. Obi insists love can conquer all and buys her a ring and a Bible. He follows her puppy-like as she selects things for the kitchen in his new flat, and plans to find better lodgings when she starts in a week. Clara annoys Obi by suggesting there is a good movie playing rather than asking to go and wins arguments by refusing to talk. As she carries two-thirds of their conversations, silence ensues and he gives in. When Obi tells her about obtaining a £50 bank overdraft to cover car insurance, Clara grows silent. The next day, she sends him a packet, which he fears is his ring. Instead it is a wad of bills, which Obi cannot accept. She accepts it back without taking offense as Obi fears, but the money is lost when thieves break into Obi's car during a dance. Once Clara walks in on Obi with a young girl who is offering herself in exchange for a scholarship recommendation and merely acts superior and possessive. Afterwards, she tells him accepting monetary bribes is less offensive than accepting sexual ones.

As Clara predicts, everyone aligns against their marriage. Obi's friends try to point out how absolute the osu taboo is. When the Umuofia Progressive Union, which funds Obi's scholarship, objects to his willful behavior, he briefly breaks with them. A friend writes Obi's parents, and Obi is summoned home. His father Isaac knows Clara's father, Josiah, and admits that Josiah is a good man and a great Christian, but insists that people look upon the osu as those in biblical days view leprosy. If Obi and Clara marry, their descendants for generations will curse their memory and live in sorrow. Still, Obi convinces himself that all will work out in time. Clara, however, again wants to break up and holds back a secret. Obi guesses that she is pregnant and together they seek a doctor willing to perform an illegal abortion. Clara suffers complications, which



hospitalize her for five weeks, after which she takes seven weeks leave and disappears. She refuses to see Obi and returns his one note asking for another chance.

## Christopher

A friend of Obi Okonkwo, Christopher has a degree from the London School of Economics and has recently transferred to Lagos from Enugu. Christopher always takes the opposite side from Obi in any argument. A ladies' man, Christopher introduces Obi to an Irish girl teaching in a Roman Catholic convent, and argues against his marrying Clara Okeke because she is an osu. Bisi is the only one of Christopher's girlfriends seen in the novel. She is too made up for Obi's taste and clashes with Christopher's sense of male entitlement in making decisions. When they discover that Clara is pregnant, Christopher obtains the names of doctors who perform illegal abortions. Christopher argues with Obi that going to bed with girls who want help getting a scholarship does not constitute bribery. In the end, Obi does bed such a girl but cannot bring himself to tell Christopher about it. Christopher pays the bride-price and wants to marry, but the girl wants to go to England to study nursing.

## Mr. Green

Obi Okonkwo's outspoken British boss, Green views all Africans as thoroughly corrupt, sapped mentally and physically by the climate, disease, and then given Western education, which they do not know how to handle. When Obi is introduced, Green mutters only that he should not be "bone-lazy" but should "use his loaf". He posts Obi to assist Mr. Omo, a groveling thirty-year veteran of the civil service. Secretary Marie Tomlinson, with whom Obi shares an office, paints a different picture of Green as a devout Christian, a sideman in the Colonial Church, but agrees that he says outrageous things about educated Africans. Obi has to admit that Green has admirable qualities, like keeping Charles Ibe from being sacked for sleeping on the job. Obi cannot understand why a man who does not believe in Nigeria works so hard. Green submits a resignation to coincide with Nigerian independence, but withdraws it when that does not come about. He clearly loves the Africa of 1900, when he could have been a great missionary, wiping out human sacrifices—or even of 1935, when headmasters could still be slapped. In 1957, he can only curse. Obi compares Green to Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and considers writing a tragic novel. During Obi's trial for bribery, Green is a witness for the prosecution.

## Charles Ibe

A messenger in Obi Okonkwo's building, Ibe has been avoiding him since the time limit for repaying a thirty-shilling loan passes. Obi finds the promissory note when his £42 insurance bill arrives and he has but £13 in the bank. He tells Ibe, who needs the money when his wife gives birth to a fifth child, that debts never rot and threatens to report him to Green if he fails to pay up by the end of December.





## Rev. Samuel Ikedi

The pastor of of Umuofia's St. Mark's Anglican Church, Ikeda presides at the prayer service that sends Obi Okonkwo off to Lagos and ultimately England. Ikedi over the course of half an hour sees Obi as fulfillment of the prophecy of Matthew 4.16 (paraphrasing Isaiah 9.2) before asking for someone to lead them in prayer. Ikedi comes originally from a township, so he understands the changing patterns in marriage ceremonies.

## Ikemefuna

A boy with whom Obi Okonkwo's father Isaac grows up, Ikemefuna is given to the Umuofians in appeasement and becomes inseparable from Isaac, but when the "Oracle of the Hills and the Caves" orders the boy killed, Isaac's father does it personally. Even then, some elders feel it is wrong to kill someone who calls one father.

## Mr. Jones

Obi Okonkwo's fellow passenger aboard the HV Sasa from England to Nigeria, Jones is with the United Africa Company. He eats heartily but self-righteously refuses desert. Achebe contrasts him with the boat's chief engineer, who looks always on the point of seasickness at meals. Approaching Madeira, Jones quotes Jones quotes, "Water, water everywhere but not a drop to drink", from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner".

A different Mr. Jones is Inspector of Schools when Obi is a child. An enormous white man, a veteran of the "Kaiser's war", Jones enjoys surprise inspections. One year he throws a child through a window; another, he bullies Headmaster Simeon Nduka, who uses an old wrestling move when he can stand the abuse no further. Obi sees his first civil service boss, Mr. Green, as a would-be Inspector Jones, frustrated that he can no longer slap the natives around.

## Joy

Joseph Okeke's former girlfriend, Joy, puzzles Obi Okonkwo by crocheting the word "osculate" on a pillow. Joseph says she is odd but foolish and wishes they had not broken up. She is a virgin when they meet, which is rare in Lagos.

