

Marriage is a Private Affair



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CHINUA ACHEBE

The fifth child of Isaiah Okafor Achebe, a Christian catechism teacher, and Janet Ileogbunam, Chinua Achebe was born into a privileged and educated family. He was christened Albert as an homage to Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert. Nevertheless, Achebe's first language was Ibo, and he did not start learning English until about the age of eight, despite the fact that Nigeria was still a British colony and would be until 1960. Growing up listening to the traditional Ibo language and stories from an early age allowed him to develop a strong affinity to his culture, which he continued to appreciate as he learned and became fluent in English. Though he excelled in his secondary studies and studied medicine at the University College of Ibadan, he ultimately switched to a liberal arts curriculum and studied history, religion, and English instead. Around that time, Achebe, stirred up by the growing nationalist sentiment and calls for independence, began to go by his Ibo name "Chinua," a name whose long form "Chinualumogu" means "My spirit come fight for me." It was also in college where he began to publish stories like "Marriage is a Private Affair," which explores the community upheavals and cultural tensions that occur as a result of the colonialism on African societies. Although his earlier works are less known than his 1958 classic, the acclaimed novel [Things Fall Apart](#), many of the themes are similar and deal with colonialism, Christianity, and traditional culture. Achebe also worked as a senior broadcasting officer in the 1950s. However, as his writing career took off, he began to work as a professor in Nigerian and American schools. He published his last novel in 1987, three years before a car crash in Lagos left him paralyzed from the waist down.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Chinua Achebe wrote "Marriage is a Private Affair" in 1952, eight years before Nigeria won its independence from the British Empire. Consequently, the short story should be read with the understanding that Achebe was very much interested in the growing independence movements that were percolating in Nigeria and other nearby African nations. Ghana was the first African country to gain independence, six years after he published "Marriage is a Private Affair," but Nigeria would follow soon after. "Marriage is a Private Affair," anticipates some of the cultural and political issues that the newly independent Nigeria would face a few years later. Tensions between ethnic groups, the impact of Christianity, and the conflict between a modern, urban Nigeria and a rural,

traditional Nigeria were central to Nigeria's post-independence path. Ethnic and political tensions eventually created the impetus for the Biafran War (1967-1970), in which the Ibo community of Nigeria tried to form a separate state. This is just one example that shows how the issues Achebe discusses in his work have large stakes, not just for the small community he writes about, but for the new nation he is anticipating.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Achebe's work often deals with the conflict that arises within indigenous African cultures as a result of colonial influences. Sometimes these influences are explored through religious conflict, and other times through tense interactions among community members caught between traditional and modern, westernized values. Other works by Achebe that explore similar themes. Another short story of his, "Dead Men's Path," is a testament to his ability to weave nuanced issues that touch on history, colonial legacy, and the conflict between old and new within a nation on the brink of independence. Additionally, his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, is not only his most important contribution to African Literature, but also encouraged other African writers to write about issues unique to them. Other African authors like Wole Soyinka and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie have written works that explore similar issues. [Death and the King's Horseman](#) by Soyinka, for example, also deals with the cultural upheavals provoked by colonialism and the pull towards western culture, while Adichie pays direct homage to Achebe by referencing the title of his acclaimed book, [Things Fall Apart](#), at the beginning of one her most distinguished novels, *Purple Hibiscus*. Unsurprisingly, Achebe continues to be a source of literary inspiration for a new vanguard of writers in Africa and beyond.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Marriage is a Private Affair
- **When Written:** 1952
- **Where Written:** Ibadan, Nigeria
- **When Published:** 1952
- **Literary Period:** Postcolonialism
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** Lagos and an Ibo village in Colonial Nigeria
- **Climax:** Okeke dismisses Nnaemeka and refuses to talk to him for eight years because of Nnaemeka's refusal to marry Ugoye, the woman Okeke has chosen for him, instead of Nene.
- **Antagonist:** Okeke

- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Working Title. Achebe originally published “Marriage is a Private Affair” as “The Old Order in Conflict with the New.”

Brit Lit. Two of Achebe’s major literary influences are Charles Dickens and W.B. Yeats.



PLOT SUMMARY

“Marriage is a Private Affair,” begins with Nene asking Nnaemeka if he has told his father, Okeke, about their big news. Though Nnaemeka thinks it would be better to have the conversation with his father in six weeks when he goes to visit his village, Nene encourages him to write to Okeke and tell him sooner. She is sure that Okeke will be happy—who wouldn’t be delighted that their son is getting married?—but Nnaemeka has to remind her that things are more complicated because the rural community that he is from is much different from **Lagos**, the city where Nene has lived all her life. He explains that in his community, it is customary for a father to choose a spouse for his children, and that said spouse must be Ibo. Although this is difficult for Nene to grasp, she realizes for the first time that Okeke might be displeased by their decision to get married. She nevertheless remains positive that Okeke will forgive Nnaemeka and subsequently continues to encourage him to send a letter to his father. Before returning to his place, Nnaemeka is able to finally convince Nene that it will be better for him to tell his father in person.

Later, Nnaemeka thinks about the letter his father sent him recently and smiles. In the letter, Okeke details the merits of a woman named Ugoye, particularly her “Christian upbringing,” and communicates his desire to begin marriage negotiations between Nnaemeka and Ugoye in December.

During the second night of Nnaemeka’s visit to his village, he asks his father for forgiveness before refusing to marry Ugoye, claiming that he doesn’t love her. Okeke is shocked by Nnaemeka’s refusal and is surprised that his son thinks he has to love Ugoye to marry her. Although Okeke tries to change his son’s mind, Nnaemeka won’t budge. Instead, Nnaemeka tells Okeke more about Nene, particularly her Christian faith and her job as a teacher. This makes Okeke even more furious, as he does not believe Christian women should teach, but his anger reaches its height when he realizes that Nene is not Ibo. Nnaemeka remains steadfast, however, and insists that Nene will be his future wife. Okeke walks away from the conversation and refuses to eat dinner that night.

The next day, Okeke again tries to convince his son to change course, but is unsuccessful, leading him to characterize his son’s decision as “Satan’s work.” Nnaemeka, however, continues to

hope that Okeke will change his mind, though Okeke promises that he will never accept or even meet Nene.

The rest of the village takes Okeke’s side and share in his disappointment that Nnaemeka has chosen to marry “a woman who spoke a different tongue.” Some take Nnaemeka’s behavior as a sign of the “beginning of the end.” One person in the village, Madubogwu, eventually suggests that Okeke consult a **native doctor** and get medicine to cure his son. Okeke refuses, citing Ms. Ochuba’s mistakes as the reason he will not consult a native doctor to help his son “kill himself.”

Six months pass and Okeke still has not come around. He even sends back the wedding picture Nnaemeka and Nene sent to him, with Nene cut out of the picture, with a letter describing how little interest he has in the couple. Nnaemeka consoles Nene after they read the letter. Eight more years pass and Okeke still refuses to see his son or have him in his house.

Nene also faces hardship within the Ibo community in Lagos, but the community eventually comes around accepts her. News of Nene and Nnaemeka’s happy marriage travel to Okeke’s village, but Okeke remains aloof. He uses his energy to push his son out of his mind, almost killing himself in the process.

One day, however, Okeke receives a letter from Nene. In the letter, Nene reveals that she and Nnaemeka have two sons, and explains that the boys would like to know their grandfather. For the first time since shunning Nnaemeka, Okeke feels overcome with guilt. Though he tries to fight it and attempts to stuff down his feelings, the raging storm outside pushes him to think about the consequences of his actions, his estrangement from his son and grandsons, and what it will mean for his family. He is unable to sleep peacefully that night because of his fear that he will never atone for his behavior.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Nnaemeka – Nnaemeka, the protagonist of the story and a young Ibo man, is Nene’s fiancé and Okeke’s son. He is extremely cautious and cares greatly about his father’s opinion of him. For that reason, he postpones telling Okeke about his engagement, afraid that his father will react negatively because Nene is not an Ibo. This causes tension to rise between him and Nene until he finally agrees to leave **Lagos** and travel to his rural village to talk to his father about his decision to marry Nene. Despite his father’s vehement disapproval and subsequent estrangement from him, Nnaemeka remains optimistic that his father will eventually accept Nene and his decision to marry her. What Nnaemeka doesn’t fully internalize, though, is that he is the very first person in the community to go against the grain of tradition by choosing his own spouse and choosing to marry someone who is not an Ibo, which makes his decision all the more shocking and offensive to Okeke and the rest of the

village. However, spurred by the eventual acceptance Nene finds among her Ibo peers in Lagos, Nnaemeka continues to send letters and pictures to his father about him and Nene's marital life in Lagos. While Nnaemeka does not regret his decision to marry Nene, regardless of his father's reaction, he never stops hoping Okeke will accept their marriage and play a role in their growing family. Thus, Nnaemeka is a man that is torn between his deep love for his father and his desire to be a good son *and* his urban lifestyle that wholeheartedly embraces multiculturalism.

