

The Wrestling Match Study Guide

The Wrestling Match by Buchi Emecheta

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Introduction

Buchi Emecheta's *The Wrestling Match* was first published in 1983 in Great Britain by Oxford University Press, in conjunction with University Press Ltd. of Nigeria. The story is a deceptively simple tale of a boy coming of age in a Nigerian village, but Emecheta uses the tale as a commentary on war, as well as on relationships between generations and the need for everyone to have productive work.

Emecheta retains the strong storytelling tradition of her Nigerian homeland; *The Wrestling Match* is told in simple yet vivid language, and makes readers feel as if they're in "an open clearing in which children and old people sat, telling stories and singing by the moonlight," as the narrator of the book notes.

Many of Emecheta's works deal with poverty and the oppression of women, both in Nigeria and in England; in this sense, *The Wrestling Match* is a departure, as it tells the story of a young man and his uncle, and the women in it are marginal characters who retain their traditional roles as wives or wives-to-be.

In an interview with Julie Holmes in *The Voice*, Emecheta told Holmes that writing is the "release for all my anger, all my bitterness, my disappointments, my questions and my joy."

Author Biography

Buchi Emecheta was born as Florence Onye Buchi Emecheta on July 21, 1944, near Lagos, Nigeria. Her parents were from the Igbo village of Ibuza in southeastern Nigeria, and although they were nominally Christian, they also retained traditional Igbo beliefs, so that Emecheta grew up with a multiplicity of cultures. Her parents made sure that she spent time in their village so that she would know her original culture, but she grew up in Lagos, where another ethnic group, the Yoruba, was dominant.

Emecheta became aware early that not only was she a member of a minority in Lagos, but also that her own culture, the Igbo, valued boys more than girls. These experiences gave her a feeling of being an outsider that continued throughout her life, and was often expressed in her writing.

As a girl, she dreamed of becoming a writer someday, but this dream was discouraged by her teachers. When she was sixteen, she left school to marry, and two years later her husband traveled to London to study. Emecheta and their two young children went with him.

In London, they experienced deep poverty and intense prejudice. They had three more children, and Emecheta worked to support them all while her husband studied. By the time she was twenty-two, they were divorced, and Emecheta supported all the children and continued her own education. She eventually earned a degree in sociology, and began writing fiction. She completed a novel, *The Bride Price*, but her husband burned the manuscript; later, she would rewrite it from memory.

In 1972, her work began to be published in the journal *New Statesman*, and in that same year, her autobiographical story collection *In the Ditch* was published. This began her career as a novelist and, since then, she has supported herself and her family from writing; M. Keith Booker noted in *The African Novel in English* that she may be the first full-time professional African writer.

Emecheta has written numerous novels and short stories, as well as poems, television plays, and essays, most of which explore the position of women in both African and European society. She has also written young adult fiction, including *The Wrestling Match*. She has remained in England since 1962, and has won worldwide recognition as a chronicler of women's experience.



Plot Summary

Chapter 1

The Wrestling Match opens with a conflict that disrupts a quiet evening in the compound of Obi Agiliga, when his senior wife, Nne Ojo, yells at his sixteen-year-old nephew, Okei, for Okei's sullen bad manners. Okei has been adopted by his uncle because his family was killed in the Biafran War, or Nigerian Civil War, and the event has left him confused and rootless. Also, like some of his agemates, he has had some education, which makes him reluctant to labor on his uncle's farm, work he sees as demeaning, exhausting, and fruitless, since every year they end up going hungry no matter how hard they work. Like teenagers everywhere, he is fed up with being nagged and told, "When I was your age" by his uncle and others.

His uncle tells him that some of his age-mates have been stealing from old people. Okei discusses this with his friends Nduka and Uche, who are shocked, and also annoyed at the fact that because they are all in the same age-group, they will all be blamed. Like Okei, Nduka and Uche are fed up with being told they have to grow up, with being nagged to work on their parents' farms, and with being compared to the "good" boys of their agegroup, who did not go to school and who are content to work on the farms.

Chapter 2

Okei and his friends head toward the neighboring village, Akpei, to meet girls from their own village who are coming home from selling plantains there. The girls walk the distance instead of selling in their own village because they can make a little more money at the other market. The boys overhear the girls bathing in a stream and gossiping, saying that maybe the boys did rob someone, since everyone in the other village is talking about it and "there's no smoke without fire." They also comment on the fact that because the boys have been to school, they are "bigheaded." Unlike the girls, who have to work all the time, the boys have plenty of free time to get into trouble, and the girls complain about the way the people in the other village are saying bad things about their boys. The main gossip is Kwutelu, a seventeen-year-old who is the leader of her age-mates. She is known for her sense of style and her sharp tongue. Her friend is Josephine, a quieter girl.

Okei is upset by their gossip. He tells his friends that they must go around the village the next day and make announcements that all the members of their age group will meet for a discussion, but he doesn't say what for.

Chapter 3

Obi Agiliga is working on his farm, and takes a rest in the heat of the day. He wishes he could have more help on the farm, and his youngest son, Onuoha, asks him why Okei



won't join them. Onuoha admires Okei's strength, and Obi Agiliga worries that when he is older, he will turn into a shirker like Okei. However, he understands that Okei is confused and troubled, both by the violence in his past and by his education, which is at odds with traditional culture.

Obi Uwechue, a man from the neighboring village of Akpei, visits him and explains that the boys of his village are also restless and bored, starting fights and making trouble. He suggests that the village elders give the boys of both villages something to worry about. "I think we will have to create a big worry for our young men," Obi Uwechue says. "By the time they have finished solving that problem they will be wiser."

Obi Agiliga agrees, saying that the girls of the villages will be useful, since they tend to gossip and they can be useful in the plan. "Leave the rest to me," he says.

Chapter 4

The next morning, Uche and Nduka meet each other at the stream and discuss how to make the announcement of their age-group meeting. Uche wants to show off by making the announcement in English, but Nduka scoffs at this, saying it will exclude people who don't know English, and is inherently wrong anyway, because if everyone used education to exclude someone else, Uche would be left out by the people who are already in college. Uche decides to use the traditional method of beating a gong and yelling out the announcement, and Nduka writes the message on notebook paper and hands the sheets out to people.

At the meeting, Okei is elected the leader of his age group. The group decides that the insults the other village has heaped on them will be settled by a wrestling match. The best wrestler from each village will be involved. They will not invite the village elders to judge the match; it will be strictly judged by young people.

Obi Agiliga comes home from a long day at the farm, and tells them all, "Clear out, you lazy, good-for-nothing pilferers of fishes and muggers of the old." He knows very well that they are not bad boys; he's just egging them on to prove their worth. "These boys thought they were the only people who have ever been young," he chuckles to himself. "They will learn, sure they will learn."

Chapter 5

Okei begins practicing wrestling, getting up early, running, and toughening himself. He and Nduka wrestle on the path to the stream, and Kwutelu and the girls come by and tease them, telling them they've heard the boys steal fish and steal from old people. Okei says he doesn't know who the thieves are, but if he did, he'd tell them to go to Kwutelu's house and rob it. She tells him time will tell if he's guilty or not, because tradition says the innocent will win at a wrestling match.



Chapter 6

Kwutelu goes home and tells Josephine that Okei threatened her. They discuss the situation, and Josephine says she thinks the elders from both villages have stirred up the trouble on purpose.

Kwutelu's father, Obi Uju, comes home from his farm. He lives apart from Kwutelu's mother, and she is so close to him that she often sleeps in his house, not her mother's. Kwutelu tells him about Okei's threats, exaggerating and saying that he threatened her personally. This angers him, and he goes to bed early that night.

