A Grain of Wheat

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF NGŨGĨ WA THIONG'O

Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o was born and baptized James Ngugi in British-controlled Kenya in 1938. Ngũgĩ and his family were members of the Gikuyu (or Kikuyu; or Agikuyu), the largest ethnic group in Kenya. Even from his early childhood, Ngũgĩ's life was framed by the Kenyan struggle against the British. His family was heavily involved in the Mau Mau freedom fighting movement—one of his brothers was a freedom fighter, the homeguard tortured his mother, and Ngũgĩ's deaf brother was shot in the back by a British soldier. Ngũgĩ began writing very early and at the age of 24 premiered a play he had written for the African Writers Conference. His first novel, *Weep Not, Child*, was published in 1964, the first English-language novel to be published by an East African writer. After completing a B.A. in English at Makerere University around the same time, Ngũgĩ traveled to England to work on an M.A. at Leeds, but he did not complete his studies since his energy was instead devoted to the writing of *A Grain of Wheat*, which was published in 1967. *A Grain of Wheat* marked a turning point for Ngũgĩ, after which he became a Fanonist Marxist, rejected Christianity, began writing only in Gikuyu (and then translating his stories into English), and legally changed his name to Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, rejecting James Ngugi as a "missionary construction." Ngũgĩ abandoned his M.A. and returned to Kenya, taking a position as a literature professor at the University of Nairobi. During this time, Ngũgĩ's writing became more brazenly political, criticizing Kenya's newly independent government and earning the ire of Jomo Kenyatta, a man whom Ngũgĩ had praised in *A Grain of Wheat*. In 1977, Ngũgĩ was imprisoned by Jomo Kenyatta's successor. In prison, Ngũgĩ wrote his first entirely Gikuyu novel, *The Devil on the Cross* (translation), on prison toilet paper. Following his release, Ngũgĩ and his family were exiled from Kenya. He continued to write—publishing books and essays as late as 2012—and teach as a visiting professor at several universities around Europe and America, including Yale, Bayreuth University in Germany, and New York University. Ngũgĩ revisited East Africa in 2004, but never moved back to his home country.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A Grain of Wheat is set in the four days preceding Kenyan Independence in December 1963, but the author recalls events as far back as British settlement in Kenya in the first two decades of the twentieth century, when the British occupiers forced tribal groups off of their land, making them squatters and often using them as forced labor to propel their expansion across Kenya. Most significant to the story, however, is the Mau Mau Uprising, also known as the Emergency, which Ngũgĩ's own family took part in. The Mau Mau Uprising began in 1952 as a coalition of the Gikuyu, Meru, and Embu people of Kenya who waged war on British colonial forces, including both British Army soldiers as well as Gikuyu who chose to side with the British colonizers. Within the first year of the Mau Mau rebellion, British authorities imposed a state of emergency, leading to mass arrests and detention of suspected Mau Mau leaders and sympathizers, including Jomo Kenyatta. This pressure drove the remaining Mau Mau freedom fighters into the forest, where they adopted guerilla tactics to harass and terrorize British forces, who were far more heavily armed and well supplied. Although the Mau Mau's primary leader, Dedan Kimathi, was captured in 1956, signaling a formal defeat, various factions of Mau Mau fighters continued to wage their local wars against the British all the way until Independence, playing a significant role in forcing the British to cede control of Kenya back to the Kenyan people.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Ngũgĩ's literature played a formative role in the development of African literature distributed to a global audience, as well as chronicling East Africa's struggle against British colonialism. Ngũgĩ himself was a close contemporary of Chinua Achebe, author of *Things Fall Apart*, widely considered the greatest masterpiece of African literature, which describes life in pre-colonial Nigeria and British arrival in the nineteenth century. Another notable contemporary includes Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka, whose plays chronicling and criticizing both colonial rule and the independent Nigerian government—the most famous of which is *Death and the King's Horseman*—earned him imprisonment and exile from Nigeria, but also the 1986 Nobel Prize in Literature. A third important contemporary is Tanzanian postcolonial author Abdulrazak Gurnah, author of *Paradise*, a novel that sought to counter dominant Western imaginings of Africa propagated by Joseph Conrad's infamous *Heart of Darkness*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *A Grain of Wheat*
- **When Written:** 1964-1966
- **Where Written:** Leeds University, England
- **When Published:** 1967
- **Literary Period:** Postcolonial African
- **Genre:** Historical novel
- **Setting:** Kenya

- **Climax:** Mugo admits to his whole village that he, and not Karanja, betrayed Kihika to the British.
- **Antagonist:** Karanja; John Thompson
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Personal Experience. The "deaf and dumb" character Gitogo, who is murdered by a British soldier who does not understand that Gitogo cannot hear his orders to halt, is a direct excerpt from Ngũgĩ's own life. One of the author's brothers was similarly murdered, shot in the back as he ran from a British man pointing a rifle at him, deaf and unable to hear the man's orders to halt.

PLOT SUMMARY

The central story takes place in the four days leading up to Kenya's independence in 1963, with frequent flashbacks to events that happen as early as the 1920s.

In the village of Thabai, a man named Mugo desires to live a solitary life now that he has been released from the detention camps. However, he is unwillingly engaged by the Movement, Kenya's league of Freedom Fighters and nationalists bent on reclaiming their sovereignty from the British colonialists. The Movement seems pervasive throughout rural Kenya. Although no one is sure exactly when or how it began, it is generally assumed that it formed shortly after the first white missionaries arrived from England, who slowly and deceitfully gathered power and land for themselves before making way for British soldiers and administrators.

Mugo has only had one interaction with the Movement, at a meeting where he heard Kihika, the revolutionary leader, speak as a young man. Not long after that meeting, Kihika becomes a leader of the Freedom Fighters based in Thabai, becoming known as "the terror of the whiteman." Although he is eventually captured and executed, Kihika's martyrdom becomes a symbol of the Movement. Representatives from the Party and prominent members of the village—a shopkeeper named Gikonyo, and two village elders who devoted their entire lives to the Movement, Warui and Wambui—ask Mugo to lead their independence celebration in a few days and become a village Chief, since everyone knows that Mugo helped Kihika hide from the colonial soldiers after he assassinated a colonial District Officer. Furthermore, two of Kihika's comrades, General R. and Lt. Koina, have discovered that Kihika was betrayed to his death, and hope to reveal the culprit during the independence celebration and bring the traitor to justice. Mugo is torn by this, since it was actually he himself who betrayed Kihika, though no one in the village knows his crime. After the meeting is over, Gikonyo returns home to his wife, Mumbi, who makes him dinner and tries to speak with him. However, Gikonyo acknowledge her as little as possible—they are clearly estranged.

Another Thabai villager, Karanja, works for the British colonizers in a nearby agricultural research station in Githima. Though he has betrayed his countrymen's quest to rid themselves of the British and be free, Karanja enjoys the power that his proximity to the whiteman affords him, especially in the eyes of his fellow villagers—since Karanja is himself afraid of white people. Although Karanja views his work as very important, he only writes labels for library books and performs mundane errands for John Thompson, a former District Officer; his wife, Margery; and occasionally Dr. Lynd. A rumor that the Thompsons will soon leave Kenya troubles Karanja, since his power will leave with them, but he cannot find the courage to ask either John or Margery about the matter.

John Thompson himself is dispirited by Kenya's quickly approaching independence. As a young man, Thompson developed a firm belief in the righteousness of expanding the British Empire, convinced that its Western ideals were a purifying and moralizing force upon the savage, primitive world. He even began writing a manuscript of a book outlining his beliefs, but now, on the eve of Kenyan independence and his exit from Africa, it all feels meaningless.

Although Mugo does not wish it, the people of his village and the surrounding areas begin to see him as their hero, a stalwart and trustworthy figure. That night, he finds Gikonyo waiting for him in his hut, wishing to confess a great burden he has carried for years. Like Mugo, Gikonyo spent many years in British detention camps on suspicion of being a Freedom Fighter. Unlike Mugo, however, Gikonyo confessed to taking the oath to aid the Freedom Fighters in their crusade against the British, hoping in vain that it would earn him an early release so he could return to his wife. The guilt he feels for confessing haunts him still, many years later. Worse yet, when Gikonyo returned from six years of detention, he discovered that Mumbi had given birth to a child by friend and rival of his youth, Karanja. Karanja is now the chief of the colonial security force governing Thabai, which oppresses the villagers and uses them as slave labor. Gikonyo is shamed, furious at Mumbi, powerless against Karanja, and feels as if life has lost its meaning. After Gikonyo finishes his confession to Mugo, Mugo decides that he will bury his past and accept the role asked of him, envisioning himself as a savior, leading his people to freedom.

Mugo walks to Gikonyo's house the next morning to announce his decision, but instead meets Mumbi, who also wants to confide her story to Mugo. Mumbi tells Mugo about the forced labor the village endured after most of the men were arrested and put in detention camps, including Mugo, who was jailed for attempting to stop a soldier from beating a woman to death. Living under a strict curfew and martial law, the people of Thabai were put to forced labor for several years. All of the women who lost husbands to the detention camps believed

they would never see them again. Kihika was one of the few men remaining in the village, and offered Mumbi and Gikonyo's mother occasional help and food until Mumbi discovered that he was working for the British colonialists. After this, she despised him. Karanja became the reigning chief of Thabai and a ruthless governor, but several times professed his love to Mumbi and tried to persuade her to be with him. She always refused, since she despised him. However, one day, Karanja ordered her to his house and announced that her husband—whom she had long believed to be dead—would be coming home soon. Mumbi was so shocked that when Karanja took advantage of her, she did not resist and became pregnant with his child. As Mumbi finishes telling her story to an overwhelmed Mugo, General R. and Lt. Koina enter and announce that they believe Karanja is Kihika's betrayer. Mugo panics, declaring that he cannot lead the celebration or the village. With this, Mugo runs from Mumbi's hut.

While Karanja is still obsessing over whether or not the Thompsons will leave Kenya, one of Lt. Koina's comrades persuades Karanja to attend the upcoming independence celebration so that they may trap him there and bring him to justice before all the people. Meanwhile, John and Margery Thompson say their goodbyes to their British co-workers.

After being cheated on a business deal, Gikonyo takes his anger out on Mumbi, beating her and calling her a "whore." Mumbi leaves his house and moves in with her parents. Gikonyo's mother is furious with him. Meanwhile, Mugo walks through the village, which now feels less disconnected to him than it once did. Mumbi's story touched him in a strange way, and his self-imposed isolation seems threatened. He meets Warui and Gikonyo and tells them he is unwell, and cannot lead. However, by refusing to lead, the people of Thabai view Mugo as even *more* humble and virtuous, and his renown quickly spreads, making him a nearly mythical figure overnight.

Wambui asks Mumbi to try to convince Mugo to lead, since it is what the people want. When she goes to his hut, Mugo makes his own confession to her: years before Mugo's detention, after Kihika assassinated a particularly evil District Officer, Kihika arrived unexpectedly in Mugo's hut, asking to be hidden from the soldiers who were searching the village for him. Although Kihika trusted Mugo and saw him as a stalwart figure, Mugo was secretly furious at Kihika for implicating him in the fight against the British. After Kihika left, Mugo was terrified that the British would discover him and brand him a terrorist like the other Freedom Fighters, so he betrayed Kihika to John Thompson, who was at that point the District Officer over Thabai. While at first, Mugo's act of betrayal made him feel courageous, he quickly regretted his crime, but could not take it back. While Mumbi is initially horrified by Mugo's story and filled with scorn, this turn to pity when she sees the pain in Mugo's eyes. She decides not to reveal what she knows to anyone else, even though Kihika was her own brother. She leaves, and Mugo is mentally tormented throughout the night by his own shame, but knows what he must do.

The independence celebrations begin at night with singing and dancing. People from all over the region have gathered near Thabai to celebrate, and they sing songs about Kihika and Mugo and freedom. Although they surround Mugo's hut and sing to him for over an hour, he will not emerge. The next morning, the ceremony of remembrance, where Kihika's betrayer is to be revealed, is preceded by a foot race. Gikonyo and Karanja race against each other, but both fall in the final stretch. Gikonyo breaks his arm and is sent to the hospital, Mumbi leaves, embarrassed by her estrangement with her husband, but Karanja remains for the ceremony. Since Mugo will not speak, General R. stands to speak in his stead. However, as he is about to accuse Karanja of treachery, Mugo arrives confesses to the whole gathering that he betrayed Kihika. The crowd is stunned into silence and lets Mugo walk away unharmed. Rather than be angered by his treachery, they are stunned and impressed by his willingness to sacrifice honor, power, and wealth for the sake of the truth.

General R., Lt. Koina, and Wambui arrive at Mugo's hut in the night to hold a trial in the forest and execute him. Although Mugo desires to live, he peaceably accepts this punishment for his crime. Karanja—now a traitor to his people, shorn of his power without the whiteman present, and spurned by Mumbi—leaves in shame, exiling himself to wander alone, away from Thabai, Mumbi, and all that he has known. Gikonyo, though he is lying in the hospital, hears about Mugo's confession and is touched by his courage, hoping that he, too, may someday be so brave. He realizes that he has treated Mumbi wrongfully, and begins to take the first steps of attempting to reconcile himself to her.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Mugo – Mugo is the primary protagonist and a villager of Thabai. Mugo's parents die when he is young, leaving him destitute in the care of an alcoholic aunt who abuses and demeans him throughout his childhood. As an adult, Mugo is isolated and alone, purposefully keeping himself detached from the world around him and the struggles of his village, embodying the natural desire to be independent and free of the problems of one's community. However, despite Mugo's wish to be alone and unbothered, he is drawn into the Movement when Kihika comes to him for shelter from the British. Although Mugo does not wish to be involved or even to help, he is too passive and indecisive to resist, and afterward becomes a key figure amongst his people and symbol of resistance against the British, even though he secretly betrays Kihika to his death. This dissonance between Mugo's perceived heroism and his

secret guilt over his treachery becomes a key aspect of his character. Despite his reticence and weakness, the villagers insist on making him their hero and his status within the community grows until he has been made into a mythical figure. Although Mugo spends most of the novel trying to run from his duty to the community, he ultimately finds the courage to confess his crime and accept the consequences: a death sentence. Although Mugo is responsible for heroic Kihika's death, the villagers are so moved by his bravery to sacrifice everything for the sake of the truth that they venerate him as a hero once more. However, Mugo is still executed, privately and with dignity. In his confession and death, Mugo is redeemed of his crime, demonstrating the redemption that may be found through owning one's guilt and willingly accepting the punishment, as well as by accepting one's responsibility to their community in spite of their personal desires.

Kihika – Kihika is the brother of Mumbi and Kariuki and the son of Mbugua and Wanjiku. Though already dead in the book's present storyline, Kihika is the great hero of the Gikuyu and a leader of the Mau Mau Freedom Fighters. In contrast to the generally passive and indecisive male characters in the story, Kihika is assured of his destiny even as a child, knowing that his role is to fight the evil rule of the British and give his life as a sacrifice for his people if necessary. Kihika is driven by the stories of the Bible and his responsibility to his community, modeling the noble sacrifice required of oneself for the sake of others, especially in times of great historical struggle, even recognizing himself as a possible Christ figure in his leadership and sacrifice. In the depiction of colonialism, Kihika stands opposite John Thompson, representing the moral struggle for freedom from oppression, even at the cost of bloodshed. Kihika's beliefs about sacrifice inevitably come to fruition, as he is betrayed by Mugo, captured, and executed for his leadership of the Freedom Fighters and his assassination of the notorious Thomas Robson. However, in his death, Kihika becomes an icon of the resistance for his people and is the "grain of wheat" referred to in the title, who by his death brings new life into the world.

Gikonyo – Gikonyo is Mumbi's husband and Wangari's only son. Gikonyo spends his early years as a poor carpenter supporting himself and his mother, who were abandoned by his father. Although he is shy, Gikonyo falls in love with Mumbi and she with him, and for a few months he is deliriously happy. However, this comes to an end when he is arrested and taken to detention on suspicion of having sworn **the oath** and and conspired with the Mau Mau, which he did. Although Gikonyo remains firm for the first few months of his detention, the passage of time wears him down and eliminates any noble thoughts of freedom or national suffrage. Driven by a vain hope to be released early and returned to Mumbi, Gikonyo confesses the oath, betraying his country and shaming himself. Gikonyo secretly carries this guilt and shame with him for the rest of the story, becoming a vessel through which to explore the dark effects of a burden of guilt. When Gikonyo is released from detention, he returns home to find Mumbi has had a son by Karanja, the rival of his youth. Rather than ask Mumbi what happened, Gikonyo immediately turns to rage, which he keeps within himself for years, furthering his suffering. Although Gikonyo becomes a wealthy merchant, his relationship with Mumbi and his own self-loathing continue to fester until he beats her, causing them to become estranged from each other. Although Gikonyo and Mumbi never completely reconcile in the story, Mugo's sacrifice and bravery touch Gikonyo so deeply that he realizes he too must own his guilt and shame, and he takes the first steps towards admitting his wrongs and reconciling with his wife, thus demonstrating the redemptive power of honest confession.

Karanja – Karanja is the story's primary antagonist, though not in a strictly villainous role. Karanja is a villager of Thabai and works for John Thompson in Githima. In his youth, Karanja is friends with Gikonyo and Kihika and is in love with Mumbi, though she rejects him in favor of Gikonyo. However, after the Emergency, as his friends are swearing **the oath** and joining the Mau Mau or being arrested and taken to detention, Karanja instead joins the British colonial force, betraying his country to save himself and remain near Mumbi, and thus representing the commitment to self-interest at the expense of one's community. Karanja believes in the power of whiteman's technology and weaponry and puts himself as close to it as possible. Although this gives him the appearance of power, which he exults in, Karanja is truly a coward and frightened of both white people and his own countrymen, who hate him for his treachery. He acts ruthlessly towards his fellow Gikuyu and enjoys exerting power over them and inflicting pain. Throughout this time, Karanja remains obsessed with Mumbi and even uses his position to take advantage of her and impregnate her, though he hates himself for doing so afterwards. Ultimately, Karanja's allegiance to the whiteman's power turns out to be a fool's gamble. When Kenya achieves its independence and John Thompson and company leave the country, Karanja's power leaves with them. At the end of the story, Karanja is depicted as irredeemable after his total betrayal of his people over the course of a decade. Humiliated and firmly rejected by Mumbi for all time, Karanja exiles himself to wander alone without power or community, a wretched figure. Karanja's detestable character and pathetic fate provides a strong argument against forsaking one's community for the sake of personal gain.

Mumbi – Mumbi is Gikonyo's wife, Wanjiku and Mbugua's daughter, and Kihika and Kariuki's sister. Mumbi is a villager of Thabai and the single main character to remain in the village while everyone else is either fighting in the forest or arrested and in detention. As a woman, Mumbi is also the strongest main character in the story, demonstrating the power of women and

their ability to affect events and succeed where men have failed. After marrying Gikonyo, Mumbi is afraid that he will go to the forest to fight with the Mau Mau, but resolves that she will fight alongside him in spite of her fear. After her husband is arrested, Mumbi helps to care for her mother-in-law Wangari and does her part in rebuilding the village of Thabai after it is burned down. Although she resists Karanja's advances for the six years Gikonyo is detained, she is so dispirited and weakened by the end that she allows him to take advantage of her, eventually giving birth to Karanja's child. Although she loves her child, this betrayal of Gikonyo becomes a great burden for her to carry. However, Mumbi also plays a critical role in Mugo's character development. In her willingness to sit and share her life story with Mugo, as well as her courage to confide her own failure to him, Mumbi begins to penetrate Mugo's thick wall of detachment and eventually inspires him to tell the truth about his betrayal of Kihika. Thus, Mumbi is not only the strongest but one of the most vital characters in the story, moving Mugo, the protagonist, from a state of detachment from his community to a state of engagement with it, however brief.

John Thompson – John is a British administrator and Margery's husband, as well as Karanja's employer in the present timeline of the story. John primarily exists for the author to explore arguments in favor of British imperialism. After John meets two thoroughly Westernized African students at Oxford, he becomes convinced of the great moral cause of colonialism, viewing it as a modernizing and purifying force upon a savage, primitive world, inspiring him and his wife to move to East Africa to participate in colonization. In this manner, John is the antithesis of Kihika, his moral opponent, believing that the moral argument favors colonialism and not revolution. However, despite John's moralism, he proves to be a ruthless overseer, even causing the deaths of eleven prisoners in a detention camp that he oversees, suggesting that there can be nothing moral about colonialism. When news of the deaths makes international headlines, John is publicly excoriated and demoted to working a menial job in Githima. Like many of the male characters, John projects an image of power but is actually weak and indecisive. After the Kenyans win their independence, John's defeat is complete and he becomes utterly disillusioned with his life, colonialism's great purpose, and even his wife, before they both leave Kenya for good. Although Karanja fawns over John Thompson, John himself hardly takes any notice of Karanja.

Margery Thompson – Margery is John's wife. Although, as a woman, Margery possesses less social power, she finds ways to exert power and agency within her own life, particular to her gender. When Karanja visits, Margery utilizes her sexual allure and position as a white woman to make Karanja squirm, enjoying the rush she gets from the use of power. In the same way, Margery has an affair with the Dr. Van Dyke, who disgusts her, primarily for the "anarchic joy" and power she feels in the treachery. Margery plays a small role and principally serves to demonstrate that women may find other forms of power to exert within their own lives, even when they are constrained by society.

Warui – Warui is a notable village elder who tries to convince Mugo to lead the Uhuru celebration and become a Chief in the village. Warui is an old man and has been involved in the Movement and Kenya's fight for freedom for his entire life. As a young man, Warui marches in protests for the release of Harry Thuku and Jomo Kenyatta, and as an old man teaches his stories of oppression and resistance to young Kihika, fostering his revolutionary spirit. He also believes that the great African leaders, including Mugo, possess mystical power, the "spirit of the black people." After the Uhuru ceremony is complete and Mugo has confessed, Warui is disappointed by the loss of a hero and seemingly disenchanted with independence, suggesting that it came at great cost and was not what he thought it would be.

Wambui – Wambui is a notable village elder who also tries to convince Mugo to lead. Wambui is good friends with Warui and has also participated in the fight for freedom for her entire life. As a young woman and even as an old woman, Wambui collaborates with the Mau Mau, smuggling messages and weapons to them in the forest. Wambui serves to demonstrate and tell of the power of women to act and succeed where men have failed, especially in times of revolution, believing that many of their achievements could not have been made without the essential help of women. Like Warui, Wambui is disappointed both by Mugo's confession and by Uhuru, seemingly disenchanted with life after all her long, hard years of struggle.

