

Symbolism in Chinua Achebe's Writing Style

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Abstract

The writer, Chinua Achebe uses this style of writing 'Symbolism' in his first novel (**Things Fall Apart ; TFA**) in 1958, during British Colonial era (period) in Nigeria. To some extent may challenge White People readers that Black People have their own culture, values, traditions, customs and religions. Beside they have white hearts, knowledge, history, and intellectuality. Authors use symbolism to communicate a deeper idea than actually write. Symbolism is an object used by an author to open doors of meaning. Signs and symbols are important concepts to understand literature. For example, in this case the word "tree" generally stands for a large class of plants ; if I say "look at that tree" am designating a specific meaning for the word. Chinua Achebe put African literature on the map due to his various styles of writing.

Keywords (05) : symbolism, culture, intellectuality, Chinua Achebe, African literature

Résumé

L'écrivain, Chinua Achebe utilise ce style d'écriture "Symbolisme" dans son premier roman (Things Fall Apart ; TFA) en 1958, pendant l'ère coloniale britannique (période) au Nigeria. Dans une certaine mesure, les lecteurs de "White People" peuvent défier le fait que les Noirs ont leur propre culture, leurs valeurs, leurs traditions, leurs coutumes et leurs religions. En plus, ils ont le cœur blanc, la connaissance, l'histoire et l'intellectualité. Les auteurs utilisent le symbolisme pour communiquer une idée plus profonde que l'écriture réelle. Le symbolisme est un objet utilisé par un auteur pour ouvrir les portes du sens. Les signes et les symboles sont des concepts importants pour comprendre la littérature. Par exemple, dans ce cas, le mot « arbre » désigne généralement une grande classe de plantes ; si je dis "regarde cet arbre", je désigne un sens spécifique pour le mot. Chinua Achebe a mis la littérature africaine sur la carte en raison de ses différents styles d'écriture.

Mots clés : symbolisme, culture, intellectualisme, Chinua Achebe, Littérature africaine

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Introduction

Symbolism is the art movement, the theory, or practice of the late 19th century symbolists. The use of light and dark symbolizes good and evil. Symbols refer to domination are : fire, flames, heat, hot temperatures. And those refer to salvation are : crosses, angles, haloes, clouds, churches, rainbows, dawn, sunrise, broken chairs, etc. Symbols refer to death or endings, gravestones, cemeteries, skulls, candles blowing out, ringing of bell. The name “symbolist” itself was first applied by critic Jean Moreas, who invented the term to distinguish the symbolists from the related decadents. Symbolism had a significant influence on modernism, and its traces can be detected in the work of many modernist artists, including T.S. Eliot and William Butler Yeats in Anglophone tradition and Ruben Dario in Hispanic Literature. After the beginning of the 20th century, symbolism had a major effect on Russian poetry even as it became less popular in France. Understanding symbolism will enhance your child’s understanding of deeper meaning behind written words. Achebe used variety of Symbolism in his writing style: Proverbs “if a child washed his hand, he could eat with kings”. (TFA, p. 6). Beside idioms and similes derived from the Ibo (his ethnic community).

Who’s Chinua Achebe, briefly ?

Chinua Achebe was born on 16 November 1930 in Ogidi, Nigeria. His parents were Christians, they heavily inundated him with traditional Ibo values. He received his B.A. from London University in 1953, and later the director of External Broadcasting for Nigerian Broadcasting Service. From (1987-88) he was Professor of English at University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and also at the University of Connecticut, Storrs. He still there till his death on March 2013. The famous African writer who put African Literature on the map. He is a writer, editor, essayist, poet, novelist, critic, story teller, and children’s writer. *Things Fall Apart* (TFA) is his first and famous novel, a description of the cultural clash between native African culture and traditional white culture. A major theme of Achebe’s writing is the social and psychological impact of European imperialism on indigenous African societies. A variety of Symbolism is used in his writing style of the language: proverbs “if a child washed his hand, he could eat with kings” (TFA., p. 6). Beside idioms and similes derived from the Ibo ethnic community. Later will see more about.

What is Symbolism?

Symbolism according to *American Dictionary* (2000) refers to the practice of representing things by means of symbols or of attributing symbolic meanings to objects, events, or relationships. The use of symbols to represent ideas, especially in art and literature. Symbolism is the art movement, the theory, or practice of the late 19th century symbolists. The use of light and dark symbolizes good and evil. Symbols refer to domination are : fire, flames, heat, hot temperatures. And those refer to salvation are : crosses, angles, haloes, clouds, churches, rainbows, dawn, sunrise, broken chairs, etc. Symbols refer to death or endings ; gravestones, cemeteries, skulls, candles blowing out, ringing of bell. The name “symbolist” itself was first applied by critic Jean Moreas, who invented the term to distinguish the symbolists from the related decadents :

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[Symbolism was hostile to] “plain meanings, declamations, false sentimentality and matter-of-fact description”, and that its goal instead was to “clothe the ideal in perceptible form”.
(reference/Author, year: page(s))

Symbolism had a significant influence on modernism, and its traces can be detected in the work of many modernist artists, including T.S. Eliot and William Butler Yeats in Anglophone tradition and Ruben Dario in Hispanic Literature. After the beginning of the 20th century, symbolism had a major effect on Russian poetry even as it became less popular in France. Understanding symbolism will enhance your child’s understanding of deeper meaning behind written words. Rachel Mark (2012), argues that:

“Symbolism is when the author uses an object or reference to add deeper meaning to a story. Symbolism is often used to support a literary theme in a subtle manner.”