Later, when Kwutelu comes in to sleep, he hears her opening the door and assumes it's Okei, come in to rob and make trouble. He grabs a knife and, in the dark, attacks the robber. It's not Okei, it's Kwutelu, but before he realizes it, he cuts off her ear.

Chapter 7

Okei was home sleeping when this occurred, so he is exonerated; still, it's a tragedy that this happened to Kwutelu. The accident has a chastening effect on her, however; she's now more quiet, less teasing, less forward. It also changes Okei, who begins to trust his uncle and aunt because they spoke up for him and protected him from the charges of robbery. "He is sleeping now," Obi Agiliga's wife tells him. "I think he is beginning to trust us at last. He knew that you would take care of everything."

Chapter 8

Okei wakes up and wonders what really happened the night before. He gets up early and resumes his wrestling training. Uche shows up and tells him about Kwutelu's ear, and also mentions that God will be on their village's side during the wrestling match, because they are in the right. Okei wisely says that the other side will be praying just as hard, and "God will not come down and wrestle with the Akpei boys for us."

Obi Agiliga and Obi Uwechue talk and discuss the knifing. They are sorry because they know that through their encouragement of the girls to gossip, they are indirectly responsible. However, they agree that the situation could have been much worse; Kwutelu could have been killed. They also note that the boys are all busy, and don't have time to harass anyone in the footpath, steal fish, or make any other trouble. Obi Agiliga notes that they are beginning to act and think a little more like adults, and says, "even my nephew is beginning to look at me as if I am somebody at last. Before, I was just an old man to be shouted at."



Chapter 9

On the next market day, the girls go to the neighboring town as usual to sell plantains, but the tensions over the intervillage wrestling match have risen to the point where no one will buy from them. An old woman tells them they may as well give their plantains to her for free, because otherwise they will have to carry them home. This turns out to be true. Empty-handed, they go home and have to throw their plantains away because the plantains will spoil anyway. They are upset by this, because they were planning to use the money they earned to buy fine new clothes to show off at the wrestling match. When the male elders hear about this, they "smile with a conspiratorial wink," because it's all a part of their plan.

Chapter 10

The boys' age group meets again. They choose Okei and Nduka to wrestle for their village. A farmer's son tells Okei that his uncle was a master wrestler, and he should go to him for advice to learn the proper wrestling dance. Okei reluctantly agrees.

Chapter 11

Okei is shocked to think that he and his agemates could ever make any mistakes, and dismayed that he will have to get advice from his uncle. But he goes to his uncle, who teaches him a host of master moves and agile dances. Through this, the two become closer.

Chapter 12

In the preparations for the wrestling match and the yam festival, even Kwutelu joins in the singing to praise Okei, the village wrestler. Okei's uncle tells him that even if he loses, it's important for him to do his best.

Chapter 13

On the day of the match, the villagers beat their drums to announce the event. The rival villagers arrive, and the match begins. The young people in charge vow that the match will be friendly and will solve the problems between the two villages, and the old men chuckle and wink knowingly at each other.

Chapter 14

The match begins as a friendly contest, but soon degenerates into a brawl, in which every boy is fighting another boy from the opposite village. At the height of the fight, the elders from the two villages wade into the melee and beat the drums and shout.



Eventually, everyone calms down. Obi Agiliga announces that the fight has been very successful, and that now everyone has learned that "in all good fights, just like wars, nobody wins. You were all hurt and humiliated. I am sure you will always remember this day."



Chapters 1 and 2

Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

Buchi Emecheta's novella *The Wrestling Match* tells the coming of age story of a young Nigerian boy, Okei, in a culture that had been nearly destroyed by war in the 1960s.

The story opens during the early evening in a Nigerian village, and all the vendors and buyers have left the market to return to their homes. In the compound of one of the villagers, Obi Agiliga, a woman yells at a boy about his ungrateful attitude. Nne Ojo is Obi Agiliga's senior wife and involved in another screaming match with her sixteen-year-old nephew, Okei, who lives in the compound.

Okei's parents were murdered during the Nigerian Civil War in the late 1960s, and Okei has been living with his uncle since that time. Without his immediate family, Okei drifts through life, and no one helps him address his anger, which erupts in violent outbursts or exhibits through listlessness.

Nne Ojo throws a pounded yam at Okei in frustration at Okei's attitude and threatens to have some boys his age beat him up if he does not improve. Obi adds to the turmoil by stating that some local boys are stealing from the elders in the village, and Okei resents the implication that he or his friends may be involved. Obi Agiliga orders Okei out of the compound so that the fighting will stop for tonight.

Okei's friends, Nduka and Uche, have been waiting for Okei to finish his evening meal so they can go to a neighboring village called Akpei to meet a girl named Josephine and some of her friends. As the boys walk, they commiserate that all their parents give them the same speech about being useless because they have had some schooling. Their parents would prefer sons who are willing to work on the farms and quickly grow up to be men.

As the boys reach the next village, they can hear Josephine and her friends bathing in the river and realize that the girls have returned early from their day of selling plantains in Akpei. Josephine has told Nduka before that although Akpei is a little farther than the closest market, the buyers in Akpei are nicer and willing to pay more for the plantains.

The boys lie down in the bushes to wait for the girls to finish bathing and listen to the gossip and giggles coming from the direction of the stream. As they bathe, the girls discuss the rumor of some boys stealing from old people. They cannot completely rule it out because normally there is some shred of truth in every rumor.

The topic of boys leads the girls to mention the difference between the farm boys and those who have gone to school. When Okei hears his name mentioned by an older girl named Kwutelu, he is instantly angry because she says that he is arrogant and capable of leading a group of boys to steal.



The girls finally emerge from their baths and are surprised to find the boys already waiting for them. Nduka and Uche are friendly with the girls, but Okei keeps his distance because of the hurtful comments he has heard. When it comes time to part for the evening, Okei orders Uche to announce that all the young men are to meet at Okei's uncle's compound the next night.

Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

The story is told from a third-person omniscient point of view, which means that the narrator is not one of the characters and is able to provide information not only about the plot line but also about the characters' emotions and feelings about the action.

Historically, the Nigerian Civil War began in 1964 and resulted in the deaths of over a million people. The political and social ramifications of such a tragedy are extensive. A whole generation of children became displaced, with no family and no heritage. Okei is one of the fortunate children taken in by relatives who escaped the slaughter, but as Okei reaches the age of young adulthood, his anger for what he has lost emerges in altercations with almost everyone he encounters.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

The next day is a sweltering one for Obi Agilaga and the workers on his farm. In the afternoon when the heat is at its worst, Obi Agilaga and the workers lie down in a cool shed on the property. A rest is necessary to avoid heat exhaustion even though Obi Agilaga is concerned that the sweet potato crop will wither if this heat continues. More helpers on the farm would ease the problem, but Okei and his friends refuse to do any manual labor.

Obi Agilaga directs one of his sons, Onuoha, to the stream to bring water for the men. Before Onuoha is able to leave the shed, sounds of approaching men bring a rush of fear over father and son. Onuoha is able to peep out and determine that the group of approaching men includes Obi Uwechue from Akpei, an old friend of Obi Agilaga.

Obi Agilaga knows that his friend's visit must be concerning an important matter for him to travel this distance in the searing heat at harvest time. Obi Uwechue has brought some water, so the old friends sit and discuss the topic of the young men who refuse to work and find time to steal from the elders in the villages.

In Obi Uwechue's village, the young men have even started to attack the women who walk the paths to the stream every day. Obi Uwechue tells Obi Agilaga about the encounter Okei and his friends had with Josephine and her friends the day before. Obi Uwechue hoped to see Okei working on the farm today so that he could speak to him, but Obi Agilaga tells him that Okei does not lower himself to farm work.