## John Macmillan

Obi Okonkwo's fellow passenger aboard the HV Sasa from England to Nigeria, Macmillan is an administrative officer in Northern Nigeria. When he slips and falls on a wet deck, Macmillan and Obi become fast friends. Each is twenty-five years old and



both admire Clara Okeke's beauty. The trio goes ashore to walk about enchanting Funchal in the Madeira Islands. When Macmillan retires to his cabin, Obi and Clara share their first kiss.

## Elsie Mark

A seventeen- to eighteen-year-old Ibo girl, Elsie shows up at Obi Okonkwo's door intending to offer him sexual favors in exchange for an interview to turn her Grade One certificate into a scholarship to England. Flustered, Obi offers her a Coca Cola, wondering as he pours how someone so young can be so wise in the "ways of the world". Elsie intends to see all the Board members at home because a scholarship is so important. Her father, who spends all his money on her brother's failed education in England, has died and they lack money. Obi insists he can make promises. Obi's fiancée, Clara Okeke, arrives, reacts stiffly to Elsie and possessively towards Obi. After dropping Elsie off near taxis, Obi explains to Clara how Elsie's unnamed brother, dressed formally in a way that shows he is just back in Nigeria, tries to bribe him. Clara believes offering money is better than offering one's body.

## Mary

A zealous Umuofian Christian, Mary is good friends with Obi Okonkwo's mother, Hannah. Mary jumps up to pray for Obi at his farewell prayer service. Mary lives over three miles from church but never misses a service. She often arrives an hour early, blows out her hurricane lamp to conserve kerosene, and sleeps. Her prayer consists of a long series of proverbs and Obi's life history.

## Simeon Nduka

Headmaster of Obi Okonkwo's grade school, Nduka uses an old wrestling move on visiting Inspector Jones when he can stand the abuse no further. Obi remembers this and compares his boss, Mr. Green to Jones.

## Nora and Pat

Two young Irish women in Nigeria for three weeks teaching at a Roman Catholic convent in the Apapa section of Lagos, Nora and Pat meet Obi Okonkwo's friend Christopher. Nora, the less attractive because of her smile, is assigned to Obi. The boys teach them to dance the "high-life", and offer them cuisine that is a bit too peppery. Obi finds them too anti-British. When Obi tries to give Nora a passionate kiss, she tells him it is a sin for Catholics and they make do with lip kissing. When the boys visit the convent to play tennis, Nora and Pat ask them not to return, because if the bishop learns they are seeing African men he will send them home to Ireland. They agree to visit the boys in Ikoyi. Christopher finds this a bad way of missionizing.





## Ogbuefi Odogwu

The oldest elder in Umuofia, Odogwu calls for peace when Isaac Okonkwo and a non-Christian villager quarrel about kola nuts. While not a Christian, Odogwu goes to church once a year and likes the formula, "As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end". He offers a blessing in the name of "Jesu Kristi" that even Isaac cheers. Odogwu jokes that he might become a Christian if they make him a pastor. Another theological argument breaks out when Odogwu declares that Obi is his grandfather Ogbuefi Okonkwo come back to life. Odogwu ignores Isaac and talks about the great man who dies fighting the white man single-handed, and the other giants of his youth. Now Umuofia mimics the white man, among whom Obi has been. Great men like great trees grow where they choose.

## Joseph Okeke

A former classmate of Obi Okonkwo in the Umuofia CMS Central School, Joseph does not go on to secondary school because of family poverty. During World War II, Joseph serves in the Education Corps of the 82nd Division. He then becomes clerk in the Survey Department and lives in a one-room flat in the Obalende section in the Lagos Motor Park. A ladies' man, Joseph hangs a blue cloth between his sleeping area (the "Holy of Holies") from the sitting area. En route to England, Obi visits Joseph and stays with him after his return, until his own flat is ready. Joseph tells Obi about movies, dance halls, and political meetings, emphasizing that dancing is essential for social success. He has just broken up with Joy after five months and has paid the £130 "bride-price" to get married. Joseph always speaks learned English on the phone and in person invites people to look him in the face. When Obi becomes infuriated that the Umuofian Progressive Union butts into his relationship with Clara Okeke, Joseph tries to patch things up. He tells the UPU President and Obi's parents that Clara is an *osu*—an outcaste.

## Sam Okoli

A popular politician, described in the press as one of Lagos' best-dressed and most-eligible bachelors, Okoli is over thirty but looks boyish with an athletic build and flashing smile. Obi first sees him running into the Palm Grove restaurant for tobacco, and fears he is dating the girl with whom Obi is smitten, Clara Okeke. The Minister of State is engaged to Clara's best friend, and a relieved Obi comes to like Okoli. Visiting him, Obi recalls the press criticizing the Government for building ministers' houses at £35,000 each. Knowing Obi's thoughts, Okoli says he pays £275 for the huge radiogram that Obi admires, and demonstrates how it also tapes and plays back conversations. Okoli catches himself speaking pidgin and turns on the radio. He wishes he could hire Obi and says Nigerians have a long way to go. At the height of Obi's financial troubles, he borrows money from Okoli and repays him, just before being arrested for taking bribes.



## Hannah Okonkwo

Obi Okonkwo's beloved mother, Hannah, often argues with her husband about his excessive generosity. Known as "Janet's mother" from the time her first child is born, she becomes "Obi's mother" upon the advent of her fourth child and first son. Obi enjoys a special relationship with his mother, especially from the time she cuts her hand on a rusty razor blade that he leaves in a pocket. Hannah takes being a catechist's wife seriously, and orders the children not to accept food from neighbors for fear it has been offered to idols. Early in their marriage, she beheads a goat dedicated to the local god when it eats a yam in the season yams are hard to get. This gets her shunned for a while.

After being hospitalized several times, Hannah listens to Obi's arguments why he should be allowed to marry Clara before telling him about a recent bad dream: termites eat the bed out from under her. She tells no one about it, but when Joseph's letter arrives, saying Obi intends to marry an osu, Hannah knows the dream foretells her death. Hannah declares that if Obi marries while she is still alive, she will kill herself. She sinks down in her bed, exhausted. Hannah dies shortly after Obi returns to Lagos, Clara has an abortion and disappears, and the pressure weakens his will to resist bribes, leading to his downfall.

