Vengeful Creditor Study Guide

Vengeful Creditor by Chinua Achebe

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Contents

Introduction

Chinua Achebe's story "Vengeful Creditor" first appeared in 1971 in the inaugural issue of *Okike: A Nigerian Journal of New Writing,* a magazine that Achebe founded, and it was later reprinted in his collection of stories, *Girls at War, and Other Stories.* The story focuses on the gap between the wealthy and the poor in the tumultuous environment of a haphazardly modernizing African country. The overt political Issue at stake is the government's institution of free primary education for children, a policy the well-to-do Emenikes resent because it means they will have difficulty keeping their servants. In order to obtain a nurse for their baby, the Emenikes promise an impoverished girl that she will eventually be able to go to school-her only chance at obtaining a better life for herself. As it becomes clear that the Emenikes are not going to make good on their promise, the young servant, Veronica, becomes increasingly resentful and acts out her frustration on the Emenikes and their child.

Achebe is known primarily as a novelist, and his 1958 novel *Things Fall Apart* is considered one of literature's most important African novels. He has written relatively few short stories in his career, but his collection *Girls at War, and Other Stories* like his novels, has received overwhelming positive reviews from critics. "Vengeful Creditor" in particular is noted for its satirical qualities in depicting "women and their aspirations, blighted. . . by the society and the circumstances that surround them," according to C. L. Innes in her book *Chinua Achebe.*

Author Biography

Albert Chinualumoga Achebe (Chinua Achebe) was born in the village of Ogidi in eastern Nigeria in 1930. His parents, members of the Ibo people, were missionary teachers. By the time Achebe was fourteen, he could speak English and he was sent to study at the Government College at Umuahia, one of the best schools in West Africa. Continuing on to college, Achebe matriculated at University College, Ibadan, a new school affiliated with the University of London, and studied English literature. While in school, Achebe published stories in the *University Herald,* and upon graduation he decided to be a Writer. In 1954, Achebe obtained a job with the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, where he worked until the Nigerian government began persecuting the Ibo people in 1966. He then resigned and relocated to Biafra, the region in which many massacres of the Ibos were taking place.

Things Fall Apart, his first novel, appeared in 1958 and almost instantly gained renown. A portrait of traditional village life in Nigeria at the beginning of the colonial era, it reminded Nigerians about their heritage at a time when independence from British rule was imminent. In the novel, Achebe told *Nigeria Magazine,* he tried to remind his nation, and all Africans, that they "did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, that they had dignity."

Achebe followed *Things Fall Apart* with two other novels about the meeting of the British colonial and the Nigerian indigenous cultures, *No Longer At Ease* (1960) and *Arrow of God* (1964). Both explore the waning colonial days of the country and its independence from British rule. In his other novels, he has examined issues related to self-rule and to the corruption and mismanagement that have often characterized the Nigerian government as well as many other African governments.

Although Achebe is primarily known as a novelist, he is a master of all forms of writing. During the two and a half years of the Biafran civil war that began in 1967, Achebe was not inclined to concentrate on long fiction. He did Write poetry, much of which was later published in the collections *Beware, Soul Brother, and Other Poems* (1971) and *Christmas in Biafra and Other Poems* (1973). He also produced a number of short stories, many of which-including "Vengeful Creditor"-appear in his 1972 collection *Girls at War, and Other Stories.* Achebe has since published several stories for children and collections of essays. He returned to the novel in 1988 with the publication of *Anthills of the Savannah.* Set in an imaginary African country, it tells the story of three childhood friends who all rise to positions of political power. Emeritus professor at the University of Nigeria since the early 1970s, Achebe has also held a number of visiting fellowships and professorships at universities in the United States and England.

Plot Summary

Set in an unnamed independent African country, "Vengeful Creditor" opens as Mrs. Emenike, an educated and well-to-do African woman, is checking out of the supermarket. She is irritated at the decline in the standards of service in the store ever since the government instituted free primary education. She complains that her household servants have been quitting lately, returning to their native villages to go to school. She wonders how "a working woman with a seven-month-old baby" is expected to cope.

The newspaper has published many letters written by highly educated people who are critical of the government's policy. The Emenikes are representative of these critics: he is a mid-level bureaucrat, while she is a social welfare officer. They oppose the program and are affected by it directly when several of their servants quit to go to school. The defection of their baby-nurse makes Mrs. Emenike particularly angry. However, since more than twice as many children have enrolled in school as the government had anticipated, financing for the scheme falls through and after a single school term, the program is suspended.

In an impoverished village, one of the people who is "broken-hearted" at the suspension of free education is Veronica, a ten-year-old girl whose widowed mother, Martha, is struggling to care for four children. Martha has some education, having attended a missionary school, but the death of her carpenter husband has left her destitute and unable to pay school fees for her children. Veronica had enjoyed her brief term in school as a respite from her responsibilities taking care of her younger siblings while their mother worked in the fields. Martha's children spend their time foraging for grasshoppers and palm-kernels to take the edge off their hunger.

One day Mr. Emenike, who was born in the village, visits Martha's hut. He wants to hire Veronica to take care of the baby. Martha is reluctant to let her daughter go, despite the family's desperate need for the annual payment of £5. She recalls that she once assumed all her children would go to college and now laments her inability even to send them to primary school. In the course of their discussion, Mr. Emenike comments that if Veronica is a good nurse, "what stops my wife and me sending her to school when the baby is big enough to go about on his own?" Martha and Mr. Emenike understand this to be "only a manner of speaking." Veronica, however, overhearing the conversation, goes off happily to work for the Emenikes thinking she will soon be able to return to school.

Veronica proves so competent and efficient that Mrs. Emenike nicknames her "Little Madame." But Veronica gradually becomes dissatisfied with her situation. At first she simply envies the older children when she watches them leave for school in the morning, but as time passes she increasingly covets those "little daily departures in fine dresses and shoes and sandwiches and biscuits wrapped in beautiful paper-napkins in dainty little school bags." Veronica channels some of her frustration into inventing songs that she sings to quiet the baby.

One day Mrs. Emenike discovers that Veronica has painted her lips with red ink from Mr. Emenike's desk. In scolding the girl she warns her that red ink is poisonous. Soon afterwards Mrs. Emenike comes home to discover the baby's dress stained red. She whips Veronica "until her face and arms [run] with blood." The girl then admits to making the baby drink red ink.

Mr. Emenike hastily loads Veronica into his Mercedes and returns her to the village. Martha returns from a hard day of labor, listens to her daughter's story, and insists that they go at once to see the Emenikes, who are still in the village. When Martha realizes that her daughter meant to kill the baby she attempts to whip Veronica herself, but when Mrs. Emenike implies that Veronica's upbringing is at the source of her actions Martha is shocked and denies the charge. Mrs. Emenike then remarks sarcastically, "Perhaps it's from me she learnt. " Mr. Emenike tries to quiet the dispute by blaming the girl's action on "the craze for education." As Martha and Veronica return home, Martha at first berates her daughter. Her anger is slowly redirected, however. as she realizes the unfairness of Mr. Emenike's comment and of a situation in which her daughter thinks she has to kill in order to have a chance to go to school.

Characters

Mark Emenike

Mark Emenike is a Permanent Secretary, a midlevel bureaucrat in the postcolonial government of an African nation. Although his family enjoys such economic privileges as private schooling for the children, a car, and a houseful of servants, Mr. Emenike is constantly made aware of his own lowly status in comparison to those who are wealthier and more powerful. As a civil servant, he is not permitted to express his views on education in the local newspaper and must be content to comment on his friend Mike Ogudu' s letter to the editor. In Cabinet meetings, he must refrain from any participation in the debate; even laughter is prohi.b1ted for a civil servant, and when he violates this strict protocol, he receives a "scorching look" from the Prime Minister. Nevertheless, he is an important man in his home village and is easily able to persuade Martha that Veronica will be happy in his comfortable home in the nation's capital.