Wangari – Wangari is Gikonyo's mother. After being abandoned by her husband and left to die, Wangari proves her resilience by taking young Gikonyo and scratching out enough of a living to survive until he is old enough to ply a trade. After Gikonyo is arrested, Wangari works with Mumbi to rebuild their hut and parts of the village, demonstrating her own capability to work and provide like men. When Gikonyo beats Mumbi, Wangari stands up to her son and stops him, once again demonstrating a strength over and above that of her son's.

Wambuku – Wambuku is Kihika's lover. Although Wambuku believes she will be able to convince Kihika to give up his revolutionary leanings—which she sees as a rival to herself—Kihika leaves her to go fight in the forest. Wambuku is so heartbroken that she destroys herself, eventually being beaten to death by a soldier and thrown in a shallow grave. Wambuku primarily serves as a symbol of weakness and tragedy, a foil to Njeri's strength.

Njeri – Njeri, like Wambuku, is a young woman in love with Kihika, though he never returns her affections. However, Njeri is strong in contrast to Wambuku's weakness. Although Njeri is

small, she is a natural-born fighter, able to best almost any man in the village. When Kihika goes to fight in the forest and Wambuku is heartbroken, Njeri despises Wambuku for her feminine weakness and goes to the forest to fight alongside Kihika. Njeri is killed, shot by a soldier during battle, but remains a symbol of women's power, a seeming successor to Wambui.

Mbugua – Mbugua is Kihika, Kariuki, and Mumbi's father and Wanjiku's husband. Mbugua does not play a large role in the story, though he is described as saddened by Kihika's decision to go and fight despite the fact that Mbugua was a great warrior himself in his youth. After Kihika dies and is publicly hung from a tree, Mbugua urinates on himself when he sees the mangled, tortured body of his son, a tragic depiction of a parent's pain at the loss of their child to a bloody cause.

DO Thomas Robson – DO Robson is a British District Officer who rules over Thabai until Kihika assassinates him. Although he is briefly depicted as Tom the Terror, a terrifying and cruel oppressor and hunter of Freedom Fighters, his main purpose in the story is to be killed by Kihika, which leads to the bounty on Kihika's head and his betrayal by Mugo.

Harry Thuku – Harry Thuku is an early revolutionary leader in the initial days of the Movement, serving as a precursor to Kihika and using the same biblical imagery to fuel his calls for liberation. However, Harry Thuku is captured and broken by his British oppressors over a period of seven years, becoming nothing more than a tragic figure of history occasionally mentioned by characters in the novel.

General R. – General R. is a Freedom Fighter and former comrade of Kihika who emerges from the forest with Lt. Koina to discover who betrayed their great leader. General R. plays a minor role in the story, representing the Mau Mau fighters and working with Warui and Wambui to convince Mugo to lead. However, although the rest of the village does not seem bent on Mugo's destruction after he confesses his betrayal, General R. and Lt. Koina are committed to justice, privately taking Mugo into the forest to execute him.

Lt. Koina – Lt. Koina is General R.'s friend, a fellow Freedom Fighter and comrade of Kihika. Lt. Koina joins General R. in searching for Kihika's betrayer, believing that it must be Karanja after running surveillance on him in Githima. As a young man, Lt. Koina once worked for Dr. Lynd, but after realizing how much money she spent on her dog (enough to feed several Gikuyu families) he steals her weapons, butchers her dog, and joins the Freedom Fighters. However, when Koina sees Dr. Lynd again, years later, with even more money and another dog, he begins to suspect that Kenya will not be any different after Uhuru than it was before.

Githua – Githua is a one-legged cripple, the village beggar. Although Githua tells a story about how he lost his leg as a Freedom Fighter, General R. discovers that Githua is lying, having lost his leg in a traffic accident instead. However, General R. is understanding, insisting that Githua invents his life for himself to give it meaning, as everyone does, and suggesting that most people are hiding such secrets as Githua, Gikonyo, or Mugo—though perhaps not as grave.

Dr. Lynd – Dr. Lynd is a British researcher and an old spinster who loves bull-mastiffs and hates black people after they break into her house and murder her first dog. Lt. Koina briefly works for her as a young man before robbing her and butchering her dog, and she recognizes him again while he is in Githima, investigating Karanja.

Gatu – Gatu is a Kenyan detainee imprisoned in the same camp as Gikonyo. Gatu keeps up the spirits of his fellow prisoners by telling fake stories about Abraham Lincoln fighting the British, which, though obviously false to the reader, provide hope to the prisoners that the British will someday be defeated.

Rev. Jackson Kigondu – Rev. Jackson is a Gikuyu preacher who models the role of Christianity on both sides of the independence conflict. Although Rev. Jackson initially incorporates the ideas of Christianity into traditional Gikuyu beliefs, thus maintaining his Kenyan identity and making him a sought-after counsel amongst village leaders, he eventually converts to an orthodox, Western form of Christianity which leads him to reject ancestral beliefs and practices, spurn his relationships with village leaders, and even preach against the Freedom Fighters. This change represents a betrayal of Kenyan ideals, sacrificing their own cultural identity in exchange for a set of Western values. Not long after Rev. Jackson makes this change, he is executed by Mau Mau Fighters as a traitor, setting a firm example about the Kenyan practice of Christianity.

The Old Woman – The old woman is Gitogo's mother, a strange hermit who lives alone. Mugo feels an odd sense of connection to the old woman, since she often stares at him and makes him feel as if she is seeing through him. However, it is revealed in the end of the story that she believes Mugo to be her own son, raised from the dead and come to take her home.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Wanjiku – Wanjiku is Kihika, Kariuki, and Mumbi's mother and Mbugua's wife. Wanjiku is mentioned several times but plays little role and given no real characterization.

Dr. Henry Van Dyke – Dr. Van Dyke is a drunken researcher who works at the Githima station. He has an affair with Margery until he drives his car into **the train** and kills himself, potentially as a protest of Kenyans retaking control of the government.

Mwaura – Mwaura is Lt. Koina's associate who works with and spies on Karanja at the Githima station.

Jomo Kenyatta / "The Burning Spear" – Jomo Kenyatta is the political figurehead of the Uhuru movement, though he is

imprisoned by the British for most of the years in which the story takes place.

Gitogo – Gitogo is the son of the old woman, a deaf and dumb man who is killed when he is shot in the back by a British soldier because he cannot hear the man's order to stop running.

Kariuki – Kariuki is Kihika and Mumbi's brother. Since he leaves Thabai to study in college, he is absent for much of the story and plays little role.

TERMS

Uhuru – Uhuru is the Swahili word for "freedom." It encapsulates both the concept of freedom and the Kenyan struggle for independence from colonial Britain, especially through the efforts of the Movement and the Party.

Gikuyu – Gikuyu (or Kikuyu) is the name of Kenya's largest ethnic group as well as the language they speak, occupying the rich agricultural highlands and hills of rural Kenya. In the early days of British settlement—preceding the story—the Gikuyu were known for their resistance, and many Gikuyu tribes maintained a practice of killing anyone who gave aid to the foreigners.

Mau Mau – The Mau Mau, officially known as the Kenyan Land and Freedom Army, is the coalition of numerous groups—predominantly the Gikuyu, Meru, and Embu—who fight against the British colonists. In 1952, the Mau Mau Uprising occurred, and the Kenyan Freedom Fighters waged war on colonial forces until 1960, causing Britain to adopt harsh, militaristic policies in the governance of its Kenyan subjects. The Mau Mau Uprising is variously known as the Rebellion or the Revolt, but is most often referred to in the story as the Emergency.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

COLONIALISM

In *A Grain of Wheat*, Britain's colonization of Kenya is the context against which its characters are formed as well as the primary political tension of the book. Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, himself a native Kenyan, uses this context and development of his characters to explore the moral aspect of colonization from both the perspective of the British and rural Kenyans. Ngũgĩ's narrative argues that, although both the colonizer and the colonized feel morally justified in their pursuits, colonialism is ultimately an immoral and oppressive practice, justifying the colonized people's struggle for freedom, even through violent means.

The British colonialists and the Kenyan freedom fighters (the Mau Mau) want fundamentally opposing futures for Kenya, pitting them at war with each other and creating a moral tension over the future of Kenya. The British, in the expansion of their empire, seek to modernize Kenya with technology and administration. However, in doing this, they force themselves upon ancient ethnic groups like the Gikuyu and steal their land from them for their own purposes. The Mau Mau fighters, with the support of most of their village, Thabai, seek to push "the whiteman" completely out of Kenya so they can preserve their way of life. Rather than the "modern" future envisioned by the colonizers, the Gikuyu hope to maintain their independence and right to self-govern, as well as their ancestral traditions. The moral tension over the future of Kenya is exemplified by the fact that some Kenyans, and even some Gikuyu, choose to align themselves with the British and adopt their vision of the future as Kenya's best option. This makes colonization more than simply a conflict between nations, but a conflict between moral ideals: Western imperialism versus Kenyan tradition.

Both the colonizer and the colonized see themselves as the righteous, heroic figure working for the good of humanity, and their enemies as evil. This is exemplified in the story by the mirrored characters John Thompson and Kihika. John Thompson, the English regional governor, is an evangelist of British colonialism, believing it to be a moralizing and purifying force of human progress. Decades before the story takes place, John meets two African students studying in a British institution who are thoroughly knowledgeable of Western history and literature and convinced of British imperialism's benefit to the world. This awes and inspires John, in his eyes demonstrating the power of colonialism to replace the "irrationality, inconsistency, and superstition so characteristic of the African and Oriental races" with "the principle of Reason, of Order, and of Measure." To a group of officers, John makes the declaration, "To administer a people is to administer a soul," suggesting that beyond making subjects more rational and less superstitious, British colonialism makes them more intrinsically human and moral, further from primitive beasts.

In contrast, Kihika, a young Gikuyu man, is raised on stories of British oppression and injustice, inspired by Gandhi's rejection of their imperialism in India. With his own eyes, Kihika sees how the British have forced the Gikuyu tribe—who take their relationship to their ancestral lands very seriously—out of their original territory, stolen their lands, and resettled them in British-controlled districts. Furthermore, for the last three generations the British colonialists have subjected Kihika's people to forced labor and made them pay exorbitant taxes, often with the threat of detention, rape, or murder. From an early age, Kihika knows his life's calling is to lead the moral fight

against the British: "from early on, he had visions of himself, a saint, leading Kenyan people to freedom and power." In Kihika's eyes, the sins of the colonizers are obvious, suggesting that colonization is not the establishment of a moral society, but of an evil social order; the righteous cause is Kenyan freedom.

Although to each party, their own aims seem noble, Ngũgĩ's depiction of their representative figures and their methods argues that colonialism is indefensible and barbaric at its core, giving the moral high ground to the Kenyan freedom fighters. Both Kihika and John wage their war through violence; Kihika as the leader of the Mau Mau resistance fighters, and John as the brutal overseer of the detention camps and the colonial soldiers in his region. Notably, both groups blame the need for such violence on the other. While Kihika's fighters kill British soldiers and are labeled as terrorists by the British—Kihika himself assassinates John's predecessor—the British are repeatedly depicted raping and murdering their Kenyan subjects. As the overseer of the detention camps, John and his underlings routinely torture prisoners to get information from them and break their spirit of resistance. Although the British government chastises John for beating eleven prisoners to death in a single week, they only put such pressure on him to save face once the killings make international headlines. Privately, it seems that John's barbarism earns him the quiet adoration of his colleagues, suggesting that on some level, the British revel in the domination of their subjects. Although the author does not depict the freedom fighters as entirely blameless, their violence pales in comparison to the abhorrent violence the British commit, often against defenseless civilians and prisoners. This uneven depiction argues that in the conflict between colonizers and colonized, the Kenyans and their quest for freedom morally outweighs the British mission to "moralize" what they see as a lesser country. If violence is the only way for the Gikuyu to fight British oppression, *A Grain of Wheat* implies, so be it.

The novel ends on the day of Kenya's independence from Britain, thus resolving the conflict between colonizer and colonized. Even so, since the author observes that Britain remains imperialistic, the moral argument against such colonization—by any country—remains firm.

THE INDIVIDUAL VS. THE COMMUNITY

A Grain of Wheat's narrative is framed between the Gikuyu tribesmen Mugo and Kihika, who are fundamentally opposites. Mugo wants nothing more than to be left alone, uninvolved in Thabai's conflict, while Kihika is the self-sacrificing leader of the freedom fighters. Through the contrast between their characterizations, the narrative argues that, although the desire to live independent and unburdened is understandable, it is virtually impossible—each person's life is interconnected with those around them, which consequently makes them responsible for sharing the burdens of their community, even at the cost of great sacrifice.

Through Mugo and fellow villager Karanja's characters, the author recognizes the desire to live a simple, private life, unburdened by responsibility to one's community, suggesting that such a desire is not inherently wrong. Mugo's primary wish is to be left alone, untroubled and unconnected to his community. Although such anti-social behavior at first seems pitiful, the narration describes it as the result of an abusive childhood, which has left him anxious and without confidence. By describing not only Mugo's desire to be alone and unburdened by his community but also the source of that desire, the author leads the reader to be sympathetic to such a wish. Connected to this desire to be alone, Mugo has no interest in participating in national affairs or the fight for independence from the British. Describing his time in a detention camp, Mugo says, "In those days we did not stay alive because we thought our cause strong. It was not even because we loved the country. If that had been all, who would not have perished? We only thought of home." Mugo thus represents the desire to simply live, independent of the world and its problems, taking no sides. Just as Mugo's village audience is receptive to his speech, so too does the author seem to validate such a desire as natural and human. Karanja expresses the same desire as Mugo, though goes about it in a more blatantly self-serving way. Disenchanted with life after being rejected by his love, Karanja joins the homeguard, the British security force, because he believes it will result in less suffering for him than he would endure as a freedom fighter—effectively too, since Karanja is given imperial power and avoids the detention camps. In Karanja's mind, he is justified by his duty to himself, saying, "Every man in the world is alone, and fights alone, to live." Though similar to Mugo's understandable desire to be left alone, Karanja's betrayal of his countrymen for his own benefit seems blatantly selfish, since he not only refuses to fight for freedom, but sides with the colonizers.

Despite their desire for autonomy and freedom from social responsibility, Mugo and Karanja's lives are inevitably connected to those in their community, demonstrating that it is not possible to live utterly independent, without responsibility for or connection to others. Though Mugo wishes to remain alone and uninvolved, Kihika comes to Mugo for shelter while he is being hunted by the British precisely because Mugo lives in isolation. Mugo is angered that Kihika's very presence has drawn him into the conflict, forcing him to take a side, and he decides to secretly betray Kihika to the British in a bid to remain uninvolved. However, Kihika's trust in Mugo causes the villagers to view Mugo as the new symbol of resistance after Kihika is killed, not knowing that it was Mugo who betrayed him. Mugo's inevitable, unwilling involvement in the struggles of his community demonstrates the near impossibility of living one's life alone, unburdened by the striving and struggling of

those around them. Karanja, though he is detached from his brethren's fight for freedom, still inevitably impacts his fellow villagers' lives. As a member of the imperialist homeguard, Karanja minimizes his own suffering but becomes a source of suffering and oppression for the people of Thabai. Karanja's selfish exchange –causing suffering to his people in exchange for his own safety—further demonstrates the impossibility of living independent of one's community.

Kihika, in contrast to Mugo and Karanja, understands and nobly accepts his social responsibility to his community, though it costs him his life, demonstrating that to take responsibility for the people around oneself often requires great sacrifice. Kihika's selflessness and courage to fight the British makes him a hero and a symbol of hope for his people, even though he admits to Mugo that he would rather enjoy "the comfort of a warm fire and a woman's love" than live in the wet forest and fight. Kihika's willingness to set aside his desires for a simple, happy, unburdened life make him the most admirable figure in the novel and demonstrate the virtue of shouldering the burden of one's duty to their community. Although Kihika is killed because of Mugo's betrayal, the homeguard pursue Kihika so fiercely that it seems unlikely he would survive even without Mugo's actions. The probability of this sacrifice is something Kihika recognizes even as a young man, when he leaves his lover behind to join the Mau Mau fighters in the forest. Kihika's nearly inevitable death underscores that as virtuous and important as accepting one's duty to their community is, it often comes at great personal cost.

The conflict that the story establishes between an individual and their responsibility to commitment is difficult, since the virtuous course of action is also one that demands great sacrifice. However, the hope that Kihika gives to his people through his selfless example indicates that such sacrifices are not only necessary, but meaningful.

GUILT AND REDEMPTION

Both Mugo and his fellow villager Gikonyo carry the burden of guilt for secret crimes that they harbor for years, which mentally torment them. Although both men try to run from their guilt, they eventually realize they will only find relief and redemption when they willingly admit to their mistakes and face the consequences. Through Mugo's and Gikonyo's respective journeys, *A Grain of Wheat* argues that redemption and freedom from guilt can only be gained by open confession and willingness to face the consequences of one's actions.

Both Mugo and Gikonyo carry shameful secrets, spoken to no one. Although there is little chance of either of them being found out, the burden of guilt mentally torments them, demonstrating the excruciating burden that hidden guilt becomes. Although the Thabai villagers mistakenly view Mugo as a brave, noble hero who gave shelter to Kihika, it is revealed in the final act of the story that Mugo is responsible for his death, betraying Kihika to John Thompson to save himself from the power of the whiteman. Although it is impossible for this to be discovered and his fellow villagers want to make Mugo a chief and a leader, Mugo is tortured by guilt, demonstrating how the internal burden of guilt can haunt and overwhelm one's worldly successes, denying them any peace. Like Mugo, Gikonyo also carries the shame of betrayal. In the detention camp, Gikonyo breaks his oath to the Mau Mau by confessing to be part of the resistance, hoping—in vain—that he will be released. Like Mugo, Gikonyo is haunted by his betrayal, imagining that he hears the footsteps of his guilt walking behind him at all hours. This pent-up shame makes Gikonyo violently reject his wife, Mumbi, when he discovers, upon returning home, that she has had another man's child. Gikonyo's rage, though directed at Mumbi, is truly towards himself for his own cowardice, illustrating the way in which harbored guilt affects not only oneself, but the people around them.

Both men discover that the only way to be free of their burdensome guilt is through honest admission of their crimes. After Mumbi confides the details of her adultery to Mugo, Mugo is touched, and experiences his first taste of relief from guilt when he confesses his complicity in Kihika's murder to Mumbi, who is Kihika's own sister. Although he expects Mumbi to hate him for this, she pities him instead, seeing what a burden he carries, especially since the village has adopted him as their new hero of the freedom fight. Although Mumbi elects not to reveal Mugo as a traitor, the relief that Mugo feels in confessing makes him realize that he must tell the truth in front of the entire village, which he does several days later, modeling the only way to be free of such oppressive guilt and shame.

Like Mugo, Gikonyo finds a small amount of relief from his guilt when he confesses his betrayal to Mugo. However, Gikonyo does not yet find the same courage to confess his betrayal to his countrymen and so is not entirely relieved of his burden. Gikonyo's persistent guilt suggests that to be freed from it, one must confess their crime to all who were betrayed by it. Since Gikonyo's betrayal was of a national cause, he will have to confess before his entire village to be truly free.

Mugo's crime is grave and carries a death sentence. However, his willingness to face this consequence redeems him in the eyes of the community and inspires others, including Gikonyo, to be honest and brave. Mugo's journey suggests that, by taking account of one's crimes and accepting the due consequences, one may find redemption, if not physical freedom. Mugo confesses to his crime in front of the entire village, expecting that he will be torn limb from limb. Instead, the village is so stunned that their new hero has just admitted to betrayal that he is simply allowed to leave. Rather than hating Mugo for betraying their hero, the villagers believe that Mugo is the bravest and most noble of them all, since he willingly sacrificed

his role as a village chief and the accompanying wealth and power to tell the truth.

The village's response to Mugo's confession perfectly illustrates the redemption that can come with admitting and owning one's guilt. Rather than giving Mugo a shameful and public death, two of Kihika's comrades take Mugo privately away to execute him with as much dignity as possible. This, too, demonstrates Mugo's redemption in the eyes of his village. Mugo's courage also inspires others in the village. Although Gikonyo does not publicly confess before the end of the story, Mugo's example leaves him resolved to do so, as well as to reconcile himself to Mumbi, ending the story on a hopeful note. Mugo's sacrifice brings not only redemption for himself, but plants the seed of redemption for Gikonyo as well, thus demonstrating the manner in which one's own redemption can positively impact an entire community.

CHRISTIANITY

In *A Grain of Wheat*, Christianity occupies a complicated position. Both the imperial British and the freedom-fighting Gikuyu utilize various aspects of the religion, and for Kenyans it seems alternately a source of hope and a symbol of the whiteman's invasion. Throughout the narrative, Ngũgĩ's depiction of Christianity suggests that it plays a complex role in Gikuyu culture, acting sometimes as a tool of Western colonialism or, when integrated with traditional beliefs, a profound source of meaning and revolutionary spirit.

Christianity initially enters into Kenya as a tool of colonialism, encouraging its adherents to adopt Western values and reject their traditional beliefs. The narrator recalls that the first white people to enter Kenya are Christian missionaries who, by their humility and gentleness, win the trust of several Kenyan tribes. However, when the missionaries suggest that Kenya should submit itself to live under the "shadow of [British] authority and benevolence," their listeners only laugh at the idea, suggesting that the Kenyans do not perceive the threat hidden within the seemingly gentle Christian message. As Christianity's influence slowly grows, however, Kenyan converts begin rejecting their ancestral beliefs, "[treading] on sacred places to show that no harm could reach those protected by the hand of the Lord." Their blasphemy demonstrates that they begin to favor the doctrinal beliefs of the Christian missionaries over the beliefs of their Kenyan ancestors. As the authority of the missionaries grows, "people saw the whiteman had imperceptibly acquired more land to meet the growing needs of his position," and before the local leaders can protest, other whitemen have arrived, carrying "not the Bible, but the sword." Thus Christianity is revealed not to be a tool for salvation, but for invasion and colonization.