## Isaac Okonkwo

Obi Okonkwo's father, Isaac, is a Christian convert and retired catechist. After twenty-five years service to the Church Missionary Society (CMS), he receives a paltry £25 a year, which makes it necessary for him and his aged and infirm wife Hannah to continue farming. Isaac builds the first "zinc" house in Umuofia. The banquet he gives for his son's departure from Umuofia outdoes many modern wedding banquets. Isaac insists on Christians abstaining from food offered to idols and leads twice-daily prayers for the family, in which each reads a Bible verse in turn. His room is filled with printed materials, showing his devotion to European literacy.

As Hannah nears death, Isaac summons Obi home to forbid him to marry an osu, even though she is the daughter of a friend. For the first time, Isaac tells his son about being taken by missionaries as a boy and having his father place a curse on him. Obi has never heard this before and the darkness makes him feel sorry for his father. When word comes to the school that he hangs himself, Isaac declares that "those who live by the sword must perish by the sword". Isaac is still bitter about his father slaying Ikemefuna, his childhood companion.

## The Okonkwo Siblings

Esther Okonkwo, the firstborn, becomes a teacher when Obi is very young, and everyone is told to call her Miss out of respect, but Obi sometimes slips up. Esther is the mother of three, and upon her mother's death is expected to look after her father. Janet,



the second oldest, is the mother of two. Agnes, the third oldest, is the mother of one, having lost a little girl while still practically a child herself. After the evening's prayer service, Hannah asks her to carry the sleeping grandchildren to bed, but to make sure they urinate first. Agnes grabs the first by the wrist and pulls, earning a rebuke, to which Obi adds: it can cause a child's soul to leave the body and not find its way back. Mother smiles without amusement. Charity, the fourth oldest and Obi's immediate elder, is the only sister with whom Obi quarrels. He makes fun of her Ibo name, turning it from "a girl is also good" (expressing her father Isaac's resignation at getting a fourth daughter) into "A girl is not good". For this, Obi receives beatings once their mother is not looking. Charity is as strong as any boy and feared in the neighborhood. Obi's younger brother, John, is still in school, and Obi agrees to pay his fees to relieve the parents' burden. The youngest sibling, Eunice, is still at home with distant relatives Joy and Mercy, who have been sent to learn housekeeping from Mrs. Okonkwo. Umuofians remark about all of the children moving away to seek their fortunes.

## Ogbuefi Okonkwo

Obi Okonkwo's grandfather, Ogbuefi Okonkwo is a legendary warrior who dies fighting the white man single-handedly. His namesake, Ogbuefi Odogwu, declares that he has come back to life in Obi, an assertion that Obi's Christian father, Isaac, rejects.

## Mr. Omo

Administrative Assistant to Mr. Green, Omo is a thirty-year veteran of the Nigerian civil service. He plans on retiring when his son finishes law school in England. Obi is assigned to learn basics from him his first day and soon sees him as a typical "old African".

## Marie Tomlinson

Mr. Green's attractive English secretary with whom Obi Okonkwo shares an office, Tomlinson is at first suspected of being an "agent provocateur", and seems to watch him closely when Mr. Marks tries to bribe him. Over the weeks, however, Obi lets his guard down, particularly after Tomlinson comments on Clara's attractive telephone voice. They are on a first-name basis. Tomlinson is amazed at all the holidays Nigerian workers enjoy and is offended by the Muslim holidays.

## Stephen Udom

Obi Okonkwo's fellow passenger aboard the MV Sasa from England to Nigeria, Udom is a Nigerian civil servant.

## **Mrs. Wright**

Obi Okonkwo's fellow passenger aboard the MV Sasa from England to Nigeria, Mrs. Wright is returning to Freetown. Wandering with indigestion while in port in Madeira, Wright interrupts Obi Okonkwo and Clara Okeke's first kiss.



# Objects/Places

## Lagos

Most of the novel takes place in Nigeria's largest city, Lagos, which in the mid-1950s is also the colonial capital. Lagos consists of four islands and a bit of the mainland on the Atlantic coastline of central Africa. Lagos Island is the largest. It is shown as a business district, with Tinubu Square being specifically mentioned and Obalende, where Joseph Okeke lives in a trailer park. Ikoyi Island is also prominent, as it houses the government offices, homes for senior officials including Obi Okonkwo's flat once he becomes a senior civil servant, and tennis clubs, used as a symbol for upper-class prestige. Ikoyi is separated from Lagos Island by a vast cemetery. Victoria Island is mentioned, but is too wealthy an area to figure in the novel. Most people live on the mainland, where Yaba is depicted as a hot night spot. The Umuofia Progressive Union meets somewhere on the mainland. Suburban Ikeja, a twelve-mile drive from Obi's flat, features a good restaurant. Kingsway is apparently an up-scale shopping area centered on Broad Street; there Obi buys Clara an engagement ring and zippered Bible. Finally, Apapa is home to a Roman Catholic convent that Obi and friend Christopher visit to see a pair of Irish teachers.

## Umuofia

A fictional region in Eastern Nigeria, Umuofia consists of nine Ibo-speaking villages located west of the market town of Onitsha on the bank of the Niger River. Obi Okonkwo hails from Iguedo village. Umuofia has a warlike reputation before the coming of Christianity, and the people are quite proud of their traditions. Few Umuofians emigrate permanently, but many young men leave for a few years to earn enough money to build a "zinc" house and marry. Wherever they go, they form chapters of the Umuofia Progressive Union (UPU). Umuofia's soil is "unwilling and exhausted", and money is a rarity. Still, the villagers give Obi Okonkwo small monetary gifts as he leaves to study in England.