Mr. Emenike

See Mark Emenike

Mrs. Emenike

Mrs. Emenike, the middle-class employer of the story, is the mother of five children and a social welfare officer. She is self-absorbed and sees people and events only in terms of how they will affect her own life. Free primary education, for example, which means so much to the poor people of her country, is viewed as a major inconvenience and a threat to her comfort. Young people who are in school are unavailable to serve her needs, both at the market, where the only person left to carry her groceries to the car is a forty-year-old "grumbling cripple," and at home, where she depends on a staff of poorly paid domestic servants, most especially a nurse for her infant son. Mrs. Emenike is oblivious to the needs and desires of those who serve her. When Veronica composes a song about her longing to go to school with the other children in the family's noisy little Flat, Mrs. Emenike interprets this as support for her own desire for a new sports car.

Madam

See Mrs. Emenike

Martha

Martha, Veronica's mother, is a widow with four children. She works long hours on a farm and in the market to eke out a meager living-so meager that the children must

scramble for palm-kernels and grasshoppers to eat. Martha's early life had held great promise; she was educated by white missionaries so that she might serve as a cleric's wife but was instead urged by her teacher to marry a trade school student, a future carpenter. Her husband was never as prosperous as any of the teachers and evangelists she might have married and worse yet, he was partially paralyzed for the last five years of his life. His death has left Martha and the children destitute. Furthermore, since the couple had been married for twenty years before they were able to have children, Martha is an older widow trying to support very young children. Reluctantly, she must abandon her dream that her children will achieve a higher level of education than she herself did. At one point she had hoped they might attend college, but Veronica's entry into domestic service forecloses that possibility. When the Emenikes bring Veronica home, beaten and disgraced, Martha is at first inclined to beat the child again but, in a flash of insight, she realizes that the more appropriate targets for her anger are Mr. Emenike for his refusal to honor his pledge and the rigid class system that makes it all but impossible for the poor to obtain an education and a way out of their misery.

Mary

Mary is Veronica's one-year-old sister for whom Veronica must care before she goes to work for the Emenikes. The girl is undernourished and cannot even chew her food, although she is always hungry.

Vero

See Veronica

Veronica

Veronica is a girl of ten who temporarily escapes the grim poverty of her mother's home by going to school during the brief period when free primary education is available in her country. She is a bright child who loves school and misses It terribly when she is forced to resume her duties watching her younger siblings while her mother works. She takes up similar duties in the Emenike household, caring for their baby in exchange for room, board, and the £5 her mother receives for Veronica's services for one year. Veronica is so anxious to resume her education that she misinterprets Mr. Emenike's suggestion that he might send her to school when the baby is older. Although this is merely small talk offered by Mr. Emenike to Veronica's mother, the girl takes it at face value and becomes impatient when the baby does not grow fast enough to suit her plans. In her eyes, the baby stands between her and an education, and finally, in desperation, she tries to poison the infant. At that point she becomes the vengeful creditor of the title, trying to make the Emenikes pay the debt they owe her. When her employer discovers what she has done, Veronica is severely beaten and sent home in disgrace.

Themes

Class Conflict

In "Vengeful Creditor" the interests of the middle class are pitted against those of both the rich and the poor. The Emenikes, with their civil service jobs, are certainly comfortable enough, although they are neither as wealthy as Mr. Emenike's friend Mike Ogudu, who owns a shipping line, nor as powerful as the Cabinet Ministers whom Mr. Emenike serves as a Permanent Secretary. Compared with the poor, however, who have barely enough to stay alive, the family is extremely well off. Because of the desperate poverty of the majority of the country's people, the Emenikes are easily able to exploit their unfortunate servants. Veronica's mother, for instance, is paid only £5 for the girl's services for an entire year, although another more knowledgeable applicant for the baby-nurse position demands a salary of £7 per month. Similarly, Mrs. Emenike feels cheated by one of the young males in the family's service who should, according to her, forfeit a month's pay in lieu of his notice to quit Yet when the gardener tries to give notice, she refuses it and finds another excuse to deny him the wages she owes him.

One of the most glaring consequences of class difference involves access to education. The middle class and the rich can afford to pay school fees, and, of course, all of the Emenike children attend school. The poor, however, are unable to pay these fees; the only educational opportunity they enjoy is the "free primadu" briefly offered by the government and then subsequently withdrawn. The middle class refuses to support this program because it would necessitate a tax increase that would confer no benefits on their own group and also because education for poor children would eliminate the vast pool of cheap, unskilled labor that serves the middle class.

The Emenikes, particularly Mrs Emenike, are barely able to contain their contempt for the poor. Mrs. Emenike is disgusted by the "grumbling cripple" who carries her packages at the market. She disapproves of "old men running little boys' errands," and seems to feel that a youngster in that position would not be complaining about having to do "monkey work" and would perhaps be more grateful for the meager tip she dispenses. When a member of the domestic staff outwits her and disappears with a full month's pay, Mrs. Emenike refers to him as a "little rat" and vows to avoid treating future servants with kindness, since in her experience, it simply does not pay. But this contempt is returned by Martha at the story's end when she expresses, if only to herself, her rage at Mr. Emenike, "that thing that calls himself a man."

Morality and Ethics

"Vengeful Creditor" explores the relationship between public ethics and private actions. A cynical government establishes a program of free education as a means of currying favor with the poor, but then withdraws it a few months later because it is too successful

The only way to maintain the program would be to raise taxes, which the officials are unwilling to do because It would adversely affect their chances of remaining in office. As for the poor children who must leave school, the Finance Minister is unconcerned about their situation. They are expendable.

The Emenikes regard their domestic workers in a similar fashion. If free education is available to the masses, then the pool of inexpensive labor will disappear, causing serious inconvenience to the family. The implications for the million and a half individuals who must give up their dreams of an education are lost on the Emenikes, whose personal comfort takes precedence over everything.

It seems only logical, then, that Veronica should learn from the actions of her government and her employers that impediments to personal goals must be eliminated. Mr. Emenike himself believes that "any sacrifice" should be made in order to secure an education. Since little Goddy seems to be the primary impediment to Veronica's education, she quite naturally wishes to eliminate him.

Education

Formal education in this story is essential to the development of the plot and emblematic of class differences. Also important, though, are issues of informal education-those lessons passed, often by example, from parent to child or from employer to employee. For example, Mrs. Emenike's first baby-nurse was an ignorant young woman who had to be educated, not only on the duties of her position, but also on the most basic elements of personal grooming and comportment. Once Mrs. Emenike transforms Abigail into a "lady," though, the ungrateful girl abandons her position in order to continue to better herself, this time by taking advantage of free primary education.

When Veronica paints her lips and fingernails with red ink, Mr. Emenike says the girl "is learning fast," and reminds his wife of a proverb that seems to apply to the situation: When mother cow chews giant grass her little calves watch her mouth. His wife, however, is not amused by the comparison between herself and a cow, and the issue of what exactly Veronica has learned from Mrs. Emenike's example becomes Important at the story's end when Martha and Mrs. Emenike accuse each other of having taught the girl to murder.

City vs. Country

The Emenike family lives in the capital, although they are originally from the same rural village where Martha and her children live. The contrast between the prosperous life of a civil servant and the grim conditions of life in the countryside are apparent when Mr. Emenike comes calling to recruit Veronica into domestic service.

His Mercedes 220S cannot make It up the narrow path to Martha's hut, so the "great man" must park on the main road and cover the remaining five hundred yards on foot.

For Veronica, the difference between country life and city life is nowhere near as great as she had hoped it would be. Although she leaves behind a diet of palm-kernels and bitter-leaf soup, her position is virtually the same in both locations. At the Emenikes' home, the other children go off to school and leave Veronica behind to watch little Goddy, just as in her mother's home she is left in the hut to care for her siblings. Her chances of obtaining an education are equally dismal in both situations.

