No Sweetness Here Study Guide

No Sweetness Here by Ama Ata Aidoo

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Introduction

Ama Ata Aidoo's short story "No Sweetness Here" first appeared in 1970 as the title piece in *No Sweetness Here*, Aidoo's first collection of stories.

The story is narrated by a character known as Chicha, which is the local pronunciation of "teacher." Chicha is a Westernized woman who is the schoolteacher in the small Fanti village of Bamso. As the story opens, she is visiting Maami Ama, whose beautiful ten-year-old son Kwesi is Chicha's favorite pupil. Maami Ama tells Chicha of her seven-year-long marriage to Kodjo Fi; although she is his first wife, her husband has neglected her and shut her away from the rest of his family. The divorce proceedings between Maami Ama and Kodjo Fi take place the following day. As a result, Kwesi is to be taken away from his mother and placed in the custody of his father, who has taken no interest in him up to this point. Shortly after this decision is made, Kwesi is found bitten by a snake, and dies that night. After Kwesi's funeral, Chicha finds Maami Ama alone in her hut, clutching Kwesi's schoolbooks and uniform in agonized mourning.

This story concerns several themes central to Aidoo's works of fiction. It places an educated, Westernized African woman in the context of traditional village life. From this "outsider" perspective, the narrator is able to observe the unfair treatment of women in traditional marriage customs.

Author Biography

Novelist, playwright, and short story writer Ama Ata Aidoo was born on March 23, 1942, in Abeadzi Kyiakor, Gold Coast (now Ghana). Her mother was Maame Abba Abasema, and her father, a chief of Abeadzi Kyiakor, was Nana Yaw Fama. Aidoo attended the University of Ghana, graduating with a B.A., with honors, in 1964. She later attended Stanford University. From 1970 to 1982, Aidoo worked as a lecturer in English at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana. She was a consulting professor at the Phelps-Stokes Fund Ethnic Studies Program in Washington, D.C., from 1974 to 1975, and from 1982 to 1983, she held the post of Minister of Education in Ghana. She was writer-in-residence at the University of Richmond, Virginia, in 1989. In 1990 and 1991, Aidoo was the Chair of the African Regional Panel of the Commonwealth Writer's Prize. She has one child, Kinna Likimani.

Aidoo was first noted for her play *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965), which was first performed in 1964. This was followed in 1970 by the publication of her play *Anowa*. Aidoo's first collection of short stories, *No Sweetness Here*, was published in 1970. Her first novel, loosely autobiographical, entitled *Our Sister Killjoy; or Reflections from a Black- Eyed Squint*, was published in 1977. Aidoo has subsequently published several collections of poetry and a collection of stories for children. Her second novel, *Changes: A Love Story*, published in 1991, has received a generally positive response from critics, who see it as an improvement over her first novel. Aidoo has contributed stories to numerous anthologies, including *Modern African Stories* (1964) and *African Literature and the Arts* (1970). All of Aidoo's works are written in English.

Aidoo has become known for her fiction, which stresses the struggles of the modern African woman in an era of post-colonialism. Her works have been noted for their treatment of feminist concerns and their mixture of traditional African and Western literary styles.

Plot Summary

The narrator of this story is a Westernized woman working as the schoolteacher in the Fanti village of Bamso. She is known only as Chicha, the Fanti pronunciation of "teacher." As the story opens, she is visiting the hut of Maami Ama, whose ten-yearold son Kwesi is Chicha's favorite pupil. Chicha commends Maami Ama on Kwesi's physical beauty, teasing that she is going to kidnap Kwesi and take him away with her; Maami Ama appreciates the compliment, but also expresses her fear of losing her only child. Maami Ama explains that, although she is his first wife, she has been completely neglected by her husband of seven years, Kodjo Fi. She has been given his worst piece of land to farm, been personally ignored by him, and been shut out of the rest of his family; both his two sisters and his mother treat her badly. He has also taken no interest in their son Kwesi, who lives with Maami Ama. Maami Ama says to Chicha, "Our people say a bad marriage kills the soul. Mine is fit for burial." When Kwesi arrives home, Chicha observes the joy his arrival brings to his mother: "All at once, for the care-worn village woman, the sun might well have been rising from the east instead of setting behind the coconut palms. Her eyes shone."

On the following day, which is a festival day of Ahobaada, the divorce proceedings between Maami Ama and Kodjo Fi are conducted in the center of the village. During her students' recess, Chicha goes to observe the divorce and learns that Kwesi has been awarded to his father's custody. The people of the village seem to feel this is a fair decision. In addition, Kodjo Fi has not been made to pay Maami Ama a fee he officially owes her. The two sides of the family, Ama's and Kodjo Fi's, argue among themselves regarding the details of the divorce decision. Yet Maami Ama accepts these decisions with complete passivity, not attempting to fight for her rights to her son and the money she is owed.

When Chicha returns to the schoolhouse, all of the children are gone. She then finds them crowded in a circle around Kwesi, who is lying on the ground, having been bitten by a snake. Although Kwesi is attended to by both a traditional medicine man and a Western doctor, he dies that night. The next day, Chicha learns that Kwesi's family members are arguing among themselves as to who is responsible for his death. Chicha sits down and thinks of the ambitions she had had in mind for Kwesi□that he would leave the village to become highly educated and a world traveler. Chicha brings the schoolchildren to Kwesi's funeral and to the cemetery where he is buried. Both sides of Kwesi's family have set aside their differences in mourning the loss of this child. After the funeral, Chicha goes to Maami Ama's hut to find her in agonized mourning, clutching Kwesi's schoolbooks and uniform.

Summary

"No Sweetness Here" is Ama Ata Aidoo's short story of the traditional roles of African women as told from the point of view of a Westernized African woman teaching in a small village school.

The narrator, who is referred to as Chicha, thinks about the discussions she has held about one of her students, Kwesi, a ten-year-old boy, with Kwesi's mother, Maami Ama. Chicha remembers commenting on Kwesi's stunning good looks and teasing Maami Ama that if Chicha were to ever go away from the village she will take Kwesi with her. Maami was both pleased and concerned about Chicha's comments, since she lives in fear of losing her only son to her husband, Kodjo Fi.

Today, Chicha waits for Maami Ama to return to her hut from the day's work in the fields. The time is after four o'clock, and school has just been dismissed. The older people in the village who no longer work in the fields call out compliments and encouragement to Chicha for her good work at the school.

Maami Ama returns home a little late today and is separating the gathered vegetables when Chicha arrives. Tomorrow is the Ahobaada holiday remembering a man who sacrificed himself to the gods to save the village from pestilence. Maami Ama has an admirable crop today but appears sad, and Chicha questions her about her mood. Chicha reveals that tomorrow she will be divorced from Kodjo Fi, and she is almost certain that she will have to relinquish Kwesi to his father.

Maami Ama is the first of Kodjo Fi's three wives, and yet she has always been mistreated by him and his family. She has received the least favorable plot of land to work and almost no money to raise Kwesi. Life as one of Kodjo Fi's wives has been an unbearable trial, and Maami Ama would be glad to be rid of the tie to Kodjo Fi if it were not for the fact that she will probably lose her only son in the process.