## Umuofia Progressive Union

A mutual benefits organization for Umuofian emigrés, the UPU has chapters everywhere, including Lagos. Idealizing education as the means of becoming a modern people, Umuofians tax themselves mercilessly to provide a scholarship for one of their own to go to Oxford University. They select Obi Okonkwo as the first recipient. Upon return, he must repay the £800 loan within four years, in order that it may benefit other young scholars. The UPU also expects Obi to be on the lookout for good jobs for its members. Obi bristles when the President of the UPU suggests getting involved with an osu is bad and for a while refuses to deal with the UPU. They are eventually reconciled, but Obi proudly rejects the UPU offer to defer repayment of his loan. This proves fatal.



When Obi is arrested for accepting bribes, the UPU pays his legal expenses, because anger against a brother goes only flesh-deep, not into the bone marrow.

## Church Missionary Society

An evangelical branch of the Church of England, the CMS is shown operating schools and bookstores in Umuofia and Lagos. Isaac Okonkwo is employed for twenty-five years as a catechist by the CMS and is rewarded with a measly £25 a year pension. Obi and Joseph Okeke attend a CMS middle school together. At the CMS Bookstore in Kingsway, Obi buys Clara an engagement ring and the zippered Bible that she says is also traditional.

## Funchal

A beautiful "garden city" on Portugal's Madeira Island in the North Atlantic, Funchal is the first port of call for the MV Sasa en route from Liverpool, England, to Lagos, Nigeria. Obi Okonkwo and John Macmillan accompany beautiful Clara Okeke ashore for a brief hike in the hills, wine and coffee at an outdoor café, and shopping for trinkets. A local praises the local wine.

## Harrington Docks

The waterfront in Liverpool, England, from which the MV Sasa departs, carrying Nigerian university graduates Obi Okonkwo and Clara Okeke home. Customs is cleared in minutes, compared with what awaits in Nigeria. Obi is shown to have learned that when Englishmen complain about the weather, they do not appreciate foreigners agreeing.

## Kola

The caffeine-rich fruit of a tree indigenous to West Africa, the kola nut is chewed as a stimulant and revered as a symbol of hospitality and plenty. A ritual is shown whereby the youngest male at a gathering shows the kola nut to the company before handing it to the oldest male for a blessing. Isaac Okonkwo forbids a "heathen" blessing in his Christian house, but the kola nut is too much a part of Ibo culture to forego completely. "Kola" is a synonym both for celebration and for bribe.

## Mbaino

A village neighboring Umuofia, Mbaino appears to be an ancient rival if not enemy. Before Obi Okonkwo's gala homecoming, the elders point to Kwokeke getting hit by "thunder", perhaps because his chi does not recognize him away from home. Obi's



Christian father, Isaac, resists the idea that anyone but God controls nature. Mbaino is home to the osu family into which Obi wants to marry.

## Onitsha

A market village fifty miles from Umuofia village, Onitsha provides local color as Obi Okonkwo waits for the final drive home in a "pleasure" car. To the sound of blaring local music, two men are selling "Long Life Mixture", and passing out leaflets to the illiterate locals, listing the diverse diseases it cures. Near the waterfront, a row of women sell garri, each contributing a handful to One Way, a beggar who dances for their entertainment.

## Osu

A hereditary caste with whom the rest of class-conscious Ibos refuse to marry, Osus are in olden days dedicated to a god. Even Christian Ibos feel the taboo deeply, and catechist Isaac Okonkwo categorically refuses to allow his son Obi to marry Clara Okeke, even though her father is a friend and exemplary Christian. Obi argues from scripture that in Christ there is no slave and free, but the father worries that the taboo would affect generations to come. Obi's friend agrees that some day Nigeria will not worry about such things, but the pioneer generation cannot afford to make mistakes. Clara, knowing her fate, from the beginning tries to spare stubborn Obi from fighting with his relatives.

## Palm Grove

A Lagos restaurant, not one of its hottest spots, the Palm Grove is where Joseph Okeke takes Obi Okonkwo after his job interview. Obi wants traditional Nigerian food after too many "boiled potatoes" in England, but decent restaurants do not prepare it. The restaurant's owner turns out to be not a Syrian as Joseph believes, but an English woman near eighty. They talk about their school days over broiled meat and in the lounge see handsome Sam Okoli, a popular politician and eligible bachelor run in for tobacco. Obi is afraid that Okoli is dating his beloved Clara when he sees her in Okoli's De Soto.

## MV Sasa

A cargo ship running from England to Nigeria, the Sasa carries twelve passengers and a crew of fifty. Obi Okonkwo and nurse Clara Okeke are among the passengers. They share their first kiss after a stopover on Madeira Island. Because cargo ships' arrivals are unscheduled, no one awaits Obi at the Atlantic Terminal in Lagos.

## **St. Pancras Town Hall**

The site of a dance sponsored by the London branch of the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons in London, where Obi Okonkwo and Clara Okeke are first introduced. It is inauspicious. He finds her pretty; she spends their one dance trying to avoid having her toes stepped on. They do not see one another for eighteen months, and Clara does not recall the dance. This dance, riding on trains, and the quick passage through customs in Liverpool is all the detail that Achebe provides on the protagonist's formative years in England.





# Themes

## Sex

Sexual tension pervades *No Longer at Ease*, but its expression is muted as one would expect in a novel written in the late 1950s. Several of young Obi Okonkwo's male friends are sexually active. Joseph divides his one-room flat with a blanket and declares his bed a "Holy of Holies". He remarks with some amazement that his girlfriend Joy had been a virgin when they meet; the next day, Obi wanders the city to give Joseph and his trashy new girlfriend privacy. While riding a lorry home, Obi thinks erotic thoughts in English, because his early training in Ibo censors such words. Falling asleep in his childhood bed, he wishes he were pressed against girlfriend Clara Okeke's body. Obi thinks about how, with earlier girls (Nigerian, West Indian, and English), he is always aware of a superior part of himself watching the passion and dismissing the idea, but with Clara it is different. He cannot understand why she accepts the nonsense that being an osu prevents their marrying. The President of the UPU warns from experience that Lagos' "sweetness" causes many young people to perish and says social pioneers must deny themselves pleasures like drinking or running with women.