However, when Christianity is integrated with traditional beliefs and not allowed to supersede them, the stories of the Bible have the potential to become powerful vessels of meaning and fuel anti-colonialist sentiments. In contrast with those Kenyans who reject their sacred spaces, many Gikuyu place the stories of the Bible alongside their traditional beliefs and practices such as animal sacrifice, polygamy, and circumcision of both men and women, which the missionaries try to keep them from. Rev. Jackson, a Kenyan minister, argues that "Ngai, the Gikuyu God, is the same One God who sent Christ." The wisdom that Rev. Jackson derives from the Bible, while still maintaining Gikuyu ancestral beliefs, makes him a sought-after council by Gikuyu village elders, demonstrating the way in which Christianity may compliment cultural values, rather than override them. (However, when Rev. Jackson eventually adopts a strictly orthodox version of Christianity and rejects his traditional beliefs, the Mau Mau execute him as a traitor to their country.) As a boy, Kihika buys a Bible and becomes obsessed with the biblical story of Moses and the Exodus, seeing it as a natural parallel to Kenya's oppression at the hands of the British and fueling his conviction to rid Kenya of its colonizers. In the same way, though Kihika does not seem interested in the idea of salvation, he does see in Christ's life the need for a movement to have a leading, self-sacrificing figure. The entire village of Thabai adopts this biblically informed narrative, explicitly naming Kihika as their Christ-figure in the struggle for freedom. When allied with with traditional, ancestral beliefs, Christianity becomes a vessel of meaning for the revolutionary spirit of the Gikuyu people and the Mau Mau fighters, lending its stories to help them understand their own plight. The fact that Christianity can be either a tool of oppression or a fuel for liberation suggests that it is dynamic, capable of being utilized for many different, even opposing purposes.

Through the difference in religious practice and conduct, the narrative suggests that the Kenyans are, in many ways, more Christian than the British missionaries. Although the British introduce Christianity to Kenya, the narrative and the characters often show that even the missionaries do not seem faithful to its tenets. Kihika recounts in a revolutionary speech, "[The missionary] went on reading the word, beseeching us to lay our treasures in heaven where no moth would corrupt them. But he laid his on earth, our earth." *A Grain of Wheat* suggests that for the whiteman, the self-sacrifice of Christianity seems only to apply to others, as a tool to claim more for themselves. The British characters in the story, though more traditionally Christian, rarely speak of the Bible, while the Kenyans robe themselves in it, finding their call to freedom not only in the Book of Exodus but in the Gospels and the Book of Revelation's depiction of a "new earth" as well. This, along with the brutal, decidedly un-Christian conduct of the British colonizers, suggests that the Kenyans, though they have synthesized their beliefs together, are more faithful to the spirit of Christianity than the orthodox missionaries who brought the message in the first place.

Although Ngũgĩ would eventually go on to reject all Christian teaching as undue Western influence, his depiction of Christianity in *A Grain of Wheat* depicts it as complex, dynamic influence, fueling both the rejection of traditional beliefs in favor of Western ideals as well as the fight to preserve traditional Gikuyu beliefs and throw off British oppression.

GENDER AND POWER

A Grain of Wheat's male characters are notably weak and indecisive save for a rare few, while its female characters present themselves as confident, capable, and proud. Although women are socially disempowered in Gikuyu society, Ngũgĩ's depiction of his female characters argues that they are just as strong as men and often stronger, succeeding when men fail or are gripped with indecision.

In *A Grain of Wheat*, Gikuyu women occupy a lower social stratum than men, as demonstrated by the lives of Gikonyo's mother and his wife, Mumbi. Gikuyu society is polygamous, meaning that a single man often has many wives, which can lead to oppression and mistreatment of women with no recompense. This is illustrated by Gikonyo's mother's hardship: after growing tired of his mother, Gikonyo's father, who has many wives, simply forces her to leave, wandering homeless with her young son where she will most likely die. However, through the determination of Gikonyo's mother, the two of them survive, also indicating her strength. Although the men in Gikuyu society have the ability to cast off their wives whenever they please, their wives do not enjoy the same freedom. After Gikonyo strikes his wife, Mumbi, Mumbi leaves him. Although she is not immediately forced to return to her abusive husband, Mumbi's own father shames her for defying Gikonyo, saying, "In our time, a woman could take blow and blow from her husband without a thought of running back to her parents." This deference to an abusive husband over the safety of his wife demonstrates that Gikuyu society possesses much of the same gender inequality as British society in that era, where women are socially disempowered.

Despite the inequality between men and women, the Gikuyu remember times when they were ruled by women, proving that there is nothing inherently weaker about their women than their men. When the British missionaries arrive and tell the Gikuyu about their English queen, the concept of a matriarch resonates with them, echoing their own history. The author recalls that Gikuyu society was once dominated by warrior women, who kept their men in subjugation to serve their "whims and needs." However, the men staged a revolt by fooling all of the women to become pregnant at the same time, thus weakening the warriors enough for the men to overcome them. That the men could only overcome the women through treachery, and not strength, again suggests that Gikuyu women are just as powerful as their men.

The story's female characters are consistently the strongest, exercising their own forms of power and succeeding where men fail in the struggle for freedom. Aside from Kihika, nearly every male character in the story is crippled by either cowardice or indecision, often both. As a prisoner in the detention camps, Gikonyo caves to the pressure and confesses to being a freedom fighter, spending the entire novel living in shame and unable to even admit his own cowardice, following the "line of least resistance." Karanja betrays his country and works for the whiteman, presenting the image of power and confidence before his countrymen but secretly cowering in fear of any white person, unable to approach them or speak his mind. Even the ruthless John Thompson is revealed to be a coward, unable to make decisions under pressure—such as when he witnesses a dog attack one of his employees but cannot summon the willpower to stop it—or admit his own weakness to his wife or his colleagues.

On the contrary, the female characters most often demonstrate strength. When most of Thabai's men are fighting with the Mau Mau in the jungles or imprisoned in detention camps, Mumbi and her mother-in-law "put on trousers" and set about rebuilding new homes for themselves after the homeguard burn theirs down. Njeri, a woman who is in love with Kihika, follows him into the forest and wages war on the British until she is killed. However, no character in the story is more powerful than Wambui, an old Gikuyu women who smuggles messages and weapons beneath her dress to aid the Mau Mau. During a political meeting, Wambui climbs onto stage, grabs the microphone from the male speaker, and declares that their success thus far has been due to the work of Gikuyu women, not men, and that the men ought to "come forward, wear the women's skirts and aprons and give up their trousers to the women." Wambui and the other female characters' strength depicts a legacy of powerful Gikuyu women who, though socially disadvantaged, nevertheless demonstrate incredible strength and capacity.

Ngũgĩ's glowing portrayal of the women in his country suggests that like Wambui, the author completely "believe[s] in the power of women to influence events, especially where men had failed to act, or seemed indecisive." Despite their lower standing in Gikuyu society, women are revealed as a forced to be reckoned with and a major contributor to Kenyan independence.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE TRAIN / THE IRON SNAKE

The train represents British progress and technology as the empire establishes its colony in Kenya, and more specifically represents how that technology is perceived by the Gikuyu people. Physically, the train is a technological marvel to the Gikuyu, as well as the machine that brings both soldiers and administrators. On first sighting, the Gikuyu are terrified of the train, calling it the "iron snake" and envisioning it as an actual monster "wriggling its way toward Nairobi for a thorough exploitation of the hinterland." As the people grow accustomed to the presence of the British, before the Emergency, the train becomes a point of interest to the Gikuyu, and Thabai's train platform even becomes a social center where the young people gather each day to watch it pass by.

However, as the spirit of revolution grows among the Gikuyu and war looms, the young people cease going to the train platform, and the train itself becomes a symbol of colonial power. Kihika recognizes that the British are dependent on their train, and if it could be destroyed they would be crippled. Karanja, likewise, has visions of the Gikuyu fleeing before the train—and thus the might of the British—until they are silenced, seeing it as a symbol of white power to crush and destroy. Karanja aligns himself with the British and the power of the train, though he suffers for his choice. After the British leave and Kenya regains its independence, Karanja exiles himself. In his final scene, he stands in the night and watches as the train leaves without him, sinking him into silence and darkness, symbolizing the last vestiges of his power departing, leaving him behind with nothing at all and no one to turn to.

THE OATH

The oath, once referred to as the "Oath of Unity," is a pledge to fight and die for Kenya's freedom and support the Mau Mau fighters. Although there is nothing binding about the oath, keeping it—by never confessing to the British that one has taken it—becomes a mark of patriotism and commitment to the Movement. Especially for men in the detention camps, keeping the oath represents their sustained devotion to their national cause, while confessing the oath—as Gikonyo does, hoping that it will result in a lighter sentence—is a mark of cowardice, representing a betrayal of one's people for the sake of selfish gains.

Although the oath is taken very seriously, Kihika reveals to Mugo that it is ultimately meaningless, a mere symbol that reflects the bravery or cowardice that is already in one's heart. Thus, he is not bothered by the fact that Mugo has never taken the oath, saying it holds no true power but is merely a token, like "water sprinkled on the head" during a baptism. Even so, Gikonyo's confession of the oath represents the greatest betrayal of his country in his mind and becomes an enduring source of shame.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *A Grain of Wheat* published in 2012.

Chapter 2 Quotes

> The whiteman told of another country beyond the sea where a powerful woman sat on a throne while men and women danced under the shadow of her authority and benevolence. She was ready to spread the shadow to cover the [Gikuyu]. They laughed at this eccentric man whose skin had been so scalded that the black outside had peeled off.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator recalls the first British missionaries' arrival, when they charm the Gikuyu with their gentle speech and humility, but offer an omen of the colonialism that will follow. The Gikuyu, however, do not take this warning seriously.

The British initially penetrate Kenya with their missionaries, who are unarmed and seem peaceable enough. As a calculated tactic, this demonstrates England's use of Christianity and proselytism as a means of invasion, in addition to whatever moralizing effects they may believe it possesses. Christianity is thus weaponized—rather than being offered to Kenya out of goodwill or love, the missionaries' Gospel is utilized as a tool to condition Kenyans to the whiteman's presence, gaining their trust and making them more easily exploitable. Waving witnessed such a gross use of Christian religion, it is no surprise that the author rejected it altogether later in life. However, in *A Grain of Wheat* Ngũgĩ builds a dynamic portrayal of Christianity—while the British use Christianity as a means and motive for colonization, the Gikuyu learn to use Christianity as a message of revolution, thus demonstrating the religion's multi-faceted nature and potential to be utilized for all manner of objectives.

> They looked beyond the laughing face of the whiteman and suddenly saw a long line of other red strangers who carried not the Bible, but the sword. [...] The iron snake [...] was quickly wriggling towards Nairobi for a thorough exploitation of the hinterland.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 11-12

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly after the missionaries arrive, British soldiers and engineers appear to conquer and build, which they initiate with the construction of their railroad. In this introduction of the train, the novel's most significant symbol, the language used to describe the train reveals one of the primary differences between the two cultures. While to the British, the train is a machine which they can use to move soldiers, weapons, and goods across Kenya very quickly—thus aiding their colonial efforts—the Gikuyu tribesmen first understand it not as a technological marvel, but a literal monster invading their land. This not only demonstrates the clash between an industrial culture and an agrarian culture, but also how the Gikuyu use story to describe and understand their own history. In their eyes, the British did not merely build a train, but let a beast loose to consume and exploit Kenya. This emphasis on storytelling will be apparent throughout the novel, especially in the messianic roles given to Kihika and Mugo in the eyes of their people.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ [Mugo] had always found it difficult to make decisions. Recoiling as if by instinct from setting in motion a course of action whose consequences he could not determine before the start, he allowed himself to drift into things or be pushed into them by an uncanny demon; he rode on the wave of circumstance and lay against the crest, fearing but fascinated by fate.

Related Characters: Mugo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

Prominent members of the village have just asked Mugo to lead the independence celebrations and commemorate the dead, since Mugo nobly endured detention and sheltered Kihika from harm. One of Mugo's strongest character traits is his passivity, his inability to act or exert himself on the world around him. Although this seems like an entirely negative trait and is depicted as such in this passage, Mugo's tendency to simply fall into the events that surround him actually makes him a valuable member of the village and an unlikely hero to his people, though a hero who rarely does anything himself. Mugo's seemingly stalwart, detached stoicism makes him a trusted confidant and allows several characters to confess their long-held shames to him—not because Mugo wants them to, but because once they start, he does not have the wherewithal to stop them. In the same way, Mugo shelters Kihika from the British when Kihika arrives in his hut one night. Although Mugo does not want him there and does not want to help him, he does not have the assertiveness to defy Kihika and thus inevitably helps him, becoming a village hero. In this way, Mugo is a play on the archetype of an unlikely or unwilling hero. However, rather than learning that he must act in spite of his passivity, Mugo becomes a hero directly because of his overwhelmingly passive nature.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ At Githima, people believed that a complaint from [Karanja] was enough to make a man lose his job. Karanja knew their fears. Often when men came into his office, he would suddenly cast them a cold eye, drop hints, or simply growl at them; in this way, he increased their fears and insecurity. But he also feared the men and alternated this fierce prose with servile friendliness.

Related Characters: Karanja

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

During Karanja's introduction into the story, he is working for the white administrator, John Thompson, running errands and writing labels on books in the library.

Aside from the British characters, who are thinly portrayed, Karanja is the only character in the novel given no redeeming qualities. He is selfish, greedy, and desires power and control for himself. Even as a child, he is too lazy to support and care for his single mother. In the thematic tension between the individual and the community, Karanja epitomizes one's devotion to their individual self at the expense of their community. By working for the whiteman, Karanja betrays his community and makes himself a slave to "white power" since he sees that, by proximity, he will also gain some of this power. However, the fact that Karanja both feels powerful over his countrymen but also fears

them, often placating their anger, demonstrates one of the woes of spurning one's community—Karanja is alone, trusts no one, and thus will always live in fear of those he has betrayed or exerted power over. Although as a Gikuyu Kenyan, he should be able to trust and confide in his countrymen, Karanja has destroyed that trust and so can never be at peace.

Chapter 5 Quotes

"In a flash, I was convinced that the growth of the British Empire was the development of a great moral idea: it means, it must surely lead to the creation of one British nation, embracing all peoples of all colors and creeds, based on the just proposition that all men were created equal."

Related Characters: John Thompson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52-53

Explanation and Analysis

After meeting two African students at Oxford who were thoroughly Westernized, John Thompson becomes a firm believer in the righteousness of British colonialism.

Ngũgĩ's inclusion of the moral argument for colonialism is intriguing. While he could have easily left the British in the role of the oppressors and not delved into their own characters—and been justified in this, since he himself suffered under British occupation—he chooses to present a moral argument for British Imperialism to demonstrate that on both sides of the struggle for independence, each party fully believes they are fighting for a righteous cause. In this way, Kenya's struggle for its independence becomes not merely a struggle for freedom, but a moral conflict over what is best for Kenya's future. However, John's own vision of the morality of the British Empire has notable flaws—never once does he consider that other nations might not want to be absorbed into one British nation, that they might harbor their own beliefs, or that using Africans as slave labor wildly contradicts the "just proposition that all men are created equal." Thus, while Ngũgĩ takes the time to explore the argument for colonialism, the moral balance between the two is tipped very firmly in favor of freedom.

Chapter 6 Quotes

"Many of us talked like that because we wanted to deceive ourselves. It lessens your shame. We talked of loyalty to the Movement and the love of our country. You know a time came when I did not care about Uhuru for the country anymore. I just wanted to come home."

Related Characters: Gikonyo (speaker), Mugo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

Gikonyo recalls a meeting in which, while many survivors of the detention camps make impassioned speeches about their patriotism and loyalty to their homeland, Mugo stands and says that he did not care about any of that, he only wanted to survive. Many feel that Mugo tells the truth on behalf of everyone.

Although the fight for Kenya's independence undergirds the story and forms its setting, and although much is spoken of oppressed peoples' heroism in struggle, the author makes a point of emphasizing human weakness in his characters, creating a dynamic—to the point of being underwhelming—depiction of those who fight for freedom. For the survivors of the detention camps, most forgot about their crusade for independence as the months turned to years spent in cages. However, such an admission does not leave a powerful legacy, especially in Gikuyu culture which prizes storytelling and remembrance. Nationalism and black suffrage against the whiteman thus become ways to mask each individual's own self-interest. Rather than admitting their own human weakness and shame, the survivors tell stories about national pride, which give meaning to their years of suffering, rather than admit that their only thoughts were of survival and returning home. Although inspiring, these stories are not true.

Chapter 7 Quotes

Unknown to those around him, Kihika's heart hardened towards "these people," long before he had even encountered a white face. Soldiers came back from the war and told stories of what they had seen in Burma, Egypt, Palestine and India; wasn't Mahatma Gandhi, the saint, leading the Indian people against the British rule? Kihika fed on these stories: his imagination and daily observation told him the rest; from early on, he had visions of himself, a saint, leading Kenyan people to freedom and power.

Related Characters: Kihika, Gikonyo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

As Gikonyo recalls his years as a young man, the narrator looks to Kihika's formation as revolutionary leader. Kihika is explicitly named as a savior and Christ-figure multiple times throughout the book and draws heavily on Christ's ideas of sacrifice for a greater good. However, the author also subverts the typical Christ archetype by making Kihika a warrior, one who achieves salvation and liberation through bloodshed, rather than passive non-violence. It is notable that Kihika—and thus, the author—also looks to Gandhi's leadership in India, but again overlooks the fact that Gandhi was committed to nonviolence. Kihika's praise of non-violent leaders while embracing violence himself seems oddly contradictory, though may perhaps indicate the author's own belief that the violence of oppression by the British must be fought with violence.

> "I would hate to see a train run over my mother or father, or brothers. Oh, what would I do?" [Mumbi] quickly exclaimed.
>
> "Women are cowards." Karanja said half in joke.
>
> "Would you like a train to run over you?" Mumbi retorted angrily. Karanja felt the anger and did not answer.

Related Characters: Karanja, Mumbi (speaker), Kihika

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

When they are young, Kihika is discussing the need for great sacrifice in the fight for freedom, which he envisions as throwing oneself in front of the train.

This passage exemplifies the train's symbolism of British progress and technology, as well as foreshadowing both Kihika's death and Karanja's betrayal of his people. The symbolic meaning of throwing oneself before the train is apt on several levels. On the one hand, it demonstrates the conflict between the machine of British colonialism, which appears cold, unfeeling, and technologically advanced, and the Gikuyu people, who are community-minded and connected with the land. The train and the British empire also seem like an unstoppable force that obliterates anything or anyone that stands in its way; a single person throwing themselves in front of a train would do very little to impede its progress, which suggests that the only hope Kenya has of stopping it is through massive amounts of sacrifice. The train thus represents both a technological marvel and an unstoppable, oppressive force. This helps to explain why Karanja, in his cowardice, chooses to side with power rather than submit himself to sacrifice, as Kihika, Mumbi, and many of the Gikuyu do.

> In Kenya we want deaths which will change things, that is to say, we want true sacrifice. But first we have to be ready to carry the cross. I die for you, you die for me, we become a sacrifice for one another. So I can say that you, Karanja, are Christ. Everybody who takes the Oath of Unity to change things in Kenya is a Christ.

Related Characters: Kihika (speaker), Karanja

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

Karanja overhears Kihika talking to a group of other men on the train platform about the need for sacrifice in the struggle for independence. Beyond the irony of Kihika naming Karanja as a potential Christ-figure—since Karanja goes on to become the greatest betrayer and unwilling to sacrifice anything of himself—Kihika's speech again exemplifies both the use of Christianity to ascribe meaning to struggle and the author's unique use of Christ-archetypes within the narrative. Rather than a single Christ-figure and savior of his people, Kihika believes that everyone has the responsibility to be Christ to each other, to mutually die for each other and thus offer salvation and liberation. This is reflected in the narrative arc as well—although Kihika plays the primary Christ-figure, Mugo himself becomes a combined Judas and Christ-figure as well. Rather than follow the archetypal singular savior pitted against the one who betrays him, *A Grain of Wheat*'s Judas both betrays Christ and becomes his successor in his courageous honesty and willingness to accept death as the

just consequence of his crimes, which inspires his fellow villagers.

> Though Njeri was a short girl, her slim figure made her appear tall. But there was something tough about that slimness. She despised women's weaknesses, like tears, and whenever fights occurred at Kinenie [forest], she always fought, even with men. A cat, men called her, because few could impose their physical will on her.

Related Characters: Wambuku, Kihika, Njeri

Related Themes:

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

After Kihika leaves for the Githima forest and his lover Wambuku is left heartbroken, Njeri is disgusted by Wambuku's cowardice and resolves that she will join Kihika in the forest and fight at his side.

Though her presence in the story is brief, Njeri exemplifies the strength of Gikuyu women to act, fight, and die as well as any men. Aside from perhaps Kihika, Njeri is the most powerful and courageous character in the story, demonstrating a firm resolve and assertive stance towards fighting for freedom and justice and pursuing Kihika, whom she loves. Her courage creates a marked contrast not only to Wambuku's weakness, which is also sparsely explored, but more importantly to the cowardice of nearly all of the primary male characters and the indecision and passivity that plagues them. Njeri's characterization as a fierce warrior underscores female strength and ability, in the same vein as Wambui and the matriarchal Gikuyu rulers of old.

> Gikonyo greedily sucked sour pleasure from this reflection which he saw as a terrible revelation. To live and die alone is the ultimate truth.

Related Characters: Mumbi, Gikonyo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

After returning from six years of detention to find that Mumbi has had a child by another man, Gikonyo falls into depression and disenchantment.

In the thematic conflict between the individual and the community, Gikonyo is one of several representations of an individual who tries to live only for his own benefit. Although Gikonyo had bravely marched towards detention six years before, his sense of social responsibility seems to have been grounded primarily in his love for Mumbi, rather than in his duty to his countrymen. Thus, when Mumbi fails him, Gikonyo's whole purpose for living and surviving seem eradicated. The novel thus warns against not only ignoring one's responsibility to their community, but also in placing all of one's hopes in a single person, since that person, as a human being, is bound to fail at some point. After Mumbi fails him, Gikonyo's resultant loss of meaning turns him into an utterly selfish figure in the same manner as Karanja, even though they are now enemies.

Chapter 9 Quotes

> "As for carrying a gun for the whiteman, well, a time will come when you too will know that every man in the world is alone, and fights alone, to live."

Related Characters: Karanja (speaker), Mumbi

Related Themes:

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

Karanja, now a member of the colonial homeguard, is an authority figure over his own village. Since the village is oppressed and slowly starving to death, Karanja smuggles food to Mumbi and tries to justify his betrayal after she calls him "Judas."