Kwesi's arrival at the hut immediately brightens Maami Ama's mood, and the boy acts shyly because Chicha is in his home. Chicha cannot help but notice that Kwesi is Maami Ama's whole world and that nothing else exists while he is in her presence.

The next day is the holiday, and all over the village, people are mending quarrels and broken relationships, as is the custom for the day. Despite the holiday, Chicha has not let the children off from school, and their restless behavior all day is payment for this transgression. At three o'clock, Chicha sends the students outside to play with the intention of visiting Maami Ama's divorce proceedings and then returning to the school at four o'clock for formal dismissal.

Chicha makes her way to the home of Nana Kum, Maami Ama's aunt, where the divorce proceedings have just finished. By the bits of conversation Chicha hears among the villagers, she knows that the divorce is final and that Kwesi is to be turned over to Kodjo Fi. In addition, Maami Ama must pay Kodjo Fi for items and money he provided over the

course of this ill-fated marriage. Chicha marvels at the strength shown by Maami, who must find a way to pay this amount as well as give up Kwesi to live with his father and relatives who do not know him.

Chicha can do nothing more here, so she returns to the school to find that all the children have already left the schoolyard although their books and other items remain in the classroom. Noise from the street draws Chicha outside, and she sees a crowd of children in the street near Maami Ama's house.

As Chicha draws nearer, she sees Kwesi lying in the street, naked from the waist up, his arm swollen to the size of his head from a snakebite. As the adults gather, cures and potions are offered up to no avail, and the villagers wait nervously for messenger to return from a neighboring village with the chief medicine man.

The medicine man is well known for bringing people back from the brink of death by administering a potion that purges the venom from the victim's body. Usually the potion works within an hour or two, but Kwesi never vomits the venom and is dead before midnight. No one in the village sleeps that night for mourning the death of Kwesi, and the villagers say, "And he was his mother's only child. She has no one now. We do not understand it. Life is not sweet!"

The families of Maami Ama and Kodjo Fi argue about whose family caused this horrible death, and Chicha thinks about the illustrious life Kwesi could have had outside this tiny village given his good looks and intelligence. The only thing to do now, though, is to bury Kwesi, and Chicha takes the schoolchildren to the funeral and to the cemetery to say goodbye to their classmate.

After the funeral, Chicha visits the House of Mourning, where she listens to some of the other visitors comment on Maami Ama's unhappy fate with the loss of her only child. The visitors have no advice, and one of them asks to no one in particular, "What does one do when one's only water pot breaks?"

Chicha leaves to go to Maami Ama's house and finds the woman kneeling on the floor clutching Kwesi's schoolbooks and clothes. Maami Ama does not respond to Chicha's presence, so the teacher leaves the hut to return to her own home.

Analysis

The story is told from the first person narrative point of view, which means that the reader understands the story's plot line and thoughts and emotions from the perspective of the main character, Chicha. In this particular case, it is almost as if Chicha is a sage providing wisdom about what she encounters because she is an African woman who has left her village in Ghana to become westernized and educated. This position elevates her in the eyes of the villagers, so the reader also gets a deeper view of the plot as opposed to a simple re-telling of the facts.

Chicha has selected Kwesi as her favorite student and is devastated at his death, not only because of his young age, but also for the loss of promise and potential he had and the illustrious life he could have lived away from the village. This is an educated position rare for an African woman, whose plight is typically one of subservience and lack of rights.

The chasm between Western cultures and the African village culture is particularly evident in the divorce proceedings, where it is assumed that Maami Ama will lose everything in spite of the fact that Kodjo Fi has been an unfit husband and father. Women have no rights in the village, and Maami Ama's life essentially ends with Kwesi's because she has no child or husband any longer. This makes her an outcast in the village society.

Most of the villagers rely on ancient rituals, and the ministrations of the medicine man and even Kwesi's death become topics of superstition as the gossip hinges on whether it was the behavior of Maami Ama or Kodjo Fi which caused the death. The author also uses symbolism to portray Maami Ama's dismal plight. When Chicha comments that Maami Ama's yams look big enough for the holiday, Maami Ama replies, "Do you think so? Well, they are the best of the lot. My daughter, when life fails you, it fails you totally. One's yams reflect the total sum of one's life. And mine look wretched enough."

The story and the plot line play out the story's title, as the villagers comment after Kwesi's death, "She has no one now. We do not understand it. Life is not sweet!"

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Characters

Chicha

Chicha (the local "Fanticized" pronunciation of the English word "teacher") is the village schoolteacher and narrator of the story. She holds a unique position as a Westernized person who is living in the traditional Fanti village of Bamso. This narrator's "outsider" perspective on the events and traditions of the village provides the non-Fanti reader with a point of identification. Thus, the peculiarities of local traditions regarding marriage are questioned by this Western perspective. In the beginning of the story, Chicha is visiting Maami Ama at her house, discussing her son Kwesi and her unpleasant marriage. The next day, Chicha goes during her students' recess to observe the divorce proceedings. When she returns to the school, all the children are gone. She finds them surrounding Kwesi, who has been bitten by a snake. After Kwesi dies, Chicha finds Maami Ama in mourning in her home.

Kodjo Fi

Kodjo Fi is Maami Ama's husband. He is described as "a selfish and bullying man, whom no decent woman ought to have married." Although Maami Ama is his first wife, he has neglected her, given her his worst piece of land to farm, and isolated her from the rest of his family during their seven years of marriage. During the divorce proceedings, he is clearly favored over Maami Ama, given the rights to their only child and allowed to forego a fee he should have had to pay to her.

Kwesi

Kwesi, a ten-year-old boy, is Maami Ama's only child and a favorite of Chicha. He is repeatedly referred to as a beautiful child and described as "quite tall for his age. His skin was as smooth as shea-butter and as dark as charcoal. His black hair was as soft as his mother's. His eyes were of the kind that always remind one of a long dream on a hot afternoon." The narrator comments, "It is indecent to dwell on a boy's physical appearance, but then Kwesi's beauty was indecent." The result of his parents' divorce is that he is to leave his mother's house to live with his father's family. Shortly after the divorce proceedings, Kwesi is found lying on the ground, surrounded by the other school children, having been bitten by a snake. Although he is nursed for days by both a traditional medicine man and a Western doctor, he dies.

Maami Ama

Maami Ama is the mother of Kwesi, who is her only son. As the story opens, she explains to Chicha the unfortunate circumstances of her seven-year marriage to Kodjo Fi. Although she is his first wife, she has been given his worst piece of land to farm and

has been shunned and isolated by the rest of his family. Although she loves her son dearly, she does not protest when, as a result of the divorce, his custody is granted to his father instead of her. She also does not protest not receiving the fee which her ex-husband is required to pay her. After Kwesi dies, Chicha finds her in mourning in her home. Maami Ama, from the perspective of Chicha, represents the extent to which women in this traditional culture passively accept unfair treatment by their community.