Nene Atang – Nnaemeka's fiancée. At the beginning of the story, Nene is eager to for Nnaemeka to share the news of their engagement with his father, Okeke, believing that the man will be thrilled. Her naivete, however, does not allow her to anticipate Okeke's firm resistance to their marriage. As a woman who grew up in the cosmopolitan culture of **Lagos**, Nene struggles to grasp the different norms and ideas that govern rural life, and has trouble understanding how sidestepping these conventions in a community that so greatly values tradition can be a serious offense. Thus, she urges her husband to talk to his father, convinced and optimistic that Okeke's love for his son will supersede any anger and disappointment. Nevertheless, she must grapple with the fact that her ethnic identity and role as a teacher are enough to disqualify her as a suitable wife for Nnaemeka when she realizes that Okeke has harshly cut her out of her own wedding picture. This does not stop her from trying to win him and others over, which speaks to her persistence. She eventually wins over the Ibo community in Lagos by showing how capable of a wife she is, and people begin to respect how happy her marriage is as well. In her persistence, she sends a letter to Okeke about what his absence in her son's (his grandchildren's) lives are costing them as a family, a move that points to an eventual resolution within the family.

Okeke / Nnaemeka's Father – Okeke is Nnaemeka's father and the antagonist in the story. He is the one that shows the fiercest resistance to his son's news that he plans to marry Nene, a girl who is neither from their village nor Ibo. A deeply Christian and family-oriented man, Okeke sees his son's decision as deviant, sinful, and particularly disrespectful to him as a father. Nevertheless, he takes it as his duty as a father to teach his son to see reason; consequently, he spends ample time encouraging his son to change his mind. Once it is clear, however, that Nnaemeka has made up his mind, Okeke stubbornly refuses to see him for eight years as punishment for his son's decision to marry Nene. He insists all the while that he wants nothing to do with such an insolent son whom he believes has chosen to sever himself from his family and community for a sinful marriage. Nevertheless, underneath Okeke's hubris, he continues to hope and pray every day that his son will return to him and ask for his forgiveness. It is Okeke, however, who shows the first signs of remorse. Upon

learning about the existence of his grandchildren, he realizes that his actions may have cost him the opportunity to play a critical role in his grandchildren's lives. Nene's letter to him, along with **nature's** reprimand in the form of a storm outside his window, remind him that he may never recover from the pain his absence has caused his family now and in the future.

Madubogwu – Madubogwu is one of the members of Okeke's rural village. He is a practical man who likes finding ordinary and uncomplicated solutions to problems. He is the one to first suggest to Okeke that he consider hiring a **native doctor** to help Nnaemeka change his mind about marrying Nene. Although Okeke eventually rejects his suggestion, Madubogwu shows that the issue of marriage involves a lot more actors than just Nnaemeka and Nene. It involves Okeke as well as other people in the village, who see marriage as a community issue rather than a private one.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Ugoye Nweke – Ugoye is the woman whom Okeke chooses for Nnaemeka to marry.

Mrs. Ochuba – Mrs. Ochuba is a woman from Okeke's village who many believe is a "wicked murderess" for killing a **native doctor** by giving the doctor the medicine that was meant to make Mrs. Ochuba's husband interested in her again.

TERMS

Ibo – The Ibo (or Igbo) are an ethnic group native to Southern Africa, primarily concentrated in rural southeastern Nigeria. Achebe, the author of "Marriage is a Private Affair," is an Ibo chieftain, and many of his writings focus on the clash between his native culture and modernized Western influences. In the story, **Nnaemeka**, his father **Okeke**, and the rest of their village are Ibo people. The Ibo language is part of the Niger-Congo language family and is divided into many different regional dialects. Although the Ibo people are widely varied in their language, cultural practices, and traditions, they are united by their predominantly Christian faith. Those who live in rural villages like Okeke's are primarily craftsmen; traders; and farmers of yams, cassava, and taro.



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.



URBAN VS. RURAL SPACES

“Marriage is a Private Affair” begins in **Lagos** with a conversation between two of the central characters of the story, Nene and Nnaemeka. The conversation is tense as Nene tries to understand why her fiancé hasn’t yet spoken to his father, Okeke, about their engagement. The root of the tension, however, stems from the fact that both of the characters disagree about what the father’s reaction to their engagement will be, since Nene is not Ibo like her fiancé: Nene insists that Okeke will be happy, while Nnaemeka reminds her that her expectations are skewed because of her naivete about rural spaces and cultures. He reminds her that she has spent her entire life in Lagos and thus understands “very little about people in remote parts of the country.” In other words, Nene does not understand how devotedly Nnaemeka’s father clings to the expectation that one must marry a person from their ethnic group. With this conflict, Achebe suggests that there exists a gulf between urban and rural spaces—one space culturally diverse and governed by choice, the other insular and marked by tradition—and that this gulf is difficult to bridge.

Nene and Nnaemeka’s conversation at the beginning of the story introduces the coming rift between the realities of the more accepting city space in which they have made their home and the rigid traditional expectations that Nnaemeka has left behind in his rural home. From the beginning, it is evident that Nene has taken for granted her urban upbringing to the point that she has come to expect that every space shares similar progressive ideas about marriage. Consequently, she cannot understand why Okeke would be anything but happy for his son. Her naivete is reflected in her assertion to Nnaemeka that “[Okeke] should be let into our happiness now.” Of course, Nnaemeka objects to this, reminding her that the remote part of the country he comes from is different from Lagos. He reminds his wife bluntly that not only are the people from his father’s community “unhappy if the engagement is not arranged by them,” but that things are even worse for him and Nene because she is “not even an Ibo.” In other words, tradition takes precedent over choice in rural spaces. The bluntness of Nnaemeka’s assertion causes Nene to reflect on the different expectations of rural spaces, something she hasn’t had to consider before: “In the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the city it had always seemed to her something of a joke that a person’s tribe could determine whom he married.” For the first time, she must grapple with the ease and freedom of choice that dwelling in an urban space affords her. It is a sobering moment, one that opens her eyes to the difficulties that lay ahead for her and Nnaemeka as they navigate and seek to reconcile their urban lives with the resilient traditions of Nnameka’s rural upbringing.

Notwithstanding the opposition from Okeke, Nnaemeka and Nene eventually get married, severely underestimating the extent to which his rural and largely homogenous village will

shun them because of it. However, “if it had occurred to [Nnaemeka] that never in the history of his people had a man married a woman who spoke a different tongue, he might have been less optimistic.” Nene is not just marrying Nnaemeka—she is also marrying into a previously homogenous, traditional community. The villagers must grapple with the fact that her very presence forces them to broaden the way they define themselves and their community. It is an uncharted territory, and because of that, it’s terrifying for everyone. They must decide if they will embrace the cosmopolitanism of city life and make Nene one of their own.

Okeke, though, refuses to see his son and daughter-in-law for eight years and even writes to Nnaemeka to tell him that he is not welcome to even step foot in Okeke’s house. Scathingly, he adds: “it can be of no interest to me where or how you spend you leave—or your life, for that matter.” With this declaration, Okeke essentially declares that Nnaemeka is better off in Lagos since he has chosen to scorn his rural community’s customs on two counts, first by denying Okeke the fatherly duty of arranging his son’s marriage, and then by choosing to marry someone outside of the community. Consequently, the rural community has turned his back on Nnaemeka as well, as Okeke’s house is no longer fit for his son. This suggests that one can only belong to one space or the other, but not both. As Nnaemeka has chosen to live in Lagos with a non-Ibo wife, Okeke believes he has effectively rejected his rural community.

In contrast, while the Ibo people from Nnaemeka’s village alienate Nnaemeka for many years, he and Nene find some refuge in the cosmopolitan spaces of Lagos—even among other Ibo people. Though at first, they show Nene “such excessive deference as to make her feel she was not one of them,” eventually they warm up to her, and “slowly and grudgingly they began to admit that she kept her home much better than most of them.” Their acceptance of Nene further proves that Lagos—a multicultural space—is not as hampered by the same inflexible rules and time-worn traditions that govern rural spaces. In a cosmopolitan space, people are able to break away from outdated expectations because of the diversity of ideas and people that surround them. Consequently, they are able to more easily traverse the stubborn deference to tradition that hampers their rural counterparts.