Obi Agilaga and Obi Uwechue ponder the problem silently for a few moments, and then both men begin to smile, remembering what their fathers told them about such situations. The elders used to say that when young men are restless, it is up to the others to give them something to occupy them.

Obi Uwechue thinks that he and Obi Agilaga need to create a big problem for the boys so that they can overcome it, learn from the experience and become men. Obi Agilaga wholeheartedly agrees and tells Obi Uwechue that he thinks the girls will be invaluable in this lesson. He encourages Obi Uwechue to tell the girls of his village to begin spreading gossip and rumors. Obi Agilaga will take care of the rest of the plan.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The generation gap is an important theme in this story, as the young men who are fortunate to have received an education consider themselves above the manual labor by which their families must earn their livelihoods. The universal theme of teenaged boys thinking that they are wiser than their fathers is apparent here, as the boys reject everything the elders say in favor of their own ideas of how life should be. There is also

an element of elitism, since the boys think that their educations make them superior to those who labor on the farms.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Uche rises very early the next morning, and for a brief time, his family thinks that perhaps he is going to help at the farm today. Instead, Uche heads to the stream where he meets Nduka. The two boys discuss Okei's order to inform all the boys about tonight's meeting and wonder if they should include the uneducated boys who will be working on the farms today.

Knowing that the farm boys will not be able to read any announcements, especially those made in English, Uche claims that this is the best approach. Nduka challenges that idea, saying that all the boys should be given the chance to participate regardless of education level. Uche and Nduka compromise, and Uche beats out the message on a gong while Nduka writes the message on school paper and distributes it to the people in the village.

In preparation for tonight's meeting, Okei enlists the help of children to sweep the area outside the compound of Obi Agilaga, whose wives make comments about how hard Obi Agilaga works and how much he is in need of help in the fields. Okei ignores the comments because he does not want any confrontation with these women today.

Not surprisingly, Okei is voted leader at the evening meeting, and the discussion turns to the topic of the boys of other villages spreading rumors about Okei and his friends. Apparently, the boys from the other village are hearing the negative comments made by Obi Agilaga and others. They use this information to taunt Okei and his friends. Uche shares a story about being harassed when he and a friend went to Akpei to fish a few days ago. The group decides that the only method to stop the insults and rumors is to hold a wrestling match. The best wrestler from each village will participate in order to determine the superior group. The match will be conducted properly with the exception that the young men will judge the winner, as opposed to the typical method of asking the elders of the village to decide.

After the decision to hold a wrestling match is finalized, Okei leads a discussion about the need to modernize the farming methods of the country. Each farmer works very long hours and can barely feed his family. The droughts bring nothing but starvation. The boys would like to implement some new methods, which would not only improve the food production but also allow the farmers some rest. The educated boys agree with this philosophy, while the uneducated boys nod in agreement although they do not understand.

Soon Obi Agilaga returns home from a particularly long day in the fields. He is furious to find this gathering of idle young men at his home, and he orders them to clear out. One of Obi Agilaga's wives urges him to come in for supper, as the boys begin to disperse. Later that evening, Obi Agilaga visits the homes of some of his friends to put a plan into



motion to teach the boys a lesson. Obi Agilaga smiles to himself on the way home as he thinks about the boys who think they are the only ones who have ever been young.

Chapter 4 Analysis

The author provides some insight into the motivations of the educated boys and their resistance to working on the farms. It is not that the boys do not want to work or provide for themselves and their families, but they have learned information in school that will improve the quality of farming for the drought-prone area. They resist labor that they see as needless. It is not clear yet whether the boys' ideas have been shared with the elders who resist change or whether the boys hold the secret of improvement as a badge of superiority. Either way, the conflict will have to be resolved in some way.



Chapters 5 and 6

Chapters 5 and 6 Summary

Okei rises early and goes to the stream so that he may toughen up his feet on the incline at the water's edge. Nduka arrives, and the two boys discuss their wrestling conditioning. They condition themselves at this early hour to prevent suspicions from anyone who may see them. Okei orders Nduka to tell all the boys to begin their conditioning in the event that Okei is beaten or cannot compete for some reason. Nduka congratulates his friend for thinking like a true leader.

Okei and Nduka begin to wrestle to build up their strength, and soon a group of girls arrives on the way to the stream. Okei can see that the nasty girl Kwutelu is with them, and she taunts Okei for trying to build up his strength to wrestle the boys from Akpei. Kwutelu also accuses Okei and his friend of stealing from the elders and says that the wrestling match will determine if Okei and his friends are guilty or not because an innocent man always wins a match, according to custom.

The girls with Kwutelu begin singing a song to taunt Okei, who leaves the stream without washing and vows to return later. Okei asks Nduka about the man engaged to Kwutelu, and Nduka tells him that the man works for the government in Ilorin, a town to the west of the village. Okei thinks the man needs good luck to marry someone like Kwutelu and says he may not be able to control himself if Kwutelu does not stop taunting him.

In the meantime, Kwutelu goes to Josephine's home to tell her that the plan to spread rumors about the boys is working. She shares her morning confrontation with Okei, who threatened violence until Nduka stopped him. Josephine tells Kwutelu that she has heard her father discussing the situation with the local boys, who have chosen to rise to adulthood through a wrestling match.

Josephine feels that the elders of the village have initiated a plan to make the boys mad and goad them into this match. Kwutelu cannot believe this is true, but she would like to see Okei and his friends defeated because of their arrogance. Later that evening, when Kwutelu's father, Obi Uju, returns home from a long day in the fields, Kwutelu tells him about her confrontation with Okei today. Obi Uju is immediately angered and vows to speak to Obi Agilaga about keeping Okei under control.

Obi Uju retires early so that he can get an early start on tomorrow's labor. Kwutelu and one of Obi Uju's youngest wives prepare his sleeping area, and Kwutelu leaves her father when it is announced that Kwutelu's fiancy's brothers have come to the compound to see her. They have heard that Okei had made threats to Kwutelu earlier in the day. Kwutelu and her guests visit for several hours, discussing the dismal situation with some of the boys in the village lately. It is the middle of the night when the brothers leave, and Kwutelu walks quietly back to her father's house.



Obi Uju hears a noise at the door of the house, and thinking that it is Okei coming to carry out his threat of violence, he rises and grabs a huge knife intending to strike Okei on the shoulder where he will not be maimed, only scarred. In the dark, Obi Uju cannot see that the figure entering the door is not Okei but Kwutelu. His strike with the knife severs the ear of his daughter. Obi Uju catches Kwutelu's body as she falls toward the floor, and Obi Uju cries out for help thinking that he has killed his daughter.

Chapters 5 and 6 Analysis

The author captures the mood and tone of Kwutelu and the other girls who taunt Okei at the stream. The girls have even developed a song, which they sing just to infuriate Okei even further in the universal way that girls behave whenever trying to get attention from boys at this age. The girls sing, "Stealer of sprats from the streams, Molester of innocent girls by the streams, They will never go to the farms, They will never help in the house. Akpei boys will teach them a lesson, a lesson..." The reader can almost hear the singsong quality of the words and see the jeering looks from the girls so perfectly portrayed by the author.

Ironically, though, the taunts and gossip perpetuated by the girls with the permission of the village elders results in tragedy when Obi Uju maims Kwutelu thinking that it is Okei sneaking into his house. The author begins her lessons in the story that no good can come of any violence or confrontation, however innocently it may begin.