Themes

Marriage and Tradition

This story explores the perspective of the narrator, an "outsider," a Westernized African woman referred to as Chicha, on the marriage traditions of a small Fanti village. Maami Ama explains to Chicha that she has been unhappily married for seven years to a man named Kodjo Fi. Although she is his first wife, he has completely neglected her, as well as their son, and has allowed the rest of his family to shun and isolate her. In addition, Kodjo Fi is described as "a selfish and bullying man, whom no decent woman ought to have married." Maami Ama's "formal divorce" from Kodjo Fi exposes the narrator to traditional attitudes and practices of her culture which she had either not known or forgotten. The divorce proceedings take place at the home of one of the women of the village, and other members of the community attend for the sake of entertainment. When Chicha arrives on the scene, it has been decided that Kwesi will be taken away from Maami Ama, who has raised him, and given into the custody of his father, who has neglected him up to this point. In addition, Maami Ama is expected to pay a variety of fees to her husband which she cannot afford to pay. Finally, Kodjo Fi manages to shirk the paying of a fee he should traditionally have been required to pay to Maami Ama. Chicha observes the extent to which all of these traditions are unfair to the woman in the divorce. Maami Ama accepts the outcome passively, not even attempting to fight for the right to keep her son. As these various traditional rules of marriage and divorce are explained to her, Chicha recalls, "I sat there listening to these references to the age-old customs of my people of which I had been ignorant." The entire divorce process reminds Chicha of the distance between the traditional culture from which she comes and the Westernized perspective she has acquired through her higher education.

Gender and Beauty Standards

Chicha's admiration of Kwesi, the ten-year-old schoolboy, focuses above all on her observation of his sheer physical beauty. This highlights the teacher's outsider status to her own culture, in which it is considered inappropriate to dwell upon male physical beauty. The theme of male beauty thus develops Aidoo's central themes of gender roles in traditional culture and the perspective of the Westernized African on her own society. The story opens with a developed discussion of this theme: "He was beautiful, but that was not important. Beauty does not play such a vital role in a man's life as it does in a woman's, especially if that man is Fanti. If a man's beauty is so ill-mannered as to be noticeable, people discreetly ignore its existence. Only an immodest girl like me would dare comment on a boy's beauty." The narrator again dwells on the physical details of the boy's beauty, acknowledging once again the extent to which such observations are contrary to traditional notions of gender: "His skin was as smooth as shea-butter and as dark as charcoal. His black hair was as soft as his mother's. His eyes were of the kind that always remind one of a long dream on a hot afternoon. It is indecent to dwell on a boy's physical appearance, but then Kwesi's beauty was indecent."

Maternal Love

The central relationship of the story is that between Maami Ama and her son Kwesi. The mother's love for her beautiful son is emphasized throughout the story, making his death all the more tragic. Kwesi is Maami Ama's only child and only real family, as she has been isolated from that of her husband. When Chicha jokes of kidnapping Kwesi to take him with her, Maami Ama expresses her "gnawing fear" of losing him: "'Please, Chicha, I always know you are just making fun of me, but please, promise me you won't take Kwesi away with you.' Almost at once her tiny mouth would quiver and she would hide her eyes in her cloth as if ashamed of her great love and her fears." Maami Ama goes on to plead, "'What will I do, Chicha, what would I do, should something happen to my child?' She would raise her pretty eyes, glistening with unshed tears." Maami Ama then insists that, should Kwesi misbehave in school, she herself would "willingly submit" to the punishment of caning in place of her child. These expressions of maternal love in the beginning of the story make all the more poignant and significant the mother's mourning of her son's death in the end. After Kwesi's funeral, Chicha finds Maami Ama in her hut, "kneeling, and like one who catches at a straw, she was clutching Kwesi's books and school uniform to her breast."

Style

Narration

This story is told from the perspective of the *first person restricted* point of view. This means that the narrator is a character in the story, and that the narrative point of view is limited to that of the narrator. The reader is given only information available to the narrator□in this case Chicha, the schoolteacher in the small Fanti village of Bamso. This narrative technique is effective for this story in that it allows the reader to identify with a woman who is an outsider to the traditional village culture in which she is living and working. Thus, her perspective on the characters and events around her, such as the conditions of the marriage and the traditions of divorce between Maami Ama and Kodjo Fi, is that of an outside observer. Although this is her culture of origin, she has been educated in a Western culture and so her own traditions are unfamiliar to her. This allows her, and the reader, both a privileged inside view of a traditional African culture and the vantage point of an outside perspective. This narrative technique allows for the exploration of themes central to much of Aidoo's fiction: the conflicts faced by the African woman who has been immersed in Western education and culture, as well as the unfair conditions of African women in traditional African culture.

Language

The use of language is central to Aidoo's story. Aidoo's fiction is written in English, but incorporates some elements of African languages and words, as well as hybridized terms that have grown out of the collision between African and Western culture. For instance, the narrator is called Chicha, which, it is explained, is the "Fanticized" pronunciation of the English word "teacher." Another example of "Fanticized" English occurs in an exchange between Chicha and Nana, whom she passes on her way home:

'Kudiimin-o, Chicha.' Then I would answer,
'Kudiimin, Nana.' When I greeted her first, the response
was 'Tanchiw', that is 'Thank you.'

The reader may guess that "Kudiimin-o" must be the Fanticized pronunciation of "Good morning."

Dialogue

Aidoo's first two literary publications were both stage plays. Critics have noted that her prose fiction, like a stage play, relies heavily on dialogue as a means of conveying character and developing the story. She thus allows the characters to speak for themselves, rather than telling the reader how to interpret them. This story makes use of dialogue between Maami Ama and Chicha in order to convey Maami Ama's feelings about her son and her relationship to her husband and his family. Dialogue is also

central in the scene of the divorce proceedings, where Maami Ama's family members argue with Kodjo Fi's family members regarding the outcome of the divorce.

Description

While dialogue is central to developing character and building the story, Aidoo also uses vivid descriptive language in order to convey the daily life of a traditional woman in her village. During the conversation Chicha has with Maami Ama about her son Kwesi and her marriage, the description of Maami Ama's preparation of the food she has just brought in from her field captures a sense of her everyday life and work. The description, rich with mouth-watering details of the food itself and vivid with color, is worth quoting at length:

> . . .when I arrived at the hut, Maami Ama had just arrived from the farm. . .Oh, that picture is still vivid in my mind. She was sitting on a low stool with her load before her. Like all the loads the other women would bring from the farms into their homes, it was colourful with miscellaneous articles. At the very bottom of the wide wooden tray were the cassava and yam tubers, rich muddy brown, the colour of the earth. Next were the plantain, of the green colour of the woods from which they came. Then there were the gay vegetables, the scarlet pepper, garden eggs, golden pawpaw and crimson tomatoes. Over this riot of colours the little woman's eyes were fixed, absorbed, while the tiny hands delicately picked the pepper.