Style

Point of View

"Vengeful Creditor" is told by a third-person narrator who focuses on the viewpoints of various characters at different points in the narration. The story opens with Mrs. Emenike doing her marketing in a modern supermarket. She is pleased by the deference accorded her by the staff; the checkout clerks compete for the privilege of serving her, and even the paper receipt politely thanks her for her patronage. But when the only "boy" available to carry her groceries to her Mercedes is less than eager to serve and less than grateful for the tip she offers, Mrs. Emenike displays her impatience and irritation with members of the lower class. Although the reader is given Mrs. Emenike's version of these events, she is not presented in a favorable light. For example, the narrator's description of Mrs. Emenike's painstaking search through the many coins in her wallet for a three-penny piece to confer on the waiting bag boy, or the "grumbling cripple" as she refers to him, makes the reader sympathize with him rather than her.

Midway through the story, the narration shifts to Veronica's point of view. Again the narrator is not completely objective, but in this case the evaluation of the character is positive. The girl's destitute condition combined with her enthusiasm for education make her a very sympathetic character, especially when her hardships are contrasted with the relatively minor "problems" of the Emenike family. These contrasts are emphasized by the narrator's shifting perspective, between Mrs. Emenike's "nightmare" when Abigail leaves and Veronica's impatient calculations of how long it will take an infant to achieve independence. At the end of the story, Martha's point of view is presented. Although she initially blames Veronica for trying to poison the baby, Martha slowly becomes aware of the horrible injustice of a system that has driven her daughter to such a desperate state.

Setting

The story's setting is an unnamed African country in the postcolonial period, though the description of the government's "free primadu" is reminiscent of Nigeria's education policy in the mid 1950s. The British colonial government has been replaced by native officials and bureaucrats who have adopted their predecessors' love of privilege and contempt for the poor. Government policies and programs, therefore, are based on expediency and self-interest rather than on the welfare of the citizens. The story also makes use of the contrast between city and country.

Dialect

One of the ways in which Achebe indicates the deep class divisions in his story is through the use of dialect. The Emenikes speech is depicted as standard English, while the poor speak a dialect that combines elements of their native language and English.

Martha, who has been educated, is the exception. Although desperately poor, she uses the language taught to her by the white missionaries. Her daughter Veronica is fluent in both, as is the supermarket clerk, who speaks one way to Mrs. Emenike and another to John, the bag boy. Mr. Emenike, too, seems to be bilingual, using native dialect when he grills the servants, but also when he speaks of Mike Ogudu, whose position is superior to his own. "Too much money is bad-o," he tells his wife, referring to his rich friend.

Irony and Satire

Irony and satire are important stylistic elements in "Vengeful Creditor." The reader's evaluation of the characters is dependent on seeing through the pretensions of the Emenikes, who seem to believe the lower class's happiness should be found in faithful service to their superiors. Thus, when Mrs. Emenike switches to a different checkout line at the market, the narrator refers to the clerk at the first machine as "the cheated girl," ironically suggesting that it is such a privilege to wait on Mrs. Emenike that the "loser" regrets not being chosen. Mrs. Emenike consoles the girl with a promise to pick her on the next visit. The reference also foreshadows Veronica's status as "the cheated girl," although the Emenikes will deprive her of something far more important than the privilege of serving them.

The narrator repeatedly satirizes the self-absorbed attitude of the middle class that fails to see the limited options available to the poor. For example, the debate over free education is conducted in the local newspaper with several "responsible citizens" insisting the time is not right for the country to offer such a program. They, of course, are all professionals who can afford the fees to send their own children to school. Mr. Emenike, although forbidden as a civil servant from writing to the newspaper, believes that free education is unnecessary. "Parents know the value of education and will make any sacrifice to find school fees for their children," he tells his wIfe. "We are not a nation of Oliver Twists," he claims, associating himself with the former colonizers of his country by this reference to a British novel about a poor orphan. Mr. Emenike's statement reveals his failure (or refusal) to notice that, with the exception of the privileged classes, they are indeed a nation of Oliver Twists.

The Finance Minister is equally oblivious to the plight of the poor, insisting that school fees, unlike taxes, are entirely voluntary in a democratic society. As he sees It, if a parent chooses not to pay school fees, "the worst that can happen is that his child stays at home which he probably doesn't mind at all." Again, this suggests that the poor can "choose" whether or not to pay for their children's education.

The story's ending turns on a doubly ironic statement by Mrs. Emenike who sarcastically suggests that perhaps Veronica learned to murder while in her service. Of course she means to blame Veronica's mother by pointing out how absurd it would be to teach a child in one's service to kill, but in truth that is exactly where the young girl was taught that people could be sacrificed in the pursuit of one's own interests.

Symbolism

The most obvious use of symbolism in "Vengeful Creditor" is the red ink. When Veronica appropriates Mr. Emenike's ink and uses it in apparent imitation of Madame's use of cosmetics, she is chastised and told that the ink is poisonous. In the business world, red ink indicates debt, and here, when the girl later attempts to eliminate little Goddy by making him drink the red ink, she is, in effect, using it to call in her debt. She is the vengeful creditor of the story's title, the creditor who is owed an education by her employers. She is, in effect, bathing the child in red ink, an image that is echoed soon afterward when Madame beats Veronica until she is bloody. Besides signifying debt, the ink also serves as a symbol for Veronica's desire for education and literacy-a desire to be able to use ink for its intended purpose, to write, just as Mr. Emenike does.

Historical Context

History of Nigeria

Achebe belongs to an ethnic group known as the Tho, who have had a civilization in West Africa for centuries. Unlike many other African civilizations, the Tho were a decentralized people who maintained a largely village-based culture rather than one governed by a king or an emperor Achebe has based much of his writing on the Tho culture and its interactions with the British colonial administrations, as well as its conflicts with the central Nigerian government.

In the early 1800s, British traders interested in palm oil began to travel to the region that later became known as Nigeria, and there they encouraged the slave trade. The British maintained their influence in the area until 1914, when the British government assumed direct control of the land (which up until then had been under the administration of the Royal Niger Company). They united the northern and southern halves of the country and administered the territory from the city of Lagos, which remains the capital.

Ethnic differences made governing the country difficult, and the three regions developed at different paces. The British granted Nigeria independence in 1960, but not until they set up a constitution that guaranteed the rights of minority ethnic groups. After a honeymoon period of approximately two years, in which Nigerians celebrated their newly-won independence, the country began to have political troubles. Elections were disputed and boycotted, and in 1965 a group of military officers attempted a coup. Ethnic tensions began to rise, and much anger was directed against the Ibo people in the north of the country.

In 1967, three of the eastern states of Nigeria seceded from the country and named their new country Biafra. After two and a half years of bloody civil war in which many thousands were killed and many more civilians starved, the Biafrans surrendered in 1970. Since then, the country has endured numerous military dictatorships and failed civilian administrations.

Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa, is also potentially one of the wealthiest. Its abundant natural resources-which include large oil reserves-indicate that the country should enjoy prosperity and development. However, corrupt administrations have ensured that the prosperity is only enjoyed by a tiny segment of the population.

The poor are crowding into the cities, and Lagos is now the second largest city in Africa (after Cairo). Nigerian artists and writers have been persecuted for speaking out against the government and against what they see as the environmental depredations of foreign countries, and one prominent writer, Ken Saro- Wiwa, was executed for his political activities.

Education in Nigeria

The temporary program of free primary education represented in "Vengeful Creditor" has as its basis actual events in Nigeria in 1957. The Eastern Region attempted to establish such a program, modeled after a similar venture in the Western Region two years earlier. Just as in the story, free education had to be withdrawn because demand quickly exceeded the government's resources. Workers who had left their menial jobs to attend school were forced to return to them since they could not afford to pay the reinstated school fees. Not until 1976, five years after Achebe's story was initially published, did the universal primary education program begin again. Compulsory primary education was in place after 1979.

Critical Overview

Primarily known as a novelist, Chinua Achebe has published relatively few short stories. His only collection of stories, *Girls At War, and Other Stories,* appeared in 1973 and brought together stories written over the preceding twenty years. "Vengeful Creditor," which appears in this collection, had first been published in the inaugural issue of the journal *Okike: A Nigerian Journal of New Writing. Okike* itself was founded by Achebe, and he has continued to edit the magazine throughout his stays in the United States.