In contrast, it takes Okeke many years for him to even consider accepting the marriage. This proves that the rural space he comes from is more resilient to progressive ideas centered around choice and new perspectives on community. It also shows that urban and rural spaces are fated to have a contentious relationship, as Achebe shows how anxiously those from urban spaces fear losing their hold on their children to the freedoms promised by urban spaces.



FAMILY, LOVE, AND MARRIAGE

In “Marriage is a Private Affair,” Okeke vehemently believes that as a father, he should be the one to choose who his son, Nnaemeka, marries. He

believes this so much that in his letter to Nnaemeka, he does not ask about his son’s willingness to marry the woman he has found for him. Instead, he confidently declares that he has “found a girl who will suit [his son] admirably,” suggesting that Okeke’s approval of the girl matters more than Nnaemeka’s desire to marry the girl. This implies that Okeke believes that marriage is *not* a private affair, as the title would suggest, but a familial one. Thus, when Nnaemeka rejects his father’s choice and marries Nene instead of Ugoye, the father and son’s familial bond unravels. Okeke sees their subsequent estrangement as proof that Nnaemeka has denied him his rights as a father *and* rejected his duties as a son and community member, which he likens to filial suicide. However, Okeke’s stubbornness begins to soften upon learning that his son’s wife has given birth to two sons, who are now old enough to be asking about their grandfather whom they’ve never met. Though Okeke believes denying familial expectations is a grave insult, it is not enough for him to risk alienating the new generation of family member from the old generation and create a lasting rift within his lineage. This implies that in Okeke’s world, as the patriarch of the family, failing to ensure the past and present generations know and learn from each other is akin to ensuring a family’s doom, and that familial love can and should eclipse other concerns.

When Okeke realizes that his son is resolute in his decision to marry Nene, he takes it as his fatherly duty to change his son’s mind. However, his son’s stubbornness proves too insurmountable, forcing Okeke to break ties with him in hopes that the threat of losing him as a father will be enough incentive for his son to shun Nene and accept his filial duty by marrying a wife whom Okeke approves of. Okeke takes his responsibilities as a father so seriously that before alienating Nnaemeka, he reminds his son that it is his “duty to show [Nnaemeka] what is right and what is wrong.” He is unable to sit idly and watch his son internalize wrong ideas about marriage because “whoever put this idea into [Nnaemeka’s] head might as well have cut [his] throat.” Within this, Okeke implies that Nnaemeka has forgotten that family is a lifeline and so disobeying Okeke is akin to severing the very thing that sustains him. It is also a warning to Nnaemeka that refusing to fulfill one’s filial duty is to live as if already dead. Nevertheless, Okeke’s words are not enough to change Nnaemeka’s mind, and Okeke disowns his son: “From that night the father scarcely spoke to his son. He did not, however, cease hoping that he would realize how serious was the danger he was heading for.” Again, a rejection of familial expectations is so perverse to Okeke that he equates it to danger as if Nnaemeka’s life is on the line.

Okeke staunchly holds on to his disavowal of his son’s decision

to marry Nene, refusing to see his son for many years. Other people in Okeke’s community echo this belief, reassuring Okeke that he is right for alienating his son; they remind him that the Bible says, “it is the beginning of the end” when “sons [...] rise against their Fathers.” Moreover, an elder in the village delivers a lasting “verdict” on the situation with the simple statement, “it has never been heard.” This, taken with the other dire warnings the villagers give Okeke, imply that Nnaemeka’s refusal to marry the woman of his father’s choosing is an exceptionally grave insult, one that previous generations of sons would have never entertained. Again, Achebe emphasizes that a son’s duty to his father is and has always been to marry a wife his father deems suitable. So Nnaemeka is essentially turning his back on not only his father but previous generations of family members who faithfully followed this rule. Nevertheless, Okeke refuses to entertain his neighbors’ suggestion that he rectify the situation by visiting a **native doctor**; he notes that Nnaemeka’s stubbornness is enough for his son to kill himself, “with his own hands,” adding that he will no longer have any part in it. While Okeke refuses to see a native doctor, he still implies that his son has made a fatal decision.

Okeke, nevertheless, eventually learns that Nnaemeka and Nene have children, which forces him to see the conflict between him and his son in a new light. For the first time, he entertains the possibility that his harsh reaction may permanently disrupt his family lineage. He is so anxious that his family will never recover from his alienation that as he chastises himself, Okeke imagines **nature** is chastising him as well for destroying the sacred connection between a family’s past and present. Okeke realizes that “it was one of those rare occasions when even nature takes a hand in a human fight. Very soon it began to rain [...] [coming] down in large sharp drops [...] accompanied by the lightning and thunder which mark a change of season.” In this moment, even nature spurs him to change his ways so that he can restore order between the past and the future generations and ensure his family endures beyond his conflict with his Nnaemeka. Okeke’s consequent guilt and fear “that he might die without making it up to them”—presumably his grandchildren, but perhaps his son and daughter-in-law as well—are a positive sign that he understands the stakes of his flawed decision. It also implies that he is willing to make amends to save his family from losing its connection to the past, thereby setting up the future generation for success.



CHRISTIANITY

In “Marriage is A Private Affair,” Christianity is intricately linked to the question of marriage. Both Nnaemeka and his father are on the same page about the expectation that Nnaemeka marry a woman who is a “good Christian,” and thus implied to be a good woman and good wife. In fact, this is one of the only things they both agree on in the course of the story. Nevertheless, while Christianity is

a unifier in this instance, it is a divider in many others. After all, it is what Okeke and his neighbors use as a reason to reinforce their opposition to Nnaemeka's choice for a wife. For example, shortly after Nnaemeka delivers the news that he is marrying a woman his father did not approve, Okeke declares that this decision is "Satan's work." Here, Okeke likens his son's choice to Satan to project some of the negative associations connected to the devil unto Nnaemeka's choice for a wife. He does this to convince Nnaemeka to change course and choose God and the Christian path by listening to Okeke. Christianity thus plays a dual role in the story: Okeke and Nnaemeka both use it to find common ground, but it is also a convenient crutch that Okeke uses to plant doubt and guilt in his son. In this way, Achebe shows that Christianity is a flexible religion that can be both a positive force and a negative one, a way to unite people and a way to divide them.

From the outset, it's clear that Christianity plays a crucial role in the lives of the story's characters, as both Okeke and Nnaemeka invoke it during their conversation about marriage to align their respective choice for Nnaemeka's wife with goodness and virtue. As Okeke reminds his son, "Look here, my son [...] what one looks for in a wife are a good character and a Christian background." Nnaemeka echoes this point a few moments later as he—taking a page out of his father's book—characterizes Nene: "She is a good Christian." In an otherwise tense conversation, Okeke and Nnaemeka use their joint belief that Nnaemeka's wife should be a devout Christian to find common ground, revealing in the process that Christianity can be a unifying principle. While they do not agree with each other's choice for who Nnaemeka should marry, they do agree that the person must at the very least have a "good Christian upbringing." The definition of a "good" Christian woman, however, is left purposely vague as if they understand that it loses its power as a unifying force once they define it with stricter terminology.

Yet this is precisely what happens moments later when Nnaemeka mentions to his father that in addition to being a "good Christian," Nene is also "a teacher in a Girls' School in Lagos." Suddenly his father foregoes the unifying aspects of Christianity and uses his definition of the religion as a way of undermining his son's choice for a wife. His censure is immediate: "Teacher did you say? If you consider that a qualification for a good wife I should like to point out to you, Emeka, that no Christian woman should teach. St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians says that women should keep silence." Like before, Okeke conflates goodness and Christianity, except now he is arguing for a specific definition of Christianity that is binary *and* leaves Nene out. According to Okeke, the only a thing a good Christian woman should study is the Bible, and "fluently" in fact; they certainly should not teach, and they must be silent and subservient. He says as much in his letter about his choice for his son's wife: "[Ugoye] has a proper Christian

upbringing. When she stopped schooling some years ago her father [...] sent her to live in the house of a pastor where she has received all the training a wife could need [...] and she reads her Bible very fluently." That Nene dares to depart, even minutely, from this characterization of a good Christian woman is enough for Okeke to believe she is bad for her son. In this moment, Okeke is asking Nnaemeka to forego marrying someone who is a sinner, and thus a bad woman, according to *his* understanding of Christianity. Okeke tells his son to reject aligning himself with a sinner, Nene, and follow his advice because it is closer to the Christian way and thus closer to God. It is an argument meant to produce guilt, shame, and a need for atonement from Nnaemeka. It is also a moment of truth: suddenly, the promise of different, coexisting definitions of Christianity, promised by the vagueness of "good" used by both characters in the beginning, is abandoned for Okeke's more narrow vision of Christianity.