In the conflict between the individual's desire to live independently and their duty to their community, Karanja has entirely committed himself to his own success, siding with the powerful but oppressive British colonialists. Karanja, like most of the characters in the story who commit selfish acts, has formed a justification for his own behavior so that he can see himself as a righteous figure, rather than the cowardly traitor he actually is. In this way, Karanja exemplifies the human ability to rationalize nearly any behavior, whether that be oppressive colonialism, betrayal of friends and family, or even murder of one's own countrymen as Karanja later admits to. However, Karanja's fate in the end of the story—being exiled without friends, community, or redemption—forms a clear value statement

and confirms that such individualistic behavior is ultimately unjustifiable, regardless of whatever rationalizations that individual comes up with.

❝ A big lump blocked Mugo's throat. Something heaved forth; he trembled; he was at the bottom of the pool, but up there, above the pool, ran the earth; life, struggle, even amidst pain and blood and poverty, seemed beautiful; only for a moment; how dared he believe in such a vision, an illusion?

Related Characters: Mumbi, Mugo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

As Mumbi tells Mugo her story of what happened while Gikonyo was in detention, Mugo envisions himself as struggling in the bottom of a pool of water, seeing the world above pass him by. Despite his wish that she would not burden him with the pains of others, Mumbi's presence and courageous vulnerability begins to break through Mugo's shell of apathy and detachment from the world around him. This is a critical step in Mugo's development, seeding the idea of courageous honesty and vulnerability, which ultimately leads him to confess his betrayal of Kihika, first to Mumbi and then to the entire village. Mumbi's breakthrough with Mugo, though she is not immediately aware of it, demonstrates the power of human connection to pierce one's apathy and fears, drawing them out of their self-absorption and into the world around them.

❝ "It makes his life more interesting to himself. He invents a meaning for his life, you see. Don't we all do that? And to die fighting for freedom sounds more heroic than to die by accident."

Related Characters: General R. (speaker), Mugo, Githua

Related Themes:

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

General R. tells Mugo that he has discovered that Githua's heroic tale about losing his leg as a Freedom Fighter—which greatly inspired Mugo—is false, and that Githua simply lost his leg in an accident with a truck. Mugo is tremendously disappointed to learn this.

General R.'s admission that every person, in some way, invents meaning for themselves is poignant, suggesting that the same false heroic perception the village has of Mugo is also true of all heroes; in reality, they are less heroic than they may seem. In this way, Githua's lies about his heroism—and the meaning he give his own life through them—parallel not only Mugo, but everyone. Just as Mugo is living a lie, every character is, in some sense, telling a particular story about themselves that feels meaningful, if not completely truthful.

Although it is tempting to consider that such false perceptions are justified if they are mostly harmless and provide meaning, Mugo's disappointment at discovering Githua is a liar arguably negates that. Githua's heroism had briefly inspired Mugo to play the role of hero himself, but learning the truth crushes that notion of grandeur and seems to reiterate to Mugo that he must tell the truth as well—otherwise the hope his presence offers to the village is based on falsehood.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ The man who had suffered so much had further revealed his greatness in modesty. By refusing to lead, Mugo had become a legendary hero.

Related Characters: Mugo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

After Mugo refuses to lead the independence ceremonies out of guilt for what he has done, word spreads of his refusal and only increases his status as "legendary hero."

Mugo's reticence being misinterpreted as heroic humility suggests that, once a community or group has placed their heroic or messianic expectations on an individual, they will adjust any instance or event to uphold those expectations and beliefs even when reality does not justify them. In the framing of the Christ narrative, which the novel leans heavily upon, the praising of Mugo as a great hero again represents a playful divergence from the traditional story. Although Mugo represents Judas Iscariot—in the end of the novel, he literally names himself "Judas" in front of the whole village—the village deifies him even in his refusal to lead or participate, celebrating him as a second Christ-

figure, "Kihika born again." Rather than following the traditional tack, the author suggests an alternative Christ narrative in which Judas is celebrated for his humility and even redeemed by his honesty, creating new meaning through the reordering of the story's traditional themes.

Chapter 13 Quotes

❝ [Wambui] believed in the power of women to influence events, especially where men had failed to act, or seemed indecisive […] Let therefore such men, she jeered, come forward, wear the women's skirts and aprons and give up their trousers to the women.

Related Characters: Wambui

Related Themes:

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

After the men of the village are unable to convince Mugo to lead, Wambui decides that the women will make their own attempt, reflecting on the times throughout the Movement when women had made up for the shortcomings of the men. Wambui's belief in women's power to act and create change, as well as her recollection of times in her life when this had been evident, serves as the novel's thesis around gender and power, encapsulating all the moments when the male characters prove themselves as pointedly weak and indecisive and the female characters carry the day. It is worth noting that the author does recognize the lower social role of women in Gikuyu and British society, but unlike predominant beliefs of the era, does not attribute this in any way to biological weakness or deficiency. Rather, through his depiction of powerful women who take action, the author argues that the lower station afforded women is socially-constructed. Women have the same power to fight and risk, as demonstrated by Wambui and Njeri, or to make difficult decisions and assert themselves, as shown by Mumbi.

❝ "I despise the weak. Why? Because the weak need not remain weak. Listen! Our fathers fought bravely. But do you know the biggest weapon unleashed by the enemy against them? It was not the Maxim gun. It was the division amongst them. Why? Because a people united in faith are stronger than the bomb. They shall not tremble or run away before the sword."

Related Characters: Kihika (speaker), Mugo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

While Kihika is hiding in Mugo's hut, having just assassinated a District Officer, he preaches to Kihika about the righteousness of their fight for freedom.

Kihika's speech explains the essence of black power in the book. While white power, as preached by Karanja, is the technological power to build, expand, and destroy, black power—which Karanja fears—is the ability of the Kenyan people to come together, to unite en masse for a common front, much as the Indians united under Gandhi against the British. Kihika's proclamation that Kenyans can defeat the British imperialists and their bombs and guns through unity recalls his visualization of sacrifice as a great number of Kenyans throwing themselves in front of a train. Liberation can be achieved and freedom won, but only through a tremendous level of sacrifice and at great cost.

❝ "But what is an oath? For some people, you need the oath to bind them to the Movement. There are those who'll keep a secret unless bound by an oath. I know them […] In any case how many took the oath and are now licking the toes of the whiteman? No, you take an oath to confirm a choice already made. The decision to lay or not to lay your life on the line for the people lies in the heart. The oath is water sprinkled on a man's head at baptism."

Related Characters: Kihika (speaker), Mugo

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 187

Explanation and Analysis

While Kihika is hiding in Mugo's hut, he explains that the oath is only symbolic, despite how seriously many take it. The recognition of the oath as a mere symbol of what is already in a man's heart increases the tragedy of Gikonyo's character arc in particular, since he is so heavily burdened for many years by his confession of the oath in detention. That the oath is insignificant even to Kihika implies that the weight of Gikonyo's burden is, in a way, unnecessary. What

Gikonyo should grieve is not that he confessed the oath itself, but that his own character was so weak that he was bound to confess his involvement in the Movement.

At the same time, although Mugo never takes the oath consciously, his final decision to sacrifice his life for the truth and the good of his community suggests that at some point, Mugo makes that same vow. In this sense, Mugo has indeed taken the oath through his own actions and dies as a Freedom Fighter committed to justice, even justice against himself. Like Kihika and Christ, Mugo's death for a righteous cause makes him akin to a martyr.

❝ I am important. I must not die. To keep myself alive, healthy, strong—to wait for my mission in life is a duty to myself, to men and women of tomorrow. If Moses had died in the reeds, who would ever have known that he was destined to be a great man?

Related Characters: Mugo (speaker), Kihika

Related Themes:

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

The day after Kihika leaves Mugo's hut, having promised Mugo that he will visit again in a week to incorporate Mugo into the Movement, Mugo decides to betray Kihika to the colonial authorities and is here justifying his own treachery to himself.

Mugo's use of a biblical narrative once again demonstrates Christianity's capacity to lend meaning and structure to certain events, which can be used for both noble, righteous causes or cowardly, treacherous ones. In the thematic conflict between the individual's desire for safety and their responsibility to community, Mugo's betrayal of Kihika represents the greatest betrayal of his community and his devotion to himself. That despite his objectively wretched act, Mugo briefly manages to morally justify himself in his own eyes once again illustrates how wildly one's perception of self or others can differ from reality. However, Mugo's moral justification is short-lived; mere moments after he betrays Kihika he is overwhelmed by regret, arguing that any betrayal of community for one's own good is ultimately indefensible.

Chapter 14 Quotes

❝ Koina talked of seeing the ghosts of the colonial past still haunting Independent Kenya. And it was true that those now marching in the streets of Nairobi were not the soldiers of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army but of the King's African Rifles, the very colonial forces who had been doing on the battlefield what Jackson was doing in churches.

Related Characters: Rev. Jackson Kigondu, Lt. Koina, General R.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 216

Explanation and Analysis

On the day of independence, during the long awaited ceremony, General R. reflects that the day is bittersweet, and that some wonder if anything will truly be different in a free Kenya. Despite the long anticipation of independence, the novel expresses reservations about its achievement, questioning whether or not Kenya will be able to make its own future or if it will lean on the trappings and authority structures of the past. As with the subjects of Christianity and colonialism, even Kenyan independence is observed and reflected on from various angles, creating a multi-faceted depiction of freedom and painting a less ideal picture than many would hope. However, the author's apparent reservations about freedom in Kenya turned out to be sadly prescient. In the years after the publication of *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngũgĩ himself was exiled from Kenya by Jomo Kenyatta's government—whom Ngugi often praised in his work—for fighting to reject Western culture and emphasize Gikuyu culture and language.

Karanja Quotes

❝ Then, somehow, [Karanja] had not felt guilty. When he shot [Freedom Fighters], they seemed less like human beings and more like animals. At first this had merely thrilled Karanja and made him feel a new man, a part of an invisible might whose symbol was the whiteman. Later, this consciousness of power, this ability to dispose of human life by merely pulling a trigger, so obsessed him that it became a need. Now, that power had gone.

Related Characters: Karanja

Related Themes:

Page Number: 225

Explanation and Analysis

Karanja sits alone in a tea shop in Githima, having exiled himself from Thabai forever. John Thompson and the British have left, and Karanja finds himself with nothing left. Karanja's thrill at killing other human beings, whom he sees as animals, is both disturbing and revealing. It confirms his psychopathic tendencies and desire to exert his will on other people. More significantly, however, it reveals the degree to which Karanja has absorbed the colonial oppressors' mentality. Karanja's belief that his fellow Africans are less human reflects John Thompson's own dehumanizing belief that by colonizing them, Britain was giving Kenyans their "souls," or making them into real human beings rather than animals or savages. Although this belief is grotesque in John Thompson's mind, it is easier to dismiss as merely racism—Thompson is white, and his subjects are black. That Karanja could hold such a belief about his own people, however, argues that the colonial mentality and the power it vests individuals with over other people is fundamentally dehumanizing, unjust, and grotesque.

Harambee Quotes

❝ Courage had failed [Gikonyo], he had confessed the oath in spite of his vows to the contrary. What difference was there between him and Karanja or Mugo who had openly betrayed people and worked with the whiteman to save themselves? Mugo had the courage to face his guilt and lose everything. Gikonyo shuddered at the thought of losing everything.

Related Characters: Karanja, Mugo, Gikonyo

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 241

Explanation and Analysis

Gikonyo lies in a hospital bed with a broken arm for a week, where he has nothing to do but reflect on his own cowardice and Mugo's bravery in being able to confess. Despite learning of Mugo's betrayal, Gikonyo and the other villagers cannot help but regard Mugo as braver than any before him, since he was offered wealth and power and forsook it all to tell the truth. Though Mugo dies, this redeems him in the eyes of his community and makes him a symbol of brave honesty and sacrifice. Within the biblical parallel, although Mugo has just called himself Judas, his sacrificial redemption—which also redeems others, such as Gikonyo, who is emboldened to reconcile himself to Mumbi and her child and atone for his wretched treatment of her—makes him a second Christ figure, just as the people of his village had wanted him to be. Although there is no redemption for Karanja, Mugo and Gikonyo's character arcs both come to a close, Mugo fully redeemed by his confession and death, and Gikonyo taking his first steps toward redemption, having been inspired by Mugo's bold sacrifice.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Mugo wakes from a strange dream, lying alone in his hut, deciding whether or not he should rise for the day. He finds a bit of maize-flour in a corner of his hut and makes porridge with it, which reminds him of the porridge he ate in detention. Mugo leaves his hut, takes his tools, and begins walking towards his strip of farmland on the other side of his village, Thabai. On the way, he meets Warui, a village elder, who makes brief conversation about the coming of Uhuru until Mugo excuses himself. The land that Mugo is walking to was given to him by Warui to grow food on, since Mugo's own land was taken by the government during his detention.

Mugo's introduction depicts several key characteristics at once: he is alone, he is poor, and he seems uncomfortable around other people. This initial characterization makes him seem rather pathetic, which, importantly, will contrast with the way his fellow villagers see him and even how he sees himself, setting the stage for his character development. "Uhuru" refers to Kenyan independence, and establishes the story's timeline as leading up to one specific event.

Mugo reflects that Thabai looks the same in 1963 as it did in 1955, when they were still threatened by the "whiteman." As Mugo walks through the village, he keeps his head down, seemingly ashamed. A one-legged cripple named Githua approaches him and salutes him "in the name of blackman's freedom," calling him Chief and saying "Uhuru na Kazi." Githua refers briefly to "the Emergency" before hobbling away. Mugo continues walking, wondering why everyone is treating him so strangely. As he passes an old woman's hut, Mugo remembers her deaf son, Gitogo, who was shot in the back and killed by a British soldier as he ran to protect his mother, because he could not hear the soldier telling him to halt.

Githua's praise of Mugo is the first contrast against his prior depiction as a lonely, isolated, pathetic man, setting up the tension between how Mugo sees himself and how other people see him. Narratively, it is worth noting that Githua is the first in the story to praise Mugo as a leader, since he will also be the only figure in the village to ever turn on Mugo and mock him. "Uhuru na Kazi" means "freedom and work" and is a common slogan of Kenya's independence movement.

Mugo feels as if Gitogo's mother, the old woman, somehow knows everything about him, can see straight through him. He feels the desire to help her but does not know how, so he continues to his strip of land where he scratches in the dirt for a while. There are no crops planted there, only weeds. Mugo cannot find the motivation to work hard, realizing he has not cared for working the land since the Emergency.

After Warui's kind words and Githua's adulation, Mugo goes back to being a poor, unmotivated figure. Whenever he is alone, Mugo is depicted as pathetic or lazy, which is exacerbated by the fact that he wants to be alone all the time. The Emergency refers to the 1952-1960 war between the Mau Mau and the British, during which time the British colonizers issued a state of emergency and ruled through martial law.

Mugo's parents died when he was a child, leaving him destitute and under the care of an alcoholic and abusive aunt who hates the world and believes everyone conspires against her. Often, Mugo fantasizes about murdering her, but does not have the strength. Regardless, she kills herself through "over-drinking," leaving him alone in the world and oddly missing his aunt. After her death, Mugo decides that he will labor and become wealthy, forcing the world to recognize him as someone important. He holds these dreams until "Kihika had come into his life."

Mugo's childhood abuse does much to explain his odd qualities and self-imposed isolation. Without the support of good family or even good friends, Mugo develops into a man who is unconfident and uncomfortable around other people. The fact that Mugo misses his aunt after she dies seeds the subtheme of family and belonging, which will surface again in Mugo's final scene in the story.

Mugo goes home early. While he is in his hut, he is visited by Warui, Wambui (an elder woman of the village), and Gikonyo (a wealthy businessman). Fearful, Mugo runs to the "pit lavatory" where he waits for a long time before returning to the hut. His visitors do not seem angry with him, however, but rather excited, explaining that they have come on behalf of the Party to be the voice of the Movement.

Mugo's lack of confidence and flight under the pretense of relieving himself again characterizes him as lacking confidence or decorum, and his surprise that they are not angry with him indicates that he feels guilty over something and expects the ire of those in his community. The Party and the Movement both refer to the Kenyan resistance against British colonialism led by Jomo Kenyatta.

CHAPTER 2

It seems as if everyone is a part of the Movement, though none can recall exactly when it began. It is assumed that it started with the arrival of the "whiteman," when Christian missionaries arrive and are allowed to set up temporary shelters for themselves. The missionaries preach from the Bible and speak of a woman across the sea who will soon stretch "the shadow of her authority and benevolence" over Kenya. The Gikuyu laugh at the missionaries, though the concept of women ruling resonates with them, since they themselves were once ruled by powerful warrior women who were only overthrown when the men schemed to impregnate them all at the same time, and thus overpowered them while they were physically weakened.

This section establishes three major themes at once: colonialism, Christianity, and gender and power. Colonialism and Christianity are linked from the moment that the new religion arrives in Kenya, which creates the tension between Christianity as colonial device and as a source of meaning and hope. It is also significant that the first mention of women as a group portrays them as powerful warrior rulers, indicating the author's own perception of gender and power. The men are unable to overthrow the women through strength, and must use treachery instead, which contradicts common notions of men as naturally more powerful than women.

The missionaries convert a few Kenyans, who then begin treading on sacred lands to prove that their new god has made them untouchable. Quietly, the missionaries gather more land for themselves and build permanent structures. By the time the village elders protest, other strangers have arrived carrying "not the Bible, but the sword." The "**iron snake**" that was foretold in visions stretches itself across the ground, "wriggling towards Nairobi for a thorough exploitation of the hinterlands." A rebellion is staged by Kenyan warrior-leaders, but is crushed, and the power and influence of the missionaries continues to grow.

Christianity, as used by the "whiteman," is both a deceptive colonial tool granting Europeans easier access into foreign territories as well as a motivator for Kenyans to abandon their ancestral beliefs and adopt a Western mode of thinking. Both of these Western uses of Christianity paint it as a particularly dark and villainous tool of colonialism, a tool of oppression rather than salvation.

A Kenyan leader named Harry Thuku emerges, carrying a message from God that he must free his people from the British like Moses freed the Israelites from Pharaoh. Under Harry Thuku's leadership, the Movement blossoms. When he is captured by the whiteman, tribesmen from all over the country come down from the ridges, gather in Nairobi, and stage peaceful marches in protest. The police are waiting for them with bayonets and bullets, opening fire on the crowds of unarmed protesters. The Movement is dismayed for a time, until the Burning Spear rises, who would be known all over the world.

Harry Thuku's utilization of the liberating message of Christianity to combat the British colonial use of Christianity exemplifies the complex role of the religion in Kenya. Christianity plays a central role in both sides of the same war, though to opposite effect. This demonstrates how powerfully the usage of Christianity can affect the message that it communicates. The Burning Spear refers to Jomo Kenyatta.

Mugo once attended a meeting of the Movement, where he saw Kihika, a fellow villager a few years his junior, call for revolution and bloodshed to end their exploitation at the hands of the British. Although Kihika condemns the use of Christianity to exploit his brethren, he also weaves Christian imagery into his own revolutionary speech. Mugo hates him for his bravery, and for speaking of sacrifice when he is so young and certainly inexperienced. However, Kihika goes on to "[live] the words of sacrifice he had spoken to the multitude." When Jomo Kenyatta and other Kenyan leaders are arrested in 1952, Kihika leaves Thabai to lead the Freedom Fighters in the forest. After he captures a famous police station, Kihika becomes known as "the terror of the whiteman."

Like Harry Thuku, Kihika uses Christian imagery to call for violent revolution against a colonial system that also uses its own Christian principles, again demonstrating how the same religion can be put to different, even oppositional uses. Curiously, despite Christianity's primarily nonviolent message, both the British and the Gikuyu use it as a justification for violence and warfare, as have many before them. By contrast, Gandhi, whom Kihika will often mention as a great inspiration, internalized the tactic of nonviolence.

A bounty is put on Kihika's head. He is captured a year later, tortured, and executed publicly. The homeguard (the colonial security force) forces the local people in the area to go see Kihika's body, but the Movement is only strengthened by his sacrifice.

Kihika is here established as a Christ-figure within the story's narrative, a selfless and symbolic sacrifice. This demonstrates Christianity's ability to lend meaning to events, since without the Christ-narrative to give significance to Kihika's death, its symbolic power for the Movement would not be as strong.

CHAPTER 3

Back in Mugo's hut, his three visitors tell him that they are there to discuss the Uhuru celebrations coming up in a few days. Mugo feels strange in the presence of these three—Gikonyo is a wealthy merchant and husband of the most beautiful woman in the land, Warui's entire life has been committed to the Movement (he was there in the protest march for Harry Thuku), and Wambui has long been a collaborator with the Freedom Fighters, smuggling messages and weapons through police checkpoints. The three tell Mugo that they want to commemorate Kihika's life. Mugo almost panics.

Mugo's nervous reaction to his visitors' simple announcement that they want to commemorate Kihika's life indicates both his guilt and the burden that this guilt is upon him. Rather than being honored by his visitors or even receiving the news peacefully and going on with his day, Mugo's guilt makes any human interaction a source of paranoia and fear, demonstrating the destructive effects it is having upon his life.

As they are speaking, two more men enter the hut: General R. and Lt. Koina, both Freedom Fighters who have lived the past seven years in the forest. After catching up with the others, General R. announces that he believes Kihika was betrayed, perhaps by Karanja. Since he knows that Mugo gave shelter to Kihika after he assassinated DO (District Officer) Robson, General R. is hoping that Mugo might know who Kihika was supposed to be meeting on the day that he was captured. Mugo seems frightened and does not answer, but merely shakes his head "no."

General R. and Lt. Koina's seven years spent hiding in the forest is another early example of the sacrifice that one's duty to their community requires. While Mugo, the individualist, has been living in his hut, sleeping in his own bed, the two freedom fighters' responsibility to their community has compelled them to forsake the comforts of home and exile themselves to the forest, in the name of claiming freedom for their people.

Gikonyo, Wambui, and Warui finally explain why they have come: Since Mugo's name is now forever tied to the Movement and Kihika for the contributions he has made, they want Mugo to lead the ceremony and sacrifice of remembrance during the Uhuru celebration. Furthermore, they want Mugo to stand as their chief and regional representative to the government. Mugo does not give an answer, as he has always been crippled by indecision, and they tell him that they will need an answer in three days' time. Although they understand his desire to be alone, "it is not easy for a man in a community to be left alone, especially a man in [his] position." The visitors leave.