In general, critical opinion on Achebe is overwhelmingly positive. He has claimed a place as one of Africa's leading writers, and *Things Fall Apart* is now considered a classic of African literature. Critics laud Achebe's ability to meld his pride in his own culture with a deep respect for Western literary traditions. *Things Fall Apart,* for instance, is a story of a traditional African village in which the inclusion of British influence is an important theme, but by no means the defining characteristic of the story.

Critics have noted Achebe's allusions to Western classics in his novels, specifically the epics of Greek mythology and the modernism of Eliot and Yeats (from whose poem "The Second Coming" the title of *Things Fall Apart is* taken). The primary importance of Achebe's works, to many critics, is his simple dictum that Africans had a deep and complex culture before the arrival of the colonizing powers Achebe does not reject the Western tradition in favor of a strictly Afro-centric viewpoint; nor does he attempt to graft Western intellectual structures onto supposedly "primitive" African traditions. He shows that the two traditions are of equal value and importance, and his writings often depict what happens when these sometimes-opposing forces meet. Achebe is also known for his willingness to criticize the conduct of the ruling classes in postcolonial Africa.

The story "Vengeful Creditor" has received little critical attention apart from general reviews of the collection, *Girls at War, and Other Stories.* Most critics point out its satirical critique of middleclass Africans, its use of irony, and its realistic narrative voice. According to John Carr in the *Critical Survey of Short Fiction,* it "appears to be a story about class struggle and then, as the reader sees layer after layer of meaning stripped away and one theme leading directly to another, it seems to be-and is-about something really quite different than either education or the class system." David Carroll, in his book *Chinua Achebe,* focuses on the story's examination of "the corruption of both private and public morality." In an article published in the journal *Comparative Literature Studies,* F. Odun Balogun notes numerous stylistic and thematic similarities between this story and the story "Sleepy," written by the nineteenth-century Russian writer Anton Chekhov.

BOOKRAGS

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Kippen is an educator and a specialist on British colonial literature and twentieth-century South African fiction. In the following essay, he explores the satirical intent of Vengeful Creditor. "

In the story "Vengeful Creditor," Chinua Achebe presents a situation similar to that of post-independence Nigeria, in which an African country's administrative class has maintained the worst attributes of the departed British colonial system. His depiction of the class conflict between the rich and the poor centers around whether or not free primary education (called universal primary education, or UPE, in Nigeria) should be implemented, and if so, how it should be paid for. Achebe's exploration of this matter becomes a scathing satire of the failures of traditional (Le., European) solutions, both liberal and conservative, to the problems of governance and inequality between classes, problems that emerged as African nations achieved independence.

Everyone has lost something by the story' s conclusion. Mrs. Emenike has lost her baby nurse, as well as any willingness to consider the merits of "free primadu." Mr. Emenike has certainly lost peace of mind and. at least for the moment, status, since he was playing "the great man" to Veronica by holding the promise of an education out to her. Martha, herself once a pioneer mission-school student, had already lost her husband before the story begins; by the story's conclusion she has also lost her one remaining hope: that her daughter will have a better life than she had. Veronica, of course, has lost more: the luxuries of the well-appointed home she had become accustomed to and the promise of a good future which is contingent upon membership in the educated elite. Given the abysmal state of things at the story's conclusion, given that this is satire and not tragedy, the first question confronting the reader must surely be "why doesn't Achebe offer solutions?" The answer has to do both with the restrictions of satire and the uncomfortable position Achebe occupies as a novelist from a postcolonial state.

Satirical fiction is unique in that it identifies a problem, adopts a clear position in regard to it, but rarely offers a concrete solution. Were the satirist to offer solutions, he or she would be exchanging the thick mantle of outrage for the thin and self-serving cape of advocacy, hopelessly weakening the force of the satire. In some cases-the most famous being Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal,* in which the eating of babies is suggested as the solution to a number of ills-the satirist may even go one step further and suggest a spurious solution, one that clearly cannot and should not be implemented. In short, satire does not solve problems; it proclaims their existence. So, for example, James Joyce wrote *Dubliners* in a spirit of "scrupulous meanness" to alert Ireland's residents to their condition (which he identified as paralysis), but he did not blaze a path for them to follow.

Once people see themselves in the satire, it is the satirist's hope that they will change themselves appropriately. Therefore, that Achebe' s satire offers no solutions is not coincidental, but central to its success as story and effectiveness as satire. And, since satire is based upon the assumption that the reader will generalize from the particulars

of the satire to the problem at large, the subjects of satire are easily recognizable types, not fully individuated characters. Thus, the Emenikes, their various servants, the Ministers of Education and Finance, etc., are two-dimensional, lacking emotional complexity. If Mrs. Emenike, the social welfare officer who receives the bulk of Achebe's animosity, surprises the reader it is With her meanness or with the irony of her unintended self-revelations ("Perhaps it's from me she learnt "), not with shows of unexpected compassion or introspection. Mr. Emenike is created from a similar mold, playing the great man about the village to his perceived subordinates, while laughing too loudly in town, in servile, disingenuous support of his superiors. He also is not immune to the revealing irony, responding to Mrs. Emenike's "perhaps it's from me she learnt" in proverb: "when the mother cow chews giant grass her little calves watch her mouth."

In addition to working within the form of satire as an internationally recognized member of Nigeria's intelligentsia, Achebe must also contend with the possibility that his writing will be of consequence. Put another way, what he says is certain to be heard. While this may be true of every writer who captures the imagination of the reading public and becomes, however unwittingly, the spokesperson for others, this carries added weight for African writers. As James Booth observes in his *Writers and Politics in Nigeria,* "conceptual problems unknown in Europe and North America confront the political thinker and the imaginative writer in an independent African state. . . . The first step of political emancipation having been achieved he is wary of re-enslaving himself by a kind of cultural neo-colonialism to non-African concepts and ideals whose relevance to his situation is questionable." Satire's genre restrictions aside, Achebe cannot easily come down in favor of the solutions offered by either the Minister of Finance or the Minister of Education because, Simply put, the solutions they have to offer do not fit the problem they are trying to solve. This is not to say that questions of taxation and education, issues of rights and responsibilities, or a basic disagreement over the value of a free market mean any less in Nigeria than they do elsewhere. Quite the contrary-they mean at least as much, and perhaps more, arising as they do against a national backdrop that still remains to be painted. The important issue is neither a question of who should pay or who should attend (since everyone loses in the end anyway), but of what the core values of "the new Nigeria," the post-colonial Nigeria, will be. Follow the example of the Emenike family, and Nigeria looks disturbingly like it did before the British began their gradual retreat, except that people are now divided along the lines of class rather than race. Follow the path trod by Veronica, and the future looks more bleak than it did for her mother, and the severe malnourishment of Veronica's youngest sister Mary promises an even deeper decline for the yet-unborn poor.

This is not to say that the questions surrounding UPE do not also address core values, but these are tangential to Achebe's main target-the educated elite. In one of the more ironic passages in the story, Achebe identifies a chorus of the educated and shows their solidarity in their mean-spirited oppression of the less fortunate: "responsible citizens-lawyers, doctors, merchants, engineers, salesmen, insurance brokers, university lecturers, etc.-had Written in criticism of the scheme. No one was against education for the kids, they said, but free education was premature." This selfish declaration is central to the irony surrounding Veronica's short career in the Emenike household. Mr. Emenike

seems oblivious to the irony of recognizing Veronica's genius while denying her schooling, or of telling her mother that destiny is all written in the hand when his own destiny and ongoing success are so clearly the result of a patronage system. Achebe underscores the dichotomy between the educational haves and have-nots by alternating between standard English and pidgin English.