In addition to undermining their earlier show of solidarity, this final moment illuminates the fluidity of Christianity in the story. Although it helps Okeke and Nnaemeka find common ground, it also deepens the rift between them by the end of the conversation. Thus, Achebe suggests that there is something indefinite about Christianity, and perhaps religion in general, as its power to unite and divide gives it a slippery texture that makes it pliable for those who can bend it to suit their needs and opinions.



SYMBOLS

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



LAGOS

Lagos, Nigeria, the cosmopolitan city in which Nene and Nnaemeka live, represents the modern world at large in contrast with Nnaemeka's upbringing in a rural Ibo village. Lagos is a large city in Nigeria that is marked by progressive ideas. Those who call Lagos home accept new concepts about marriage and love much quicker than their rural counterparts due to the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the city. Consequently, it is an experimental place, a place to fashion new ideas about marriage, family, and love that sometimes break with older ways of thinking. Thus, Lagos acts as a foil to the more traditional ideas that govern family life, marriage, and community in Okeke's village.

Lagos also represents a physical and emotional refuge for Nene and Nnaemeka's relationship, a union which bridges the gap between their disparate cultures. While Nene takes for granted her upbringing in the city, Nnaemeka is often caught between his more traditional upbringing and the opportunity to create a new type of life for himself that Lagos makes possible.

Therefore, because the city functions as a place to both question one's upbringing *and* create possibilities of living among different ethnicities, customs, and traditions, it becomes a refuge for Nene and Okeke's marriage.



NATURE

Nature is a symbol of Okeke's changing mood near the end of the story. It's an emotional moment for

Okeke to learn that he has two grandsons he has never met, having shunned his son and daughter-in-law so many years ago. As Okeke digests this news, Nature seems to share in Okeke's grieving for the time he has lost with his family by becoming overcast and windier: "It was one of those rare occasions when even Nature takes a hand in a human fight."

Nature is also what keeps Okeke accountable as he tries to battle his feelings of guilt and shame; the more Okeke puts up a fight and tries to keep his resolve and ignore his guilt, the more Nature demands his attention with a heavy and loud rain storm, complete with thunder and lightning. This suggests that, much like the changing seasons, Okeke's own internal storm is brewing, hearkening back to the moment when Nnaemeka revealed his engagement to Nene and "expected the storm to burst" in the form of an emotional reaction from Okeke. Instead, Okeke bottled up his emotions and shunned Nnaemeka for years, and this encounter with the thunderstorm represents his long-awaited release from those pent-up feelings. The aggressive and loud storm gives his own internal struggle a physical presence, so he is unable to run from his overwhelming emotions. Just as he is unable to ignore the storm, Okeke is unable to ignore the fact that he may never recover from his unfair treatment of Nnaemeka, Nene, and his two grandchildren.



THE NATIVE DOCTOR

In the story, the native doctor, an African herbalist who specializes in indigenous healing remedies for

a host of medical and spiritual conditions, symbolizes the community's loyalty to tradition and perhaps superstition. Members of Okeke's community urge him to consult a native doctor because Nnaemeka's actions—going against the grain of tradition and choosing his own wife, who isn't even from his same tribe—suggest that he is sick and in need of healing. Madubogwu believes that Nnaemeka's "mind is diseased," and that the native doctor's medicine is the only effective remedy for this illness. Although Mrs. Ochuba's son, another young man from the village, died from these natural remedies, the community is still adamant that Nnaemeka must undergo the same treatment. The native doctor, then, represents just how grave a threat nonconformity and the outside world pose to the Okeke and Nnaemeka's village, as the community is willing to put Nnaemeka's life at risk in order to rid him of his desire to

defy his father and thereby thwart their traditions.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *Girls at War and Other Stories* published in 1991.

Marriage Is A Private Affair Quotes

☞ "You have lived in Lagos all your life, and you know very little about people in remote parts of the country."

Related Characters: Nnaemeka (speaker), Nene Atang

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

Nnaemeka, who was raised in a remote village, tells Nene bluntly that the more modern, progressive life she enjoys in Lagos is very different from the lives of others in more rural areas. Consequently, Nnaemeka subtly encourages Nene to think about how the cosmopolitan space of Lagos has impacted her way of thinking and shaped her way of life. The fact that the story begins with Nnaemeka's blunt observation hints at the central role the divide between urban and rural communities will play in the story. It also suggests that Nnaemeka's family, whose native culture is entirely alien to Nene, will be a point of conflict in their relationship. This passage encourages the reader to pay attention to the differences between these two ways of life hereafter, and to understand how the interactions among characters in the story are shaped by the different expectations and standards of a given environment.

☞ At last she said, "You don't really mean that he will object to your marrying me simply on that account? I had always thought you Ibos were kindly disposed to other people."

Related Characters: Nene Atang (speaker), Okeke / Nnaemeka's Father, Nnaemeka

Related Themes:



Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Nene wonders why Okeke would object to his son's marriage because Nene does not share Nnaemeka's Ibo heritage. She questions whether this is unique to Ibo people, a move that further reveals her naiveté about the role of marriage in rural communities. She jumps to the conclusion that Okeke's anger stems from his resentment of other ethnicities, when in reality it is much more complicated. She is unable to see how Okeke's reaction may be a result of his environment. As a member of a rural village, it is likely that he has never had to interact with diverse groups of people before (as Nene likely has) and has been surrounded by fellow Ibo people for most of his life. As such, she fails to realize that Okeke's possible disapproval would be less about a deep-seated resentment of others and more about his lack of knowledge on what constitutes a happy marriage between two people from entirely different upbringings.

“I have found a girl who will suit you admirably—Ugoye Nweke, the eldest daughter of our neighbor, Jacob Nweke. She has a proper Christian upbringing [...] Her Sunday school teacher has told me that she reads her Bible very fluently. I hope we shall begin negotiations when you come home in December.”

Related Characters: Okeke / Nnaemeka's Father (speaker), Ugoye Nweke, Nnaemeka

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis


Okeke makes his priorities for his son Nnaemeka's marriage clear. He wants a girl he knows well, is a proper Christian, and one that he has played a role in choosing. Unsurprisingly, he reveals how important it is to him that he knows the people in his small, close-knit community who know Ugoye best, such as her father and Sunday school teacher. He mentions all of these things because he assumes that they are everything that Nnaemeka could and should want in a wife—failing to realize that he is robbing his son of his freedom of choice.

Okeke ends the letter not with a question about Nnaemeka's thoughts on Ugoye, but with a statement about beginning “negotiations” soon. This shows that Okeke's mind is already made up and he does not expect his son to

refute his decision, nor suggest an alternative choice for a wife. There is no mention of love within the letter. Rather, Okeke emphasizes Ugoye's Christian background, making it a strong selling point for why he has chosen her and why Nnaemeka should be satisfied with the choice. This suggests that love is of minimal concern to Okeke and the rest of Nnaemeka's village when it comes to selecting a wife—practicality and spiritual soundness are what matters in a marriage.

“Father,” began Nnaemeka suddenly, “I have come to ask forgiveness.”

Related Characters: Nnaemeka (speaker), Nene Atang, Okeke / Nnaemeka's Father

Related Themes:  


Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

Before Nnaemeka tells his Okeke about Nene, he asks his father for forgiveness. The Christian undertones are very present in this passage, as Nnaemeka is essentially taking on the role of a sinner who has come to ask for penance from his Okeke. His use of the word “father” has multiple meanings here. It alludes to his real father, Okeke, as well as to God, who is referred to as a paternal figure throughout the Christian Bible and is the spiritual father of Nnaemeka, Okeke, and the rest of their village. It is unclear if Nnaemeka truly believes he has sinned or if he is merely trying to soften the effect that the upcoming news will have on Okeke by appealing to his father's devout religious sensibilities. It is possible that he hopes Okeke will show mercy on him if he appears to be an obedient son. Either way, the moment is tense and shows the extent of Nnaemeka's anxieties about breaking the news of his marriage to his father.

“I owe it to you, my son, as a duty to show you what is right and what is wrong. Whoever put this idea into your head might as well have cut your throat. It is Satan's work.”