Overcoming the first temptation to accept a monetary bond, Obi puts the feeling almost on a par with his first sexual experience in England. Obi is surprised to see the offerer's attractive stranger, Elsie Mark, at his door. Elsie intends to "see" all the Scholarship Board members at home. Clara believes offering money is better than offering one's body. Obi's friend Christopher, another womanizer, holds the opposite view: monetary bribes impoverish a person but consensual sex causes no harm. Obi is "the biggest ass in Nigeria", because girls like Elsie are not innocent; she probably figures Obi is impotent. A trip to a dance club describes various ways of dancing the "high-life", some quite provocative. Christopher later invites Obi to his flat to party with two Irish girls. Nora rebuffs Obi's passionate kiss, saying for Catholics it is a sin.

Obi and Clara are shown kissing passionately and making up after a fight. She spends the night before Obi goes home for a visit. When he gets back they have another scene and she admits she is pregnant, clarifying the earlier innocuous language. She vehemently refuses to marry Obi, has an abortion, and disappears. As scholarship season begins, Obi gives in and begins accepting monetary and sexual bribes. He dances the high-life with a girl on the scholarship short-list before steering her to his bedroom. Obi is disappointed in himself afterwards, takes her home, visits Christopher to tell him and laugh it off, but does not manage to tell the story.

## Religion

Religion is a constant backdrop and occasional major player in *No Longer at Ease*. Protagonist Obi Okonkwo grows up under the roof of a Christian convert and catechism, Isaac, whose neighbors wryly observe that some people can drink palm-wine without it



going to their heads. Isaac is obsessed with "food offered to idols", which is proscribed to converts from paganism in New Testament writings. Obi has lost his father's faith while in England, but does not know how to tell him. Isaac is a member of the Church Missionary Society (CMS), which seems to be preeminent among the Christian bodies in Nigeria. It works under the auspices of the Anglican Church, which has an ordained clergyman, Samuel Ikeda, in Umuofia. He seems to appear in the villages for occasions, leaving it to the catechists to preside at services. Isaac leads the family in daily readings from the Scripture Union Card. Hannah joins the "people of the church" from the "people of nothing" along with her mother and siblings after her father's death. She marries Isaac and in some ways she is more zealous than he. She forbids her children to accept food in neighbors' homes, which sets them apart in Ibo society.

Nigeria is also missionized by Roman Catholics. A song reminds Odi of "Empire Day" in his childhood when Protestants and Catholic compete in athletics and the Protestants sing mocking songs. Obi and friend Christopher party with a pair of Irish teachers at a Catholic convent, Nora rebuffing a passionate kiss, saying for Catholics it is a sin, and visit to suggest tennis, but are told not to come back lest the hostile Mother and Bishop send them back to Ireland for going around with African men. Christopher remarks it is not very missionary. It is briefly mentioned in an office setting that Northern Nigeria is Muslim and the government gives time off for many Islamic holidays. A long, colorful, noisy procession of the "Eternal Sacred Order of Cherubim and Seraphim" is shown as Obi is driving.

Native religion is given short shrift in the novel except vis-a-vis Christianity. Obi recalls a story from early in his parents' marriage when in Aninta the local god Udo has a goat dedicated to him. It leaves droppings in church and eats Isaac's crops, and Isaac complains to the priest, who lets the goat do whatever he wants. He thinks it might show that their two gods are pals. The other instance is Isaac's recollection of how the "Oracle of the Hills and the Caves" orders the boy Ikemefuna, whom Isaac's father has virtually adopted, killed and Isaac's father does it personally. Isaac is later "taken" by missionaries to be educated and his father puts a curse on him before hanging himself. In the person of old Odogwu, enlightened non-Christians are shown accommodating. He approves of the formula, "As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end", and offers a blessing of kola nuts in the name of "Jesu Kristi". Theodicy (why God allows bad things to happen) and reincarnation are touched upon, with straight-backed Isaac insisting on orthodoxy. Preparing to forbid Obi to marry an osu, Clara Okeke, he prays about the works of the devil. Obi presents proof texts showing that Christians ought not to obey outmoded taboos, for in Christ "there are no bond or free". Isaac declares that being osu is like leprosy in the minds of the people—like Namaan, captain of the host of Syria in the Bible.

## Culture

The dichotomy of Nigeria's double culture is shown when, after the verdict in Obi Okonkwo's trial, Europeans gather in a tennis club bar—theoretically desegregated, but in fact a European enclave—and find that Africans are thoroughly corrupt, sapped



mentally and physically by the climate, disease, and given a Western education that they do not know how to use. Meanwhile, Umuofia Progressive Union (UPU) leaders see Obi as merely young, strong-willed, and inexperienced; he does not know how to take bribes properly and safely. Western ways like wedding invitations with RSVP written on them, are shown changing Ibo ways and being modified by the recipients. In olden times, Obi would have fought wars and brought home human heads, but instead pursues knowledge. He is warned above all not to marry a white woman.

When he returns to Nigeria from England, Obi is one of a trickle of Africans who obtain "European posts" and lodging in luxurious Ikoyi. Obi insists that Nigeria's problem is letting old men rise to the top by bribery and then expect to be paid off for everything. The point is made that second-generation educated Nigerians revert to eating with their fingers because it tastes better. They are gaining the confidence to be themselves. It is noted that when mail boats dock in Lagos and are met by sullen groups, it means that a son has married a white woman. The UPU rejoices that Obi has not been tempted; one member talks about white women turning their husband's face away from his kinsman while she remains—and then leaving. Obi is proud, hearing that men in Iguedo, his birth village, are not white with whites and black with blacks.

Obi takes an instant dislike to his white boss, Mr. Green, and sees Mr. Omo as an "old African". Green clearly would have loved the Africa of 1900, when he could have been a great missionary, wiping out human sacrifices—or even of 1935, when headmasters could still be slapped. In 1957, he can only curse and insist on being called "sir". Green cannot see how institutions like "local leave" are introduced by Europeans for their own benefit and it is unfair to rail against the few Africans who rise to such positions for taking the perks. Green believes no Nigerian will forgo privilege in the interests of his country, in which case self-government is a moot point.