In focusing almost exclusively on the Emenikes' disdain for their less fortunate countrymen, Achebe simplifies the issue to sharpen his satire. In fact, the educated elite stood to benefit considerably from UPE. In *The Political Dilemma of Popular Education: An African Perspective,* David Abernathy argues that the promise of UPE would solve a number of problems for this elite and help them to gain and consolidate power. "Colonial rulers . . . had created a three-way struggle for legitimate authority among the British. . . the chiefs. . . and the educated elite. Initially this elite lacked the prestige that came from having substantial political or administrative power. . .. The political leaders of the early 1950's could expect to gain popular support only by promising certain benefits that neither the British nor the chiefs were likely to provide. Universal primary education was an admirable aid in resolving 'the legitimacy crisis.'" Though UPE was successfully implemented in 1976, followed in 1979 by a law requiring compulsory education for six years, the division between educational haves and have-nots and the corresponding imbalance between powerful and powerless remain today much as Achebe described them in 1971. In terms of social equality, Veronica's credit still exists while the educated classes' debt continues to mount.

Source: David Kippen, "Overview of 'Vengeful Creditor'," in *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

Piedmont-Marton has a Ph.D. in English and teaches American literature and coordinates the Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin. In the essay below, she offers a general introduction to "Vengeful Creditor, "focusing upon issues related to class struggle.

"Vengeful Creditor" was first published in 1971 and two years later was included in the short story collection *Girls at War, and Other Stories.* Long before, following the publication of his first novel, *Things Fall Apart,* in 1958, Chinua Achebe established himself as Nigeria's best-known novelist. The subsequent publication of four more novels and several volumes of poetry has expanded his reputation to the point where he is now widely recognized as one of the preeminent writers of Africa. Achebe has also written many essays and delivered numerous speeches in which he discusses the role and responsibility of the modern African writer in the turbulent postcolonial period characterized by military dictatorship, civilian misrule, and civil war. "Vengeful Creditor" takes place during the period when the new government had established and then discontinued an experimental program in free primary education for all. Achebe uses this situation as an opportunity to examine the way this abortive democratic initiative affected the lives of a variety of people. Achebe treats his subject with his characteristic tone of detached irony, but his social critique is serious and well-aimed.

The world that Achebe describes in this story, and in all his fiction, is one still struggling with the legacies of colonialism. The departure of the British in 1960, Achebe acknowledges, created the modern nation state of Nigeria and provided all Nigerians with a language they could use to communicate with others beyond their immediate tribes. Independence, however, created a cluster of new problems and failed to solve those that existed under colonial rule. One of the most pernicious of these social problems is the gap between a prosperous governing class, represented by the Emenikes, and a poor, rural, uneducated underclass, represented by Veronica and her mother. Achebe points out in his fiction the painful irony that those who sought freedom from the bigotry and oppression associated With British rule quickly assumed the same condescending posture towards the lower class once they were in power. Critic C. L. Innes noted that tills story marks a shift in focus in Achebe's fiction, away from portrayals of the limitations of traditional village life, toward a concern for "the importance of class interest in the denial of individual fulfillment" for modern Africans. It is clear from the opening scene of "Vengeful Creditor" that Mrs. Emenike is going to bear the brunt of Achebe's satire. Her cruel and patronizing attitude toward the workers in the supermarket is characteristic of members of her class who are "willing to sacrifice the poor and relatively helpless so that their own lives may not be discomforted," Innes further stated.

Achebe finds many rich veins of irony to expose in Mrs. Emenike and her husband. While she is certainly a modern Nigerian woman with a career outside the home, her attitudes derive from the "old" days of colonial rule. In addition, her professional identity as a social worker is comically at odds with her behavior; she is a government official

whose duty it is to improve the lives of the people, but her major complaint is that the promise of free education makes it difficult for her to get good servants. At the grocery store she is upset that free schooling has depleted the ranks of the help and she must settle for a surly forty-year-old to grudgingly carry her bags to the car. Both she and her husband are supposedly disinterested civil servants, but in fact, they are motivated only by self-interest. After blaming the free education experiment for the defection of their household staff, Mr. and Mrs. Emenike exploit Veronica's desire to attend school in order to hire her at low wages to care for their baby.

In his portrayal of Martha's family, Achebe offers further ironic commentary on the Christian missionaries who have professed to help the poor. Veronica's father had believed the missionaries' promises when he became a carpenter and assumed he would continue to have employment, but "carpentry never developed much," and the family was not prosperous. When he died, the Christians offered to the widowed Martha and her children only the useless reassurance that "he had been called to higher service in the heavenly missions by Him who was himself once a Carpenter on earth." Martha and her children are powerless in the face of a system that denies them even basic education and that employs people like Mrs. Emenike as Social Welfare Officers. It is no wonder, then, that when Mr. Emenike shows up in his big Mercedes to offer Veronica a job, Martha feels that she has no choice but to accept even though she does not believe his promise to send her daughter to school.

A further irony emerges when Veronica proves to be so good at her job that Mrs. Emenike praises her by calling her "little Madame." Achebe's point is that Mrs. Emenike can joke about the likeness between the two of them only because she is quite certain that they have nothing in common. This ironic contrast becomes more extreme as Veronica earns praise and recognition for her intelligence. According to Mr. Emenike, the child is a genius despite her lack of schooling. The couple seems to find in Veronica's natural abilities justification for their beliefs that universal education is unnecessary, and they are quite willing to exploit her for their own ends The two worlds are poised to collide in Achebe's surprisingly dark ending.

Veronica finally decides to collect the debt she believes the Emenikes owe her by eliminating what she sees as the obstacle to her attendance at school, the baby. Veronica's plan is literally to take the baby's place at school and the weapon she employs to eliminate him, red ink, resonates with the ironies characteristic of the story as a whole. In the first place, Mrs. Emenike herself gives Veronica the idea by telling her that red ink is poisonous, and Veronica is smart enough to learn the lesson well. Furthermore, red ink is the medium of creditors and Veronica is using it to write the debt-due notice large on the body of the child. Finally, the choice of ink as a weapon signifies Veronica's violent appropriation of the means of education. If the Emenikes and their kind will not give her access to education, she will take it anyway

The discussion between Martha and the Emenikes that closes the story contains one final, ominous irony. After Martha insists that Veronica could not have learned to become a murderer from her, Mrs. Emenike says sarcastically, "Perhaps it's from me she learnt." Readers know that on a literal level, she is right; she taught Veronica that

red ink could poison the child. On a larger symbolic level, she is also right, but does not know it. The governing class's politics of exclusion have taught the underclass that they will have to seize their fiat share. Veronica learns how to be a murderer from Mrs. Emenike and she learns how to collect the debt that is due her. Mr. Emenike's final pronouncement, that he had "always known that the craze for education in this country will one day ruin all of us," is a chilling and ironic prediction.

Source: Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton, "Overview of 'Vengeful Creditor' ," in *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt from his book-length study of African short stories, Balogun examines how "Vengeful Creditor" exposes various inadequacies in Nigeria's political, social, and religious systems, focusing on class differences, education, power, and the distribution of wealth.

Materialism and hypocrisy remained with the church even after It had survived infancy in Nigeria, and as Achebe's stories reveal, these evils have continued to survive today. . . .

The inadequacy of the new faith is . . . evident in "Vengeful Creditor." A close examination of this story shows that religion is callous where it needs most to be sympathetic and understanding. Martha's pathetic fate is dismissed with easy platitudes. Her husband who dies prematurely, leaving her and their children in miserable poverty, is said to have been called to "higher service," when it is obvious that his "higher service" actually lay in remaining alive to cater to the needs of his family. His death plunges his dependents into misery and subjects them to degradation and callous exploitation at the hands of the modern elites, represented in this story by the Emenike family. The much vaunted advantages of Christian and colonial education are revealed in this story not to be the result of a conscious plan for the advancement of the black man, but the accidental byproducts of a basically paternalistic objective: Martha's husband was trained "by white artisan-missionaries at the Onitsha Industrial Mission, a trade school founded in the fervent belief that if the black man was to be redeemed he needed to learn the Bible alongside manual skills." . . .

It is obvious from all this that the Christian missionaries and colonial administrators were not the right people to select and train modern replacements for the elites of traditional African societies. It is the misfortune of Africa, however, that it was precisely the task these missionaries and administrators were morally ill-equipped to perform that they actually performed. It was therefore a foregone conclusion that modern elites, be they in the bureaucracy, business, politics, religion, or the academics, were going to misuse power perhaps even worse than did their predecessors in the traditional society. . . .