Related Characters: Okeke / Nnaemeka's Father (speaker), Nnaemeka

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

After Nnaemeka's confession that he has found a wife of his own choosing to marry, Okeke is convinced that his son has been misled by Satanic influences. Okeke's tone is patronizing as he appears very comfortable playing the role of an all-knowing patriarch and elder who knows more about marriage and the world than his son does. Consequently, he takes the paternal "duty" of correcting his son's mistakes very seriously, which is why he refuses to waver from his original stance that Nnaemeka is in the wrong for choosing to marry Nene. He suggests that by choosing Nene, Nnaemeka has essentially chosen a metaphorical death of his spiritual and cultural identity over his familial duty, which is a grave insult to him as a father. Nnaemeka's decision appears to be so ludicrous to Okeke that he believes Satan must have played a role in his son's decision. It is the only explanation he can accept as to why his son would jeopardize his relationship with his family, marry a woman who does not comport herself as a proper Christian woman (according to Okeke's own rigid definition of Christianity) and risk "death." Okeke likely means that without family and without good Christian practices, Nnaemeka's life is meaningless and thus he cannot truly live.

“I shall never see her,” was the reply. From that night the father scarcely spoke to his son. He did not, however, cease hoping that he would realize how serious was the danger he was heading for. Day and night, he put him in his prayers.

Related Characters: Okeke / Nnaemeka's Father (speaker), Nene Atang, Nnaemeka

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 26


Explanation and Analysis

After Nnaemeka reveals that he has chosen a woman to marry outside of his father Okeke's wishes, Okeke vows to his son that he will never see (nor accept) Nene as Nnaemeka's wife. Nene might as well not exist for Okeke, since she does not fit within his rural Ibo community nor his ideas about what constitutes a good wife. Whereas Nnaemeka is marrying Nene for love, Okeke only cares that she fails to live up to his standards of what a good Christian woman should be. He ceases talking to Nnaemeka because he interprets his son's decision as a choice with far-reaching

consequences. In Okeke's eyes, Nnaemeka has essentially chosen Nene and their life in the more modernized, cosmopolitan city of Lagos over his father, his family, and his community. Okeke's silence emphasizes that he finds Nnaemeka's choice unacceptable and dangerous. Again, Okeke does not believe that one can live a life divorced from his or her family and community, and his ardent prayers reflect this stance. He prays dedicatedly in hopes that his Nnaemeka will change course, return to him, and fulfill his duties as a son.

“It has never been heard,” was the verdict of an old man speaking a few weeks later. In that short sentence he spoke for all of his people. This man had come with others to commiserate with Okeke when news went round about his son's behavior.

Related Characters: Nnaemeka, Okeke / Nnaemeka's Father

Related Themes: 



Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

Okeke is joined by others in his village, like this elderly man, who disapprove of Nnaemeka's decision to marry Nene. They reflect on the fact that this idea of marrying from another ethnic group has never been heard, which means it has never been spoken, thought of, or understood as a real possibility until Nnaemeka proved them wrong. Thus, the notion of their beloved community being overtaken by the urban culture to which Nnaemeka has assimilated becomes a very real and visceral threat. This realization is a moment of deep anxiety for the community, who take Nnaemeka's decision as an insult to a deep-rooted tradition of the patriarch dictating the marriages of his family members. It brings them together, suggesting that Nnaemeka's decision implicates all of them. After all, as a member of their community, he is flagrantly flouting their expectations by proposing that they should accept an outsider as one of their own.

“What did Our Lord say?” asked another gentleman. “Sons shall rise against their Fathers; it is there in the Holy Book.” “It is the beginning of the end,” said another.

Related Characters: Nnaemeka, Okeke / Nnaemeka's Father

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 26


Explanation and Analysis

Some men in Okeke's village voice their dismay that Nnaemeka has rejected his father's teachings and chosen to marry Nene, a teacher and city-dweller of whom Okeke does not approve. They use Nnaemeka's actions to suggest that the Lord's prophesy is coming true and the "beginning of the end," is near. The melodramatic reactions from the villagers demonstrate the extent to which marriage and family are intertwined in the community as a whole. It is an unquestionable expectation that fathers will help their sons find wives, and that the sons will accept without challenge. This tradition helps ground the village and keeps familial as well as communal bonds strong from one generation to the next. Thus, Nnaemeka's refusal to marry a woman outside of his village while defying his father poses a risk to the entire community, as it challenges the tenacity of these communal and familial bonds. The resulting anger, spoken fears, and prophesies are the villagers' way of dealing with new questions that arise about their identity as a community.

☞ "If my son wants to kill himself let him do it with his own hands. It is not for me to help him."

Related Characters: Okeke / Nnaemeka's Father (speaker), Nnaemeka, Madubogwu

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Nnaemeka doubles down on his belief that his son has essentially committed suicide and betrayed his community by agreeing to marry Nene. He ignores Madubogwu's suggestions that he should consult a doctor, revealing his doubts about the usefulness of native medicine. In fact, he suggests that the native doctor would make things worse and hasten the symbolic death of his son. Although Okeke wants his son back, he is not desperate enough to risk aggravating the situation and permanently pushing


Nnaemeka further away. This suggests that, although Okeke feels betrayed by Nnaemeka and has resigned himself to his son's self-destruction, he does not wish to cause him any direct harm.

Okeke's words also reveal a bit of hubris. He adamantly believes his son has made a poor choice, in spite of Okeke's advice and subsequent punishment. Consequently, he refuses to save Nnaemeka from himself, which suggests that he wants his son to face his mistake, suffer for it, and prove that Okeke was right. He does not want to rescue him, as he welcomes the opportunity for Nnaemeka to learn an important life lesson so that he can return to Okeke, apologetic, all on his own.

☞ "It amazes me that you could be so unfeeling as to send me your wedding picture. I would have sent it back. But on further thought I decided just to cut off your wife and send it back to you because I have nothing to do with her. How I wish that I had nothing to do with you either."

Related Characters: Okeke / Nnaemeka's Father (speaker), Nene Atang, Nnaemeka

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 



Page Number: 27


Explanation and Analysis

Okeke, angered that Nnaemeka and Nene sent a picture of their wedding picture to him, sends the picture back with Nene cut out of it to symbolize his commitment to having "nothing to do with her." Okeke's refusal to accept Nene stems from his feeling that because he never approved of or accepted her, she has no real place in his family or in their community. In the absence of blood ties, his approval is what would have tethered her to Nnaemeka's lineage. Without it, Nene remains spatially *and* socially distant from Okeke. In contrast, Nnaemeka has blood ties to the community and for that reason, Okeke cannot completely ignore his presence and his claims to the rural community. Nevertheless, he does express his wish that things were different and that he could extinguish the claim his son has to him and the village, if not for the misfortune of their blood relationship.

“Our two sons, from the day they learnt that they have a grandfather, have insisted on being taken to him. I find it impossible to tell them that you will not see them. I implore you to allow Nnaemeka to bring them home for a short time during his leave next month. I shall remain here in Lagos.”

Related Characters: Nene Atang (speaker), Okeke / Nnaemeka’s Father

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 29


Explanation and Analysis

After Okeke has cut off contact with Nnaemeka for eight years, Nene’s letter to Okeke reveals to him, for the first time, that he has two grandsons who would like to see him. This is the only direct line of communication between Nene and Okeke in the story thus far. Consequently, it is an introduction of sorts. Without Nnaemeka as an interlocutor, Nene is able to make a direct appeal to Okeke and reveal bits of herself in the process. The letter is not about her and her hope that Okeke accepts her. Instead, it is about her sons, and how Okeke is doing them a disservice by keeping his stubborn distance from the family. This serves as a turning point in the story, in which Okeke is challenged for shirking his familial duties as a grandfather, just as he denounced Nnaemeka for failing as a son. Nene conveys to Okeke that she hopes that Nnaemeka will be able to bring their sons with him to the village during Nnaemeka’s time off. She adds that she will remain in Lagos, not to garner pity, but to show that her priorities are her sons and making sure that they know their only living grandfather. It also suggests that the progressive bubble of Lagos has become her norm, and she is not quite ready to directly face Okeke’s malice or the unfamiliar rural environment he calls home.

It was one of those rare occasions when even Nature takes a hand in a human fight. Very soon it began to rain, the first rain in the year. It came down in large sharp drops and was accompanied by the lightning and thunder which mark a change of season.

Related Characters: Okeke / Nnaemeka’s Father

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 29


Explanation and Analysis

After Okeke learns that he has two grandsons whom his fight with Nnaemeka have prevented him from meeting, Nature symbolically encourages Okeke to change course and reignite a relationship between himself and the alienated members of his family. Consequently, it acts as the manifestation of Okeke’s inner turmoil and guilt. It demands loudly and effusively—with lightning and thunder—that Okeke become the type of man that his family needs, someone who is present in the lives of the coming generations and passes down important knowledge and the history of their lineage. Because of the overwhelming presence of the storm, Okeke is unable to run from the guilt and shame the knowledge of his grandsons’ trigger. The vigor and intensity of the storm prevent him from forcing his grandsons out of his thoughts with the same ease he once used. The presence of the storm also suggests that the natural world has turned its back on Okeke for his treatment of his family, implying that there is something fundamentally unnatural about Okeke’s behavior towards Nnaemeka and his children.