Obi's most directly conflict comes when he insists on marrying Clara, whose distant ancestor is dedicated to a god, turning his descendants into taboo "osu". Obi's friend Joseph declares that this is "no matter for book"; Obi's upbringing and education have made him a stranger in Nigeria. If Obi and Clara marry, their descendants for generations will curse their memory and live in sorrow. Obi is certain that in ten years things will change. Obi's most cherished story about his mother involves a sacred he-goat. Father Isaac has little luck getting the priest of the god Udo to corral the destructive animal, but when it wanders into Hannah's kitchen and eats a yam, rare that time of year, she summarily cuts off its head. For this she is threatened and shunned. Fifteen years earlier, the men of Aninta would have gone to war over such things, but the white men order all firearms surrendered. The children born that year are still called the "Age Group of the Breaking of the Guns".



# Style

## Point of View

In *No Longer at Ease*, author Chinua Achebe consistently adopts the third person omniscient point of view, but much of the novel is driven by dialog in the first person. The anonymous narrator feels sympathy for protagonist Obi Okonkwo but sees him as a callous, stubborn, opinionated young man who causes himself nearly as many problems as fate seems to drop upon him. The story opens with Obi sitting in court, about to be sentenced for accepting bribes. He has made himself numb over the weeks of confinement and trial. European commentators at the end of the trial consider that it is in the African character to fall in this way, while fellow Umuofians believe that Obi is simply too naive to do what all officials do in the safe, accepted fashion.

The narrator then shows how Obi comes to receive a scholarship to a coveted English university education and a high-paying "European post" in the civil service with its attending perks. The Umuofians want their first educated son to be a shining light—and to pay back the loan promptly. Obi's boss is consistently the voice of the "white man's burden" to enlighten the savages, although his image is softened a bit late in the novel. Obi's father is the voice of evangelical Christian zeal, refusing to compromise with the "world of nothing" in which pagans live. Sophisticated friend Christopher, an economist, joins Obi's father in arguing against Obi's marrying beautiful Clara Okeke because of a generations-old osu taboo on her family. Obi idealistically expects things to change in Nigeria. As his finances worsen with unexpected bills, Obi fights to maintain his idealism about the bribery system. In the end, he gives in and swiftly falls. No one can explain how a young person of such potential could do this. The novel makes it more than clear how.

## Setting

The main action of *No Longer at Ease* by Chinua Achebe can be set precisely in November 1955 through the late spring of 1956. The protagonist, Obi Okonkwo is then twenty-six years old, so flashbacks to his youth occur in the mid-1930s, when he writes a letter to Hitler that gets him caned. Most of the novel takes place in Lagos, the largest city in Nigeria and in that period the colonial capital. Obi is born in Eastern Nigeria in the village of Iguedo, one of nine Ibo-speaking villages located west of the market town of Onitsha on the bank of the Niger River. The collective term for the fictional villages is Umuofia. It enjoys a warlike reputation before the coming of Christianity, and the people are proud of their traditions. One of the traditions is treating as taboo outcasts descendants of a "osu" who is dedicated to the gods. Few Umuofians emigrate permanently, but many young men leave for a few years to earn enough money to build a "zinc" house and marry. Wherever they go, they form chapters of the Umuofia Progressive Union (UPU). That organization's members sacrifice financially for years to



create a scholarship to send one of their sons to England for an Education. Obi is the first recipient.

Very little of England is shown, but it is clear that Obi forms radical views on how "old Africans" are corrupting Nigeria. The voyage home shows more of shipboard life in the choppy Bay of Biscay and a short stop at picturesque Madeira Island. Obi returns to Nigeria with a degree in English literature (not law as the UPU wants) and joins the élite bureaucracy. Most of the novel takes place in Lagos, whose constitution as four islands and a bit of the mainland are illustrated by trips to restaurants, nightclubs, and a Roman Catholic convent. Obi's office and flat are on Ikoyi Island. Trips home allow description of the Nigerian countryside.

## Language and Meaning

No Longer at Ease by Chinua Achebe is told in modern British colonial English, but with American spellings. It is a novel about a region slowly sloughing off colonial rule but very much enslaved to it culturally. The protagonist, Obi Okonkwo, is the son of a zealous Christian catechist who receives a scholarship to study in England. Rather than major in law as the scholarship grantors want in order to get value out of him afterwards, Obi majors in English literature. In the course of his life abroad, Obi loses his father's religion, but the English Bible and English poetry still provide the warp and weave of his conversation. Obi's father and the President of the Umuofia Progressive Union (UPU) also fill their speeches with literary and sacred allusions, some exceedingly subtle. Extensive use is made of Ibo folk sayings and stories—although Isaac Okonkwo resolutely avoids any compromise with "heathenism". As a result, the novel is dense with literary citations and exegesis on these passages. Obi prides himself in several particularly apt ones. His favorite poet is AS. E. Houseman. During a job interview, Obi discusses the contemporary Nigerian poet Amos Tutuola, quotes W. H. Auden, and slips into an analysis of an Auden-inspired Waugh novel, working in its handling of Charles Dickens.

All of the non-European characters slip between "proper" English, Ibo, and various forms of pidgin. They speak a given form to achieve specific purposes. Clara does it to show that as a university graduate she is above other Africans. Ibo is quoted only in untranslatable words, but these are explained in English. Passages in pidgin vary in their degree of difficulty to understand. When the speaker is excited, it is nearly impossible. The logic and flow of the language engages the reader even when some words may be doubtful. An employee who has borrowed money from Obi writes a letter promising repayment that anyone having read the book in current times and having receiving spam email about Nigerian lotteries will find familiar. Add to this the folk sayings and stories that are as abundant as the Western illusions and quotations, and No Longer at Ease is a rich, satisfying adventure in reading.