Historical Context

Ghana

Aidoo was born in 1924, in the region of Africa now called Ghana. The history of Ghana, like that of many African nations, is that of colonization by Europeans, followed by national independence in the 20th century. The Portuguese first arrived in the region, by sea, in 1471. Their initial interest was in sources of gold, which they shipped to Europe. The area was thus known to Europeans as the Gold Coast until 1957. In the 1600s, Portuguese dominion in the Gold Coast ceded to the powers of Dutch, British, and Danish traders, who kidnapped Africans to be sold as slaves in the United States. In the early 1800s, these European nations outlawed slave trade. The British gradually increased their control in the Gold Coast during the 1800s, and in 1874 it was made a British colony. In the early 1900s, the primary trading resource of the Gold Coast became cocoa, from the development of vast cocoa plantations. In 1957, the region, renamed Ghana, achieved the right to self-government, although it remained a member of the British Commonwealth. In 1960, it became a republic. A military coup in 1972 resulted in an era of repressive policies; another military coup was carried out in 1981; in 1992, a new constitution was instituted, and in 1993 a fourth Republic of Ghana was established.

Education in Ghana

Chicha, the narrator of this story, is the schoolteacher in the small village of Bamso. Ghana enjoys a relatively high level of adult literacy, due in part to the government's establishment of a new system of education in 1974. There are three universities in Ghana, all of them owned and run by the government: The University of Ghana, the University of Science and Technology, and the University of Cape Coast.

West African Literature

M. Keith Booker has discussed Aidoo's works in the context of the development of the novel form in West African literature. Booker explains, "Writers from countries such as Nigeria and Ghana have been especially important in the development of the African novel, partially because Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa, and Ghana was the first African colony to achieve independence from British rule." Citing Amos Tutuola as a key figure, Booker adds, "Nigerian novelists can draw upon an especially strong tradition of oral storytelling." Tutuola's novel *The Palm-Wine Drunkard* (1952) was a seminal text in the development of West African literature in English. Booker claims that Tutuola "can be seen as a sort of bridge between traditional African oral narratives and the more conventionally literary African novels that began to be published soon after his work first appeared." Among other key West African novelists, according to Booker, is Chinua Achebe, particularly for his novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958); Booker states,

"Achebe has been an inspirational figure for the generation of African writers who followed him, not only in West Africa, but in the entire continent."

Literary Heritage

Like many African countries and cultures, each ethnic group in Ghana has a tradition of oral storytelling, including myths and legends on their religious figures and the beginning of the universe. Folktales are particularly important ways of both entertaining and imparting values. One type of folk story is the "dilemma tale," which presents social and moral issues in a way that provokes discussion of the topics raised. An example of this is Aidoo's *Anowa*.

While there is an emphasis on performance in the oral transmission of folktales, Ghana has a more modern theatrical tradition. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, commercial theater shows and troupes traveled throughout Ghana, coming into their own after World War II. Part of so-called "concert parties," three or more comedic actors in a troupe used stock characters to comment on social and familial problems while entertaining audiences. Primarily a nonurban phenomenon, these concert parties as a whole were rather like vaudeville in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in form, and, to some degree, content.

Critical Overview

Aidoo is best known for her stories, which combine both Western literary and African oral storytelling traditions in exploring themes of feminism and colonialism pertinent to the modern African woman. Aidoo's first two publications were the stage plays *The Dilemma of the Ghost* ((1965) and *Anowa* (1970). Her third publication was the short story collection *No Sweetness Here* (1970). Aidoo's first novel, *Our Sister Killjoy*, was published in 1977. Her second novel, *Changes: A Love Story*, was published in 1991. Aidoo has also published collections of stories and poems for children, including *An Eagle and Chickens and Other Stories* (1986) and *Birds and Other Poems* (1987). She has also published two collections of poetry: *Someone Talking to Someone* (1985) and *An Angry Letter in January and Other Poems* (1992).

The short story "No Sweetness Here" was originally published in 1970 as the title story in Aidoo's first collection of short stories, *No Sweetness Here*. According to Naana Banyiwa Horne, in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography, No Sweetness Here* "includes Aidoo's most successful efforts at integrating African oral techniques and Western literary conventions." Horne goes on to say that Aidoo's "feminist concerns are most apparent" in this collection: "This gallery of female portraits offers perceptive images of womanhood, exposing sexism and degradation, and celebrating the physical and intellectual capabilities of women. In this panorama Aidoo covers a wide range of issues: budding girlhood and the identity crisis emanating from growing up female in a sexist environment. . .; modernization and its impact on both rural and urban women . . .; and transcendence over degradation, followed by the assertion of humanist values. . . ." Further, "Aidoo's interests are comprehensive and essentially tragic, with all the stories echoing the same theme: the absence of any quintessential sweetness in life."

Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang, commenting on Aidoo's hybrid style, explains, "There is an experimental fusion of oral traditional forms, sharp dialogue and commentary, vivid imagery and adept use of language, which make [*No Sweetness Here*] a unique collection." Opoku-Agyemang points to Aidoo's narrative style, in which she "excels, principally, in her methods of narration and in the creation of powerful scenes. There are shifting points of view and narrative turns in *No Sweetness Here* that bear testimony to exciting and successful artistic innovations." Focusing on the dual narration in the story "No Sweetness Here", she states, "The absence of freedom for these women is seen through their point of view." Chicha is the story's principal narrator, while Maami Ama is a secondary narrator, as she tells her own story to Chicha: "Chicha is a narrator and commentator, while Maami Ama is a narrator of her own story, and an autobiographer. The close relationship between the two is important. It allows Chicha to take over the narration of Maami Ama, when the death of Kwesi does not allow the latter to be sufficiently distanced emotionally to continue the narration." Opoku-Agyemang goes on to demonstrate that, using innovative narrative techniques, Aidoo creates strong female characters who must face their particular predicament within their own culture: *No Sweetness Here* "confirms Aidoo's artistic talents as one who constructs her narratives by exploring various forms of the short story, and at the same time providing a variety of

women in different contexts. These women are not superhuman. They are ordinary people who survive difficult circumstances. In using innovative forms to convey their plight, Aidoo shows artistic strength, pointing at possibilities and alternate ways of telling old tales to confront new problems."

Linda Strong-Leek also praises Aidoo's creation of strong female characters in *No Sweetness Here* in illustrating issues facing the modern African woman: "She is 'speaking about' many of the 'painful' situations faced by African women in her stories, such as being wives, mothers, prostitutes, cooks and children, or all these conditions combined, from the colonizers, and the Africans who replaced the colonizers after independence." Strong- Leek elaborates on this point: "The women in Aidoo's stories are strong, independent, and often willfully detached from society; yet they remain susceptible to the community's rules and definitions of womanhood. Although she seems to offer no final analysis or any definitive solution, Aidoo continually poses questions pertaining to how and why African women are subjugated, abused, neglected, and mistreated by post-colonial societies, and often by those they love."