By a curious mental process he imagined them standing, sad and forsaken, under the harsh angry weather—shut out from his house.

Related Characters: Okeke / Nnaemeka’s Father

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

After a thunderstorm symbolically punishes Okeke for ostracizing his family, the vigor of the storm continues to invade Okeke’s thoughts, washing away his lingering opposition to Nnaemeka’s life outside of the village. The knowledge of his grandsons at last forces Okeke to acknowledge his faults and the ways he may have failed his grandsons. His fears take the form of a daydream. Okeke imagines that his grandsons are trapped in a storm outside of his house, with him unable to help or fulfill his duty as a grandparent by protecting them and teaching them how to

weather the storm, which symbolizes life's trials and tribulations. It is a sobering moment for Okeke, who likely realizes that he is really no different from his son. While Nnaemeka failed to fulfill his duties as a son in Okeke's eyes, Okeke's own failure to fulfill his duties as a grandfather

appear to be just as reprehensible. Although Okeke does not show or say what he will do, his obvious shame and regret hint at a possible reunion between himself and his family members in the near future.



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.

MARRIAGE IS A PRIVATE AFFAIR

In **Lagos**, Nene asks Nnaemeka if he has told his father, Okeke, the exciting news. Nnaemeka reveals that he hasn't and would prefer to tell his father about it "when [he] gets home on leave."

The beginning of Nene and Nnaemeka's conversation hints at the diverging expectations of city life in Lagos and rural life in Nnaemeka's home village. While Nene believes in delivering the "news" as quickly as possible, regardless of Nnaemeka's father distance from them, Nnaemeka believes the news should be delivered personally. In other words, it should be an intimate conversation between father and son.



Nene wonders why Nnaemeka doesn't just write to Okeke instead of delaying the news for another six weeks until his trip. She is eager to "let [Okeke] into our happiness now." Nnaemeka disagrees, however, slowly telling her that he is uncertain about what Okeke's reaction to the news will be.

Nene shows her unfamiliarity with the importance Okeke places on marriage decisions. To her, delaying the news for another six weeks delays the opportunity to share their happiness with Okeke. However, Nnaemeka tempers her reaction, hinting that the couple's happiness is not necessarily a factor in Okeke's possible acceptance and support, and may be a secondary concern to Okeke.



Nene is confused as to why Okeke wouldn't be happy about the news, but Nnaemeka reminds her that she has spent her entire life in **Lagos** and for that reason "know[s] very little about people in remote parts of the country."

For the first time, Nnaemeka makes it explicitly clear to Nene that Lagos and Okeke's village are governed by different rules and expectations. The freedoms that Nene enjoys in Lagos cause her to naively assume that Okeke must be happy about his son's news. Yet these assumptions do not reflect the realities of rural life and the traditional ideas about marriage that persist there.



Nene continues to believe that Okeke will be pleased—she can't fathom how anyone could "be unhappy when their sons are engaged to marry." Nnaemeka explains that not only are his people unsatisfied if "the engagement is not arranged by them," they find it even more concerning when the woman is "not even an Ibo."

The fact that Nene is unable to grasp the differences between urban and rural cultures shows just how distant in proximity, ideas, and expectations Lagos is from Nnaemeka's rural village. Consequently, Nnaemeka must explain to Nene that, according to his village, marriage is not a decision that two individuals make. Rather it is a community decision that is informed by one's ethnic and linguistic identity. Upholding the homogeneity of the village—in contrast to Lagos's more multicultural atmosphere—is a key factor in rural expectations of marriage.



Nene is taken aback by Nnaemeka's bluntness. Growing up in a big, urban city, she always that it was "something of a joke" that marriage would hinge on a person's tribe. For the first time, she wonders whether Okeke will be unhappy about the news after all. She tries to reconcile this possibility with her long-held belief that "Ibos were kindly disposed to other people."

Nnaemeka, however, reminds her that this particular belief about marriage is not specific to Ibos, but a feature of other groups as well. He even suggests Nene's father would react in a similar way if he "were alive and lived in the heart of Ibibio-land."

Nevertheless, Nene continues to urge Nnaemeka to send a "a nice lovely letter" to his father. Again, Nnaemeka refuses, preferring not to "shock" him quite so abruptly. At last, Nnaemeka finally concedes, agreeing that Nnaemeka knows his father better than she does.

Later, on his way back to his home in **Lagos**, Nnaemeka thinks about ways to break the news to his father. He remembers a letter his father sent him recently about Ugoye, the woman Okeke has chosen to marry Nnaemeka. When Nnaemeka gets home, he reads the letter again and remembers Ugoye fondly as "an Amazon of a girl who used to beat up all the boys" and a "dunce."

In the letter, Okeke professes to have found a girl for Nnaemeka that will "suit [Nnaemeka] admirably." Okeke praises Ugoye for her "proper Christian upbringing" and reveals that after she stopped attending school a few years ago, "her father (a man of sound judgement) sent her to live in the house of a pastor where she has received all the training a wife could need." He also adds that Ugoye's Sunday School teacher "has told [him] that she reads her Bible very fluently." Okeke ends the letter hopeful that all parties involved will be able to "begin negotiations" when Nnaemeka returns to the village in December.

Nnaemeka's explanation creates an epiphany for Nene. She must reconcile her cosmopolitan upbringing with Nnaemeka's characterization of rural life and confront the idea (for the first time) that her way of viewing the world is not the standard, but perhaps the exception. As someone unused to considering the importance of her linguistic and ethnic identity, she wonders why Ibos place such a huge emphasis on it. However, Nnaemeka again breaks down her assumptions by saying that many ethnic communities share these traditional ideas of marriage—possibly including hers. These traditional ideas are shaped by the logic of small homogenous communities, and their desire to protect their cultural uniformity and thus preserve their community, rather than the assumption that groups cannot co-exist.



Everything about his Okeke's upbringing suggests that the news of the marriage would shock him, throwing his perspective on tradition, right and wrong, and family in chaos. For this reason, Nnaemeka chooses to deliver the news gently and carefully in person.



Nnaemeka reflects on the woman his father has chosen to be Nnaemeka's wife. His brief characterization of her as an "Amazon of a girl" and a "dunce" reveals how superficially he knows her. It also suggests that his minimal knowledge of the girl is of very little importance to his father, Okeke. Okeke does not place importance on a couple having a strong relationship prior to an engagement. Marriage, then, seems to be more practical than romantic in their culture.



Okeke reveals just how much of a wife's worth is based on her outward display of Christianity. A wife's fervor and dedication to the faith, according to Okeke, trumps intimacy and love. Moreover, Okeke's knowledge of Ugoye's family is also at play here. He is able to reflect on her father's "sound judgment" because he knows the man and can assess the fitness of not only Ugoye, but of her family as well. This suggests the importance of close-knit, rural, communal bonds to Okeke. He knows her father, most likely, because he is a member of the community. This knowledge allows him to better judge the compatibility of the marriage. Furthermore, the letter assumes that Nnaemeka will not contest Okeke's decision because Okeke does not expect his son to have an opinion on his marriage. It is something that he, as the patriarch of his own family, must decide and implement.



Eventually Nnaemeka returns to his village, and on day two of his return, he joins his father under one of his favorite spots under a cassia tree. Nnaemeka begins their conversation by asking Okeke for forgiveness. Okeke is bewildered by his son's request and asks him to explain why he's asking for forgiveness

Nnaemeka's journey to his home prompts a shift in tone from the more open and progressive context of his earlier conversation with Nene. As he enters his father's domain in their rural village and all the traditional expectations that come with it, he feels like he owes his father an apology for his intent to disrupt tradition and disappoint his father, by delivering the "bad" news. Even as an adult man, the opinions and expectations of Okeke clearly still matter to Nnaemeka.



Nnaemeka explains to his startled father that he is asking for forgiveness because of the "marriage question." Okeke is still confused, so Nnaemeka cautiously but decisively explains that "it is impossible for [him] to marry Nweke's daughter," Ugoye.

Okeke is confused because he cannot fathom why there would be a question attached to Nnaemeka's marriage, since it is his sole decision to make as Nnaemeka's father. Nnaemeka's defiant response to this challenges Nnaemeka's monopoly over marriage decisions and attempts to bring the cosmopolitan rationale and freedoms of Lagos into the rural context of his village.