Achebe's stories show that the modern elite, as a rule, is not idealistic. . . . The joint exploitation of Martha and her daughter, Vero, by the permanent secretary, Mr. Emenike, and his wife in "Vengeful Creditor" is a classic example. The way the elites collaborate not only between themselves but also with foreign neo-colonial forces to protect their privileges at the expense of the exploited masses is also a major subject in "Vengeful Creditor." The controversy surrounding the withdrawal of the free primary education scheme exposes the fraud, hypocrisy, and deceit that characterize the collaboration existing between the business, bureaucratic, and political elites and their neocolonial external sponsors represented respectively here by Mike Ogudu, Mr. Emenike, the finance minister, and the newspaper, *New Age.*

With her love for cars, public displays of affluence, array of five house maids and servants, her superficiality, lack of interest in serious issues of public concern, and her callousness to her maids, Mrs. Emenike is a good example of the crass materialism and insensitivity that characterize members of the modern elite who are totally Machiavellian in the tactics they adopt to safeguard their privileges. They lie and falsify facts as happens, for instance, during the debate on free primary education. The truth is that free education encroaches on the privileges of the elites by depriving them of easy access to housemaids and servants. It provides opportunities for the common men to elevate themselves through education and thus become competitors with the members of the elite class. Moreover, it threatens the chances of the reelection of the political elites because It requires increased taxation, which the population resents. Rather than admit these facts openly, the elites- "lawyers, doctors, merchants, engineers, salesmen, insurance brokers, university lecturers, etc."-use the *New Age* (the platform provided by their external neocolonial sponsors) to publish vicious criticisms of the scheme. For instance, Mike Ogudu, the business tycoon, claims that "free primary education is tantamount to naked communism"; the *New Age* calls the proposal a "piece of hare-brained socialism" that is "unworkable in African conditions"; the finance minister pretends he is protecting "our long-suffer ing masses" from further taxation by advocating the cancellation of the program; and Mr. Emenike is all regrets that civil servants are prohibited from writing to the papers-otherwise, he would have liked to make it known that "we are not a nation of Oliver Twists" for whom free education has to be provided

Both "Vengeful Creditor" and "The Voter" give a good picture of how the modern political elites operate. To win elections they use false promises, bribes, thugs, and tribal sentiments. After elections they rob the national coffers both "to retire" their "election debts" and to provide themselves with luxuries. . . .

Source: F. Odun Balogun, "Tradition and Modernity in the African Short Story' Achebe and in Liyong," in *Tradition and Modernity in the African Short Story: An Introduction to a Literature in Search of Critics,* Greenwood Press, 1991, pp. 57-64.

Critical Essay #4

Innes is a Senior Lecturer in English, African, and Caribbean Literature at the University of Kent at Canterbury, England. In the following excerpt, she focuses on the theme of social conflict in "Vengeful Creditor. "

There could scarcely be a sharper contrast with the traditional setting and mode of "Akueke" than "Vengeful Creditor," published almost a decade later in the first Issue of *Okike.* Opening not in a small rural village hut but in a busy urban supermarket' and characterizing a confident, wealthy working woman who is also a wife and mother, we seem to have moved a long distance from the world of Akueke and the psychological isolation that was her lot. Nor is there the compassion and suspended judgement which hovers over the dilemma of all the characters in the earlier story, male and female alike; here the same and judgement is directed sharply against Mrs. Emenike, along with her husband and others of their class who are so willing to sacrifice the poor and relatively helpless so that their own lives may not be discomforted. The difference between the two stories marks a more general change in Achebe's fiction from concern with those such as Unoka, Nwoye and Akueke for whom the cultural and psychological conventions and norms of their society do not allow adequate fulfillment, to an increasing recognition (seen in *A Man of the People)* of the importance of class interest as a factor in the denial of individual fulfillment.

As a means of focusing on the ways in which private and public concerns converge, Achebe uses the Issue of free primary education and its abortive introduction by the Western and Eastern Regional Governments in 1955-57. Mrs. Emenike, a social worker, and her civil servant husband, are quickly disillusioned With Its introduction when their servants begin deserting them in order to attend school. On one of their brief and infrequent visits to Mr. Emenike's home village, they secure the services of ten-year-old Veronica for a wage of £5 a year and, more importantly as far as Veronica is concerned, the vague promise of schooling for her when their youngest child no longer needs a 'baby-nurse'. As Veronica watches the Emenike children escape each day from the world of her household duties and the moment of her own return to schooling seems ever more distant, she tries to eliminate the baby whom she sees as the obstacle to her own education, by giving him red ink to drink Her choice of ink has been made credible by a previous warning from Mrs. Emenike, who has found her playing with it, that red ink is poisonous, but the ink is also a symbol of the education she so avidly desires. Veronica is no passive resister like Akueke, or like her tired and harassed mother, and the red ink spilt over the baby's front is a potent image of the bloody vengeance that the poor may take upon the middle classes who blindly and selfishly exploit them and frustrate their aspirations to share in those things the Emenikes so complacently take for granted as their right bountiful food, work and good wages, and education for their children. As David Carroll points out in his discussion of this story, Mrs. Emenike's response, 'Perhaps it's from me she learnt', when Veronica's horrified mother protests that she could not have learned such things from home, is doubly ironic. For Veronica *has* learned by example from the Emenikes that the welfare and rights of others can be dispensed with if they stand in the way of her getting what she wants. And the remark

also epitomizes Mrs. Emenike's smug certainty that she is blameless, a blind complacency which suggests little hope of change from the top.

Source: C. L. Innes, "Marginal Lives: 'Girls at War' and Other Stories," in *Chinua Achebe,* Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 121-33.

Critical Essay #5

Balogun is affiliated with the University of Benin, Nigeria. In the excerpt below, the critic compares "Vengeful Creditor" with Anton Chekhov's "Sleepy." Noting similarities in the political and social backdrops of the two narratives, the critic also discusses stylistic and thematic parallels, particularly with regards to class conflicts, wealth and poverty, and morality.

In "Vengeful Creditor," Achebe also denounces man's inhumanity to man by exposing the deceit and callousness characterizing the attitude of contemporary Nigerian educated elites towards the poor. Mr. Emenike, a permanent secretary in the civil service, engages Vero as a baby-nurse with the promise to send her to school as soon as his baby grows up. Every morning Emenike's older children, beautifully dressed in uniforms, are driven to school; and each morning Vero is full of admiration and anticipation. She becomes anxious and wants "little Goddy," the baby she is tending, to grow up quickly so she too can join in these beautiful daily departures which guarantee escape from the poverty of her mother to the comfort of the Emenikes. Vero' s passionate desire to resume schooling, which she had stopped because of her mother's inability to pay fees, intensifies and becomes an obsession, but the Emenikes' baby, it appears to Vero, refuses to grow up fast enough. Tune passes and the situation does not change; in fact, the baby tends to become even more dependent on her. Vero concludes that "little Goddy" refuses to grow on purpose so as to deprive her of the opportunity to go to school, which promises the only avenue of escape from the poverty that looms menacingly in her future. She becomes desperate and decides to eliminate the obstacle preventing her from going to school. She gives the baby red ink to drink in the belief that it would kill him, having once been told by Mrs. Emenike that red ink is poisonous. The baby is unhurt, but Mrs. Emenike is horrified, beats Vero with bestial ferocity, and sends her back to the poverty of her mother, Martha, in the village.

Obviously, one cannot equate Varka' s deprivation [in Chekhov's "Sleepy"] of a basic physical human necessity-the need to sleep-with Vero's "dispensable" desire for education; nonetheless, the two deprivations are comparable since they each act as a catalyst for tragedy in the stories. Moreover, in the context of a developing nation like Nigeria, education makes all the difference between a decent living and a poverty-stricken existence. For Vero, therefore, the choice of going or not going to school is a choice between an abject, cruel existence and a happy, meaningful life, which, ultimately, is a no-choice situation.