Ada Uzoamaka Azodo and Gay Wilentz point out that Aidoo's feminist perspective is a distinctly African woman's perspective; Azodo and Wilentz caution that Aidoo's fiction points out the differences in feminist issues facing African women from those of Western women. They explain that Aidoo's "critical and creative writings have led to the development of a kind of African feminism based on the cultural traditions of the community and the region, which relates the political to the personal. She is one of the first women in African literature to address the fact that an acceptance of Western feminism, born from the patriarchal societies of Europe and the U.S., may not be what feminism has been set up to be for all peoples at all times; rather she turned to her own Akan cultural milieu, and began to examine what in that culture could direct an indigenous woman's movement that would make sense to the people."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Brent has a Ph.D. in American culture, specializing in film studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in the history of American cinema. In the following essay, Brent discusses the role of the narrator and the theme of cultural tradition in "No Sweetness Here."

A central concern of Aidoo's fiction is the dilemma of the African woman who has received a Western education and returned to her native village and culture. Aidoo's story "No Sweetness Here" focuses on such a character. The story's narrator, referred to only as Chicha, is a Fanti woman who has been educated by the standards of Western culture, then returns to the Fanti village of Bamso as the area's only schoolteacher. Chicha's story merges with that of Maami Ama, whose son Kwesi is Chicha's favorite pupil. As Chicha learns more about Maami Ama's ill-fated marriage and subsequent divorce, she is confronted with the extent to which she finds that her own Westernized perspective on these events is far different from "the ageold customs of my people of which I had been ignorant." In the following essay, I discuss several elements of Chicha's narration, which emphasize her encounter with these "age-old customs," and her own place as both a native and a foreigner to her own culture. I focus discussion on the cultural differences she encounters in terms of gender and beauty standards as well as conceptions of time.

Central to the story are Chicha's perceptions of the child Kwesi and of his relationship to his mother. She becomes aware of her place as outsider to her own culture in terms of her ideas about gender and beauty. The importance of Chicha's feeling for Kwesi's physical beauty is indicated by the fact that the story opens with the statement, "He was beautiful, . . ." But Chicha's sense of the inappropriateness of the concept of male beauty is immediately indicated when, in the same sentence, she makes the disclaimer, ". . .but that was not important." Chicha immediately goes on to explain the traditional Fanti perspective on male beauty: "Beauty does not play such a vital role in a man's life as it does in a woman's, especially if that man is a Fanti. If a man's beauty is so ill-mannered as to be noticeable, people discreetly ignore its existence." She then indicates her place as outsider to this Fanti perspective, admitting that "only an immodest girl like me would dare comment on a boy's beauty." While she "immodestly" reminds Maami Ama that her son is "so handsome," Maami Ama maintains the appropriate Fanti response to such a statement: "You should not say such things. The boy is not very handsome really." However, Chicha detects beneath this surface propriety on the part of Maami Ama the true feeling she has for Kwesi's physical beauty: "But she knew she was lying. 'Besides, Chicha, who cares whether a boy is handsome or not?' Again she knew that at least she cared, for, after all, "didn't the boy's wonderful personality throw a warm light on the mother's lively though already waning beauty?"

Flying in the face of the traditions of her own culture, the narrator paints for the reader a rich, sensuous portrait of Kwesi's beauty: "He was in Primary Class Four and quite tall for his age. His skin was as smooth as shea-butter and as dark as charcoal. His black hair was as soft as his mother's. His eyes were of the kind that always remind one of a

long dream on a hot afternoon." Chicha again follows this description with a disclaimer: "It is indecent to dwell on a boy's physical appearance, . . ." However, she rejoins this disclaimer with an ironic mouthing of the traditional perspective on such excessive male beauty: ". . .but then Kwesi's beauty was indecent."

Chicha contrasts this cultural taboo regarding male beauty with the idle afternoon talk of the old men, who casually discuss the physical beauty of a woman:

> "I say Kwame, as I was saying this morning, my first wife was a most beautiful woman," old Kofi would say. "Oh! Yes, yes, she was an unusually beautiful girl. I remember her."

By contrasting the taboo on the very idea of male beauty with the perfectly acceptable mention of female beauty, Aidoo suggests a critique of the traditional gender roles within Fanti culture. The narrator's status as both insider and outsider to this culture provides a perspective on these traditional gender roles, which puts them in question. On this issue, Aidoo implies that Chicha's semi-alienated status within her own culture makes possible a feminist critique of traditional Fanti gender roles.

Chicha's role as a non-traditional, Westernized outsider in her own culture is further emphasized through the repetition of a very different theme: time. At several points in the story, Chicha comments on the differences in her Westernized conception of time and the traditional Fanti conception of time. Chicha first mentions the Western conception of late afternoon by indicating, "My watch read 4:15 p.m. . ." She then contrasts this concrete, mechanized, Western conception of time with that of the Fanti. While the time according to the watch may be indicated in a brief statement, an explanation of the significance of this particular time of day for the Fanti requires a richer, more elaborate explanation:

> My watch read 4:15 p.m., that ambiguous time of the day, which the Fantis, despite their great ancient astronomic knowledge, have always failed to identify. For the very young and very old, it is certainly evening, for they've stayed at home all day and they begin to persuade themselves that the day is ending. Bored with their own company, they sprawl in the market-place or by their own walls. The children begin to whimper for their mothers, for they are tired with playing 'house'. Fancying themselves starving, they go back to what was left of their lunch, but really they only pray that mother will come home from the farm soon. The very old certainly do not go back on lunch remains but they do bite back at old conversational topics which were fresh at ten o'clock.

Thus, the Fanti conception of time is described in terms which evoke a particular mood shared by both young and old alike. However, Chicha identifies her own conception of the late afternoon with her regimented,Westernized education:

"But I was a teacher, and I went the white man's way.
School was over."

Throughout the story, Chicha mentions her watch and makes note of the time of various events and occurrences. As she walks toward Maami Ama's hut after school is out, she mentions, "I had only my little clock in my hand." It is as if the presence of the clock in her hand is a constant reminder to both herself and her reader that she has been so immersed in Western education that she can rarely even let go of Western conceptions of time, even within the community of her own Fanti people.

A clash between Fanti cultural tradition and a Westernized system of education again occurs in the context of the day of the festival of Ahobaada. As the village teacher, Chicha is compelled to comply with a schedule based on Western cultural practice, for, as she explains, "It had not been laid down anywhere in the Education Ordinance that schoolchildren were to be given holidays during local festivals." As a Fanti herself, however, she is painfully aware of the lack of provision for local cultural events and customs within this standardized system: "And so no matter how much I sympathized with the kids, I could not give them a holiday, although Ahobaada was such an important occasion for them they naturally felt it a grievance to be forced to go to school while their friends at home were eating too much yam and meat. . .In the afternoon, after having gone home to taste the festive dishes, they nearly drove me mad." Chicha thus again finds herself caught between the dictates of a Westernized education and the tug of cultural tradition upon the hearts and souls of her children.

Just as Chicha is not able to renounce a mechanized, Western conception of time, the implication here is that African children and parents must choose between the benefits of a Western education and the inevitable loss of cultural tradition attendant on such an endeavor. This loss of cultural ties that results from Western education is a central theme in much of Aidoo's fiction. Aidoo herself left her village of origin in order to receive a Western education, yet she expresses skepticism as to the value of this choice. As in the case of the character and story narrator Chicha, Aidoo questions the value of a choice that ultimately alienates the student from her or his own culture.