Chapters 7 and 8

Chapters 7 and 8 Summary

Obi Uju's cries ring out through the village, and Nne Ojo is one of the first to hear them, although she does not want to wake Obi Agiliga until she understands the situation. When Nne Ojo can make out the words indicating that Okei and his friends have killed someone, she immediately goes to the hut where the boys sleep. She is relieved to see that Okei is still asleep.

Nne Ojo wakes Obi Agiliga to tell him about the situation, and he questions Okei about what has happened. Obi Agiliga shares with Okei that he knows that Okei has been named a leader. He wants to know if Okei has ordered a crime committed, but Okei truthfully tells his uncle that this is not the case.

Obi Agiliga orders Nne Ojo to hide Okei in her hut where the men from the village will not dare enter to search and announces that he will go into the village to determine the situation. Nne Ojo is concerned when she sees that Obi Agiliga straps on his big knives. Okei offers to accompany his uncle, but Obi Agiliga will not allow it since the people of the village will act impulsively if they see Okei in the village.

Obi Agiliga leaves, and Nne Ojo hides Okei just in time before two of Kwutelu's fancy's brothers arrive at the compound demanding to see Okei. One of Obi Agiliga's younger wives feigns innocence about the incident until Nne Ojo can appear in the compound and assure the two young men that Okei and Obi Agiliga have left in search of the criminal who has committed this deed. When Obi Agiliga returns to the compound later that night, he and Nne Ojo discuss Okei's burgeoning trust of his aunt and uncle and hope that their relationship will steadily improve.

Okei wakes earlier than the others in the compound and goes to the stream for his morning conditioning. He is surprised by Uche, who tells Okei about the incident of last night. Uche informs Okei that Kwutelu's ear has been severed and that the people in the village suspected Okei and his friends of committing the crime until Obi Uju admitted that he struck Kwutelu by accident.

Uche visited Kwutelu this morning and reports that she will be taken to a big hospital for treatment. Uche finds it amusing that at last Kwutelu is speechless, even though it is her ear that is missing and not her tongue. Okei urges Uche to use discretion and not to laugh at such a misfortune. Uche believes that this incident indicates that God is on the side of Okei and his friends, but Okei does not want to indulge in such speculation, preferring instead to continue with his wrestling conditioning.

At the same time, Obi Uwechue visits Obi Agiliga to learn if Okei maimed Kwutelu. Both of these village elders feel some responsibility for the accident because they



encouraged the girls to taunt Okei and his friends, but they agree that the situation could have been worse had Obi Uju killed Kwutelu instead of cutting off her ear.

Obi Uwechue and Obi Agiliga agree that with the upcoming wrestling match and the distraction of the rumors, the boys of the villages do not have time to molest girls near the stream or steal from the old people. The two friends are happy that their plan to make men out of the boys is coming to fruition.

Chapters 7 and 8 Analysis

The author uses the literary techniques of similes and metaphors throughout the story to add interest and dimension to the language. For example, when describing Obi Uju's cries after he has maimed his daughter, the author says, "The cries cut through the otherwise still night like the sharp edges of so many shooting swords." In another example, Okei goes to the stream early and still unaware of what had happened to Kwutelu the night before. The author writes, "Once or twice an eel of fear wriggled in his stomach, but he calmed himself by remembering what Nne Ojo had said to him before his going to sleep." Obviously, cries do not have sharp edges, and fear does not look like an eel. By assigning these characteristics to Obi Uju's cries and to Okei's fear, the author can more fully explain the intensity of what the character is experiencing at the time.

Throughout the story, the author also uses many colloquialisms and the language of the Nigerian people to add to the work's authenticity. The pacing of the dialogue and the sentence structure mirror the dialect and the speech patterns of the people living in this country.

The character of Okei is beginning to show maturity at this point in the story. Perhaps it is his new role as group leader that adds a new dimension of responsibility, but Okei begins to understand the gravity of the situation created by the animosity between the young people in the different villages. The accident with Kwutelu and her father has involved other person, which is something Okei had never anticipated. He understands his uncle's role in the village better, too, and he begins to empathize with his uncle instead of treating him sarcastically. Okei's maturity shows also in his advice to Uche about not reveling in another's misfortunes such as the accident involving Kwutelu.



Chapters 9, 10, 11 and 12

Chapters 9, 10, 11 and 12 Summary

Josephine and her friends are anxious to get to the Akpei market because they have many plantains to sell and hope to make a good profit. Josephine has plans to buy new fabric for an outfit for the day of the wrestling match and hopes that she will have a successful day. As the day wears on, no one purchases any plantains from Josephine and her friends, and they begin to suspect that they are being ignored on purpose. Finally, toward the end of the afternoon, an old woman approaches the girls and tells them that they should give their plantains to poor people because no one in Akpei will buy from them. The rumors and the ill will propagated by the upcoming wrestling match between the boys of Akpei and Okei and his friends has prompted the Akpei villagers to not buy from the girls.

The evening is nearly dark when the girls return to their village with their plantains. The villagers await them with torches to light their way home. When the elders of the village hear the girls' story, they smile to each other, knowing that their plan is working.

The next evening, Okei and the boys from his village meet to discuss the wrestling match and to practice their moves. Okei and Nduka show off their skills, but the uneducated boys think their moves are too artistic and that Okei will be completely defeated when meeting the opposing team. One of the boys suggests that Okei access the skills of Obi Agiliga, who was a successful wrestler as a young boy. Okei resists this idea because it is important for the boys to succeed without intervention from the elders. Ultimately, Okei agrees to ask for Obi Agiliga's help because it is most important to win and to save dignity for the village.

Obi Agiliga has been waiting for the day when Okei will ask for his help and is pleased to offer support and to show Okei some new techniques that will enable Okei to beat the challenger. Okei is amazed and pleased to see that Obi Agiliga has retained his skills and agility after so many years. He is grateful to have his uncle's guidance and counsel on this matter.

The excitement about the wrestling match builds in the village, and the festivities are heightened because the match coincides with the yam festival. On the night before the match, a group of singers and dancers including Kwutelu arrives at the compound of Obi Agiliga and sings the praises of Okei, who is embarrassed by the tribute. Obi Agiliga advises Okei to enjoy the position of being not only the leader of the wrestling team but also the leader of his age group, which is a high honor bestowed on the household.

Chapters 9, 10, 11 and 12 Analysis

The theme of heritage and ancestry is important in this section, as Okei finally embraces Obi Agiliga's knowledge of wrestling and ultimately forms a closer bond with



his uncle. Okei has worked through the anger of the loss of his parents, which coincided with normal teen-aged rebellion. He has accepted a position of responsibility and humility that advances his relationship with Obi Agiliga.

Okei's consultation with his uncle is not only a gesture of respect but also an acknowledgment of the value and wisdom available through the elders. The village society is structured so that the elders have a position of respect and wisdom, and Okei's position as leader of the young men allows him to understand the cycle of life, knowledge and wisdom.

Kwutelu has also undergone a metamorphosis since her accident and behaves more humbly, even praising Okei and encouraging his success when before, she led the taunts against him. The author shows these physical and emotional transformations that end in more mature, responsible behavior. This is the goal of the elders for all the children.



Chapters 13 and 14

Chapters 13 and 14 Summary

The day of the wrestling match has finally arrived, and Okei awakens to the smell of smoke from fires all over the village, as people prepare their breakfast of yams to celebrate. Before long, Okei hears drums and the voices of those arriving at the compound to wish him luck in the match.

Down by the stream as Okei takes his morning bath, well-wishers greet him and hope that he will bring dignity to the village. Nne Ojo dresses Okei in special ceremonial cloths and necklaces worn to ward off breathlessness and to inspire courage. Okei is ready and begins to feel excitement as he hears the drums from the approaching Akpei villagers. Obi Agiliga asks Okei if he will not reconsider having some of the elders judge the match, but Okei tells him that this is between the young men. They are starting a new tradition.