However comparable the situations might be, the fundamental difference needs to be stressed. Vero's action lacks the compelling immediacy which eliminates moral and ethical considerations and justifies Varka' s action and makes the reader see her decision as absolutely inescapable and accept the baby's murder as a necessity to preserving her own life. Varka' s choice is not one between a meaningful and purposeless existence as is the case with Vero, but an absolute case of no-choice, for no human being who has not slept for days can resist indefinitely the overwhelming

urgency to sleep at last. This is why the reader is in total sympathy With Varka whereas Vero's action takes him a little by surprise.

Each of these stories was conceived by the author as a critical response to an existing social anomaly of the time it was written. . . .

Achebe on his part. .. based his story on a specific historical fact. In 1957 the government of the Eastern Region of Nigeria introduced a nonpaying primary education scheme following the successful example of the government of the Western Region which started the program in 1955. Unlike the latter, however, the former had had to stop the venture after only one year of implementation for financial reasons. Part of the problem was that enrollment had outstripped anticipated figures because both school-age and post-school-age children as well as children from neighboring regions had registered to take advantage of the scheme. After the reintroduction of fees, children of the poor who could not pay came to grief as they were compelled to withdraw from school which had suddenly opened new prospects of a better life to them. The disappointed would-be pupils drifted back to either the farms or to urban markets for domestic servants-places from which they had only recently hurriedly withdrawn their services in the rush to acquire education. The urban middle class who had experienced an acute shortage of domestic servants during the one year the experiment lasted once more were able to engage as many household helpers as they wanted.

Achebe not only remains faithful to the details of this historical fact but also renders the story more pungent by an effective contrasting presentation of two families representing the middle class and the poor. Not that Achebe needed prototypes to successfully represent a common reality such as the relationship between the Emenike family and that of Martha, but the factual details of this relationship as presented in the story strongly suggest that the initial impetus for its composition goes beyond the mere observation of a general fact. The account brims with such evidence of concretely observed details that it seems safe to assume that the story's characters, especially Martha, had living prototypes.

Just like Chekhov in "Sleepy," Achebe in "Vengeful Creditor" portrays the callous indifference and selfishness of the master to the servant. The shoemaker and his wife in Chekhov's story are duplicated by Mr. Emenike and his wife, who are likewise unaware of the humanity of their domestic servants whom they see as objects good only to be exploited in the process of guaranteeing their elitist comfort and happiness. The inhumanity as expressed in selfishness, hypocrisy, callousness, and exploitation which characterize the relationship of the Nigerian elite with the poor is what Achebe has exposed to satiric ridicule in his story.

It is evident from what has been said so far that a specific historical circumstance dictated to Achebe the subject of "Vengeful Creditor." There are, however, a number of coincidences which seem to adduce some degree of direct influence of Chekhov on Achebe in matters of details. Chekhov's heroine is a thirteen-year-old orphan named Varka, a diminutive for Varvara. Achebe's heroine is a ten-year-old orphan with a surviving mother and her name is Veronica, but more often she is referred to by the

diminutive, Vero. Both Varka and Vero are employed by exploitative, callous masters as baby-nurses. Both heroines compose lullabies although for slightly different reasons: Varka to pacify a baby whom the mother said must be bewitched for never stopping screaming, and Vero both to pacify her ward and to intimate her masters of her burning desire to go to school Both girls find their cruel exploitation, not intellectually, but physically and emotionally unbearable and decide on murder as the only way out. Varka' s murder of the baby cannot be said to be willful in as much as she makes her decision in a hallucinatory state of mind induced by over-exhaustion. Vero's decision, though taken consciously, also cannot be regarded as willful since such a young girl is not fully aware of the implications of her action.

The styles of the two stones are more different than alike, although similarities exist in aspects of characterization and language. In each, there is a contrasting set-up of characters with the master representing the class of callous exploiters and the teenage baby-nurse symbolizing the class of the oppressed poor. Each gives details showing the misery and abject poverty in which lives the family of the baby-nurse. Also in each case there is some detail provided about the circumstances surrounding the death of the baby-nurse's father in order to reveal the predicament of the widowed mother and orphaned daughter.

The master and mistress in each story are also negatively portrayed. . . . Vero's mistress is depicted as vain, shallow, materialistic, and callous. Varka' s master, the shoemaker, is inconsiderate, insensitive, cruel, and crude; while Mr. Emenike, Vero' s master and a permanent secretary, is in fact selfish, hypocritical, and inhumane even though he pretends to be a refined, decent gentleman. In each of the stories also, the poor are portrayed as morally superior to their social masters by virtue of their humility, patience, forbearance, and the courage with which they carry on in the face of extreme, adverse conditions.

The most significant difference in characterization is that Chekhov is very sparing in providing details concerning the lives of his characters. Achebe, on the other hand, gives elaborate details of the world of Vero's masters. The story is in fact structurally presented in two unseparated halves. The first half is generously spiced With ironic humor as the hypocrisy, callousness, and inhumanity of the masters are exposed to satirical ridicule. The second half, devoted to Martha and Vero, is humorless as it reveals the tragic details of the lives of these two.

Thus while the first part of Achebe's story fits Gogol' s formula of "laughter through tears," for being "gay in appearance but sad in substance" [D. S. Mirsky, "Chekhov," *Anton Chekhov's Short Stories,* 1979], the second half is much the reverse: "tears through laughter" [Renato Poggioli, "Storytelling in a Double Key," *Anton Chekhov's Short Stories,* 1979], because in spite of its tragic sadness there is some ironic humor, such, for example, as emanates from Vero's naiveté which makes her think she could kill by administering red ink as poison....

Although brevity in characterization enhances the over-all artistic effect of Chekhov's story, the same quality makes the characters one-dimensional, flat: the masters are

bad, the nurse is simple hearted. By contrast, Achebe is able to portray multi-dimensional characters by using more details. Although the masters in Achebe's story are still negative, some extenuating Circumstances are introduced into their motivations to ameliorate their badness. We are made to sympathize, for instance, with their plight when they had no one to take care of their children; and also, unlike the shoemaker and his wife in Chekhov's story, the Emenikes cater to the basic needs of their servants.

The most outstanding difference in the styles of the two stories is the brevity of one and the relaxed, unhurried tempo of narration of the other. . . . Achebe, who is also a master of conciseness as attested to by the majority of the stories in his collection, has elected to present a detailed narration in "Vengeful Creditor." It should be noted, however, that in spite of its detailed narration, "Vengeful Creditor" is composed With a linguistic terseness that permits Achebe to compress into fewer pages what a lesser talent would have expressed in several more. . . .

Although Achebe's "Vengeful Creditor" cannot compare as a poetic composition with Chekhov's "Sleepy" or even with Achebe' s own story entitled "The Madman," it nonetheless shows a conspicuous, conscious effort on the part of the author to produce a rhythmic prose. The first page of the story, for instance, sustains a poetic cadence based on the repetitive use of parallel syntactical units with built-in variations along with a regular recurrence of words such as "Madame," "sang," and "cash." The second half of the first page and the whole of page two of the story are structured rhythmically on the recurrence of parallel coordinating sentences repeatedly using the same coordinating conjunction, "and." A brief passage much later in the text again repeats the same formula of recurring words, phrases, and parallel sentences. The poetic rhythm of Achebe's story as a whole is further reinforced on one hand by the songs composed by Vero and on the other by the rhythm inherent in dialogue which frequently punctuates the text.

Both stories are narrated in the third person with objective detachment, but there is greater distancing in Chekhov's story. This is not to say that Achebe's story is for that reason less successful. Indeed, the satirical irony, With which the world of the middle class is portrayed and which reveals the narrator's sympathy with the exploited poor, adds a humorous dimension to Achebe's story which is lacking in Chekhov's. . . .