As in many of her stories, Aidoo's "No Sweetness Here" uses the narrative perspective of a character who is both outsider and insider to her own culture in order to launch a cultural critique on several levels. In this story, Chicha's Westernized perspective allows her to critique traditional Fanti gender roles, particularly regarding standards of beauty. On the other hand, however, Aidoo critiques the influence of Western culture, particularly education, on the African woman, as it ultimately works to alienate her from her own cultural traditions, such as the important festival of Ahobaada.

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

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay on Ama Ata Aidoo's No Sweetness Here*, Ode Ogede describes Ata Aidoo's work as a defense of both culture and womanhood, and defends the use orality as a means of achieving a textual representation of the particular forms of orality that draws on the "aesthetics of orality."*

In her book *African Novels and the Question of Orality,* Eileen Julien bitterly attacks the notion that there is anything particularly African about orality or anything essentially oral about African culture. The "oral form," she contends, "is not the concrete literary simulacrum of African essence but is, rather, a manifestation of social consciousness, vision, and possibility allowed by particular moments and niches in African sociocultural life." Despite her doubts about the wisdom of associating orality with Africa, Julien does acknowledge that the manifestation of oral forms in the work of African writers is common, but rarely discussed. Indeed, her book is, to date, the most detailed discussion of the major oral forms employed by such important African writers as Camara Laye, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, and Sembene Ousmane. It is likely to remain the definitive study in the field for a long time.

Oral forms hold a special appeal for African writers, and Julien identifies a number of reasons why: "The art of speaking is highly developed and esteemed in Africa for the very material reasons the voice has been and continues to be the more available medium of expression, that people spend a good deal of time with one another, talking, debating, entertaining. For these very reasons, there is also respect for speech and for writing as communicative social acts." But because Julien would both sniff at the idea of associating the oral with Africa, while simultaneously acknowledging the fact that "there is a continuity in African verbal arts. . . . T he artists are creatures of culture, their traditions are in them and inform their works," she engages in too much special pleading, betraying a defensiveness or protectionism toward Africa and the oral which is as objectionable as the Eurocentric prejudices that she attacks. If we are genuinely convinced that the oral is not an insignia of inferiority, we will hardly feel the need to conceal the fact that the African way of life is dominated by its oral culture.

One undeniable truth is that orality still serves as a badge of authenticity in the work of a number of African writers. But this tradition, which was first cogently elaborated in Chinua Achebe's famous words about his primary literary goal being to help his society "regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and selfabasement," has been radicalized by younger writers, including Ayi Kwei Armah and Ngugi, among others. What these younger writers all have in common is an agenda that goes beyond Achebe's intention to lead his people to a recognition that African societies "frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity" toward using oral forms as instruments for self-interrogation and as catalysts for revolutionary change in society. Ama Ata Aidoo, the only woman fiction writer of substance to come out of Ghana so far, reveals especially in her 1970 book of short stories, *No Sweetness Here,* that she was contemporaneous with Armah and Ousmane (and many years ahead of Ngugi) in using oral strategies in

fiction both to subject her people to self-scrutiny and to suggest the means that could lead them to freedom.

Ironically, this all-important aspect of Aidoo's work has received scant attention. She is, for instance, omitted entirely in Julien's study. And despite the early attention Dapo Adulugba drew to the didactic element in *No Sweetness Here*—a feature borrowed from oral tradition—by remarking that Aidoo exhibits "the involved, sympathetic eye of a critical patriot," criticism of the oral quality in Aidoo's work has been deflected to her 1979 novel, *Our Sister Killjoy,* which, in fact, relies less on oral forms than do her short stories. And yet, as Craig Tapping has conceded, "to hear Aidoo read from this novel [*Our Sister Killjoy*], her short stories, plays, or poetry is to recognize that . . . Aidoo graphs the voice of an excited storyteller, marking intonations and emphases through the learned technical conventions of open or free verse and its denoted terminals." Nonetheless, the transposed oral form, on the one hand, and an actual oral event, on the other, are, of course, two entirely different activities. Cynthia Ward makes this distinction clear with a fine example: "The value of the oral tale to the oral culture lies not entirely in the tale itself but, perhaps more significantly, in the discussion it generates after it is told, discussion that allows each participant to respond, whether by taking the center, presenting another illustrative fiction, or displaying his or her individual style." The oral performance is a live event that encourages communal participation, with gestures, mimicry, and body movement as its vital aspects. The difficulty in attempting to capture in print the key elements of performance is what makes Cynthia Ward remark, "What is lost in . . . transcription—where spoken words are lifted from their immediate social context and deposited on a page, which tolerates no immediate response— is precisely the oral."

But what about the different ways in which people in oral and literate cultures interpret phenomena? Ward opines that while there are differences, the idea popularized by Jack Goody and Ian Watt about the presumed simplicity of cognition in oral culture, relative to literate culture, is a myth. She believes that in writing cultures "discourse takes on its dictatorial 'discursive universe'"; so here, unlike what obtains in oral cultures, "words become objects with genealogies, subject to use in the service of establishing power and affirming an oppressive status quo." However, Ward goes on to observe how "even in writing, the oral antiaesthetic makes a space for itself as writers who . . . insist on life outside the text take up the pen only to find that by writing they abrogate their own rights over direct semantic ratification." Although her argument is obviously overstated, due, understandably, to the perennial frustration researchers experience in capturing the oral material in cold print, Ward succeeds in exploring the oral as manifested in the work of the Nigerian woman writer Buchi Emecheta. My paper hopes to accomplish a similar task in the work of Aidoo, Ghana's foremost woman writer.

Aidoo's *No Sweetness Here* is, like Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, a defense of both culture and womanhood. It is a defense of culture in that it deals with the acculturation problems of Africans, portraying an idealistic view of the threatened values; feminist in that it deals most sympathetically with the experience—the longings, agonies, frustrations, and pain—of being a woman in a male-dominated society.

Furthermore, Aidoo means in her stories to achieve a textual representation that draws on the aesthetics of orality. . . .

I have remarked earlier that the impact of all Aidoo's stories derives from her keen awareness that a story is not made interesting merely by its subject, but more importantly by its style, by how it is narrated. And although Odun Balogun in the essay cited above reasons that even a story with a thin theme can be redeemed by a good mastery of language, Aidoo's pieces like the title story "No Sweetness Here" and "Two Sisters" show that the best results are obtained from an intelligent balance of subject and style.

The theme of "No Sweetness Here" is the hardship African women encounter in polygamous households. This is in itself a subject of substantial interest but Aidoo adds pep to it by her choice of narrator: a teacher in a village school who knows her subject well, is objective, and is sensitive to suffering. She begins by recreating the daily routine of life in a typical village□the cycle of work and rest that typifies the life of ordinary women. Such a figure is Mami Ama, the central character of the story; a woman who has reasons to be happy but is not. Though she and her husband have been physically married for a long time, they have long been spiritually divorced. The object of abuse by her husband and his extended family and of the ridicule of her friends, Mami Ama's story frames the lives of many ordinary women who are victims of male brutality.