As the girls of the village sing and dance, Okei and his opponent meet and agree that this will be a friendly match that will bring the two villages closer together. The elders, Obi Agiliga, Obi Uju and Obi Uwechue watch from a distance and smile to each other as the match begins. The wrestling match starts with friendly overtones, and Okei quickly downs his opponent. The match is seemingly over. The Akpei villagers are not satisfied with this outcome and quickly send in another boy, who takes Okei down quickly. More and more boys join in the fight, until it becomes a massive free-for-all with no rules or judges to stop the chaos.

All around the fighting, the people from the two villages jump and scream in hopes that someone from their village will emerge victorious from this confusion. Finally, Obi Agiliga, Obi Uju and Obi Uwechue stride into the midst of the fighting and begin beating the drums to attract the attention of the fighters.

Okei is glad for the sound of the drums because he is being badly beaten by two boys at once. Soon the fighting comes to an end, and Obi Agiliga announces that the match has been a success. It has ended just as the elders planned for it to end. The elders thank the girls for their part in fanning the flames of rumors to keep the boys' ire up.

Obi Agiliga acknowledges that all the boys are good fighters and wrestlers, but they are all equally hurt and humiliated by the outcome of this brawl. The young people of the village agree that they do not remember what started the conflict, and Obi Agiliga declares that no one really wins in any fight or in any war.

Chapters 13 and 14 Analysis

Okei has learned many lessons about respect for his elders and his heritage, but the biggest lesson passed on is that no good comes from any war. The author uses the



character of Obi Agiliga to pronounce the biggest theme of the story, "... in all good fights, just like wars, nobody wins." The expected outcome of pain and humiliation has come to pass, and the lesson of the elders is complete. Perhaps by illuminating the futility of aggression, the boys will be slow to initiate major conflicts such as the Civil War that nearly destroyed Nigeria several years prior.



Characters

Obi Agiliga

Obi Agiliga is the uncle of Okei, who took the boy in when his parents were killed in the Biafran War in Nigeria. Like most of the people in his village, he is a farmer, and grows yams, which the family subsists on. He is well-off enough to hire helpers, but watches them carefully, because he knows they may take any opportunity to sneak off and shirk doing work; however, he is also fair, and when he takes a rest from the hard work and midday heat, he insists that they do so, too. He wishes he had more help, because he is worried about harvesting all the yams before the village's yam festival. When he was an adolescent, he was the leader of the wrestling group of his age, and when Okei is elected to wrestle in a match with the neighboring village, he teaches Okei all he knows about wrestling. "I have to teach it all to this young man here. It is his turn now. My turn has come and gone." He also wisely tells Okei, "Even if you lost, it won't be a complete loss because you would have added a new art to the game of wrestling, and then you would have taken part and done your best."

Josephine

A girl in Okei's age group, she, like her friends, walks many miles to the rival village of Akpei to sell plantains, because they can get a little more money for them there.

Kwutelu

A seventeen-year-old girl, she also sells plantains in the neighboring village's market. She is the oldest in her age group, the most sophisticated, and the leader; the others all model their behavior after hers. She has a sharp, mocking tongue, and likes to tease. She is engaged to someone from another village, and soon will leave her home to marry and live with him. When she comes quietly into her father's house at night, he attacks her, thinking she is Okei, and cuts off her ear. After the accident, she is more quiet and less mocking of others.

Mbekwu

See Uche

Nduka

One of Okei's friends, he is also sixteen, but unlike Okei he is short and stocky. He also has a very sharp tongue, and loses his temper easily. Nduka, like Okei, is cynical about



older people and their supposed wisdom; he remarks, "trouble with these old men is that they say things simply to hurt, without any proof."

Nne Ojo

Senior wife of Obi Agiliga, she is exasperated with Okei's adolescent bad manners, and his reluctance to contribute to the family welfare by working on their farm. She is quick-tempered, and threatens to get other boys to beat up Okei if he doesn't behave.

Okei

A thin, lanky sixteen-year-old boy, he has gone to school, which sets him apart from his uncle and many of the other young people in his village. He doesn't want to work on a farm, as his ancestors have always done; he complains that the work is endless, and every year they run out of food. However, he doesn't know what he does want to do, and is restless and bored. He's also fed up with his uncle's telling him "when I was your age," and telling him what to do. In addition, he is still troubled by the deaths of his family; he was spared only because he went out into the backyard while the soldiers killed them. He is regarded as intelligent by others in his village, and his friends admire him because he is taller, more polished, and originally came from a wealthier family, which, in their opinion, makes him a natural leader for his age group. The girls of his age, however, mock him as being a little too bigheaded. He is actually modest, and when he is elected leader, is doubtful of whether they have made the best choice.

When he is elected leader, he's assigned to wrestle a boy from the neighboring village to settle a rivalry between the two. He takes this seriously, and immediately begins toughening himself up, running and wrestling with his friends to improve his chances of winning. This shows that he is not inherently lazy, as his reluctance to work on the farm might make him seem; he simply needs a focus for his energies.

Onuoha Obi

Agiliga's twelve-year-old son, who works on the farm and is obedient and well-behaved. He wishes Okei would come to the farm and help.

Uche

Uche, whose nickname is "Mbekwu," or "Tortoise," is easy-going and laughs often, at everything and everyone, a habit that others find annoying. He is an age-mate of Okei and Nduka. They, and others their same age, are all known as "Umu aya Biafra," or "Babies born around the [Nigerian] civil war." Like Okei and Nduka, he is tired of being told to prove his manhood by going and laboring on the family farm. He likes Josephine, but tells others she is just a friend. He inadvertently gets into trouble when he goes to



the neighboring village to fish in the river, and unintentionally muddies some cassava pulp that the women of that village have left in the river to soak.

Obi Uju

Kwutelu's father; she is his favorite daughter, and often sleeps at his house instead of her mother's, because it's more relaxing. He is very protective of her, and when he hears rumors that girls are being harassed, he is determined to prevent anyone from hurting her. Like Obi Agiliga, he is a farmer, and is worried because he doesn't have enough workers to harvest all his yams before the yam festival. He hears a rumor that Okei threatened Kwutelu, and goes to sleep with a well-sharpened knife; when he hears someone coming into his house after dark, he gets the knife and goes after them, cutting off an ear. The person turns out to be Kwutelu, coming in to sleep.

Obi Uwechue

A man from Akpei, the neighboring village, who comes to see Obi Agiliga to discuss the problems both villages are having with their adolescent boys. He explains that the young men are restless and bored, have too much education and too much time on their hands, and that they are picking fights with girls and making minor trouble for the adults. He tells Obi Agiliga that they should create a diversion for the young men, some kind of "minor worry" or problem that they will have to solve. "By the time they have finished solving that problem they will be wiser," he says.



Themes

Generational Conflict

The novel opens with a conflict between Okei and his uncle, Obi Agiliga, which continues throughout the book, but is resolved by the end of the story. At the beginning, Okei is restless, bored, tired of his uncle's nagging, and thinks he can solve his own problems and that his uncle is hopelessly out of touch. He also thinks his uncle has nothing to teach him, since he has been educated. This attitude is common among his age-mates who have been to school; none of them want to work on their parents' farms, although they are happy to eat the food their parents provide. The girls of their same age, who unlike the boys are expected and required to do productive work for their families, think the boys are "bigheaded" and lazy.