The statement that one cannot easily be left alone within a community is vital to the thematic tension between individual and community. The narrator, like Mugo's fellow villagers, recognizes and validates Mugo's wish to simply be his own man, rather than chastising him for it or calling it selfish. Even so, they all recognize that within a community, especially a community that suffers and struggles, this is an impossible wish. Their fates are all inextricably bound together, and thus Mugo has a duty to fulfill.

Outside, General R. and Lt. Koina agree that they must continue to seek out Kihika's betrayer, though it seems likely that it is Karanja, a Thabai villager who now works for the whiteman. Koina reflects on how Kihika had inspired hope and confidence, teaching him to believe in "black power," leading his three hundred fighters, and assassinating DO Robson. Wambui remarks that Mugo is a "strange man," but the others retort that it is only because of the suffering he endured. During his detention, Mugo was singled out, beaten, and tortured, but never confessed to "the oath."

Lt. Koina's belief in "black power" introduces a minor thematic tension between black power and "white power" explored throughout the novel. Where white power (in the book) is technological, dominating through weaponry such as bombs and guns, delivered by trains, black power is found in the Kenyan people's unity, resilience, and determination to preserve their traditional ways of life.

After they part, Gikonyo begins to return home, reflecting on the fact that he has become wealthy, but life has lost all flavor and meaning. As he walks, Gikonyo imagines—as he often does—that he hears footsteps walking behind him. He runs, but the footsteps follow him, until he resolves that he must speak with Mugo, alone, or he will never be rid of the footsteps following him. However, when he returns to Mugo's hut, he cannot bring himself to enter, so he returns home to his wife Mumbi.

Gikonyo's recurrent hallucinations of being followed indicates that, like Mugo, he too is haunted and pursued by secret guilt over a past crime. Although Gikonyo appears successful on the outside, he shares Mugo's insecurity and fear, demonstrating how one's perceptions of a person often do not match reality.

Mumbi has prepared dinner for Gikonyo, but he will not eat. She tries to make conversation with him, but he refuses to answer her questions. Placing her hands on his shoulders, Mumbi begs Gikonyo to speak of "the child" or, if nothing else, to at least go to bed with her, but Gikonyo refuses. Mumbi is heartbroken and leaves.

Though it is not certain, it seems that the guilt Gikonyo feels effects his interactions with Mumbi, souring their relationship and demonstrating the toxic effect guilt has on one's psyche. Once again, despite his image of success, Gikonyo's poor marriage demonstrates the dissonance between perception and reality.

CHAPTER 4

Back when Europeans and Indians fought for control over Kenya, a British agricultural officer drew the plans for a forestry research station in Githima. The officer is killed by **the train**, but the research station is completed and filled with European scientists and administrators. Years later, Dr. Henry Van Dyke is killed by the same train in the same spot, when he drunkenly drives his car into it. Karanja, a Thabai villager who works in Githima dusting books and writing labels, always hated Dr. Van Dyke, but is strangely horrified by his death.

Throughout the novel, the train functions as a symbol of British technology and progress as it makes its way across Kenya via colonialism. More often than not, the train is also associated with death or fear, suggesting that even for the British, their colonialist practices are a blight. While colonialism brings technological progress to Kenya, it also destroys Kenya's freedom and encourages the British to resort to barbaric practices, destroying any sense of moralism they may have once possessed.

While Karanja is at his desk, painstakingly writing labels, another Kenyan named Mwaura enters, first brazenly insulting Karanja before telling him that John Thompson wants to see him. Karanja is infuriated by the man's presence but does nothing. Karanja reports to John Thompson, who merely wants him to deliver a message to his wife Margery. Karanja hates such trivial errands and resolves to complain to Thompson about them, but delivers the message anyway. Karanja does not want to lose his good standing with the white people, since it makes his fellow Kenyans fear him, though he also fears them and knows that they despise and mock him.

Karanja, like Mugo and Gikonyo, is depicted as a weak man, gripped by indecision and cowardice, as exemplified by his failure to stand up to Mwaura or to John Thompson. It is notable that Karanja's only sense of power is directly tied to his proximity to white people, which again indicates his own personal weakness. Where Lt. Koina believes in black power and Kenya's ability to self-govern and self-sustain, Karanja submits himself as a dependent to white power.

Karanja rides his bicycle to Margery's house, and she oddly invites him to stay for tea, apparently lonely and bored. Karanja is terrified of having tea with a white woman—particularly afraid of accidentally looking at her "pointed breasts"—but also hopes that another African will see him having tea with a white woman, which would certainly buff his reputation. Margery, meanwhile, is secretly thrilled by the alluring power she has over Karanja and how nervous she makes him. She asks him all manner of questions: how many wives he has—which makes him painfully think of Mumbi, whom Karanja loves but was rejected by—how he feels about Uhuru, and so on. Karanja hopes that she will give some hint of the rumor that she and John Thompson are soon leaving Kenya, but she gives none, and he cannot bring himself to ask.

Margery's sexual allure and the power this gives her in the scene demonstrates that, like Gikuyu women, women in British society may also find alternative ways to exert power within relationships when it is not granted by society. Moreover, both characters in the scene also capitalize on the social power granted to white people. As a white woman, Margery's alluring power is accentuated by her race; Karanja, though he fears Margery, hopes to capitalize on her racial power by his proximity, hoping that being seen having tea with a white women will make him seem powerful in the eyes of his countrymen.

After he leaves, Karanja finds Mwaura in a teahouse and apologizes for his earlier outburst, explaining that he was only upset because he believes his work of writing labels to be so critically important.

Karanja is depicted as both weak in his need to apologize and vain in his belief that writing labels on books—a menial task—is of special significance to his colonial employers.

John Thompson sits at his desk, rifling through papers and pretending to be working. His thoughts drift to Uhuru, what a betrayal it seems, and the pride he had felt when the queen visited Kenya and shook his hand while he was still the District Officer. Now, it seems to him, the carefully-maintained research station and all of their hard work will fall to ruin within months when the white people leave.

John Thompson's character serves primarily to show the colonizer's view of their oppressive colonial practices. The author's exploration of the antagonist's mentality is important, since it recognizes that in the eyes of the British they are pursuing a moral cause, even though in the eyes of the Kenyans they are immoral oppressors.

From his window, Thompson watches Dr. Lynd cross the compound, followed by her bull-mastiff. She enters a building, but her dog lingers, barking at a group of black men. Thompson senses something bad is about to happen, but cannot move himself. The dog races for one of the men, looking as if he will tear him to pieces. The man is unable to run, but at the moment that violence seems inevitable, Dr. Lynd arrives and restrains her dog. John is "relieved and vaguely disappointed that nothing had happened." He leaves his office and strides to the scene, finding Dr. Lynd and Karanja yelling at each other about the dog. In a panic, John tells Karanja in Swahili that he will take care of the situation, though he instantly regrets this.

Even John Thompson, whom Karanja views as powerful and fearful, exhibits the same indecision and failure to act as Mugo, Gikonyo, and Karanja. Compared to the recent depiction of his wife Margery as a character who finds power in her own ways and exhibits confidence, John seems weak. This constant contrast between weak, indecisive men and strong, assertive women exemplifies the book's belief in women's power, despite their socially disempowered position.

Taking Dr. Lynd aside, Thompson finds himself unable to admit his failure to act. Instead, Dr. Lynd tearfully talks about how much she hates black people, especially after an incident in which her houseboy, whom she trusted, arrived with three other men, tied her up, stole money and guns, and cut her first dog into pieces. The other two men were found and hanged, but the houseboy was never brought to justice.

Dr. Lynd's account of being assaulted, robbed, and seeing her dog viciously murdered by Kenyans is unsettling. In a novel that takes a generally permissive attitude towards revolutionary violence, Dr. Lynd's experience implies that sometimes, such violence may go too far. Even so, Dr. Lynd's racism hardly makes her an object of sympathy.

They part ways and Thompson finds himself gripped by a nebulous sense of fear. His mind wanders back to the years when he, as District Officer, oversaw the detention camps, to "rehabilitate Mau Mau adherents to a normal life as British subjects." During that time, a hunger strike and several beatings left eleven prisoners dead, which garnered international attention and resulted in his demotion and exile to the research station in Githima. As Thompson is ruminating, Karanja appears to announce that he has delivered the message to Margery. Thompson again tells Karanja he will resolve the matter with the dog, but internally curses himself for his weakness, thinking that he has stooped low indeed if he must even "pacify" Karanja.

Once again, though Thompson appears powerful to Karanja, he is both privately weak and has been shamed by his own government as well as the international community. This again demonstrates the difference between the image that one presents and the reality of their character. Thompson's brutality as a camp overseer also forms the basis for a moral argument against British colonial practices, which so often resort to barbaric violence and cruelty.

CHAPTER 5

John Thompson returns home to Margery. Though he wants to tell her about the incident with the dog, he cannot; each time he attempts, he merely comments on the weather instead. He idles around the house, jealous and furious about whichever African man will succeed him in his position of authority. Thompson's anger gradually becomes redirected towards his wife and he privately wonders, if he were to die, how quickly she would find another man.

John is once again depicted as a weak figure against his wife's self-assurance. John's anger seems to be a mixture of guilt over his inability to act and anger at the fact that Britain's colonial efforts have failed. That he takes such anger out on his wife once again demonstrates the manner in which one's private guilt inevitably effects the people around them.

Margery reflects on the days before she and John came to Africa, when they are happy and still trust each other. She tries to support him when he is publicly crucified by the press over the deaths of the eleven prisoners, but they grow further and further apart, isolated by the difference of their experiences. Their distance leads her to have an affair with the disgusting drunk, Dr. Van Dyke. Though she is repulsed by him, she also feels empowered by the "anarchic joy" of the treachery. Nevertheless, enough love for her husband persists that she finds herself caught in a "nightmare of guilt and self-hatred." When Van Dyke is killed by a train, ending their affair, Margery feels no sadness or pity, only peace.

Despite Margery's earlier projection of self-assurance and power, it is revealed that she too is stricken with guilt and self-loathing, demonstrating the sour burden that personal guilt can be as well as the repeated dissonance between perception and reality. For Margery, John, and most major characters throughout the novel, the secrets they hold inside themselves form a personal burden and become a point of pain and weakness.

Thompson first sees Africa during World War Two, splitting his time between Madagascar and Kenya. Afterwards, back at Oxford, Thompson meets two African students who are well-versed in history and literature and thoroughly anglicized, the savagery and superstition that he believes is "characteristic of the African and Oriental races" replaced by reason and order. Their presence convinces Thompson that "the growth of the British Empire [is] the development of a great moral idea."

Through John Thompson, the author develops the moral argument in favor of colonialism, not because he agrees, but in recognition of the fact that many colonizers sincerely believe they are doing the right thing. By presenting ethical arguments both for and against colonialism, the author turns the conflict between the British colonizers and the Kenyan Freedom Fighters into a moral conflict, rather than just a civil one.

Thompson begins writing a manuscript entitled *Prospero in Africa*, a manifesto of British colonialism. Thompson's enthusiasm becomes a common bond between himself and Margery; she is enthralled by his vigor and brilliance. "His moral passion gave life a meaning." A few years later, the couple relocates to East Africa to participate in the great work of colonization. Throughout his years, John takes notes and adds them to his manuscript, slowly building his body of work. But now, in exile in Githima, on the eve of Uhuru and their banishment from Kenya altogether, everything seems meaningless. John wants to finally tell his wife about these feelings, but also fears to. When he enters their bedroom, she is already asleep, and he feels relief.

Significantly, John's sense of purpose strengthens his relationship with his wife, making them feel as if they are caught up together in a grander event. However, as his ideals about the world begin to fail, his sense of meaning and purpose collapses. John's loss of meaning foreshadows that which both Gikonyo and Karanja will experience when their lives turn out differently than expected. The title of John's book is a reference to Shakespeare's play The Tempest, in which Prospero essentially "colonizes" an island and enslaves its two inhabitants, Ariel and Caliban.

CHAPTER 6

Years before, Gikonyo is one of the first men released from the detention camps and allowed to return home. His time in prison seems to have taught him self-governance, and through shrewd-thinking and strict discipline, Gikonyo quickly rises from poverty to wealth. During the harvest, he buys more food than he needs and hoards it until everyone else in Thabai is running out, when he can sell his goods at marked-up prices, beginning his trade as a merchant. Though much struggle is involved, soon Gikonyo is selling produce to Nairobi as well, employing drivers and greasing palms to move his goods without hassle. He becomes an icon for mothers to idolize before their sons, a symbol of the wealth that hard work can bring.

In the eyes of his community, Gikonyo is a self-made man, wealthy and successful through his own hard work and shrewd thinking. Gikonyo's high standing in the eyes of his community despite his own internal weakness and burden of guilt mirrors Mugo's characterization. Mugo will similarly become a venerated figure of Thabai in spite of personal weakness and an overwhelming level of guilt over a past crime.

This particular afternoon, Gikonyo is to meet with an MP in Nairobi about buying a five-acre farm in collaboration with a few business partners to create a new agriculture cooperative. He takes a bus into Nairobi, wondering why no Africans run shops in the European-dominated city and hoping that someday, black businessmen such as himself will run the place. Gikonyo meets with the MP to ask for a loan and the MP tells him it is possible, but will take a few days. When Gikonyo asks if he should find the money some other way, the MP seems nearly alarmed and promises him that he will take care of it; he simply has to handle some politicians first.

Gikonyo's aspirations reflect the aspirations of the Movement and the hope that an independent Kenya will be run by native Kenyans. This is particularly poignant for cities like Nairobi whose construction was largely due to the knowledge and organization of British engineering. This complicates the fight for independence, then, as Kenya fights for its ability to self-govern while maintaining the technological progress brought about by colonialism.

All over the region, people are discussing Mugo as the leader of the Uhuru celebrations. His hard time in detention have given him a powerful physical stature and the firm lines of his face invite people to trust him. Even so, Mugo is troubled, wishing that any other person would be chosen for such praise and adulation rather than him. He does not go to work his land for fear of meeting any of last night's visitors, and instead decides to walk to Rung'ei, Thabai's marketplace.

Mugo's role as the unlikely, unwilling hero would be nearly comical if the circumstances and Kenya's fight for independence were not such a serious context for the story. By drawing on the comedic archetype of an unwitting hero, the author gives his story a slightly absurd tone, which contrasts with the horror of many of the events involved.

As he walks, Mugo recalls the only time he has ever given a speech, at a council he had attended to commemorate the martyrs of the detention camps. While others make great speeches about national pride and black suffrage, Mugo stands and states that for most, it was not virtue or national pride that drove them to survive, but merely the desire to come home. He stops midway through his speech, disgusted by his own show of courage—which he sees as falsehood—but the hearers are impressed, interpreting his silence and reticence as emotional depth and dignity, saying, "Those were words from no ordinary heart." As he walks to Rung'ei, Mugo toys with the idea of accepting the role as leader, even though he betrayed Kihika.

Although Mugo hides the truth of his crimes for much of the novel, his occasional honesty turns out to be his most redeeming virtue. That honesty is previewed here in his willingness to admit that his time in detention was not consumed with noble thoughts of national pride, but the simple, self-interested desire to go home. While it is slightly humorous that Mugo's reticence is misinterpreted as emotional depth, the point that Mugo has "no ordinary heart" is, in its own way, true, demonstrated by his occasional willingness to tell the truth bluntly and without fear of the personal cost.

When Mugo arrives at his hut, he finds Gikonyo waiting for him. He assumes that Gikonyo is waiting for an answer on behalf the Party, but Gikonyo tells him he is actually there to confess, and felt he needed to so before someone with a "great heart" such as Mugo. Unlike Mugo, Gikonyo says, he confessed **the oath** while in detention, hoping he would be sent home. Mugo understands this, since Gikonyo has a wife and mother—and admits that he himself had nothing to confess—but Gikonyo insists that he was a great coward while Mugo was strong and firm. Now that he is home with his mother and beautiful wife Mumbi, Mugo cannot understand why Gikonyo could be troubled. But Gikonyo tells him that Mumbi is not the same, saying, "God, I sold my soul, for what? Where is the Mumbi I left behind?"

Once again, even though Mugo does not believe he has a "great heart" as Gikonyo says he does, Mugo still possesses a stoicism (through his detachment) that allows Gikonyo to feel comfortable making his confession to Mugo and Mugo alone. Thus, Mugo is a complex hero. The people around him see him as noble, but he secretly believes himself to be wretched. Despite his own beliefs and his admittedly pitiable demeanor, Mugo still possesses qualities of (intermittent) honesty and an odd stoicism that truly benefits his community.

CHAPTER 7

The narrative looks back to the days when Gikonyo, Karanja, and Kihika were young men: Thabai is proud of its Rung'ei marketplace, swarming with Gikuyu women selling goods, Indian traders from Nairobi, and young people from all over meeting on the railway platform to watch the train go by. When **the iron snake** was first built, the Gikuyu supposedly fled for a week until their warriors reported that it was harmless and would not kill any who touched it, as was suspected. Now it has become a social center and people obsess over being at the platform to watch it pass by. After meeting at the train station, young men and women often go to dance and sing in the forest, mingling with others from different tribes. Looking back, Gikonyo recalls to Mugo, "I rarely missed the train, […] yet the day I missed the train was the happiest of my life."

This continues the development of the train as a symbol of technological progress and colonialism. The Gikuyu people's relationship to the train evolves as their understanding of the British colonizers develops. While at first they are fearful of such a new and powerful presence in their midst, the people gradually grow accustomed to both the British and the train. Before the Emergency and the true oppressive force of colonialism is felt, the train is a novelty and a subject of interest, even while revolutionary sentiment begins to form, suggesting that, although they may sense the latent power of the British to kill and destroy, the Gikuyu do not yet fully realize what that will mean for them and their way of life.

In those days, Gikonyo works as a carpenter to support himself and his mother Wangari. Gikonyo's father, a man with many wives, turned him and his mother away when he was only a child, leaving them to fend for themselves and probably die. However, Wangari was resourceful, raising Gikonyo until the age where he could make his own living and support her as well. Gikonyo hopes to buy land for his mother, but this requires more money than he has. This desire for wealth and land is especially strong whenever he sees Mumbi, though he cannot imagine that such a beautiful woman would ever pay much heed to a poor carpenter. Though he tries to tell her of his feelings, he never has the courage.

Wangari's rejection by her husband and resilience to survive and raise Gikonyo on her own demonstrates both the social disempowerment and even oppression that faces women in Gikuyu society, as well as their strength to overcome challenges and persevere. Wangari's strength, as well as the strength of nearly all the female characters, contrasts with her own son's future weakness and indecision. The women of the book all seem to possess a strength over and above their male counterparts.

Mumbi is raised by her mother Wanjiku and father Mbugua, along with her two brothers Kihika and Kariuki. Young men often come to visit Mumbi at their house, including Gikonyo and Karanja. Kariuki likes Gikonyo best because he always brings small gifts and tells funny stories, though he speaks less if Mumbi is around. Karanja often tells stories as well, with a manner of "telling stories and episodes so that even without saying so he emerged the hero."

Karanja's self-interest and subtle narcissism as an adult—exemplified by his choice to side with the British over his own countrymen, for the sake of power—is apparent even in his youth, though perhaps not so obvious to his young friends. Karanja, in his self-serving individualism, contrasts heavily with Kihika's self-sacrificing commitment to serve his people.

Gikonyo makes a meager living as a carpenter, but mostly because his customers are just as poor. Even so, Wangari is proud of him. Half-jokingly, she marvels at a British-made saw, since it is capable of cutting all manner of materials. One day, tired of his work, Gikonyo picks up his guitar and begins playing and singing until, startled, he notices that Mumbi has arrived and is listening to him. Although Gikonyo is embarrassed, she convinces him to play some more and sings along with him. After a time, Mumbi leaves Gikonyo with a farming tool that needs a new handle.

Gikonyo's poverty and simple lifestyle contrast sharply with the rich, technological lives of the British colonizers. Although colonialism is depicted as morally reprehensible throughout the novel, it is also recognized that it brought technological progress to Kenya. Thus, the choice for many Kenyans to support or reject the British is complicated, since not only are they considering their own freedom, but also the modernization of their country.

Gikonyo pours himself into working on the tool handle, putting all of his expertise and love for Mumbi into the work. After finishing it, he delivers it to Mumbi at her hut, who is thrilled. Although Gikonyo is nervous and intends to leave, Mumbi invites him to stay and they share a short, but sweet amount of time alone together before Kihika and Karanja arrive.

Gikonyo's own nervousness and insecurity contrasts against Mumbi's confidence as a woman. Like Mugo, it seems that such anxiety stems, at least in part, from Gikonyo's humble beginnings, which builds sympathy for him on the part of the reader.

With Kihika present, the conversation inevitably turns to "politics and the gathering storm in the land." Kihika is involved in politics from the time he is a young man, listening to Warui tell of how the blackman's land was stolen by the British. Before Kihika even sees a white person, he is already convinced of their evil. Kihika attends a school near Thabai sponsored by the Church of Scotland, where he learns about Christianity at the recommendation of Rev. Jackson Kigondu.

Directly contrasting against Mugo, who is an unwilling and unlikely hero, Kihika's future as a Freedom Fighter, leader, and even messianic figure to his people seems destined. Rather than being indecisive like most of the other male characters, Kihika is self-assured from his youth of both his responsibility to his community and the actions he will take.

Rev. Jackson is Mbugua's friend, a Gikuyu Christian preacher who likes to visit people in their homes and offer wisdom from the Bible. Jackson interweaves Gikuyu beliefs with Christian ideas about God, and is thus respected as a wise counselor by many village elders. However, years later, shortly after the Emergency, Jackson is "converted" to a more Western orthodox form of Christianity—the only type allowed to be publicly practiced by the British colonialists—which leads him to condemn his old practices, associations with sinners, and traditional beliefs. His testimony inspires some to convert, but before long he is assassinated by the Mau Mau as a traitor.

Rev. Jackson's transition, from preaching a version of Christianity that is generous towards others' beliefs and mixes with ancestral traditions to preaching an "orthodox" Christianity that rejects ancestral heritage, is illuminating. The first mode is seen by his fellow Kenyans as valuable, a source of wisdom and meaning so long as it does not reject Kenyan heritage. Orthodox Christianity, however, appears as a method to wipe away Kenyan ancestral traditions, beliefs, and identity, and replace it with white ideals. It is thus a tool of colonialism, needing to be destroyed.