In the narrative design of the story, Aidoo is sensitive to the oral tradition of her culture, and the narrator's words capture well the rhythms of Ewe speech. She builds up Mami Ama's character charmingly□ always dutiful, cheerful, hardworking; in short, doing all her best to get on in life. Ultimately, Aidoo designs Mami's story as a protest against women's lot. Now an orphan, Mami gives everything to her marriage so as to secure happiness, but she gains nothing. When the divorce takes place, she will be separated from her only son, who will automatically be given to his father for custody. To reflect how the child means everything in her whole life, Mami calls him "my husband, my brother, my father, my all-in-all."

Aidoo confirms the crucial interest she takes in her Ewe expressive heritage through the dramatic effect she strives for. In "No Sweetness Here" the sense of performance is heightened. The story builds up to a very emotionally charged level. An instance is the scene of reunion between Mami and her son, Kwesi. When Kwesi returns from school, we sense the filial bond, the love and affectionate care of a good mother. Even though, as we learn, Kwesi does not help his mother as other children do by bringing home firewood, water, or working on the farm, Mami is uncomplaining. A crucial irony that enhances the dramatic impact of the story is that the divorce happens on a festival day, so on the fated day when Kwesi will be separated for good from his mother, he is happily playing football, innocent of what is happening.

The divorce scene, which presents one of the most unkind and most brutalizing treatments of womanhood in the whole of African fiction, affords Aidoo an opportunity to launch an open attack on some of the injustices embedded in traditional African culture. To the monologue of the narrator□we seem to get most of the information from the

narrator's reflections on Mami's plight□Aidoo adds dialogue, capitalizing effectively on its possibilities for both psychological penetration and dramatic representation. The reader witnesses the members of Mami's husband's family gang up with their son to humiliate a woman he once loved. The maltreatment that Mami receives is indeed pathetic; at the moment of separation she is branded foul names, abused, and then asked to refund her husband the dowry he paid on her. All her labors to feed and clothe her son, and to cater for his education without her husband's support, come to nothing□they take him away from her. The breakup involves two families, two communities that once were bonded by love. So hatred and animosity have replaced love and fellow feeling. The untimely death of Kwesi (from a snake bite) might belie a narrative design that reflects the author's desperation□a sort of an extreme and exaggerated reaction of pain to the injustices women suffer when polygamous marriages fail□but, in general, Aidoo's telling of this story embodies one of the attributes of the African writers who borrow from oral tradition: while acknowledging "the power and charm of the African oral tradition [she] will have none of that social stratification that the tales put forward. . . ."

Unlike many an alienated Western-educated African, Aidoo takes a deep interest in her roots. Her achievement in the act of simulated oral performance that I have discussed in this essay con- firms that the strategies and morals embedded in traditional oral literature can contribute meaningfully toward the redirection of all the shared patterns of cultural habits that govern contemporary African societies.

Source: Ode Ogede, "The Defense of Culture in Ama Ata Aidoo's No Sweetness Here: The Use of Orality as a Textual Strategy," in *The International Fiction Review,* Vol. 21, No. 1 & 2, 1994, pp. 76-84.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay on Ama Ata Aidoo's collection of short stories entitled No Sweetness Here*, Lloyd W. Brown examines the author's ironic perspective on the traditional roles of women, particularly rural women, in Africa.*

In "No Sweetness Here" the perspective on the rural woman shifts from the largely rural viewpoints, or self-images, of the village to the insights of a Western-educated young woman. The narrator is a school teacher through whose eyes we view Maami Ama, one of the vilage women. Maami is very attached to her son Kwesi who is also one of the narrator's pupils, but loses him, first to her estranged husband in a divorce hearing, and shortly after, to a fatal snake bite. The decidedly non-rural sources of the narrator's Western bearing and style are readily apparent in a mockingly scandalous candour about sex that evokes the notorious image of the sexually "liberated" Western, or Westernized, woman: "He was beautiful, but that was not important. Beauty does not play such a vital role in a man's life as it does in a woman's or so people think. If a man's beauty is so ill-mannered as to be noticeable, people discreetly ignore its existence. Only an immodest girl like me would dare comment on a boy's beauty. 'Kwesi is so handsome,' I was always telling his mother. . . . His eyes were of the kind that always remind one of a long dream on a hot afternoon. It is indecent to dwell on a boy's physical appearance, but then Kwesi's beauty was indecent."

On the surface, Aidoo seems to offer a fairly straightforward contrast between a narrator whose education and occupation effect the image of the self-sufficient outsider, and an older woman of traditional background. And this apparent contrast is the more marked when we consider the emphasis on Maami's vulnerability: her intense attachment to her son is as ambiguous as Mami Fanti's maternalism in "A Gift from Somewhere" in that this attachment both assures her claim to womanliness-throughmotherhood and compensates for the limitations of her role ("a lonely mother and a lonely son") in a society of male prerogatives; and the male's prerogatives are underlined by the fact that the divorce proceedings that are modelled on tribal custom allow her no recourse against her husband's exclusive claims on *his* son. But looked at more closely, this contrast is less clear-cut. If Maami Ama's intense attachment to Kwesi compensates for her sense of isolation and vulnerability, so does the narrator's. For Kwesi's future education, career, and even sexual exploits have become a vicarious means of fulfilment for a woman whose education and occupation□albeit Western□have brought her a smaller degree of choice or mobility than her liberated rhetoric implies. Significantly, too, this vicarious self-fulfilment excludes the domineering male figure in the story, Kwesi's father, Kodjo Fi: "In my daydreams . . . [Kwesi] would be famous, that was certain. Devastatingly handsome, he would be the idol of women and the envy of every man. He would visit Britain, America and all those countries we have heard so much about. . . . In all these reveries his father never had a place." On the whole, the narrator's insights into the ambiguous position of the rural woman reflect the ambiguities of her own situation. She too has a sense of personal vulnerability and limitations that she attempts to transcend through Kwesi's *male* future. Indeed, it is a major, and recurring, irony in Aidoo's work that the "progressive," "liberated," and "sophisticated"

images of the Westernized woman are really masks: underneath there are the familiar vulnerability and a new, self-destructive insecurity in a time of conflicting cultural values. This is clear enough in the "bad" city women of "In the Cutting of a Drink" and in the narrator's uneasy sense of kinship with the isolated and victimized mother of "No Sweetness Here." Hence the title of the latter work establishes a contextual irony for the narrative as a whole: on the one hand, it does imply a rebuttal of the notion that the situation of the rural woman is all sweetness, a notion that is fostered in the works of a writer like Nigeria's Oprian Ekwensi whose "bad" city women (especially Jagua Nana) usually retreat to unspoilt rural roots to re-discover a lost innocence; but, on the other hand, the title offers an even more personal reference, to the narrator's own individuality and to the lack of real "sweetness" (fulfilment behind her liberated Western image. Similarly, in "Everything Counts" the young university teacher who upholds her racial and sexual integrity by disdaining the national craze for European wigs still suffers from a sense of isolation□particularly since the Ghanaian "brothers" who have encouraged her in her militant African womanliness are still comfortably, and indefinitely, settled in Europe as perpetual students, with European girlfriends.