## Structure

No Longer at Ease consists of nineteen numbered but untitled chapters of generally equal length. The first chapter shows the twenty-six-year-old protagonist Obi Okonkwo in court, being convicted of accepting bribes. His boss, who testifies against him, and another British colonial official wonder what it is in the African makeup that causes such aberrations, while Obi's people in the Umuofia Progressive Union (UPU) see it being merely a case of an inexperienced young person not going about it in the established manner.

The rest of the novel shows Obi the ideal student being chosen to receive a scholarship to complete his education in England, meeting a beautiful nurse on the return voyage, making some youthful faux pas in getting his feet on the ground, and quickly overextending himself financially. He has never dealt before with insurance, car repairs, utility bills, or income taxes, and he has generously offered to help his aged parents by supplementing their meager pension and pay his younger brother's school costs. Still, he realizes his income is the envy of most young people. The worst burden is repaying the UPU loan in monthly installments. The UPU agrees to postpone payments, but then when the President mentions having heard about Obi intending to marry a "girl of doubtful ancestry", Obi is furious and obstinate. This seals his financial fate.

Obi's friend Christopher and Obi's parents object to Clara as she is an "osu", a member of a taboo social caste, but Obi is determined to make it work. His finances worsen as Clara needs money for an abortion and Obi's mother dies. He borrows and begins taking the bribes, monetary and sexual, that he has resisted so valiantly—and in Christopher's view stupidly. Obi loses Clara but gets out of debt. The final dénouement is swift, returning the reader to the opening scene: Obi is caught in a police sting operation accepting an inconsequential amount of money.





## Quotes

"Every available space in the courtroom was taken up. There were almost as many people standing as sitting. The case had been the talk of Lagos for a number of weeks and on this last day anyone who could possibly leave his job was there to hear the judgment. Some civil servants paid as much as ten shillings and sixpence to obtain a doctor's certificate of illness for the day.

"Obi's listlessness did not show any signs of decreasing even when the judge began to sum up. It was only when he said: 'I cannot comprehend how a young man of your education and brilliant promise could have done this' that a sudden and marked change occurred. Treacherous tears came into Obi's eyes. He brought out a white handkerchief and rubbed his face. But he did it as people do when they wipe sweat. He even tried to smile and belie the tears. A smile would have been quite logical. All that stuff about education and promise and betrayal had not taken him unawares. He had expected and rehearsed this very scene a hundred times until it had become as familiar as a friend." Chap. 1, p. 2.

"But this man had no following. The men of Umuofia were prepared to fight to the last. They had no illusions about Obi. He was, without doubt, a very foolish and self-willed young man. But this was not the time to go into that. The fox must be chased away first; after that the hen might be warned against wandering into the bush.

"When the time for warning came the men of Umuofia could be trusted to give it in full measure, perched down and flowing over. The President said it was a thing of shame for a man in the senior service to go to prison for twenty pounds. He repeated twenty pounds, spitting it out. 'I am against people reaping where they have not sown. But we have a saying that if you want to eat a toad you should look for a fat and juicy one.'

"'It is all lack of experience,' said another man. 'He should not have accepted the money himself. What others do is tell you to go and hand it to their houseboy. Obi tried to do what everyone does without finding out how it was done.' He told the proverb of the house rat who went swimming with his friend the lizard and died from cold, for while the lizard's scales kept him dry the rat's hairy body remained wet." Chap. 1, pp. 6-7

"'What will you have, Mr. Okonkwo?' asked Macmillan.

"'Beer, please. It's getting rather warm.' He drew his thumb across his face and flicked the sweat away.

"'Isn't it?' said Macmillan, blowing into his chest. 'What's your first name, by the way? Mine's John.'

"'Obi is mine.'

"'Obi, that's a fine name. What does it mean? I'm told that all African names mean something.'

"'Well, I don't know about African names — Ibo names, yes. They are often long sentences. Like that prophet in the Bible who called his son The Remnant Shall Return.'

"'What did you read in London?'

"'English. Why?'

"'Oh, I just wondered. And how old are you? Excuse my being so inquisitive.'

"'Twenty-five,' said Obi. 'And you?'





"Now that's strange, because I'm twenty-five. How old do you think Miss Okeke is?"  
"Women and music should not be dated,' Obi said, smiling. 'I should say about twenty-three.'

"She is very beautiful, don't you think?"

"Oh, yes, she is indeed." Chap. 3, pp. 30-31.

"Four years in England had filled Obi with a longing to be back in Umuofia. This feeling was sometimes so strong that he found himself feeling ashamed of studying English for his degree. He spoke Ibo whenever he had the least opportunity of doing so. Nothing gave him greater pleasure than to find another Ibo-speaking student in a London bus. But when he had to speak in English with a Nigerian student from another tribe he lowered his voice. It was humiliating to have to speak to one's countryman in a foreign language, especially in the presence of the proud owners of that language. They would naturally assume that one had no language of one's own. He wished they were here today to see. Let them come to Umuofia now and listen to the talk of men who made a great art of conversation. Let them come and see men and women and children who knew how to live, whose joy of life had not yet been killed by those who claimed to teach other nations how to live." Chap. 5, p. 57

"Mr. Omo jumped to his feet as soon as Mr. Green came in. Simultaneously he pocketed the other half of the kola nut he was eating.

"Why hasn't the Study Leave file been passed to me?' Mr Green asked.

"I thought...'

"You are not paid to think, Mr. Omo, but to do what you are told. Is that clear? Now send the file to me immediately.'

"Yes, sir.'

"Mr Green slammed the door behind him and Mr. Omo carried the file personally to him. When he returned he began to rebuke a junior clerk who, it seemed, had caused all the trouble.

"Obi had now firmly decided that he did not like Mr. Green and that Mr. Omo was one of his old Africans. As if to confirm his opinion the telephone rang. Mr. Omo hesitated, as he always did when the telephone rang, and then took it up as if it was liable to bite.

"Hello. Yes, sir.' He handed it over to Obi with obvious relief. 'Mr. Okonkwo, for you.'

"Obi took the telephone. Mr. Green wanted to know whether he had received a formal offer of appointment. Obi said, no, he hadn't.