Obi Agiliga, however, does remember what it was like to be a young man, and he secretly sympathizes with and understands Okei's problems, although he can't convince Okei of that. Their relationship is complicated by the fact that Okei is an orphan and believes his uncle took him in out of duty, so he is reluctant to trust Obi Agiliga. As the story progresses and Obi Agiliga comes up with a scheme to keep all the boys busy and teach them a lesson, Okei gradually learns that his uncle is trustworthy, that he does know more than Okei thinks he does, and that it might be wise to ask his advice every now and then.

One turning point in their relationship comes when Okei is wrongly accused of being in Obi Uju's house, and his uncle and aunt protect him. Okei realizes for the first time that his uncle will truly stand behind him, and that despite his "nagging," he really believes Okei is a good person.

A second turning point occurs when another boy, a farmer's son, tells Okei that his uncle was once the best wrestler in the village. This is news to Okei, who has never bothered to listen or to ask about his uncle's past, because he just assumed he was a boring old man. Obi Agiliga teaches him the traditional songs and wrestling moves, the old way, and also shows him some special techniques to attack the opponent when he is unprepared. While teaching, he regains some of his old skill and youth, and Okei is fascinated. Obi Agiliga says, "I have to teach it all to this young man here. It is his turn now. My turn has come and gone." He also praises Okei for being not only the leader of the wrestling group, but also the leader of his age group. This true praise helps Okei to trust him even more, and they are finally close; a bond of trust has been created.

Tradition versus Change

Much of the conflict in the book stems from the fact that times have changed, even within Okei's lifetime. He began life in a stable family, but that was quickly destroyed



during the Biafran War, when his family was killed and he had to go live with his uncle. He lives with the pain of this past history.

Things are also different for his generation because some (though not all) of them have been educated. In the past, young men simply farmed, like their fathers. It has also made the educated boys reluctant to work on their fathers' farms, and leads them to look down on other boys who have not been to school. These other boys, dutiful and traditional, seem dull to the educated boys, but in the end may be wiser; one of them advises Okei to go learn from his uncle, an act which makes him a much better wrestler and which he would not have thought of on his own.

The schooling has opened up new possibilities, but as one of the gossiping girls points out, not great ones; in her opinion, Okei is educated enough to be a houseboy, but has too high an opinion of himself to succeed even at that lowly job.

Because of the schooling, Okei and the other boys are in a kind of limbo—they don't want to work on the farms, and they are not educated enough to do anything else. This leaves them restless and bored, with a lot of energy but nothing productive to do with it, leading to trouble. Kwutelu observes, "They are so proud about being partly educated. They are like bats, neither birds nor animals."

Futility of War

The book ends with the sentence, "In a good war, nobody wins," and this theme is brought up early, when the narrator describes how Okei lost his family in the Biafran War. "It was a civil war that did cost Nigeria dear. Almost a million lives were lost, and not just on the losing side; those who won the war lost thousands of people too—showing that in any war, however justified its cause, nobody wins."

At the end of the wrestling match, which turns into a mass brawl, Obi Agiliga tells everyone that the fight has ended "well." By this, he doesn't mean that anyone has won, or that any real good came from the actual fight. What he means is that it ended as the elders expected it to. "You were all hurt and humiliated," he tells them. "I am sure you will remember this day."

One would hope that the young people would remember the lesson they've learned, but the book itself makes it clear that although they may remember it, their offspring may not. Memory is short when it comes to avoiding conflict; the young people, themselves the offspring of a war, are all too ready to start another one, perpetuating a futile cycle.



Style

Storytelling

The most notable feature of *The Wrestling Match* is the style in which it is told. Readers may feel as if they're in "an open clearing in which children and old people sat, telling stories and singing in the moonlight." Emecheta adopts an intimate tone, taking the reader in and telling the story as if the reader is sitting right there and knows all the people involved. In addition, she uses rhythm and repetition, as in the opening paragraph:

It was the time for the swishes of the fronds of the coconut-palms to be heard; it was the time for the fire-insects of the night to hiss through the still air. It was the time for the frogs in the nearby ponds to croak to their mates, as if to say that they should now seek shelter because night was fast approaching.

The language of the book is deceptively simple and clear, but at the same time, vividly poetic, particularly in the descriptions of the natural world, which is ever-present. Birds, animals, the seasons, night, day, and other aspects of nature are as important as the characters, and help to ground the story and add to its traditional flavor.

The narrator of the story adopts a wise, omniscient persona, that of an elder who has seen the foibles of every generation, who understands both Obi Agiliga's frustration with Okei and his compassion with him, and also his wounded pride because his nephew won't listen to him. She also has sympathy for Okei's haunted past, his ambition, and his restlessness. She shows every character in an affirming, positive light, despite their individual flaws, and presents hope for everyone to improve their lives and work together.

Setting and Culture

Another notable feature of the novel is its setting in a small Nigerian village of farming people. On every page, the reader is treated to the sounds, scents, textures, and customs of village life, made vividly real. Emecheta presents this culture as the story progresses, not stopping to explain, but simply dropping it into the text; characters eat pounded yam for dinner, wear "abada cloth," live in compounds of thatched huts, bathe in the river, and have large, polygamous, extended families. Emecheta presents village life in a larger context of cultural change, as the younger generation becomes more educated, and the girls become interested in making money so they can buy themselves better clothes.



An important part of village culture is the "age group," in which young people born around the same time are expected to socialize together and support each other. The members of a particular age group all wear the same distinctive hairstyle and go through coming-of-age ceremonies together; they elect a leader and conduct their business largely outside adult view, although they are expected to consult their elders when necessary. The leader of the age group is expected to defend their reputation, to speak for them, and to represent them to the larger world.

In this culture, girls marry young; Kwutelu is only seventeen, but is already engaged and soon will marry. Boys apparently wait until they are older, because although Okei and his age-mates are sixteen, they are still only a little interested in girls, and not interested in becoming able to support a family.



Historical Context

The Biafran War

Nigeria was a British colony until 1963, when it became a republic with four regional governments. The ruling party, made up largely of people from the north, dominated the government. Like other African nations, Nigeria is made up of many different ethnic groups, which coexist within boundaries that have no connection with traditional lands, but were drawn up by the European powers that controlled Africa in the past.

In 1964, people boycotted the first general election, leading to a crisis, and in 1965, this escalated to general rebellion when the leading political party rigged elections in the western region.

In January, 1966, army officers of the Igbo ethnic group led a coup to overthrow the government. They killed the prime minister and the premiers of the northern and western region. After this coup, Major General Johnson T. U. Aguiyi-Aronsi took control with a military government, and ruled the country until he was ousted by another coup, this time led by officers who were members of the Hausa ethnic group. During this coup, Igbo people living in the north were killed, which led great numbers of Igbo people to flee to their ancestral eastern region. However, even in this region, Igbo people were killed.

Between September and November of 1966, the four regions tried to come to a truce, but failed, partly because representatives of the eastern region refused to participate in the negotiations after the first meeting. More meetings occurred in 1967, but led to nothing, and on May 27, 1967, Lieutenant Colonel C. O. Ojukwu declared that the eastern region was a sovereign and independent republic. In response, the federal government declared a state of emergency and officially divided Nigeria into twelve states.

Three days later, Ojukwu proclaimed that the eastern region was seceding from Nigeria and was now the Republic of Biafra. Biafran and federal forces soon clashed. The Biafrans did well initially, but by October, the Biafran capital of Enugu was captured by federal troops. The war continued until 1970, when the Biafrans were so starved they were unable to continue fighting.

Ojukwu left Nigeria in 1970, and a Biafran delegation formally surrendered to the Nigerian federal government on January 15.