At the very least, however, the narrators of "No Sweetnees Here" and "Everything Counts" command respect because they are acutely aware of the irony of their situation as supposedly "liberated" and "independent" Western women. The doubledealing of her "brothers" overseas and its implication for her own isolation are not lost on the protagonist of "Everything Counts." And the narrator's conscious identification with Maami and Kwesi in "No Sweetness Here" attests to her awareness that her own situation is no less vulnerable than Maami's, and that conversely, her advantages as an "educated" woman are not necessarily superior to that resiliency of spirit that Aidoo invariably attributes to her rural women. There is no such awareness in the more intensely satiric "Two Sisters" where Aidoo ironically dons the style of the woman's magazine format in order to take a close survey of the urban middleclass woman. Her findings are not re-assuring. On the one hand, there is Connie, unhappily married to a compulsive philanderer, and on the other hand, there is her sister Mercy whose notions of "liberated" womanhood take the form of successive affairs with married politicians, their large cars, and with their healthy bank accounts. Aidoo's plot is pointedly hackneyed, for the ultimate irony of the sisters' lives is the essentially *deja vu* quality of their borrowed middleclass aspirations. As Aidoo's personified Gulf of Guinea muses, people are "worms" whose lives are both contradictory things and "repetitions of old patterns." Their tragedy as women, and the tragedy of their social milieu as a whole, consists of the fact that they are all living stereotypes whose experiences are a succession of second-hand clichés□ Mercy's neo-Hollywood obsession with "sexy" clothes, uniformed chauffers, and vulgarly large American cars; Connie's desperate determination to be respectably, even happily, married, and her hackneyed conviction that the new baby will, somehow, restore the marriage.

With her usual fastidious attention to the thematic function of her short-story techniques, Aidoo embellishes this description of a Westernized middleclass with all the popular banalities of Western women's magazines. Unlike the acutely self-conscious narrators of "No Sweetness Here" and "Everything Counts," the vapidly Westernized Mercy thinks in unconscious clichés:

As she shakes out the typewriter cloak and covers the machine with it, the thought of the bus she has to hurry to catch goes through her like pain. It is her luck, she thinks. Everything is just her luck. Why, if she had one of those graduates for a boy-friend wouldn't he come and take her home every evening? And she knows that a girl does not herself have to be a graduate to get one of those boys. Certainly, Joe is dying to do exactly that□with his taxi. And he is as handsome as anything, and a good man, but you know. . . .

Aidoo offers no easy solutions. Connie's baby effects a "magical" restoration of her failing marriage, a reconciliation that is suspect precisely because it is so sudden, so unfounded, and so obviously a mocking confirmation of Connie's wishfulfilment. As for Mercy, having barely survived one "heart-breaking" liaison she is all set to embark on another at the story's end□and her prospects are no more favorable than before. Like the ironic techniques of the narrative itself, their lives have settled into a "repetition of old patterns." Once again, Aidoo has fused her narrative art with the perspectives and roles of her African women.

Source: Lloyd W. Brown, "Ama Ata Aidoo: The Art of the Short Story and Sexual Roles in Africa," in *World Literature Written in English,* November, 1974, p. 179.

Topics for Further Study

Learn more about the history of Ghana (called the Gold Coast prior to 1957). What were the region and its peoples like before the colonization by Europeans in the 15th century? What were the conditions of colonization which characterized the Gold Coast until 1957? How has the nation changed since achieving independence as the Republic of Ghana in 1957?

Learn more about the cultural practices of Ghana and other African countries, in terms of the role of women in traditional African society. What traditions surround (or surrounded) courting, marriage, and family life in these regions?

Aidoo's work is preceded in the history of West African literature by Amos Tutuola, best known for his novel *The Palm-Wine Drunkard* (1952), and Chinua Achebe, for his novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Learn more about these authors and their fictional works. In what ways are their concerns similar to, or different from, those of Aidoo? What similarities do they share in literary style, and their connection to the oral tradition of storytelling in Africa?

The Republic of Ghana experienced various forms of national turmoil and social upheaval during the 1990s. Learn more about recent political events in Ghana. What types of conflicts have arisen within the nation, and how have these conflicts been resolved, or not?

Compare and Contrast

Late 19th-Early 20th Centuries: From 1874 to 1957, the region now called Ghana was a colony of Britain known as the Gold Coast.

Late 20th Century: In 1957, the Gold Coast achieved national self-rule, and was eventually renamed the Republic of Ghana.

1970s: During the time Aidoo's early works were being published, Ghana experienced several military coups, resulting in various forms of repression within the nation.

1990s: Beginning in 1994, Ghana experienced violent ethnic discord, as well as violent protest against new tax measures.

Early 20th Century: Ghana, then called the Gold Coast, was no longer a major source of gold, but had developed cocoa plantations as a primary export.

Late 20th Century: In 1997, new sources of gold were discovered in the Republic of Ghana, leading to the development of renewed mining operations.

1960: The life expectancy in Ghana was approximately 46 years.

1990: The life expectancy in Ghana had reached 55 years.

What Do I Read Next?

Things Fall Apart (1958), by Chinua Achebe, is considered the best known and most widely-read African novel.

Our Sister Killjoy: or, Reflections from a Black- Eyed Squint (1966) is Aidoo's first novel.

Changes: A Love Story (1991) is Aidoo's second novel.

No Sweetness Here (1970) is Aidoo's first collection of short stories.

The Palm-Wine Drunkard (1952) by Amos Tutuola is a seminal novel by the African writer who served as an inspiration for many writers who followed him.

Further Study

Odamtten,Vincent O., *The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo: Polylectics and Reading Against Neocolonialism*, 1994.

Odamtten includes critical essays on most of Aidoo's major works, interpreting them in the context of African history and culture.

Bibliography

Banyiwa Horne, Naana, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Volume 117: *Twentieth Century Caribbean and Black African Writers*, Gale, 1992.

Booker, M. Keith, *The African Novel in English*, Heinemann, 1998, pp. 30-32.

Opoku-Agyemang, Naana Jane, "Narrative Turns in Ama Ata Aidoo's 'No Sweetness Here,'" in *Emerging Perspectives on Ama Ata Aidoo*, edited by Ada Uzoamaka Azodo and Gay Wilentz, Africa World Press, 1999, pp. 128-35.

Strong-Leek, Linda, "Inverting the Institutions: Ama Ata Aidoo's 'No Sweetness Here' and Deconstructive Theory," in *Emerging Perspectives on Ama Ata Aidoo*, edited by Ada Uzoamaka Azodo and Gay Wilentz, Africa World Press, 1999, p. 146.

Uzoamaka Azodo, Ada, and Gay Wilentz, eds., *Emerging Perspectives on Ama Ata Aidoo*, Africa World Press, 1999, pp. xv-xvi.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Literature of Developing Nations for Students (LDNfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, LDNfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and

undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Literature of Developing Nations for Students

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

□Night.□ Literature of Developing Nations for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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