Okeke implores his son to explain why it is impossible, prompting Nnaemeka to explain that he cannot marry someone he does not love. His father responds by telling Nnaemeka that he does not have to love the person he marries, but Nnaemeka implies that he must because "marriage today is different."

Nnaemeka reveals just how much his ideas about marriage diverge from his father's traditional notions. His first reason for why he cannot marry Ugoye is love, which suggests that it is also his first priority in marriage. His father, on the other hand, disagrees and dismisses love as an impractical, lofty, and naïve concern in a marriage. Nnaemeka nevertheless insists his personal beliefs have changed and no longer fit into his father's expectations.



Okeke, however, insists that "nothing is different," and that Nnaemeka should only worry about whether his wife has "a good character and a Christian background."

Despite his son's challenge, Okeke still very much prioritizes Ugoye's Christian background and her vetted good character over whether his son loves her or not. Though Nnaemeka is an adult, Okeke's paternal side comes out in this scene. He easily dismisses his son's earlier points and continues to insist that his definition of marriage is best because he knows better and can better assess what is best for Nnaemeka.



Nnaemeka changes tack and finally reveals that he has found another woman, with all of "Ugoye's good qualities." His father reacts with disbelief to the news, but Nnaemeka continues by describing Nene as a "good Christian."

Nnaemeka's revelation is a surprise to Okeke, who up until this moment had most likely assumed that Nnaemeka finding his own wife was out of the realm of possibility. To Okeke, after all, part of being a good son is heeding the expectations of your family and your community. Nnaemeka, then, attempts to soften the severity of his revelation by emphasizing Nene's Christianity, as if to show Okeke that he hasn't completely abandoned his duties as a good son and forgotten the importance of faith in a marriage.



Nnaemeka goes on to explain that Nene is also a “teacher at a Girl’s School in **Lagos**.” Okeke reacts angrily to this news. He points out that not only does Nene’s job disqualify her from being a good wife, it also proves that Nene is not following St. Paul’s command in Corinthians that “women should keep silence.” Okeke begins to pace as it is revealed that he “condemned vehemently those church leaders who encouraged women to teach in their schools.”

Okeke composes himself and asks about Nene’s background and who her father is. Nnaemeka explains that her full name is Nene Atang, which further shocks his father. Nnaemeka explains, however, that she is from Calabar and “is the only girl [he] can marry.” Nnaemeka knows he’s being too abrupt and waits for “the storm to burst.”

Instead of lashing out, though, Okeke reacts by walking away, which to Nnaemeka feels far more alarming and hostile than a “threatening speech” from his father. Later, Okeke refuses to eat as well.

A day later, Okeke tries to dissuade his son from marrying Nene, though Nnaemeka remains committed to his decision, and his “heart was hardened.” Okeke gives up and sees his son as a lost cause. He dismisses him by arguing that as a father, it is his job to teach Nnaemeka right and from wrong. He also admonishes his son, telling him that “whoever put this idea into [his] head might as well have cut [his] throat,” and “it is Satan’s work.”

Once Nnaemeka reveals that Nene is a teacher, Okeke reaches his breaking point. It is one thing for his son to attempt to marry a woman he does not know and who comes from a world outside of their village, but it is another thing for Nnaemeka to marry a woman who flagrantly and wrongly scorns Christian tenets by becoming a teacher. He reminds his son of this by referencing St. Paul’s passage in the Bible, in order to add credibility to his anger and show his son that he is backed by a higher power. Okeke’s version of Christianity is strict and intractable—people who stand outside of it and practice their own version of Christianity are condemnable and akin to false believers.



Okeke gives his son the false sense that he is warming up to the idea of him marrying Nene by inquiring more about her. In reality, he asks to for more information to build his case for why Nnaemeka must not go through with the marriage. Nnaemeka seems to sense this. He reveals these things about Nene in quick succession as if he will lose the courage if he delays giving Okeke this information. Nnaemeka anxiously waits for his father’s anger and resentment to overflow and bring the conversation to an emotional conclusion.



Nnaemeka has temporarily stunted Okeke’s ability to speak, act, or eat. To deal with his son’s betrayal, Okeke recedes into himself and abstains from human communication and nourishment. Okeke has lost something central to his sense of self as a father because of his son’s decision. As a result, he cannot derive joy from abating normal human needs, because he feels he has lost an identity to nurture or express.



Okeke continues to try to dissuade his son from marrying Nene, even as his hope that his son will change his mind wanes. At last, when Nnaemeka shows that he will never change, Okeke dismisses him from his sight—and, ceremonially, from the family and the village. To Okeke, Nnaemeka has not only disobeyed him, he has unforgivably chosen sin over his family, community, and traditions. Okeke implies that Nnaemeka is essentially dead to him, suggesting that one cannot properly live when alienated from one’s biological and communal roots. Thus, only Satan, according to Okeke, can be responsible for a son making such an egregious error.



Though Okeke dismisses his son, Nnaemeka suggests that Okeke will eventually change his mind after he meets Nene and gets to know her. Okeke responds by claiming that he “shall never see her.”

Afterwards, Okeke barely speaks to Nnaemeka, though he continues to hope that Nnaemeka will recognize the error of his ways and grasp the severity of “the danger he [is] heading for.” Every day and night, Okeke prays for his son to realize his mistakes.

Meanwhile, Nnaemeka continues to hope his father will come around. He remains optimistic because he fails to realize that “never in the history of his people had a man married a woman who spoke a different tongue.”

Other people in their village share Okeke’s opinion. An old man reminds his people that Nnaemeka’s plan “has never been heard,” a phrase that speaks for everyone in the community.

News about Nnaemeka’s plans continue to spread among the people in the rural village even after Nnaemeka has returned to **Lagos**. More people share their opinion on the issue to commiserate with Okeke. Another person in the community claims that Nnaemeka’s actions are alluded to in the Bible: “Sons shall rise against their Fathers; it is there in the Holy book.” Yet another person decrees that “it is the beginning of the end.”

Okeke is adamant that he will never meet Nene because he refuses to overlook his son’s disobedience and Nene’s deviant ideas about women’s role as Christians. Thus, he will not take part in eroding tradition nor in sinning by meeting her.



Okeke feels like his son has denied him his rights as a father and plunged their family into crisis. His punishment and alienation of Nnaemeka, though severe, matches the gravity of Nnaemeka’s mistake in his eyes. Okeke continues to believe that Nnaemeka is in spiritual danger and prays for his son to change his mind and choose Okeke, tradition, and Okeke’s own notions about Christianity over his desire to marry Nene.



Nnaemeka’s optimism is well-meaning, though naïve. He fails to seriously consider how persistent his father’s ideas about marriage are. In reality, they are just as old as the village and are a significant part of its history and identity. Therefore, Nnaemeka’s decision threatens both this identity and the cohesiveness of the community. His decision thus has repercussions for his family as well as those in the community.



Nnaemeka’s decision involves everyone, because it plunges the cohesiveness of the community into chaos. People take Okeke’s side by refuting Nnaemeka’s actions. That Nnaemeka’s action has never been spoken before, and thus never heard, makes his decision seem especially extreme and perverse.



As more people come to commiserate with Okeke, people quote the Bible to liken Nnaemeka’s decision with the “beginning of the end.” This shows that there is a shared anxiety that Nnaemeka’s decision is a threat to the community’s cohesion. His decision, after all, may signal the end of the group’s identity, and their end to the claim of the shared traditions, language, and background that unifies them.



As the conversation becomes increasingly religious, a “highly practical man” named Madubogwu suggests an ordinary solution to Okeke’s problem. He suggests that Okeke “[consult] a **native doctor** about [his] son.” Okeke, however, denies that Nnaemeka is sick, but Madubogwu insists that his “mind is diseased,” and that Nnaemeka needs a “good herbalist [to] bring him back to his right senses” with a medicine called *Amalile*. He explains that women use the medicine to “recapture their husbands’ straying affection.”

Though others in the community agree with Madubogwu, Okeke insists he will not involve a **native doctor** and make the same “superstitious” mistake as Mrs. Ochuba. He explains that he prefers Nnaemeka to “kill himself [...] with his own hands.”

Madubogwu insists that Mrs. Ochuba’s mistake “was her fault,” as she did not go to an “honest herbalist.” Another man from the village, Jonathon, interjects and disagrees. He claims that Mrs. Ochuba was a “wicked murderess,” who did not use the medicine on her husband, who it was prepared and intended for. Instead she used it to kill the herbalist—who it was never intended for.