As Emecheta explains in the book, "it was a civil war, which started among the politicians; the army stepped in to keep the peace, then the military leaders started to quarrel among themselves, and one created a new state, taking his followers with him." Almost a million people died in the war, not just military people but also civilians; as Emecheta notes, this shows that "in any war, however justified its cause, nobody wins."

Diversity in Nigeria

Nigeria is roughly the size of Texas, but unlike Texas, contains more than 300 different ethnic groups who speak 300 different languages. When Nigeria was defined as a nation by the European colonialists, the borders of the nation were drawn up without regard to natural divisions between ethnic or regional groups. Thus, there are now a great number of ethnic groups within Nigeria, and divisions among them have led to frequent conflicts. "Ethnic group" is defined as a group of people who share a common language and cultural values; as Simon A. Rakov noted in the Brown University *Postcolonial Web*, there is as much difference between these groups "as there is between Germans, English, Russians, and Turks."

Most of the 300 ethnic groups are in the minority, and thus do not have political clout, or the resources needed to take advantage of development or modernization. The three "majority" groups are the Hausa-Fulani in the north, the Igbo (or Ibo) in the southeast, and the Yoruba in the southwest. These groups together make up fifty-seven percent of the Nigerian population, with the rest belonging to "minority" groups.



Critical Overview

According to M. Keith Booker in *The African Novel in English: An Introduction*, Emecheta "is probably Africa's best-known and most widely read woman novelist." She has been supporting herself and her family with her writing since 1972, when she published her first book *In the Ditch*. Her work has been widely translated and read all over the world, and indeed, she told interviewer Reed Way Dasenbrock in *Interviews with Writers of the Post-Colonial World*, "I try to write for the world."

However, she has occasionally been criticized by Nigerian writers, who feel that in some of her books, she writes about topics that, as a woman, she should not consider. Of her book *Destination Biafra*, about the Nigerian civil war, she told Dasenbrock, "Nigerian critics feel that the language I use . . . is not appropriate. They would like me to use big military words, because I'm writing about what happened at Biafra." She also commented that some are offended by her simply because she is a woman. She quoted Chinweizu, a Nigerian critic, who remarked "Buchi, I am going to ruin you." When she asked why, he said, "Why should you be writing about what men are doing? Did you go to the warfield?"

Emecheta also commented in her interview with Dasenbrock that criticism in Nigeria is heavily weighted, depending on what ethnic group the reviewer and the author are from; if they are from the same group, the reviewer usually praises; if they are from different groups, the reviewer harshly criticizes "according to who you are, your people, and the people you know."

In Europe and North America, however, she noted that "people will just artificially boost a black person. I find that a most hurtful attitude—more patronizing than supportive."

According to Chikwenye Okonso Ogunyemi in *African Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women*, Emecheta's greatest achievement "lies in internationalizing the Nigerian novel by women," and her work is enriched by the contrast between two cultures, and her outlook as a woman who has lived outside Nigeria.

Ogunyemi points out that although Emecheta is considered a feminist writer by many critics, she does not consider herself to be a feminist. According to Ogunyemi, Emecheta said, "I think we women of African background still have a very very long way before we can really rub shoulders with such women." In an interview with Julie Holmes in *The Voice*, she said, "I work toward the liberation of women, but I'm not feminist. I'm just a woman."

Ogunyemi noted that "her novels reveal a paradox: a dual vision, one insistently feminist, the other consistently denying or punishing feminism," and commented that "The subsequent tension in her works results in a mixed reception, particularly in Nigeria, where she is less popular than she is in Europe . . . and in America."



Holmes quoted African-American writer Alice Walker, who said that Emecheta "integrates the profession of writer into the cultural concept of mother/worker, because she is both." Emecheta has integrated her life and her work through her writing, since much of her work is autobiographical. She told Holmes, "I'm not really very creative. I have to experience something or know someone who has seen something in order to write convincingly." Ogunyemi praised Emecheta for using her personal story to bring wider attention to the situation of women in Nigeria: "She has shifted what was a strictly domestic agenda into the international sphere, thus situating the [discussion] in the court of world opinion."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1



Critical Essay #1

Winters is a freelance writer and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses themes of intergenerational understanding, the nature of war, and the place of women in this novel.

Buchi Emecheta's *The Wrestling Match* is notable for its clear, simple language and vivid sensory and cultural details, which bring this tale set in a Nigerian village to life. However, behind its deceptively simple façade, the novel considers deeper questions about intergenerational understanding and the nature of war.

One prevalent theme, running throughout the story, is that of intergenerational conflict versus intergenerational understanding. Okei believes that his uncle and aunt, as well as other adults, are hopelessly out of touch, have no idea what he's going through, and have no sympathy for his problems. He has suffered the loss of his family, and is further confused because he and his friends, unlike previous generations and unlike many of the other people in the village, have experienced a few years of schooling. Thus, he is unsure of what he will do in the future, unlike his uneducated and more traditional counterparts, who run their lives according to well-worn customs and are secure about their place in the world.

Although Okei believes his uncle has no idea what he's thinking or going through, the narrative reveals that his uncle does understand him, and has compassion both for his loss and for his confusion about his role in life. As he explains to his younger son Onuoha:

He is troubled about something, Onuoha. We don't know what it is. And he did not dream that he would ever be asked to come and work on the farm. That Awolowo free education has given him and his agegroup airs. They will grow, never mind. They will all grow.

Although he is sometimes exasperated with Okei's adolescent disrespect and apparent laziness, he realizes that what Okei and his friends need is something productive to do—some cause into which they can hurl their considerable energy and ability. Thus, he and Obi Uwechue come up with a scheme to provoke a conflict between their two villages. Because his scheme involves conflict, both within and between the two villages, in some sense, Obi Agiliga could be viewed as a troublemaker. However, he believes that the conflict is in the service of a higher goal: teaching a lesson and helping the young men to grow up.

Interestingly, the adults don't seem bothered by potential trouble they could cause if the mass brawl gets out of control. It does get out of control, and everyone in it gets soundly thrashed and humiliated, but the elders are able to restore control by beating drums and yelling. No one is seriously injured in the fight, which seems somewhat unrealistic, and



the elders never consider what they would have done if someone had been injured or if they were unable to stop the fighting. In addition, when Kwutelu's ear is cut off when her father mistakes her for a robber, the two elder men, Obi Agiliga and Obi Uwechue, simply shrug and remark that it could have been worse—she could have been killed. They have no apparent compassion for her disfigurement, and the narrator also seems to approve of it because it has stilled Kwutelu's "sharp tongue."

The two elders don't let anyone know that they're ultimately responsible for starting the hysteria that made Kwutelu's father think Okei was going to rob him. They are sorry, but they keep their regret to themselves, an act that seems surprisingly irresponsible. They are more interested in the successful continuation of their plan, and a few paragraphs later, they "chuckle knowingly at their cleverness" in creating problems for the "know-all" adolescents.

It's also interesting that instead of creating a positive cause for the young men to become involved in, the elders create a negative diversion—spiteful gossip and conflict between the two neighboring villages. One might think that Obi Agiliga, knowing the pointlessness of conflict, would shy away from creating it, but perhaps he knows that each generation only learns from its own experiences, not from the philosophical talk of those who are older. Thus, the boys must be allowed to experience conflict for themselves—hopefully on a small scale, rather than the full-scale war Okei has already witnessed—in order to learn that war is ultimately futile.