Regardless, before all of this happens, Kihika buys a Bible and becomes obsessed with the story of Moses leading Israel out of Pharaoh's slavery. His time in the Christian school ends abruptly, however, when he corrects the missionary teacher by saying that the Bible does not condemn their ancestral practice of male and female circumcision. Rather than be beaten and forced to apologize and "recant" his words, young Kihika escapes through the window, becoming a hero to his fellow schoolboys. Kihika tells his father that he "would rather work on the land," but in the intervening years teaches himself to read and write both Swahili and English, eventually working in Nairobi where he learns of the Movement and finds his purpose in life.

Kihika's use of Christianity to provide meaning and structure to his revolutionary aspirations, and even to overthrow those people who brought Christianity to Kenya originally, again reflects the dynamic nature of the religion. As demonstrated by his defense of their traditional practice of circumcision, Kihika does not place the words of the Bible above his own culture, but next to them, allowing the two to interact. In this way, Kihika is able to preserve his own heritage and Kenyan identity, while utilizing Christianity as a source of meaning.

Back in Mumbi's hut, Mumbi, Kihika, Gikonyo, and Karanja are discussing revolution. Karanja believes it is hopeless; Kihika declares that Kenya might find its freedom, but only if it is willing to sacrifice, which he visualizes as throwing oneself in front of **the train**. When Mumbi remarks that she would not like to see her family run over by a train, Karanja says, only half-joking, that "women are cowards." Kihika continues saying that sacrifice is necessary, just like Christ says in the Gospel; Gandhi was only successful in India because he convinced his followers to put their country before their family.

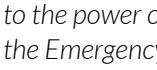
Once again, the train represents technological progress brought about through violence. Kihika recognizes that, like a train, Britain's colonial efforts seem nearly unstoppable unless Kenya is willing to show that it will fight and die for its freedom, even against insurmountable odds. The recognition of the train as a source of violence also suggests that the characters' relationship to British colonialism is beginning to shift.

As they are speaking, Njeri and Wambuku arrive—young women who are both in love with Kihika. As they do, everyone hears the rumble of **the train** in the distance and realizes they are late. The whole group goes running after it. To Gikonyo and Karanja, the race to the train seems to be a contest for Mumbi's love. Bitterly, Gikonyo realizes that Karanja will beat him, but that bitterness fades when he realizes that Mumbi has also been left behind, leaving them alone together. She does not care about who was fastest in reaching the train. Gikonyo and Mumbi talk for a time before wandering into the forest together, where they make love on the grass.

The race between Gikonyo and Karanja, in which Gikonyo loses the train but gains Mumbi and Karanja gains the train but loses Mumbi, foreshadows the entire relationship arc between the three characters. Self-serving, Karanja will commit himself to the technological colonizers but earn the eternal scorn of Mumbi in the process, whereas Gikonyo will stay with Mumbi and his people, but suffer far more than Karanja as a result of his resistance to the British colonizers.

At the train station, Karanja is disappointed, realizing that it is "dull" without Mumbi there. He realizes that Mumbi let him run ahead so she could be alone with Gikonyo and is furious at her. He tries not to imagine what Mumbi must be doing with Gikonyo, even fantasizing about violently humiliating her in public until she is on her knees, begging his forgiveness. This vision passes, but as **the train** whistles and pulls away, it is replaced with another vision of Gikuyu people running in fear of the train and the whole region being brought to silence by it. The power of the vision nearly topples him before a stranger steadies him. Karanja blames his dizziness on the heat and goes to find Kihika.

Karanja's disappointment and realization that the train platform is hollow without Mumbi again foreshadows his future, where he will find himself briefly powerful, but still distraught and unhappy without Mumbi's love or the support of his community. Karanja's violent fantasy about humiliating Mumbi, whom he claims to love, demonstrates his own utterly selfish and almost psychopathic persona. His vision of the Gikuyu people running in fear from the train before being silenced by it is an obvious and disturbing illusion to the power of the British empire, especially as will be felt during the Emergency.



Kihika is speaking with others about the need for each movement to have a central Christ-figure such as Gandhi was in India. However, explains Kihika, Christ failed in that his death did not propel his followers to fight their oppression. Kenya needs sacrifices that will incite change and revolution; thus any person who takes up **the "Oath of Unity**" is a Christ figure, whether that be Kihika or Karanja or anyone else willing to fight and die for Kenya.

The narrative is fairly unique in the way that its Christ-figure, which is a common archetype, literally recognizes himself as a Christ-figure. Even more so, Kihika is willing to share that role of Christ-figure with anyone else willing to sacrifice. In the same way that Kihika adapts biblical narratives to give meaning to his ideas, the author subverts traditional uses of biblical imagery in fiction to create something distinctive.

Njeri and Wambuku and other women arrive, and the men gathered break to go dance in the woods. Karanja plays the guitar, though his heart is not in the music, and Kihika and Wambuku dance together—with Njeri looking sadly on—before wandering off into a clearing. Even away in the forest, Kihika speaks about politics and oppression, which irritates Wambuku. Wambuku sees Kihika's idealism not as righteous but as a "demon pulling him away from her," like a rival lover. They speak and disagree about such things for a time, neither hearing the other, before promising to never part. Wambuku believes this means Kihika will abandon his demon; Kihika believes this means Wambuku will fight alongside him in the forest. Despite their mutual misunderstanding of each other, they are both exuberant.

Kihika and Wambuku's mutual happiness in spite of their fundamental misperception of each other foreshadows Thabai's praise and adulation of Mugo as a hero of the freedom movement, despite the fact that he betrays Kihika to save himself (as will be later revealed). This once again nods to the manner in which one's perceptions are often completely contradicted by reality. Even so, both Kihika and Wambuku are happy, and the entire village of Thabai benefits from having a hero to look up to, suggesting that in some cases, a misperception can still be beneficial.

Gikonyo recalls to Mugo that his moment in the forest with Mumbi was the most powerful experience of his life, staying with him through all of his years in detention. Gikonyo marries Mumbi not long after that day, but they are together only a short time before he is detained. But in that time, Mumbi's love makes Gikonyo feel as if all of life finally has a greater purpose. Though he is happy, Mumbi and Wangari note that his music and his words gradually become more like Kihika's, harboring a revolutionary spirit. The young people of Thabai no longer dance in the woods; people stop going to meet **the train**.

Gikonyo's union with Mumbi seems to make him more conscious of his duty to his community, suggesting that one becomes more aware of their responsibility to the people around them when they are responsible for caring for another—which would explain why both Karanja and Mugo remain self-centered in their isolation. Notably, as the spirit of resistance grows, the young people lose interest in the train, the symbol of white progress.

A few months after the Emergency has been declared, Mumbi stands in front of her new home waiting for Gikonyo and Wangari to come home from their day's work. Kariuki arrives instead, telling her she must come home. Kihika has gone to the forest to wage war on the whiteman. Wambuku is heartbroken, realizing that she has lost her love, but Njeri despises her for her feminine weakness. Njeri, though small, has always been strong, able to best most men physically. Staring into the forest, she swears a secret oath to join Kihika in the forest and fight by his side. Mumbi, knowing that Gikonyo will soon leave as well, is fearful but "hate[s] herself for this cowardice." Soon, Gikonyo is arrested in Thabai and taken to the detention camps, striding to meet his fate confidently and with great resolve, believing it will all be over soon and the whiteman defeated. In the village, the young women "pine for their lovers behind cold huts." **The train** platform is empty.

Njeri once again exemplifies women's power to fight and act just as well as any man. Though it is not specified by the narrative, it is implied that only men are arrested and taken to detention camps. Njeri's gender thus becomes an asset to her, allowing her to remain and fight alongside Kihika. In this way, Njeri follows in Wambui's footsteps, using her enemies' assumptions about women's weakness or inability to fight to wage war in ways that men cannot. As it becomes apparent that war and suffering are upon them, the people of Thabai lose all interest in the train. It is no longer a source of intrigue or curiosity, but a machine of oppression.

Six years later, Gikonyo walks from the detention camps back to his home, wearing rags, his body emaciated. In detention, when his "hope for early Independence" goes unmet, Gikonyo clings to memories of Mumbi and Wangari for strength. The prisoners are strong for the first few months, swearing never to confess **the oath** or reveal details about the Mau Mau fighters, but after learning that Jomo Kenyatta's appeal for freedom has been denied and he is still imprisoned, their spirits begin to break as they realize that the "day of deliverance had receded into a distant future." The narrator recalls that Harry Thuku, after his capture, was exiled on an island for seven years, returning to Africa broken and swearing "eternal cooperation with his oppressors." Gikonyo begins to fear his own death.

Although Gikonyo is strong for the first several months, the passage of time wears him down and reveals his true character as being weak. However, Gikonyo is not alone in this—even the legendary Harry Thuku was broken by his oppressors. In this way, the narrative extends sympathy towards Gikonyo much the same as Mugo does, suggesting that he blames himself for his confession far more than his village would. However, Gikonyo's conduct towards Mumbi after his release will reinforce his poor character.

The other prisoners maintain their commitment to never confess **the oath** and a man named Gatu becomes their "good spirit." Gatu tells his fellows inspirational stories about Abraham Lincoln "leading the black folk in America into a revolt" against the British, and about Napoleon's voice making British soldiers soil themselves in fear. No matter how often he is beaten, Gatu remains upbeat, even after solitary confinement. However, the camp's commander is determined to break Gatu. Only once does Gikonyo see weakness in Gatu, on a day when they are laboring in a quarry and Gatu tells Gikonyo that he loved a woman once, but now she has married another. Gikonyo feels hatred for the man, believing that Gatu is only able to be strong because he has no woman waiting for him. The next day, Gatu is murdered by soldiers, though the camp's commander tries to convince them that he hung himself in his cell.

Gatu's stories, which are obviously false but still provide hope, mirror both Kihika's use of the Bible and Thabai's idolization of Mugo. In each instance, the truth seems less important than the story and the hope and courage that a story can bring. This seems to reflect Kihika's own utilization of Christianity as a group of stories from which to draw meaning and power, without feeling the need to be faithful to the British missionaries' telling of them. It is also notable that Gikonyo seems to blame his wife for his own weakness and cowardice, believing that Gatu is only strong since he has no wife. This again reveals Gikonyo's own weakness of character and fear of taking responsibility for his actions.

Gatu's death breaks the collective spirit of the prisoners. In Gikonyo's mind, the world begins to lose its shape and everything becomes a "colorless mist." His appetite ceases and he stops eating for days. In a delirious vision which causes him to wonder if he has died, Gikonyo sees Mumbi enter his cell and hears her voice. The next morning, Gikonyo wakes, hungry and assured of what he will do. As he walks to the room to make his confession, the other prisoners watch him with "cold hostility."

It appears that Gikonyo is entirely dependent on other people to create any sort of meaning or substance in his life. As a newly-married man, his meaning and purpose came from Mumbi. In prison, he finds his meaning in Gatu's stories and enduring spirit. Left to himself, Gikonyo does not seem able to form any sort of purpose for himself.

As Gikonyo walks from the detention camp to his home, the echo of footsteps follows him, a hallucinated embodiment of his guilt. Even though he had confessed, he was not immediately released. He is not returning a hero, and he has no dignity left. He only hopes to resume his life with Mumbi.

Within the structure of biblical imagery, where Kihika is Christ and Mugo will be revealed to be Judas, Gikonyo is like Peter, renouncing his leader and his cause to save his own life, and then living in shame.

Mumbi and Wangari live in a different hut, and Gikonyo has to ask a child for directions to it. When he arrives, he finds Mumbi with a child on her back. She seems more surprised than happy to see him. Wangari emerges from the hut and embraces him, but Gikonyo is wary. Mumbi's child means she has been sleeping with other men, and his immediate desire is to kill both her and her bastard son. Once again, life seems to Gikonyo absolutely colorless, and he feels numb and detached. Wangari tells him the child is Karanja's son, but he hardly reacts.

Like both Mugo and Karanja, Gikonyo is beset by violent misogynistic fantasies, a characteristic which again seems to indicate their secretly weak characters. It is worth noting that each of their fantasies are eventually aimed against Mumbi, who, as the strongest primary character—aside from Kihika, who is already dead—puts her three male counterparts to shame.

Gikonyo goes to bed but does not sleep, and in the morning still feels nothing beyond a cold anger. As the child cries and Mumbi feeds it, Gikonyo imagines her making love to another man, imagining that she must have done so "every night for the last six years." "Gikonyo greedily sucked sour pleasure from this reflection which he saw as a terrible revelation. To live and die alone was the ultimate truth." Gikonyo leaves, wandering through Rung'ei, now mostly abandoned, and stands on a hill, looking down upon the village which had been forced to move to a new location by the British, now in disarray and disrepair.

Gikonyo once again shames himself and reveals his poor character in his assumption that Mumbi has been adulterous every night for the past six years. Despite the oppression that the village has endured and the prevalence of soldiers raping village women, not to mention that Gikonyo disappeared for six years, he automatically assumes the worst of his wife and takes it as a personal attack, rather than ever considering there may be extenuating circumstances.

Gikonyo remembers that since the Emergency is still in effect, he must report to the village Chief, so he goes to the new office. Bitterly, he realizes Karanja is the village Chief now, though Karanja acts as if he does not know him, reading off a new list of rules against revolution and stories of unity, proclaiming "the whiteman is here to stay." Gikonyo is struck by a sudden rage and tries to strangle Karanja, but Karanja points a pistol at him, reinforcing his new power. Gikonyo is furious but unable to do anything, betrayed by his friend who had once sworn the oath alongside him to fight the British Empire. Leaving Karanja, Gikonyo runs to Wangari and Mumbi's hut, determined to murder her. The door is locked, though Gikonyo beats it in. However, in doing so, he trips himself and strikes his skull against the hearth, leaving him lying on the floor, making strange gurgling noises and leaking foam from his mouth.

Gikonyo's confession in detention is a Faustian bargain—he sells his integrity (his soul) for what he hopes will be an early release. That he is still detained for several years and faced with humiliation and defeat on his return home seems just, a fitting punishment for his betrayal. However, unlike Mugo at the end of the story, Gikonyo is unable to recognize the consequences of his crime or bring himself to face them, again presenting him as a weak (though very human) character. This inability to reckon with the consequences of his actions seems to exacerbate his carried guilt.

CHAPTER 8

In Mugo's hut, Gikonyo finishes his confession to Mugo, saying he cannot well recall the next few days. Though he briefly believed in Mumbi's virtue, her child is a constant reminder of her treachery. Gikonyo cannot stand to make love to her ever again, and bereft of his love for his wife, throws himself entirely into his work and making money. As Gikonyo leaves, he is still disheartened. "Mugo's purity, Mumbi's unfaithfulness, everything had conspired against him to undermine his manhood, his faith in himself, and accentuate his shame at being the first to confess **the oath** in [his detention] camp."

Yet again, rather than realize that the ruin of his life has been much of his own making—even Mumbi's unfaithfulness should not need to be such a humiliation for him if he would only listen to her—Gikonyo sees the world as having "conspired" against him. Gikonyo's inability to accept the consequences of the life he has led chains him to his guilt, rather than allowing him to accept it and move on.

After Gikonyo leaves, Mugo goes to the door and calls for him to come back, but is only met with the stillness of the evening. He wishes had given some comfort to Gikonyo, but no words came out of his mouth. For a brief moment, Mugo considers what would have happened if he had confessed his own crime to Gikonyo, but banishes the thought. Stepping out into the night air to walk to a tea shop, Mugo reflects on the scriptures that Kihika had loved and often quoted. They stir in his mind a memory from 1955, two years after the Emergency was initially declared, before he was detained.

Mugo is still paralyzed by his guilt, and so cannot even offer comfort to someone else suffering from a similar burden. He is at least now entertaining the idea of confessing, however, and seems to recognize that this could bring him some kind of relief.

In the memory, Mugo works his piece of land, tending his crops. As he takes his noon rest, he fancies that he hears the voice of God calling him, as to Moses when he stood before the burning bush. Mugo answers, like Moses, "Here am I, Lord." Mugo regards this moment as the "climax of his life. For a week later DO Robson was shot dead, and Kihika came into his life."

Mugo, like Kihika, has messianic ideas about himself but lacks the willpower to follow through on them. Even so, his usage of Christian imagery to give purpose and significance to his life again demonstrates Christianity's capacity to create and distribute meaning. This is exemplified by the fact that Mugo sees this point as the "climax of his life" when all he is actually doing is sitting in the dirt.

Mugo arrives at the tea shop and is greeted by a drunken Githua, hobbling on his crutches, who salutes him as Chief. Githua tells him the story, everyone in the tea shop listening, of how he was once a driver with two good legs. When the Emergency was declared, according to Githua, he found General R. and became a Freedom Fighter until a bullet took his leg off. Mugo is repulsed by Githua's stump of a leg, yet "[feels] his sympathies now drawn to this man who was more worthy of praise than he." Githua implores Mugo to "remember the poor," so Mugo gives him some money and leaves.

Githua, like Mugo, will turn out to be a false hero, and it is notable that Mugo is here inspired by Githua's past heroism. However, Githua's use of his story to garner sympathy and beg for money cast a shameful light on his heroics, suggesting that the truth does not matter, the events do not matter, and even Uhuru does not particularly matter so long as Githua can find a little money to drink with.

As he walks home, Mugo resolves that he will accept the responsibility of speaking at the Uhuru celebrations, he will be a leader of his community, and he will bury "his past in their gratitude." Certainly, he imagines, God will forgive his transgressions so that he can do great deeds and save the people around him, just like he did for Jacob and Esau and Moses. That night, Mugo dreams of being in the detention camp, with all the prisoners and even John Thompson, toting his machine gun, crying out to Mugo for salvation. "How could he refuse, that agonized cry. Here I am, Lord. I am coming, coming, coming, riding in a cloud of thunder. And the men with one voice wept and cried: Amen."

Although Mugo is delusional and his messianic ideas are laughable, his motivations make sense: perhaps what his people need more than the truth is another heroic icon. But setting up the dilemma as such, the author invites introspection from the reader and actual consideration of whether guilt must always be confessed for an individual to find redemption. The novel asks: can one find redemption not through the truth, but through burying the past and serving other people?

CHAPTER 9

The narrator recalls Mugo's detention: He is taken first to a police station and then transferred to a camp where he is held for six months with many Freedom Fighters captured in the forest. Suddenly, they are all loaded onto **the train** and deposited at a much larger camp, where they wait in lines to be subdivided between the three sections of the camp. Mugo is placed in the third section for "hardcore" prisoners, those who've sworn to never cooperate with the British and often will not even work, before being chained and again transferred to a remote detention camp. John Thompson has recently been transferred to this same camp after earning a reputation as a skilled extractor of confessions. Rather than beating and torturing confessions from his prisoners, Thompson prefers to obtain them by softening his prisoners with promises and talk of home.

As demonstrated by Mugo's placement in the "hardcore" camp, even Mugo's captors make the same misjudgment as his fellow villagers—they mistake his solitude and reticence as depth and power, imagining that he must be the most stalwart Freedom Fighter and utterly unbreakable. John Thompson's approach to softly extracting confessions from his prisoners harkens back to the initial arrival of the British missionaries, who ingratiated themselves to Kenya through shows of kindness and humility before exploiting their goodwill.

Thompson questions Mugo, who tells him his name and home of Thabai—which Thompson twice served as District Officer of—but will not confess to taking any **oaths**, since he truly never took any. Mugo is "indifferent to his fate," assuming that he will die in any case. Since Mugo is the only prisoner who will answer questions at all, Thompson persists after Mugo for weeks, screaming at him, beating at him, and starving him. Mugo maintains his indifferent detachment, which seems to the other prisoners to be a mockery of Thompson, making him an unwitting symbol of their defiance. Thompson's inability to draw confessions makes him insane, prompting him to set his guards upon the inmates, beating them "day and night" and resulting in the eleven deaths that make him infamous across the world.

Yet again, Mugo, in his odd sense of detachment and willingness to passively accept whatever is given to him, becomes a hero in the eyes of his comrades and the archenemy in the eyes of John Thompson. Mugo is a unique character in this way, being not only the unlikely or unwitting hero, but an entirely passive one. This passivity infuriates Thompson and reveals his monstrously cruel potential. Since Thompson is depicted as the embodiment of colonialism, his ruthless cruelty suggests that colonialism itself is barbaric, and the moralistic dressing of it is a façade.

Mugo thinks of these events as he walks to Gikonyo's house the next morning to announce that he will lead the Uhuru celebrations and his "people across the desert to the new Jerusalem." However, rather than finding Gikonyo, Mugo meets Mumbi and her child, and she insists that Mugo stay and visit. They make idle small talk for a time, but as Mugo is rising to leave, Mumbi asks him if he ever has dreams of the future. Mugo gives a half-answer, but Mumbi continues, explaining that she dreamt of supporting Gikonyo when he rose to fight the British, if it came to that, but now she can no longer please him.

Mugo tries to double down on his silence, both wanting to avoid punishment and believing that he can do more good as a hero figure for his people, however undeserving he might actually be. Mumbi seems to have a strange hold over Mugo, and it makes him uncomfortable.

Mumbi also recalls Wambuku, Kihika's lover who, after hearing of his death, "destroyed herself with soldiers and homeguards, any man," until she was finally beaten to death by a certain homeguard she had once rejected. Mumbi remarks that in her eyes, Wambuku died for Kihika. Njeri died for Kihika too, fighting in the forest until she was killed by a bullet not long after Kihika's execution.

Mumbi's statement that Wambuku and Njeri both died for Kihika—sounding much like the language of sacrifice used by Christianity—is noteworthy, since the two women die in very different ways. Wambuku effectively gives up and goes mad, submitting herself to every British soldier and figure of colonial power until it kills her. Meanwhile, Njeri dies a fighter, resisting oppression until the end. Mumbi's viewing both deaths as nearly sacrificial again indicates that the story will subvert traditional expectations of sacrifice and redemption.

Mugo does not want to think of painful things, and again tries to leave until Mumbi calls him back again. She remarks that Mugo's presence makes her feel able to confide in him, and that Kihika once said he felt the same. Although Mugo wants to be left alone, he is drawn in by the presence of Mumbi and her "seductive power," her eyes, her voice. Mumbi tells him that she wants to speak about her relationship with Gikonyo. Mugo is briefly mad, wanting even to hurt her, wondering, "Why [does] she try to drag him into her life, into everybody's life?"