"You say sir to your superior officers, Mr. Okonkwo,' and the telephone was dropped with a deafening bang." Chap. 7, p. 75

"When Obi got back to Joseph's room it was nearly eleven o'clock. Joseph was still up. In fact he had been waiting all the afternoon to complete the discussion they had suspended last night.

"How is Clara?' he asked. He succeeded in making it sound casual and unrehearsed. Obi was not prepared to plunge headlong into it. He wanted to begin at the fringes as he used to do many years ago when he was confronted with a morning bath in the cold harmattan season. Of all the parts of his body, his back liked cold water the least. He would stand before the bucket of water thinking how best to tackle it. His mother would call: 'Obi, haven't you finished? You will be late for school and they will flog you.' He



would then stir the water with one finger. After that he would wash his elbow, then the rest of his arms and legs, the face and head, the belly, and finally, accompanied by a leap into the air, his back. He wanted to adopt the same method now.

"'She is fine,' he said. 'Your Nigerian police are very cheeky, you know.'

"'They are useless,' said Joseph, not wanting to discuss the police." Chap. 7, p. 84

"A big lump caught in Obi's throat.

"'What the Government pays you is more than enough unless you go into bad ways.'

Many of the people said: 'God forbid!' 'We cannot afford bad ways,' went on the President. 'We are pioneers building up our families and our town. And those who build must deny ourselves many pleasures. We must not drink because we see our neighbors drink or run after women because our thing stands up. You may ask why I am saying all this, I have heard that you are moving around with a girl of doubtful ancestry, and even thinking of marrying her . . .'

"Obi leapt to his feet trembling with rage. At such times words always deserted him." Chap. 8, pp. 94-95

"Obi felt very sorry for her. She was obviously an intelligent girl who had set her mind, like so many other young Nigerians, on university education. And who could blame them? Certainly not Obi. It was rather sheer hypocrisy to ask if a scholarship was as important as all that or if university education was worth it. Every Nigerian knew the answer. It was yes.

"A university degree was the philosopher's stone. It transmuted a third-class clerk on one hundred and fifty a year into a senior civil servant on five hundred and seventy, with a car and luxuriously furnished quarters at nominal rent. And the disparity in salary and amenities did not tell even half the story. To occupy a 'European post' was second only to actually being a European. It raised a man from the masses to the élite whose small talk at cocktail parties was: 'How's the car behaving?'

"'Please, Mr. Okonkwo, you must help me. I'll do whatever you ask.' She avoided his eyes. Her voice was a little unsteady, and Obi thought he saw a hint of tears in her eyes.

"'I'm sorry, terribly sorry, but I don't see that I can make any promises.'" Chap. 9, p. 105

"'Obi, what about some beer?'

"'If you'll split a bottle with me.'

"'Fine. What are you people doing this evening? Make we go dance somewhere?'

"Obi tried to make excuses, but Clara cut him short. They would go, she said.

"'Na film I wan' go,' said Bisi.

"'Look here, Bisi, we are not interested in what you want to do. It's for Obi and me to decide. This na Africa, you know.'

"Whether Christopher spoke good or 'broken' English depended on what he was saying, where he was saying it, to whom and how he wanted to say it. Of course that was to some extent true of most educated people, especially on Saturday nights. But Christopher was rather outstanding in thus coming to terms with a double heritage."

Chap. 11, pp. 125-126



"He paused to collect his thoughts, turned in his chair, and faced the bed on which Obi lay. 'I tell you all this so that you may know what it was in those days to become a Christian. Because I suffered I understand Christianity—more than you will ever do.' He stopped rather abruptly. Obi thought it was a pause, but he had finished.

"Obi knew the sad story of Ikemefuna who was given to Umuofia by her neighbors in appeasement. Obi's father and Ikemefuna became inseparable. But one day the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves decreed that the boy should be killed. Obi's grandfather loved the boy. But when the moment came it was his mathet that cut him down. Even in those days some elders said it was a great wrong that a man should raise his hands against a child that called him father." Chap. 14, pp. 157-158

"'You are making things difficult for yourself. How many times did I tell you that we were deceiving ourselves? But I was always told I was being childish. Anyway, it doesn't matter. There is no need for long talk.'

"Obi sat down again. Clara went to lean on the window and look outside. Obi began to say something, but gave it up after the first three words or so. After another ten minutes of silence Clara asked, hadn't he better be going?

"'Yes,' he said, and got up.

"'Good night.' She did not turn from her position. She had her back to him.

"'Good night,' he said.

"'There was something I wanted to tell you, but it doesn't matter. I ought to have been able to take care of myself.'

"Obi's heart few into his mouth. 'What is it?' he asked in great alarm.

"'Oh, nothing. Forget it. I'll find a way out.'" Chap. 15, pp. 162-163

"'Are you Mr. Okonkwo?' asked the stranger. Obi said yes in a voice he could hardly have recognized. The room began to swim round and round. The stranger was saying something, but it sounded distant—as things sound to a man in a fever. He then searched Obi and found the marked notes. He began to say some more things, invoking the name of the Queen, like a District Officer in the bush reading the Riot Act to an uncomprehending and delirious mob. Meanwhile the other man used the telephone outside Obi's door to summon a police van.

"Everybody wondered why. The learned judge, as we have seen, could not comprehend how an educated young man and so on and so forth. The British Council man, even the men of Umuofia, did not know. And we must presume that, in spite of his certitude, Mr. Green did not know either." Chap. 19, pp. 193-194



## Topics for Discussion

Is Isaac Okonkwo consistent in objecting to Obi marrying an osu?

Should Obi's arguments from Christian scripture be persuasive for someone of his father's mind-set?

What do the "mammy-wagon" trips contribute to the novel?

How does Obi differentiate Ibo from African?

What literary illusion in the novel do you most enjoy? How is it used and what does it contribute to the story?

What role does Joseph play in the novel's development? Why do you suppose he vanishes after Obi moves to his own flat?

How does Christopher contribute to the novel? Could you find him as a friend?

Is Clara's animosity justified? Are there any signs earlier in the novel that she will turn so vehemently against Obi?