Six months later, Nnaemeka receives a letter from his father, which he shows Nene—who is now his wife. The letter accuses Nnaemeka of being “unfeeling,” for sending a wedding picture to Okeke. Okeke reveals that he wanted to send the picture back as is, but has instead cut Nene out of the picture and sent just that portion back because he wants “nothing to do with her.” Okeke also reveals that he wishes he could have “nothing to do with [Nnaemeka]” as well.

Madubogwu suggests that Okeke consult a native doctor because he believes only a “sick” son would decide to marry a woman outside of the community, given the stakes. When Okeke refutes this, Madubogwu insists that Nnaemeka is not only sick, but “diseased.” His use of “diseased” here suggests that Nnameka’s ailment is much more dangerous than a mere sickness. His spiritual illness is implied to be contagious and life-threatening, and thus must be dealt with swiftly and immediately, lest they risk even more destruction to the community. Madubogwu suggests that with a good herbalist, Okeke can “recapture” his son’s attention which has strayed for far too long on a woman and a type of Christianity that deviates from Okeke’s own brand. “Recaptur[ing]” also suggests a coming home—it would allow Okeke to recapture his son’s respect of his rural background and the expectations that come with it.



While Okeke still believes that Nnaemeka is in spiritual danger, he refuses to give into his fears and let superstitions help him kill his son, like Mrs. Ochuba did. This suggests that, while Nnaemeka has betrayed his, Okeke still cares deeply for his son and wants the best for him. He believes that Nnaemeka’s decision already comes with adequate spiritual danger and does not see any reason to further punish his son for his sin of an illicit marriage.



While some villagers claim that Mrs. Ochuba’s mistake (which proved fatal for her son) stemmed from her choice of herbalist, others claim that her actions are a result of her being a wicked murderess. In other words, she knew beforehand about the effect that the prepared medicine would have on a person it was not intended for, but decided to use it anyway. This scene gives one the sense that the practices of a native doctor bear a hint of mysticism, which could help explain why Okeke, a devout Christian, wants nothing to do with it.



Nene and Nnaemeka’s marriage in spite of Okeke’s disapproval shows that they do not feel bound to traditional pressures. Okeke sends back their wedding picture to them with Nene cut out to emphasize how he will never relent and recognize Nene as a member of his family. The gesture’s violent undertones suggest that Okeke would rip her out of the family, just like in the picture, if he could. This also implies that he wishes he could do the same to Nnaemeka, if not for the fact that they are related by blood. Though angered, one can see that Okeke still cares very much about the family. Nnaemeka is still his son and nothing can change that.



Nene begins to cry, but Nnaemeka implores her not to and reassures her that his father “is essentially good-natured” and will come around eventually.

However, eight years pass and Okeke still refuses to speak to Nnaemeka. Okeke writes to his son only three times during those years, but only to refuse his son permission to “come home and spend his leave.” Okeke is adamant that he cannot let Nnaemeka into his home and writes to his son that it doesn’t matter to him “where or how you spend your leave—or your life, for that matter.”

Meanwhile in **Lagos**, Nene and Nnaemeka face prejudice from Ibos there as well. Though the women aren’t openly mean to Nene, they pay “her such excessive deference as to make her feel she was not one of them.” Nevertheless, Nene “[breaks] through some of this prejudice and even [begins] to make friends among them.” Gradually people in Lagos begin to accept her after they realize she “kept her home much better than most of them.”

News of Nnaemeka and Nene’s happy marriage spreads throughout Okeke’s village, but no one dares to mention this to Okeke because of how his son’s name triggers his temper. Hence, Okeke successfully “[pushes] his son to the back of his mind,” though the “strain [...] nearly [kills] him.”

Isolated from the village, Nnaemeka starts to console Nene, promising her that Okeke will eventually change his mind. He chooses to forget that older ideas do not disappear easily as long as there are people, like Okeke to uphold them.



Just as Okeke believes Nnaemeka denied him of his rights as a father by marrying Nene, Okeke is determined to deny Nnaemeka his rights as a son by symbolically disowning him. Nnaemeka no longer belongs in Okeke’s home because part of the price of belonging is upholding following tradition and heeding Okeke’s expectations. Because Okeke does not want Nnaemeka to sully his home and way of life with his divergent views on marriage and tradition, he refuses to see his son.



Nene is not completely free from prejudice in Lagos. The Ibos there, perhaps taking cues from their own rural backgrounds, coyly make her feel like she is a stranger among them. But Nene’s ability to overcome their poor treatment and find camaraderie among them, shows that Lagos begets more possibilities than its rural counterpart. It is a place to wrestle with and overcome traditional ideas about belonging and marriage. In the end, the Ibos in Lagos place more value on Nene’s skills, rather than her ethnic and linguistic background, in evaluating her as a suitable member of their group. This further undercuts Okeke’s belief that one’s ethnic background is an important factor in evaluating a woman’s fitness as a wife.



Ironically, it is Okeke who seems to be suffering more from his family’s splintering. It is he, rather than Nnaemeka, who approaches the emotional and spiritual death he anticipated for his son earlier. The loss of his son has provoked a visceral reaction within him, consuming him and leading him closer to a self-inflicted demise.



One day, Okeke receives a letter from Nene. At first, he glances at it briefly, but its contents spur him to read more closely. Nene writes that her two sons, “from the day they learnt that they have a grandfather,” have begun to ask to see Okeke. She admits, however, that it feels “impossible to tell them that [Okeke] will not see them.” She ends the letter by hoping that Okeke will allow Nnaemeka to bring their children to visit Okeke next month, while she stays behind in **Lagos**.

Nene's letter to Okeke is their only instance of direct communication. Without Nnaemeka as a liaison, it is the first time that Okeke becomes truly acquainted with his daughter in law: her way of speaking, her concerns, and her love for her children. While he thinks he is doing right by his family by alienating his son, Nene implies that Okeke is wrong. She hints to Okeke that rather than punishing her sons for their father, Nnaemeka's actions, he should consider the effects of his self-exile from the family, as it hurts a generation that was born into the conflict through no fault of their own. Nene shows that she is not interested in changing Okeke's mind about her—consequently, she will remain in her progressive bubble of Lagos. Her priorities are her sons, and forging a relationship between them and their grandfather. She is a stark contrast to Okeke as a parent.



After reading the letter, Okeke senses the cracks in the “resolution he had built up over so many years.” He tries to fight his waning resolve, and the effort of the struggle makes him look out the window and notice the world outside. He sees that the sky is overcast, and the wind is aggressively blowing leaves and dust, suggesting that “it was one of those rare occasions when even **Nature** takes a hand in a human fight.” It begins to rain soon after that, “accompanied by the lightning and thunder which mark a change of season.”

The letter deeply resonates with Okeke, whose long-held resistance to his son's marriage shows signs of collapsing. Nene's words spark an internal struggle within him, and he has to decide in that moment whether to uphold his traditional notions of right and wrong, or to read uncharted territory and reinvent his identity as the family's patriarch. Of course, Okeke, being the traditionalist he is, at first appears to be successful in his attempts to remain dedicated to his ideas about marriage and tradition. However, Okeke's potential success is halted by Nature. In this moment, his environment is the personification of his consciousness in that moment—it is volatile, angry, and adamant that Okeke must change his ways. It urges Okeke to end the season of resentment and begin a new season of forgiveness.



Okeke continues to attempt to suppress thoughts about his two grandsons, albeit unsuccessfully. He even hums a hymn to distract himself, but the large rain drops from the storm interrupts him, and he begins to think of the children again.

Okeke continues to fight his consciousness and feelings of guilt. Knowledge of his grandson's existence, however, proves incredibly difficult to suppress as it is a painful sign of how much he has failed his family by alienating the future generation. For once, his faith, exemplified through the hymn, is not enough to provide him solace and keep him committed to his stance. Meanwhile, Nature remains a persistent presence in this passage and continues to loudly and consistently (through the rain drops) demand that he choose the path of love and forgiveness.



Okeke begins to feel guilty and wonders how he “could [have] shut his door against them.” He imagines them outside in the “angry” weather, locked out of his house, sad and forsaken. Consequently, he is unable to sleep that night because of his guilt and the fear “that he might die without making it up to them.”

Finally, Okeke breaks and shows the first clear signs of regret about what he has done. The image of his grandsons outside in the weather, “sad and forsaken,” is a moment in which he must come to terms with how he has failed to be a source of protection and guidance for them within the chaotic conditions of the world. He has not been there to help them weather life’s storms like he was supposed to. His guilt follows him into his bed that night and keeps him company in the absence of his distant family. The story ends on an ambiguous note, but the fear of death without atonement replaces Okeke’s earlier commitment to tradition as his primary concern, signaling a possible end to the standoff between him and his son.





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