Mugo's attraction to Mumbi does not seem explicitly sexual, but rather the appeal of human connection, which is amplified by Mumbi's youth and beauty. For one so isolated as Mugo, being sought out by not only a notable member of the community but one who is youthful, beautiful, and kind, offers a point of human contact and engagement with the people around him that he has been missing for most of his life. Even so, Mugo still wishes she would not cast her problems and pain on him, indicating that his anxieties and wish to be alone run deep.

However, Mumbi catches Mugo off guard when she begins telling him about how she and Wangari rebuilt their huts after the British forced the villagers to burn their old homes and move to a new location as retribution for Kihika's capture of a police station. Although Mumbi is initially disheartened, especially since there is no man in the house to help them, she and Wangari set to work and build new huts—with occasional visits and help from Karanja—often sleeping in the partially finished shelters as they work. "Overnight, children grew into men, women put on trousers." Karanja's visits become more frequent, though Mumbi does not yet realize this nor know what he has become.

Mumbi and Wangari's resilience and adaptability once again exemplifies the strength and power of women depicted in the novel. The fact that Mumbi misses having a man in the house indicates that the author is not seeking to eradicate all notions of gender roles entirely, but rather suggesting that women are fully capable as men, especially in times of great need or duress. This sits in contrast to the disempowered social role women are given in both Gikuyu and British society.

When Kihika is killed, Mumbi's family is crushed—even Mbugua, a legendary warrior, "urinated on his legs." Not long after come the events of the trench, which Mumbi notes Mugo saw the beginnings of, since he was arrested and detained for attempting to save Wambuku from being beaten to death. Around this time, Mumbi also learns that Karanja has joined the homeguard, which she sees as a great betrayal of her brother and her husband. But she cannot think of this for long before the work of digging the soldiers' trench consumes everyone's life. The people of Thabai are all put to slave labor. The new District Officer lets his soldiers pick women to rape in their tents each night, though Mumbi is spared such a fate. Wambuku is beaten to death, her body thrown in a nearby shallow grave. The villagers think the end of the world has arrived. Those who cannot dig are forced to watch their loved ones dig each day. "Thabai was a warning to other villages never to give food or any help to those fighting in the Forest."

Despite the moralism in which John Thompson robes his ideas of colonialism and the British Empire, the violence, rape, and slavery imposed by the colonizers shatters any notions of the righteousness of colonial power. Although the Freedom Fighters resort to violence—and the brutal home invasion and murder of Dr. Lynd's dog is legitimately unsettling—no act of violence that they commit comes even close to the atrocities performed by the British and the homeguard. In the moral conflict between the colonizers and the colonized, the balance is completely upended in favor of the colonized, casting their fight for liberation as a righteous crusade to rid themselves of tyrants.

Thabai runs out of food and people begin starving to death. On the night when Mumbi can stand her hunger no longer, Karanja arrives outside her hut with bread, the first time Mumbi has seen him since learning of his betrayal. She refuses the bread, though feels guilty of it when she sees how emaciated Wangari is. Karanja arrives another night with bread and flour, telling Mumbi that she will die if she does not take it. Mumbi receives the food, but calls Karanja "Judas." He justifies his decision, saying, "Every man in the world is alone, and fights alone, to live." Nevertheless, Mumbi is ashamed to have received the food, feeling the same as the women who prostitute themselves to the soldiers in exchange for just enough food to survive.

Karanja, like Mugo, represents the desire to live one's own life and look out only for oneself, rather than recognize their responsibility to their community. However, Karanja takes such a desire in a notably darker direction, desiring to gather power and privilege, rather than Mugo's hope to simply not be bothered. In his selfishness, Karanja is thus the vilest character in the story. Where even John Thompson is following an ideal, Karanja's entire existence is shaped around elevating himself at the expense of his friends, family, and community.

After the trench is dug, Mumbi and the other villagers are put to more labor, though those who work for the whiteman are excluded from the forced labor. This goes on for years. Mumbi, like all the other wives, thinks only of her husband. Although everyone believes the men of Thabai will not return, they secretly hope that they are wrong. After the infamously cruel regional Chief established by the homeguard is assassinated, Karanja becomes the new Chief and proves himself more ruthless than his predecessor, leading soldiers into the forest to kill Freedom Fighters.

Again, Karanja's treachery sets him apart from anyone else's in the story. Where Mugo, Gikonyo, and Mumbi (as will be revealed) all commit their acts of betrayal in a moment of crisis, Karanja's treachery is ongoing and sustained. In the tension between one's duty to themselves and their duty to their community, Karanja represents the worst potential of idolizing oneself at the expense of others.

One day, Karanja sees Mumbi on the road and calls after her, his bodyguards threatening to beat her if she doesn't comply, though Karanja tells them to stand down. Karanja tells Mumbi that he loves her and has saved himself for her through all the years. Mumbi, however, utterly despises Karanja, insinuating that he has lost his manhood and grovels before his "white husbands." Karanja again tries to justify his treachery, saying, "The coward lived to see his mother while the brave was left dead on the battlefield. And to ward off a blow is not cowardice."

Karanja seems nearly delusional in his hope that Mumbi might love him even though he has betrayed Thabai and Kihika and joined the British colonial power. Again, Mumbi acts as a much more forceful character than most of her male counterparts.

More years pass, and Karanja grows more arrogant and Mumbi more disheartened, convinced that her husband is dead. One day, Karanja orders Mumbi to come to his house, where he announces that Gikonyo is coming home. She is so shocked that when Karanja starts to have sex with her, she does not reciprocate but neither does she resist, until she realizes what has happened after the fact and is left utterly heartbroken and horrified with herself. As Mumbi tells this, Mugo envisions himself at the bottom of a pool of water, looking up at the world passing by on the bank while he struggles alone in the darkness.

Mumbi's lack of resistance to Karanja, even though she has just learned that Gikonyo is alive, is an unusual display of passivity—especially since throughout the story, she is one of the strongest and most assertive characters. Her passive acceptance of Karanja's assault indicates the level of shock, exhaustion, and physical weakness that the years of hardship have wrought on her.

After Mumbi has finished her story, Mugo is left feeling weak, unsure of what he is supposed to do with such heavy information. Suddenly, however, General R. and Koina arrive. General R. announces that Githua's story about being a driver and a Freedom Fighter is entirely false, only something Githua made up to give his life meaning, though he recognizes that every person does that, in their own way. However, Mugo feels terribly "let down by Githua." More importantly, though, General R. and Koina are convinced that it was Karanja who betrayed Kihika, confirmed by Koina's observation of Karanja during a recent mission to Githima. They have laid a trap, with the help of Mwaura, to lure Karanja to the Uhuru celebrations where they will expose him and bring him to justice. At that moment, Mugo suddenly declares that he cannot lead the celebration or the Party. He rushes out of Mumbi's hut.

General R.'s recognition that each person, in their own way, invents meaning for their life is one of the most poignant lines in the story, relating directly to most major characters—Mugo has messianic fantasies that tell him his life is significant; Karanja devises a philosophy in which protecting oneself is the highest good, justifying his treachery; even Kihika uses the Bible to develop and invent meaning for himself as a way to structure and justify the sacrifices he must compel himself to make. General R's suggestion that inventing meaning is a universal practice implies that although this often leads to bad outcomes—Mugo and Karanja—the impulse itself is not evil, only human.

CHAPTER 10

General R. and Lt. Koina decide to lure Karanja after Mwaura reports his strange behavior to Koina. As they are scheming, Karanja himself is obsessed with determining whether or not John Thompson is truly leaving Africa, knowing that his own position of power is entirely dependent on the whiteman. Karanja's nerves are so frayed that he cannot focus on his work writing labels. He wanders the grounds, vainly hoping to catch sight of Thompson, "heavy with a sense of imminent betrayal." The feeling makes him recall the day when he was forced to resign as the Chief of Thabai, shortly after the Emergency was declared over. Karanja wrongfully had a man arrested and beaten, as he often did, but now that the Party was accruing power for itself, Karanja was dragged out before the public, made to make a public apology, and released from his post with only a letter of recommendation, which is how he came to be writing book labels in Githima.

Karanja's demotion and punishment—for actions he formerly faced no consequences for—reveals how flimsy the power he has accrued for himself truly is. Although Karanja presents the image of power and sometimes feels it himself, it is ultimately a façade. It is notable that white power, which Karanja has bound himself to, cannot exist unless supported by oppressive military might or technological force. As soon as black power and the people's ability to unify becomes formidable, even the British colonial administration is stripped of its power to dominate and rule through fear.

As Karanja is reflecting, Mwaura approaches him conspiratorially, first carefully massaging Karanja's ego by pointing out his close position to the white people before enticing him to attend the Uhuru celebrations with him, promising that there will be women all about. Karanja tells Mwaura he will go with him, privately hoping to see Mumbi again. Karanja spies Thompson and with a panicked voice asks if he and his wife are truly leaving. Thompson answers that they are and brushes Karanja off, humiliating him in front of Mwaura.

Karanja's thin character is further revealed by how easily Mwaura is able to manipulate him, playing into his own conception of himself through flattery and associating him with white people. This is utterly contradicted by how little Thompson seems to care for or notice Karanja; had Karanja not finally confronted him, it seems that Thompson would not have said anything at all and simply disappeared.

CHAPTER 11

At a farewell party for John and Margery Thompson, their fellow British workers are reflecting on how fond they are of John due to his dedication and persistence in his work, even though his own government had mistreated him. Dr. Lynd confides to John that she has seen her vengeful houseboy again, but John does not care at all about Dr. Lynd or her worries. After many of the guests have gotten drunk, John and Margery drive aimlessly until she realizes they have stopped at the exact spot where she started her affair with Dr. Van Dyke. She expects an accusation, but finds none, only John reflecting that Africa will never survive without Europe.

The affection felt towards John by his associates despite his role in the murders of eleven detainees—and the feeling that John was mistreated by his government—underscores what little regard for African lives the colonizers have. They seem more bothered by the fact that John was humiliated than the fact that eleven men died, demonstrating the degree to which colonialism dehumanizes its subjects and regards them as expendable or worthless.

CHAPTER 12

Gikonyo comes home in a foul mood. Mumbi notes that he has changed recently; where once he was merely distant, now he is hostile. When Gikonyo pushes Mumbi's son to the ground, a fight erupts between them. Gikonyo calls Mumbi a "whore" and hits her hard in the face, twice. Wangari arrives and stands between them, furious at her son, and castigates him until he leaves in a fury. However, Gikonyo's anger is not truly towards Mumbi; she only happened to be the closest and easiest person to take it out on. The MP whom he had met with to receive a loan and buy land had swindled him, stealing the land out from underneath him and purchasing it for himself.

Once again, in contrast to Mumbi's decency and the compassion she shows to Mugo (now and in the future), Gikonyo's own rage appears childish. This underscores not only the weakness of the story's male characters compared to the female characters, but also their general lack of decency. Gikonyo does not even possess the wherewithal to handle his own anger and actions.

To distract himself, Gikonyo goes to speak with Warui about the Uhuru celebrations. To Gikonyo, Warui seems happy and contented, even though he is a widower, and Gikonyo wonders if this is because he has lived a full and purposeful life. Privately, though, Warui is plagued by his own pains, most notably that his two sons have both sided with the British because of their power and wealth. In spite of this, Warui puts his hope in "the spirit of the black people" and believes that figures such as Harry Thuku or Jomo Kenyatta are imbued with "mystical power," and that Mugo must be such a man as well. However, Gikonyo then announces Mugo's refusal to lead, so they both elect to go meet with him once again.

Warui's belief in "the spirit of the black people" and the mystical power of their great leaders again demonstrates the dynamic role of religion and spirituality in Gikuyu society. Although Christianity seems to have a fairly wide reach within Thabai, Warui mixes such ideas with his own ancestral beliefs and feelings about the Movement. This dynamic approach sharply contrasts with the spiritual practice of the missionaries or Rev. Jackson before his death, which is far more rigid in its orthodoxy.

Mugo has just fled his meeting with General R., Mumbi and Koina, gripped by an "irrational terror." Somehow, Mumbi's story hx broken through his cold, dispassionate shell and made him start to feel things again. As he walks through the village, rather than seeing mere objects that don't concern him, each hut and person seems meaningful. What happened to Wambuku feels meaningful and tragic. Mugo revisits the part of the trench where he once worked, remembering how, as others cowered while Wambuku was being beaten to death, he found himself oddly compelled to reach out and stop the hand striking her. He was quickly arrested and accused of taking **the oath**, and sent to various detention camps soon after. All these feelings and reflections unnerve Mugo and he decides to return to his hut, to the safety of the "limbo" he formerly lived in.

This marks an important transition in Mugo's character arc, from disconnected, isolated individual to one who relates to and engages with his community and all that has happened to it. Despite Mugo's emphasis on detachment, the fact that he intervened to try to save Wambuku, though knowing it would certainly bring punishment on his own head, indicates that some part of him already believed in his responsibility to the people around him. Although Mugo never feels like a hero—outside of his occasional messianic fantasies—he does commit heroic acts, in his own way.

As he walks, Mugo meets Warui in the street, who has just left a small gathering of people around the old woman's hut. Mugo secretly dislikes Warui, though he cannot understand why. Warui tells him that the old woman has twice seen her son, Gitogo, back from the dead and entering her hut, so now she keeps her door always open so he may return. Although it sounds absurd, Warui claims he once saw a man come back from the dead himself when he was young. Mugo is disturbed by the thought of meeting the dead again and walks on. Though he tries to drive such thoughts and his guilt over Kihika from his mind, it keeps returning. Mugo wonders why, when Christ was crucified—like Kihika was "crucified"—everyone blamed Judas, who was only "a stone from the hands of a power more than man." In his hut, Mugo has a brief vision of blood dripping down the walls, and he wonders if he is going insane.

Mugo explicitly recognizes himself as Judas in relation to Kihika's Christ-figure. Mugo's pondering of why Judas should be to blame indicates that once again, the novel will take a unique approach to the traditional structure of Christ narratives, with particular interest in redeeming Judas Iscariot. Warui's claim of seeing a resurrection as youth also seems to play into this imagery, though this is not explored further. However, Mugo's fear at even the thought of Kihika's resurrection suggests an interesting question: had Judas lived to see Christ's resurrection, would he be relieved or terrified?

In the evening, Mugo tells Gikonyo and Warui that his mind is "not well" and he cannot speak. The two tell him to reconsider and then leave him in peace. Warui tells Wambui about Mugo's refusal, and together they spread the word through the village. "The man who had suffered so much had further revealed his greatness in modesty. By refusing to lead, Mugo had become a legendary hero."

It is once again ironic and even comical that Mugo's reticence is misinterpreted as depth and makes him yet more of a legend. Once again, this event underscores the difference between a group's perception of a person and the reality of that person's character.

At the same time, Gikonyo walks home, his rage at the world beginning to return, intending to beat Mumbi to vent his anger. When he arrives, Mumbi is gone, but Wangari is waiting for him. She tells him that Mumbi has gone back to her parents' house and that Gikonyo is a "foolish child" who never bothered to discover what truly happened to Mumbi, and will never "what woman Mumbi really is."

Gikonyo is blinded by his assumptions about Mumbi and women in general, thus unable to see the true potential that Mumbi has and the quality of her character. Gikonyo's ignorance, assumptions, and low view of his wife—when she is the morally superior character—exemplifies the inequality between men and women in Gikuyu society.

CHAPTER 13

On the day of Uhuru, as people are awaiting nightfall and the beginning of the celebration that will formally mark Kenya's independence, Mugo is spotted walking to the market in the rain. This is an odd behavior, conjuring images of Jomo Kenyatta returning from his exile during a rainstorm. To the people of Thabai, it merely confirms that "Mugo, our hero, [is] no ordinary man." In Wambui's eyes, Mugo is "Kihika born again" and thus vital for their Uhuru celebrations. Since Wambui "believe[s] in the power of women to influence events, especially where men [have] failed to act," she and the other women of the village decide that Mumbi must go to convince Mugo to attend Uhuru.

In the same way that Kihika morphs and subverts biblical stories, the author also plays with the typical roles of a Christ narrative. In this case, though Mugo is primarily a Judas-figure, he also occupies the role of a second Christ in the eyes of the village. The perception of Mugo as a Christ-figure even though he betrayed Christ-like Kihika will greatly affect the manner in which the village receives his confession of betrayal, and indeed solidify his own death as a redemptive, Christ-like, act.

Mumbi suffers when she returns to her parents—Mbugua is angry at her for abandoning her husband over a mere beating, though Wanjiku is privately sympathetic. She is also burdened by the knowledge that General R. will execute Karanja once he is exposed as Kihika's betrayer. Although she hates Karanja, Mumbi also hates the thought of more death and violence attached to her brother. She decides to send word to Karanja in Githima, warning him not to attend the Uhuru ceremony.

Mumbi's goodness is again exemplified by her wish to avoid bloodshed, even though Karanja's death seems both justified and vindicating. Such compassion is a marked contrast to Mugo, Karanja, and Gikonyo, all of whom harbor violent fantasies, and underscores Mumbi's strength and moral fortitude in the face of the male characters' weakness.

Mumbi receives Wambui's request that she speak with Mugo, and she goes to his hut, emboldened by the responsibility. She finds Mugo there, his voice oddly shaky, and she briefly remarks that she hoped Mugo would explain her story to Gikonyo, though it is too late for that to be reconciled now. She presses him to speak at the Uhuru celebrations this night. Mugo is reticent, but Mumbi realizes that she has a strange power over him, though he still will not speak. At first it seems to Mumbi that this is merely because of all of the horrible things he saw in detention, the torture and dehumanization, but Mugo finally admits that he is the one who murdered Kihika. Briefly falling into a wicked hysteria—seemingly the release of years of pent-up paranoia and fear—he attempts to strangle Mumbi as well. Mumbi resists, but then relents, realizing Mugo is not himself.

Mumbi's persistence in connecting with Mugo, both trusting him enough to confide in him as well as trying to understand his reticence to speak, is critical to Mugo's reconnection with the world around him. Mumbi's trust is particularly evident in the fact that she stops fighting him when he tries to strangle her, understanding that he is not a murderous person, merely overwhelmed by massive pain. Mumbi again proves herself to be not only compassionate, but particularly strong in her ability to leave herself at Mugo's mercy so that he can remember who he is, rather than lash out at him as most would do.

The narration moves to 1954, when DO Thomas Robson, known as Tom the Terror, oppresses Thabai and the surrounding region with a psychopathic fury. It is Tom who names the Freedom Fighters the Mau Mau and begins hunting them relentlessly. To the Gikuyu, he becomes a nightmare, seemingly everywhere and nowhere at once, always hunting, always stalking. In May 1955, as Tom is driving his jeep, a bent-over man is hobbling across the road. Tom calls him over to his jeep. The man approaches, visibly terrified, but when he is near, stands straight, pulls a pistol from his pocket, and shoots DO Robson twice in the chest.

Although Kihika is explicitly named a Christ-figure, he again diverges both from the biblical narrative and typical depictions of Christ-figures in his violent actions. Kihika is not a peaceful Christ, but a warring Christ, achieving liberation and salvation through bloodshed and personal sacrifice. This too exemplifies the dynamic approach to Christianity taken throughout the novel.

Soldiers pour into Thabai and news spreads that DO Robson has been murdered. Mugo, only twenty-five years old, returns home from working his strip of land to rest, but as he is trying to sleep the sound of soldiers, screams, and whistles fill the village. Someone knocks quietly but insistently at the door and Mugo lets them in, expecting them to be homeguards. Instead, Kihika enters, shutting the door behind him. Mugo asks if Kihika means to kill him. Outside, soldiers are blowing whistles, searching huts, shouting madly. Kihika is visibly scared, and Mugo is terrified that he himself will be caught and labeled a Mau Mau terrorist. He blows out the oil lamp, and in the darkness Kihika explains that the Freedom Fighters do not kill without reason, but only certain targets to strike terror in the hearts of the whiteman and bring unity to the hearts of the blackman. Mugo, however, thinks he is a madman.

Mugo's fear that Kihika will kill him reveals a general fear of society and the violent Freedom Fighters, since at this point, Mugo has not committed any treachery at all. This is a unique perspective into Mugo's psyche before he betrayed Kihika, and the existence of the same paranoia and fear indicates that his aunt's abuse left him with crippling levels of anxiety and insecurity. In this light, Mugo seems even more a tragic figure and his betrayal an act of fear rather than an act of malice. Kihika's admission that Freedom Fighters' attacks are meant to instill terror seemingly earns them the label of "terrorist" often pointed at them, though their violence does serve a noble cause.

Kihika says that he has seen Mugo's independence and self-sufficiency and believes he would be the best man to organize an underground movement in Thabai to support the Freedom Fighters. This alarms Mugo, but he does not have the strength to protest beyond saying that he has never taken **the oath**. Kihika responds that the oath itself is meaningless, merely a symbol to bind weak men to secrecy, like "water sprinkled on a man's head at baptism." Kihika can read men's faces, and strong men such as Mugo have no need for an oath. Mugo considers running out the door and alerting the soldiers, until he remembers that Kihika has just killed a man and could certainly do it again. Unaware of these thoughts, Kihika arranges a time and place for them to meet in the forest in one week. They hear shouting and gunshots in the distance, and Kihika slips out and disappears into the night, a nervous "man on the run."

Mugo's passivity contributes to his unwilling heroism, especially considering the extreme flow of events surrounding his village. Mugo is drawn into Kihika's struggle and becomes an icon of the fight for freedom simply because he is too weak to say no to Kihika. Kihika, like the rest of the village, misinterprets Mugo's isolation and reticence as stoicism. This demonstrates not only the difference between perception and reality, but also the way that it is nearly impossible for individuals such as Mugo to live alone, independent, and unaffected by the struggles of the community, particularly in times of great struggle such as this.

Mugo sits alone by himself, unsure of what to do. His future seems obliterated, as Kihika has unjustly forced his own struggles upon Mugo's life. Mugo bitterly reflects, "He is not satisfied with butchering men and women and children. He must call on me to bathe in the blood." Mugo spends the next several days in fear, wandering between his hut and his land, convinced first that he will be arrested and then later that Kihika will come to murder him. More than anything, Mugo repeats to himself, "Why did [Kihika] do this to me?"

Mugo's aversion to Kihika's violence is the only time in the story that such violence is condemned by anyone. That the only condemnation of Kihika's violence comes from Mugo, perhaps the least well-balanced individual in the story, suggests that the author takes a favorable view of the Freedom Fighters' actions.