Chekhov achieves his brevity and "the very limit of the detachment which he prizes so highly in a writer" in two ways. Firstly, as already pointed out he completely leaves undescribed the world of Varka's masters and by so doing forestalls the exposure of his sympathy, which is obviously on the side of Varka. Secondly, he portrays events not through his own perception as narrator but through the consciousness of his heroine, who is permanently in a hallucinatory, dream-like state of mind. Thus the story comes to us as if totally unmediated. This is particularly evident in the different ways the two authors use flashbacks. While past events are recalled in "Sleepy" through Varka's dreams and hallucinations, incidents in the past are remembered in "Vengeful Creditor" not by Vero or any of the characters but by the narrator himself. Consequent ly, the role of objective narrator is more convincingly sustained in "Sleepy" than in "Vengeful Creditor. "

Indeed, nowhere else is the "subjective objectivity" of Achebe's narrator more evident than when telling about the calamities which have befallen Martha, who appears to be the victim of cosmic irony. Martha, the narrator says, "was a hard-luck woman" who in spite of early promise as a pioneer pupil in a girls' mission school had turned out an abject failure. Her marriage, we are told, . 'had been a bad-luck marriage from the start." She accepted Without bitterness the misfortune of having children only when "she was virtually an old woman. . . and little strength left for her task." But "what she nearly did grumble about was the disease that struck her husband and paralysed his right arm for five years before his death. It was a trial too heavy and unfair. "

Even though the last sentence appears to be a direct rendering of Martha' s thoughts, there is some ambiguity that makes it possible for it to be interpreted as the narrator's own conclusion. In any case, Martha is conscious of divine unfairness, "injustice," in the way she has been treated. That she holds God responsible for her plight is evident in her conversation with Mr. Emenike:

Yes I pray God that what is written for these children will be better than what He wrote for me and my husband.

Her hope did not materialize, rather her tragedy worsened. In the end, she loses patience and cries out in revolt:

"Oh, God, what have I done?" Her tears begin to flow now. "If I had had a child with other women of my age, that girl that calls me murderer might have been no older than my daughter. And now she spits in my face. *That's what you brought me to,"* she said to the *crown of Vero's head,* and jerked her along more violently (emphasis mine).

It is obvious, of course, that Martha is addressing Vero when she says "That's what you brought me to." However, the syntactical arrangement of the quoted passage as a whole, beginning with an exclamatory query to God: "Oh, God, what have I done?" introduces an ambiguity into Martha's last complaint; and it therefore becomes equally applicable to Vero as to God: "That's what you brought me to." This ambiguity is intentional at least on the part of the narrator who out of sympathy seems to have edged Martha into her revolt.

Martha's revolt recalls the religious doubts and questioning of God's fairness by both Dimitri and Olesha, and even to some extent Ivan's atheistic revolt against God, in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov.* Martha's revolt may lack the intensity and intellectual motivations of Dostoevsky's characters, but it certainly springs from the same emotional source, and even more importantly from the bitterness of personal experience. Thus, in Achebe's hands, a Chekhovian theme has been consciously or unconsciously given a Dostoevskian twist.

The purpose of this study has not been to pitch Achebe's talents against Chekhov's Since such an exercise is uncalled for; rather its objective has been to demonstrate how writers of different countries and periods do sometimes share similar concerns as a result of their common humanism. Furthermore, the aim has been to illustrate how

similar socio-economic and political set-ups in different regions of the world and at different periods can sometimes promote similar literary responses.

Source: F. Odun Balogun, "Russian and Nigerian Literatures," in *Comparative Literature Studies,* Vol 21, No 4, Winter, 1984, pp. 483-95.

Topics for Further Study

Investigate the history of Nigeria since 1970. What complaints do the people of Nigeria have against the government? How have the Nigerian government and other countries responded to these complaints? Is there hope for change?

How do people benefit when they are allowed to have an education? Examine the economic effects of free public education in a developing country. Does it make the workforce more or less productive? Do wages go up or down?

When did the United States introduce free public education? Research the decision to institute public education, and look at some of the arguments offered for and against it.

The novella "A Simple Heart" by nineteenth-century French writer Gustave Flaubert also concerns the fate of a young, uneducated woman who goes to work in a middle-class household. In what ways are the two stories similar? How are they different?

Compare and Contrast

1974: In the heavyweight boxing title bout, Muhammad All defeats the younger George Foreman in Kinshasa, Zaire, bringing big-time Western sports to sub-Sahara Africa. With his charisma and fast-talking persona, Ali charms the people of Africa, and becomes probably the best-known Westerner on the continent.

1996: Former heavyweight boxing champion Evander Holyfield regains the title by defeating the much-feared Mike Tyson-then successfully defends his title in a rematch held in June, 1997. Ironically, an aging George Foreman still holds a rival boxing organization's heavyweight title after making a comeback in the early 1990s.

1966-72: After persecution of the Ibo people in northern Nigeria commences, Achebe resigns from his post in the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation and moves to the breakaway province of Biafra. He becomes a spokesman for the eventually defeated Biafran cause.

1995: Writers in the Third World experience increased danger for their political views. In 1990, the Iranian government issues a "fatwa," or death sentence, against the Indian writer Salman Rushdie for the purported blasphemy of his book *The Satanic Verses.* Nobel Prize-winning Egyptian writer Naghib Mafouz has his life threatened by Islamic militants. In Nigeria, writer Ken SaroWiwa is executed by the government for his political activities.

1971: The Democratic Republic of Congo in Africa becomes the Republic of Zaire on October 27th. Mobutu Sese Seko assumes political power and declares himself president.

1997: Zaire once again becomes the Congo after Mobutu is overthrown. After years of a bloody reign in which he executed enemies and friends alike, Mobutu is weakened by cancer and dies in September.

What Do I Read Next?

Things Fall Apart (1958), Achebe's first and most famous novel, traces the life of a man in an Ibo village. Okonkwo tries to overcome the shameful legacy of his father, Unoka, by rejecting everything his father stood for. The book is not just a story of a man, though, but of traditional Ibo culture preparing to come into contact with the colonizing forces of Britain and the West.

No Longer at Ease (1960) and *Arrow of God* (1964) continue the story begun with *Things Fall Apart.* In these two novels, Achebe tells the story of two later generations in the same family as they deal With British rule and with Nigerian independence.

A Forest of Flowers, by the murdered Nigerian writer Ken Saro-Wiwa, is a collection of stories that convey the vitality of everyday Nigerian life. Characters live in close-knit families, and their lives are dominated by tradition, superstition, and the corruption of the country's politics; the collection was highly praised by critics when it was published in 1986.

"The Train from Rhodesia," written by Nadine Gordimer and first published in 1952 is a story that examines the differences between the British ruling class and the African cultures they govern.

"Sleepy," a story by Russian writer Anton Chekhov Written in 1888 bears some similarity to "Vengeful Creditor." It is about an exhausted child who kills the infant in her charge so that she can finally sleep.

Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) examines another West African country, Ghana. In this novel, Annah follows a typical Ghanaian worker, a man with a job on the railroad, and delves into the anomie and alienation of the man (who is never named) as he negotiates his way between African tradition and Western expansion.

Further Study

Innes, C. L., and Bemth Lindfors. *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe.* Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1978.

A collection of essays on Achebe that concentrates primarily on his novels. However, many of the essays provide interesting context for Achebe' s work, detailing the cultural and political events on which he is commenting.

Bonetti, Kay. "An Interview With Chinua Achebe," in *The Missouri Review,* Volume 12, No.1, 1989, pp. 63-83.

An interview with Achebe, conducted in the United States, in which he delineates his view on art and on his place in world literature.

Rowell, Charles H. An Interview with Chinua Achebe," in *Callao,* Volume 13, No.1, Winter, 1990, pp. 86-101.

Interview in which Achebe discusses what texts he would include in an introductory twentieth-century world literature course His combination of traditional authors such as T. S. Eliot and Ernest Hemingway With more "exotic" authors such as Nadine Gordimer and Raja Rao provides an example of how one might "open up" the literary canon.

Wren, Robert M *Achebe's World. The Historical and Cultural Context of the Novels of Chinua Achebe* Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1980.

Although this work concentrates on Achebe' s novels, it provides a detailed context for his work. Many of the issues that Achebe discusses in his novels recur in the short fiction and in "Vengeful Creditor."

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Short Stories for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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