Despite these flaws in his character, Obi Agiliga is generally depicted as wise and kind, and so is his senior wife, Nne Ojo. The story reinforces traditional Nigerian beliefs that elders do know what's best for the young, and that younger people should both attend to their example and learn from their philosophical wisdom. For example, Okei, at the urging of a more traditional youth, reluctantly goes to his uncle to learn some wrestling moves. To his surprise, he finds that Obi Agiliga was the best wrestler in his own age group, and he also learns to take defeat philosophically. Obi Agiliga tells him, "Even if you lost, it wouldn't be a complete loss because you would have added a new art to the game of wrestling, and you would have taken your part and done your best." Okei and his friends are chastened by the lesson they learn. As Nduka, another "big-headed" youth who formerly mocked the stodgy beliefs of the elders, "prayerfully" says near the end of the book, "A village that has no elders has no future. I hope we will always have elders."

Early in the book, the narrator describes the Nigerian civil war, or Biafran War, in which the new, and short-lived, nation of Biafra was created in 1967. The war, which Emecheta notes killed almost a million people, marked more than one generation, but particularly *Umu aya Biafra*: "babies born around the civil war." However, Okei must have been more than a baby, because the narrator notes that when his family was killed by federal soldiers, he ran out into the back yard and thus escaped death. The narrator never discusses his reaction to this event, but other characters note that "Something is troubling him, we don't know what." In addition, Obi Agiliga comments that Okei was born to a more wealthy family and never expected to have to work on a farm. This



indicates that he was old enough to remember his parents and his life before the war, and to remember their presumably horrific deaths.

Okei is depicted as sullen, wary of his elders, and as having a cockiness that is rooted in an inner insecurity and rootlessness, as well as in his small amount of education. Although some of these traits may result from the traumatic loss of his family during his childhood, they are also typical of many teenagers who are beginning to separate themselves from their parents and find their own role in the world; his friends, Uche and Nduka, whose families were not slain, share them. If the book has a flaw, it is how well-adjusted and "normal" Okei seems to be, despite the horrifying things he's seen. It would seem that he, of all people, does not need a lesson in the futility of war; he has presumably seen, first hand, the waste of lives and dreams, and it would seem that he should be more obviously marked by his tragic past. In fact, the events he's been through would probably have one of two effects: they would either mark him with a burning desire to revenge himself on his family's killers, or with a more mature awareness that "in war, nobody wins," the lesson he seemingly learns only after the relatively trivial conflict of the wrestling match.

Although most of Emecheta's work examines the roles of women in Nigerian and western society and protests against the limited roles they have been assigned, *The Wrestling Match* takes a thoroughly traditional view of girls and women and their roles, perhaps because it is set in a traditional village where these roles have remained unchanged for many years.

In the story, the adolescent girls of the village don't need conflicts invented for them, because they are already dealing with adult concerns. They work hard for their families, assisting with household chores such as "claying" the huts; they walk many miles with heavy burdens on their heads to sell plantains and other produce; and at least one of them, Kwutelu, is engaged (at age seventeen) and will soon marry. They don't have time to waste, unlike the boys, who have so much time on their hands that they begin to make trouble for everyone else. Nor do they have the education that gives the boys such a high opinion of themselves. They are destined to be wives and mothers, and to take care of men, as the multiple wives of the elders do throughout the book: cooking, cleaning, nurturing.

These depictions of girls and women are natural, since the story takes place in a traditional culture where these roles are the norm, but interestingly enough, the narrator seems to approve of this situation, and is undisturbed about the girls' lack of education or the disparity in expectations between the girls and boys. In addition, the narrator presents Kwutelu's loss of an ear in a "positive" light: it has finally stilled her sharp tongue, and now she may be more modest and better-behaved, because she's afraid of people making fun of her.

However, these presentations of girls and women are surprising, considering that Emecheta is the author, and in her other books, she protests bitterly against her culture, in which men are valued more than women. In her other books, she presents women as

equals of men, and encourages them to become educated and find roles beyond simply being wives and mothers.

Source: Kelly Winters, Critical Essay on *The Wrestling Match*, in *Novels for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.



Topics for Further Study

Research the Biafran War, also known as the Nigerian Civil War. How did the conflict start? What kept it going, and what was the ultimate result? How is this similar to, or different from, the conflict between the young men in the villages in *The Wrestling Match*?

In the book, Okei's uncle and a man from the neighboring village invent a diversion to give the teenagers a positive outlet for their energy. If you could invent a similar diversion for young people in American society, what would it be? What do you think would happen as a result?

Okei is reluctant to go to his uncle and ask him for help, because he is afraid his uncle will say, "I knew you would have to ask me," and "I told you so." Do you think these feelings are universal in young people in all cultures? Why?

In the book, the characters often comment on how things have changed: some of the young people are now educated, and instead of doing traditional dances at the yam festival, they are wrestling—perhaps because they have lived through a war. Research Nigerian society in the 1970s and today, and discuss how it has changed in the last few decades.

For the characters in the book, yams are a staple food. Find out what other foods are important in Nigerian society and culture. Research a Nigerian recipe, then cook a Nigerian dish.



Compare and Contrast

1970: The Nigerian Civil War ends, leaving a total of over 1 million people dead from war, starvation, and disease.

Today: In 1999 and 2000, under the rule of President Olusegun Obasanjo (elected in 1999), rival religious and tribal groups continue centuries- old conflicts with violent rioting; in one riot, over 300 people are killed in hand-to-hand fighting. Shortages of food and fuel, as well as power blackouts, exacerbate the situation, and the country teeters on the brink of another civil war.

1970: The illiteracy rate in Nigeria is 86% for females and 65% for males. **Today:** The illiteracy rate in Nigeria has decreased to 48% for females and 30% for males.

1970: Nigeria experiences one of the world's worst famines in the wake of the Civil War.

Today: The country of Nigeria remains today in the condition of massive debt, poverty, and inflation into which it plunged in the 1980s, following a period of unprecedented prosperity (brought on by soaring oil prices) during the middle and late 1970s.

1970: Within Nigeria, ancient rivalries between ethnic and religious groups simmer to the boiling point and are not lessened by the ending of the Nigerian Civil War.

Today: Conflicts which began hundreds of years ago remain today, and, as in the 1960s and 1970s, continue to fuel social, political, and economic problems in Nigeria.

What Do I Read Next?

Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* (1980) tells the story of a young village woman who grows up and endures the trials of life in colonial Nigeria.

An autobiographical novel, Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen* (1973) tells the story of an intelligent, resourceful Nigerian girl who emigrates to Great Britain.

In *Bride Price* (1980), Emecheta insightfully depicts the life of an Ibo girl in Nigeria.

Emecheta's *Double Yoke* (1995) is an unusual novel about university life in modern Africa.

Efuru (1966), by Flora Nwapa, one of Emecheta's favorite authors, explores Nigerian village life.

In *So Long a Letter* (1991), Mariama Ba exposes the double standard between men and women in Africa.



Further Study

Arndt, Susan, *African Women's Literature, Orature, and Intertextuality: Igbo Oral Narratives as Nigerian Women Writers' Models and Objects of Writing Back*, Bayreuth University Press, 1998.

This volume examines Igbo oral tradition and its influence on the work of Nigerian women writers.

Fishburn, Katherine, *Reading Buchi Emecheta*, Greenwood Publishing Co., 1995.

This book provides a critical analysis of Emecheta's life and work.

Umeh, Marie, ed., *Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta*, Africa World Press, 1995.

This is a collection of critical essays on Emecheta's work.

Uraizee, Joya F., *This Is No Place for a Woman: Nadine Gordimer, Nayantera Sahgal, Buchi Emecheta, and the Politics of Gender*, Africa World Press, 2000.

This is an analytical survey of three post-colonial African women writers.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) 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, NfS 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 NfS 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 NfS 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 NfS 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 NfS 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

NfS 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 Novels 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 NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS 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 Novels for Students

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

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

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels 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 NfS, 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 Novels 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 NfS, 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 Novels 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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