This anguish and Mugo's wandering ends the moment he sees a wanted poster with Kihika's face above a hefty monetary sum. Mugo is struck with a strange pleasure. His mind wanders to the righteousness of Abraham sacrificing Isaac, yet Isaac was spared from death. In Mugo's mind, one thought rings clearly: "I am important. I must not die. To keep myself alive, healthy, strong—to wait for my mission in life is a duty to myself, to men and women of tomorrow." These righteous notions mix with fantasies about money and the power and women that will bring him, cementing his place in society and proving to the world that he is someone important.

Mugo's justification of his betrayal demonstrates the darkest potential of using Christian stories to give meaning to other events. Where Kihika uses biblical imagery to motivate and fight for his people, Mugo uses it to rationalize his cowardice and self-interest—much like the British missionaries do—demonstrating that despite religion's potential to benefit movements and create meaning, it has the same potential to fuel or justify evil behavior.

Mugo goes to the DO's office and requests a private audience. The homeguards viciously harass him until John Thompson arrives, earning Mugo's gratitude by saving him from the bullies. Mugo is nervous, but announces to Thompson that he knows where Kihika will be that very night. Momentarily, the act of betrayal thrills Mugo and he sees it as "a great act of moral courage." This evaporates, however, when Thompson grabs him by the chin, spits in his face, and knocks Mugo to the floor, claiming that many have already given them false information. Mugo will be kept a prisoner until Thompson determines that his information is correct; if it is not, he will hang Mugo. Within that instant, Mugo is overcome with regret. "He did not want the money. He did not want to know what he had done."

After Judas betrays Christ in the bible, he is so overwhelmed with regret that he returns the blood money and hangs himself. Mugo's own remorse directly parallels Judas's. Mugo instantly regrets his actions and realizes that all the money in the world would not make up for them. This parallel strengthens Mugo's characterization as a Judas-figure. Notably, Mugo will also soon be strongly characterized as a Christ-figure as well, making him a uniquely dual character, and thematically offering redemption to Judas Iscariot.

CHAPTER 14

On the night of December 12, 1963, Kenya reclaims its independence. In the village, the people dance in the streets and sing songs that are hybrids of Christmas hymns and traditional initiation rites. The villagers swarm Mugo's hut for over an hour, singing songs about he and Kihika's heroism together, but he never emerges. Even so, the celebration continues into the night, through a heavy downpour, and everywhere there is a sense of waiting, as if something magnificent but unknown is about to occur.

Once again, the novel's mixture of Christian practices with traditional rites demonstrates that the Gikuyu, in spite of British efforts, have managed to preserve their own cultural identity and ancestral beliefs even while adopting aspects of Christianity. This refusal to lose their own culture and beliefs to Christian orthodoxy represents a victory against colonialism.

The next morning, on the day of the ceremony, people from Thabai, Rung'ei, and even some from Githima gather in a wide open field. The celebrations start with children's races and a 3-mile community race, open to anyone. Mwaura convinces Karanja—who is hoping to impress Mumbi—to run against him, and Gikonyo has elected to run with Warui. The racers set off, many such as Warui dropping out quickly as they tire. Mumbi sees Gikonyo and Karanja once again racing each other and is embarrassed, wishing she had not come at all. She wonders why Karanja did not heed the warning she sent.

The community race is an explicit parallel to Gikonyo and Karanja's prior race to the train, in which Karanja won the race but lost Mumbi, and Gikonyo vice versa. The race itself, and particularly Gikonyo and Karanja's competition between each other, lends the entire Uhuru ceremony a rather childish air, indicating that in some ways, Thabai is not ready or mature enough to handle what they will soon learn.

The night before, Mumbi discovered that Mugo is Kihika's real betrayer. However, she had seen such pain in his eyes then that she cannot bring herself to tell anyone else what she has discovered. As soon as she had ceased fighting Mugo, he collapsed in his own misery and Mumbi knew for sure that it was he who betrayed her brother. Now she is faced with a decision: Let Karanja take the blame or expose Mugo. Mumbi does not want any more bloodshed, so both options seem wrong to her. She finds herself wishing she could ask Gikonyo for his help in the matter.

Once again, Mumbi's compassion makes her unique among the other characters, especially the men. Although Mugo has robbed her of her brother and briefly attacks her, Mumbi is still overwhelmed by compassion for him. This is a marked contrast to Karanja or Gikonyo, or even Mugo, who react with violence or fantasies of violence whenever they are wronged. This again reinforces the differing strengths of character between the men and women depicted in the book (and also what kinds of strength their society encourages in their respective genders).

Gikonyo runs his race and tries to think about Uhuru, what it will mean for African businessmen and leaders. He thinks of his long-lost father and wonders if he is still alive. He thinks about Mumbi and the contemptible power she has had over his life. Bitterly, Gikonyo realizes that he and Karanja once again race as rivals, though this time it seems there is no prize beyond the vindication of his own hatred. Half-way through the race, Mwaura leads, with Karanja two places ahead of Gikonyo.

The race functions as more than a race, but a point of reflection for several major characters to consider what the last decades of struggle for independence have cost each person individually. For Gikonyo, his time in detention—which he initially accepted proudly—has cost him his dignity, his relationship with Mumbi, and his own integrity, making independence seem to him a bitter bargain.

While he runs, Karanja thinks about the day that he beat Gikonyo to the train platform and realized his rival had fooled him, taking his chance to be alone with Mumbi. He reflects upon the fact that he sold his soul to white power to remain close to Mumbi, rather than be taken to detention, and all the power that gave him as well. He remembers Mumbi's constant rejection of him and the day he took advantage of her, the shame and humiliation he felt after the act. Yet her note of warning gives him a glimmer of hope that maybe she would still have him, someday.

Essentially, Karanja traded his integrity for the chance to be with Mumbi, not realizing that such a lack of integrity would push her away from him forever. In Karanja's dismal outcome, the story offers a warning against abandoning one's community and betraying one's integrity for the sake of a personal, individual gain, since what is lost will almost certainly be more than what is gained.

As the race enters its final third, Mumbi cheers General R. and Koina, anxiously watching Gikonyo and hoping both that he will win and he will lose. General R. runs and remembers his childhood and his father who savagely beat his mother, often sending her fleeing in fear. On the day he was circumcised, General R. had faced his father, fighting for his mother's life, but he underestimated "a slave's treachery" and his mother cast him out of her house for facing his father. Later, when General R. saw Kenyans "proudly defend their slavery" to the British, he understood his mother's prison.

The parallel between an abusive marital relationship and colonialism is interesting. It depicts the colonizers as abusers in no uncertain terms, reflecting the author's own opinion of the British Empire in spite of their moralistic claims. The parallel also suggests that for many, siding with the oppressor is less a choice of free will and more one of fear—the abused party is afraid to step out on their own, out of the shadow of power, which can even be comforting in an unhealthy way.

The race continues and Koina thinks of his own past. After being fired from several jobs for demanding better treatment, Koina worked for Dr. Lynd as her houseboy. She treated him well enough and he got along well with her dog, but one day Koina realized that the dog was given enough steaks to feed a family, pampered with the equivalent of ten Kenyan's wages, and lived in a better home than Koina and his family. When he joined the Freedom Fighters, Koina was determined to "enter the forest in triumph over Dr. Lynd." So he gathered some men, robbed Dr. Lynd of her guns, and butchered her dog. He had forgotten all this until he saw Dr. Lynd two days past in Githima with even more property and another dog. To Koina, this casts a shadow over Uhuru and causes him to wonder if anything will truly change.

Koina's account of Dr. Lynd's trauma—the most unnerving depiction of violence in the name of Uhuru—casts the event in a different light. To Koina, the killing of her dog was not about sadism or savagery, as Dr. Lynd believed, but about correcting the gross injustice of watching a dog be pampered while Kenyans live in poverty. This highlights not only the unreliability of a single person's perception of an event, but also the blindness that the colonizers have to the pain their presence causes, demonstrated by the fact that Dr. Lynd never once suspected that her lavish treatment of her dog seemed unjust.

Gikonyo and Karanja pull to the lead in the final stretch of the race, but Gikonyo trips on a tuft of grass and brings down Karanja as well. Mumbi runs over and holds Gikonyo's head in her hands to see if he has hurt himself, but leaves as soon as she realizes he is okay, ashamed of their "estrangement." Karanja begins to pick himself up, but as soon as he sees Gikonyo's head in Mumbi's hands, he faints. The crowd disperses, Gikonyo is taken to the hospital—where he discovers his arm is broken—and the morning session of the Uhuru celebration ends.

Gikonyo's broken arm sets the tone for the rest of the book, particularly the celebration of independence. Rather than a triumphant moment, as many expect—or as Gikonyo hopes for in the race—independence is, at best, bittersweet, and rather less uplifting or exhilarating than many hope. Since the author builds the entire story from personal experiences, it is possible that this is the same sentiment he himself felt.

In the afternoon, the villagers set up a platform in Rung'ei market and people come from all over to commemorate the dead and see Mugo, who is now a legendary figure. Rumors have spread of his mystical might, his ability to withstand bullets, the many Freedom Fighters he freed from prison, and even that he smuggled letters from the detention camps to members of the English Parliament. As people sing, dance, and prepare, the same feeling of expectation hangs in the air, though "it [is] not exactly a happy feeling; it [is] more a sense of inevitable doom."

The mythologizing of Mugo seems to make him an even greater figure than Kihika, increasing the irony of his true self. The "inevitable doom" seems likely even if Mugo were not to confess, since it's impossible for any person to live up to the expectations now placed on Mugo. This seems to be a subtle warning against placing such messianic expectations on any single individual.

A representative of the Party stands in Gikonyo's absence and a preacher from the Kikuyu (Gikuyu) Greek Orthodox Church leads the congregation in prayer to open the ceremony, commemorating the blood that has been spilt by the villagers. Songs are sung, speeches are made about the oppression of the British and the heroism of the Freedom Fighters. Everyone is waiting for Mugo, but he is not there. When the speaker announces that General R. will speak in Mugo's place, the crowd is furious. The elders promise that they will send two more delegates to appeal to Mugo, but in the meantime General R. will continue.

The legend that has grown up around Mugo is now so great—even absurdly so—that even General R., a true hero of the Freedom Fighters, is considered an unsatisfactory replacement.

General R. begins, but finds it difficult to speak. He thinks of all the African traitors: Karanja, Rev. Jackson—who preached against the Mau Mau at the behest of DO Robson and was warned three times to cease before they were forced to kill him. He thinks of the fact that it is not Freedom Fighters marching through the streets of Nairobi, but those Kenyan soldiers who served as the British colonial force. General R. is haunted by Koina's fear that Uhuru will not bring change. Nevertheless, General R. continues through his speech, speaking of the need to spill blood to resist the British empire and protest their wealth in the face of African poverty.

Once again, a shadow is cast over the joy of independence. Koina and General R.'s fear that a free and independent Kenya will not truly be any different carries with it a grim implication—that all the struggle, pain, and violence have been for naught. Again, the author's depiction of the moment of independence is more tragic than anything, seeming to reflect his own reservations about what was lost and what was gained. While the novel never suggests that independence was not worth fighting for (quite the opposite), it does casts its final achievement as a moment more bitter than sweet.

General R. declares that the new Kenya must be "built on the heroic tradition of resistance of our people," meaning they must celebrate heroes and "punish traitors." General R. announces that Kihika's betrayer is in their midst and asks him to reveal himself, letting the tension build. At that moment, Mugo arrives, takes the microphone, and speaks clearly: "You asked for Judas [...] That man stands before you now." Mugo explains his crime. The crowd goes utterly silent and parts as he walks through them and away from the gathering. The only person to move is Githua, who follows behind Mugo mocking him. As Githua's voice fades, the crowd disperses.

It is notable that Githua is the first person to salute Mugo as Chief in "the name of blackman's freedom" and is now the only person to mock Mugo in his climactic moment of defeat. Since Githua himself lied about his own heroism, and thus committed essentially the same crime to a lesser extent, he is depicted as a rather despicable character. However, for Mugo, this is both the climax of his character arc and the climax of the story, the moment in which the hero finally finds courage to speak the truth.

KARANJA

Later that day, Karanja is in his mother's hut, packing his bag to leave. Karanja's father was never present in his life, and he is his mother's only child to survive childbirth. Though she'd hoped he would take care of her in her old age, Karanja proved to be lazy instead. When he joined the homeguard, it further pained his mother. As Karanja leaves, his mother asks where he will go. He answers that he does not know, perhaps Githima again, and walks out into the rain.

Unique among all of the main characters of the story, Karanja is denied any redeeming quality whatsoever, which the author poignantly confirms in his final moments. He fails his people, his mother, and even himself, for not attaining his singular goal of taking Mumbi as his own partner.

Karanja walks to the bus stop, where he happens to meet Mumbi. Mumbi crushes him when she tells him that she never wants to see him again and will never let him see their child either. However, she is surprised to hear Karanja tell her of Mugo's confession. Karanja remarks that Mugo is a brave man and saved Karanja's life, though he cannot imagine for what purpose anymore. After Mumbi leaves him, Karanja takes the bus to Githima and sits in a small tea shop, imagining how he would have been torn limb from limb by the crowd had Mugo not confessed. He considers the fear he feels of his own people now that Thompson has left, the fear he feels of "black power." In the homeguard, he had the power to kill and often used it against the Mau Mau terrorists. He grew accustomed to that power; he needed it. "Now that power was gone."

Having staked his reputation, his power, and even his safety on white power and fear of the British colonial forces, Karanja is left with nothing now that they have departed. Karanja's need for power not only suggests his utter self-absorption, but yet again depicts him as a nearly psychopathic character, one who is oblivious to morality and the needs of other people or his community, only beholden to his own craving for power. Karanja's ruin in the story thus condemns such a narcissistic, self-absorbed life, demonstrating that such a life is stripped of all meaning and purpose as soon as the source of one's power is taken away.

Karanja leaves the tea shop and wanders down the street, thinking now about Mumbi's rejection, about the day he saw Kihika's body hanging from a tree and felt not pity for his friend, but merely disgust and a disbelief in any concept of freedom that should lead to such an end. Karanja joined the homeguard soon after, spending his first months with a hood hiding his face while he anonymously identified Mau Mau sympathizers from his own village, feeling pleasure at the anonymity and power to grant life or death. Karanja thinks finally of Mugo's sacrifice and Mumbi's agreement that he is a courageous man. Standing near the railway, the lights and screeching of **the train** approach Karanja approach him and rush past, the wind knocking him backwards. He is left in complete silence and a deep, pervasive darkness.

Unlike Mugo and Gikonyo, as will be seen, Karanja is denied any opportunity for redemption, with no choice but to exile himself from his own society. Because of his ego and unwillingness to face his own guilt, Karanja will be left to carry his burden forever, suggesting that the only way to be free of such guilt is to confess one's crimes and accept their consequences. The train passing Karanja by and leaving him in a silent, total darkness again symbolizes British power and technology, which Karanja had placed all of his hope in, and which now has left him behind with nothing and no one.

MUGO

Mumbi visits Gikonyo in the hospital, but he pretends to be asleep and ignores her. She returns home, angry and resolved never to see him again, but her mother Wanjiku convinces her she must persist. The next morning, they go to the hospital together. Gikonyo cannot look at the two women for a long time, but when he does he also speaks, timidly, almost shamefully. Gikonyo reflects that Mugo showed the greatest bravery of all, since so much was offered and yet he elected to sacrifice it and speak the truth. Thus, no one at he meeting could condemn him unless they too would "open [their] hearts naked for the world to look at." Mumbi is touched by Gikonyo's words, but realizes that she should have gone immediately to see Mugo. She rushes to his hut and then to General R.'s hut, but neither of them are there. Mumbi checks Mugo's hut again in the evening but it is still dark, seemingly untouched since the night she was there.

Mugo's sacrifice of wealth and power redeems him, changing him from a Judas-figure to an alternative Christ-figure. By showing the bravery to give himself up the mob and stepping to his own death, Mugo the coward becomes the brave and noble figure everyone in the village already believes him to be, fulfilling the Christ role they had thrust upon him, though in a markedly different way than any expected. Once again, the author takes the pieces of the Christ narrative and rearranges them in a particularly novel way, offering Judas redemption and the chance to give back to his people.

The night that Mugo confessed his crime to Mumbi, he lays awake all night, haunted by the look of "horror and scorn" in her eyes, feeling that he has lost her trust, which suddenly means far more to him than he ever realized. Mugo's mental anguish is exacerbated by the celebrants surrounding his hut, singing his praises. However, when he awakes on the morning of the ceremony, Mugo's pain is gone. Though he does not know why, he has the absolute resolution to confess before the gathering, and this resolve gives him peace. However, as Mugo speaks before the gathering, his peace dissolves and he realizes that he is now, for the first time, responsible for "whatever he had done in the past, for whatever he would do in the future." Walking away from the gathering, Mugo knows that, after his brief connection with Mumbi, he wants to live, and plans to walk to Nairobi and begin a new life there.

Mugo's sudden peace and reprieve from his agony, even though he is about to do something terrifying, confirms that confessing before his village is the only way for him to redeem himself and relieve his crippling guilt. However, even after confessing, Mugo nearly attempts to escape the consequences of his actions and the necessary sacrifice of his life. Paralleling Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, Mugo has his own brief period of doubting what he must do and wondering if there might not be an easier way, a happier ending for him.

However, the rain drives Mugo to enter the old woman's hut to take a brief shelter, since her door is always left open. She is happy to see him, apparently believing that he is her dead son Gitogo, "come to fetch [her] home." When Mugo looks at her face, he sees not the old woman but his long-dead aunt, and realizes with shame that the only family he has ever had has been gone for years. In light of this, nothing else in the world seems to matter. Mugo returns to his hut and waits until General R. and Koina arrive to take him to stand trial, privately and secretly, where Wambui will be the judge. Mugo consents without resistance. General R.'s voice holds no anger, no bitterness.

The revelation that the strange connection Mugo has felt to old woman since the first chapters of the story is her mistaking him for her lost son is poignant, especially because the situation is then reversed, and Mugo sees his dead aunt in her. Though it wasn't what he thought, Mugo and the old woman do share a connection—both have lost their single family member in the world, making them both tragic figures with seemingly nothing left to live for. The extent of Mugo's redemption in the eyes of his community is demonstrated by the fact that even General R. and Lt. Koina, close comrades of Kihika, feel no anger towards Mugo. They only act to fulfill their duty to his memory and to justice.

WARUI, WAMBUI

Warui and Wambui sit together in Wambui's hut, oddly unkempt, watching the rain pour down. They are both emotionless, together the "picture of bereaved children for whom life has suddenly lost warmth, color, and excitement." They placidly remark that the old woman died on the day of Uhuru, though no one knows why; apparently Gitogo came to take her home after all. Mumbi arrives hoping to warm herself in their hut, but there is no fire in the hearth. They speak about Gikonyo's arm and about how they all misunderstood Mugo. Mumbi expresses sorrow that she could not help him, could not save him from the pain she saw in his eyes. Nevertheless, they all decide, they must keep on living, for that is all that is left to do. When Mumbi asks Warui and Wambui if they have seen Mugo or General R. since the meeting, Wambui denies it. The three part ways, disillusioned. Wambui thinks to herself that she ought to clean her hut and build a fire, but she does not stir.

Warui and Wambui's disillusionment with independence is tragic, but reflects General R. and Lt. Koina's fears that it would not be so wonderfully different as hoped. For all the anticipation, this response to Uhuru is surprising, even in light of Mugo's confession. Since the author writes his literature from personal experience of the Gikuyu people, the Mau Mau uprising, and independence, it seems likely that his depiction of the day of Uhuru is similarly informed by his own experiences. Like Koina fears, it's likely that much will remain the same in Kenya. (This turns out to be unfortunately true, as the author was eventually exiled from Kenya by Jomo Kenyatta's own government.)


HARAMBEE

While Gikonyo had been in his last detention camp, he thought about carving a stool for Mumbi as a gift. For each of its legs, he would carve dour-faced laborers, straining under its weight. Now, lying in the hospital, Gikonyo thinks again of carving the stool for his wife. For three days he lay there thinking of Mugo's courage and his own cowardice by comparison, wondering if he will ever have the strength to tell his village that he confessed **the oath**. He finds himself wishing to speak to Mumbi about all of it, wishing to hear her thoughts on Mugo's courage, and even to tell her of his time in detention.

Although Gikonyo never finds the courage to confess his betrayal of the oath within the pages of the novel, it is implied that he will do so someday in the future. Thus Mugo really has acted as a hero, though not in the way everyone thought—his courage to confess has inspired others to do so as well. There is also clearly a connection between Gikonyo and Mumbi still, though it's left unclear if too much has happened between them to salvage their relationship.




Gikonyo also, for the first time, begins to consider that he is the father to Mumbi's children and wonders what a child between them might look like. Gikonyo spends his hours determining how the stool will look, longing to work with wood once again. The stool, he imagines, will not be the picture of laborers, but a man and woman holding hands, joined together by the figure of a young child.

The transition of Gikonyo's concept of the stool is telling of his future redemption, seeming to reflect his view of life and purpose. Where once his role was to suffer under the weight of the Movement and the pain of detention camps, now he finds his new purpose in being Mumbi's husband and her child's father, united in their common cause of raising a family. This represents a marked change of character for Gikonyo, who previously had gone so far as fantasizing about murdering Mumbi and her child.

Mumbi has visited Gikonyo in the hospital every day prior, but on the sixth day she does not. Her absence makes Gikonyo restless and fearful. She arrives the following morning alone, but only briefly, and tells Gikonyo that she may not visit him ever again. As Mumbi is leaving, Gikonyo asks if they can speak of their child. This gives her pause. She will not speak of it in the hospital, but tells Gikonyo that perhaps after he is released they can begin to speak. However, the hurt they have caused each other is too much to simply put things back as they were, though she may come see him tomorrow still. Gikonyo feels anxious about the new possibilities, and realizes that "in the future he would reckon with her feelings, her thoughts, her desires—a new Mumbi." After she leaves, Gikonyo reconsiders the design of his stool. It will be a figure of a woman, pregnant with a new child.

In the same way that Mumbi's courage to confess her story to Mugo inspires him to find the strength to do the same, Mugo's sacrifice and redemption of himself also plants the seeds of redemption for Gikonyo. For the entire novel, Gikonyo has been running from his problems and unwilling to admit his own fault in his broken relationship with his wife, unable to see her as her own person and recognize her individual perspective. The carving of a pregnant woman into the stool signifies not only that Gikonyo wants to give his wife a gift, but he wants to anticipate their future together with her, fully recognize her personhood and strengths, and look forward to the life-giving potential of the future.

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