Authors use symbolism to communicate a deeper idea than actually write. Symbolism is an object used by author to open doors of meaning. They use objects, actions, and characters to give more meaning to the thing itself. Symbolism helps readers connect the story to other main ideas. Throughout many traditions the sun represents the father and male principle and the moon represents the mother and feminine principle. Signs and symbols are important concepts to understand literature. Words as ordinarily used are signs in this sense, the word ‘tree’ generally stands for a large class of plants; if I say, “look at that tree”, am designating a specific meaning for the word.

What are common cultural symbols?

When we are looking for cultural symbols in literature, we will want to think of what symbols represent moral standards, beliefs or patriotic theme for a culture or country. Sometimes cultural symbols are more specific to a particular cultural group. For example, American cultural symbols are; Red, white and blue colors and written on its coin, “in God We Trust”. Medals and swords symbolize a number of the military. Nets and ropes can symbolize a fisherman or sea captain. *Sideiri* and swords identify Bija people in the eastern Sudan. Taken out the front teeth is traditional cultural symbols of Denka tribe in the Republic of South Sudan. Also Immah and Jalabiya represent traditional Sudanese culture of men’s clothes. Renaud and Tannenbaum (2013), quoted the verses of poetry which drawn an image of the whole world up to the personal home “heart”. Peace now is global demand.

- (1) *“If there is to be peace in the world, there must be peace in the nations.
If there is to be peace in the nations, there must be peace in the cities.
If there is to be peace in the cities, there must be peace between neighbors.
If there is to be peace between neighbors, there must be peace in the home.
If there is to be peace in the home, there must be peace in the heart.”*
Lao-tzu (6th century B.C.)

In many English classrooms throughout the world, there are students who mistrust or even fear each other because they belong to groups with a history of conflict based on national, political, ethnic, or other differences. Intergroup conflict often endures because people do not have the opportunity to interact personally and rely instead on long-standing stereotypes. The actions of

governments often make solutions difficult to reach. Successful language teaching utilizes methods designed to engage students in communicative activities based on their backgrounds, opinions and other personal characteristics. Some of the activities are attributed to specific authors, while others have been disseminated in various forms throughout the years and used by many teachers. Although our students were mostly at the beginning level of English.

How do writers use symbols ?

Writers insert symbols in their writing to allude a feeling, mood or attitude without directly stating the perspective or mood instead. Symbolism is supplemental orientation to the story. Farley, (2012) demonstrated that : *“Symbolism is an artistic movement that tries to express abstract or mystical ideas through symbolic use of images. Roads symbolize the visible exploitative means linking Africa to Europe.”*

Symbolism was largely reaction against naturalism and realism, anti-idealistic styles which were attempts to represent reality in its gritty particularity, to elevate humble and the ordinary over the ideal. Juris (1967) believes that :

“Symbolism is a reaction in favor of spirituality, imagination, and dreams. Symbolists believe that art should represent absolute truths that could only be described indirectly. They wrote in metaphorical and suggestive manner, enduring particular images or objects with symbolic meaning.”

Jean Morea’s (1886) published the ‘Symbolist Manifesto’ announced that symbolism was hostile to : *“ plain meanings, declamations, false sentimentality, and matter-of-fact description – its goal was to clothe the ideal in perceptible form.”*

Achebe’s feel for the African contexts has influenced his aesthetic of the novel as well as the technical aspects of his work. As Bruce King comments in Introduction to Nigerian Literature : *“Achebe was the first Nigerian writer to successfully transmute the conventions of the novel, a European art form, into African literature.”*

In an Achebe novel, King notes : *“European character study is subordinated to the portrayal of communal life ; European economy of form is replaced by an aesthetic appropriate to the rhythms of traditional tribal life.”*

When Achebe was asked for the long gap (21 years) between his novels ‘*A Man of the People, 1966*’ and ‘*Anthills of the Savannah, 1987.*’ He replied, *“Well, it was a long period, but it was not a period of silence, the novel is not the only form of expression I have.”*

(Lindfors, 1982) demonstrated Achebe’s wisdom : *“No single man can be correct all the time, no single idea can be totally correct.”*

Achebe’s Writing Style

Achebe began researching and writing his most famous novel, *Things Fall Apart* which was published two years prior to Nigerian autonomy in 1960. It is a realistic and anthropological traces the conflict between Igbo and Western customs through the characterization of Okonkwo, a proud village leader, who refuses European influences, which lead him to murder

and suicide. In this novel Achebe uses symbols widely ; rain, fire, moon, dark, yams, palm oil, holy snake, and other ironic words, to consolidate African history, culture, traditions, social life, and values. The novel consists of many cultural specific words of Igbo's Language such as :

- (2) *Agade - nay... means an old woman*
IL..... means the village play ground
Chi..... personal god
Niche..... elders
Umuofia kwenu..... a shout of greeting
Yaa..... answer/ yes
Efulefu..... worthless man
Egwugwu..... a masquerader who impersonates one of the ancestral spirits of the village
Ekwe..... a musical instrument; a type of drum made from wood.
Eneke-nti-oba..... a kind of bird
Eze-agadi-nwayi..... the teeth of an old woman
Iba..... fever. (TFA, p. 151)

Achebe in his novel *Arrow of God 1964*, describes *Igbo* village life during the late 1920s centres on Ezeudu, spiritual leader, whose son Oduche stands a missionary school to learn about Western society and technology. Highlighting the wide spread graft and abuse of power by Nigerian leaders for the independence from Great Britain. Achebe says for *Arrow of God* that : *“peculiar quality may lie in the fact it is the novel which I am most likely to be caught sitting down to read again”*. (Preface to Second Edition of *Arrow of God*)

Achebe uses symbols referring to salvation ; clouds, churches, angles, haloes and crosses

- (3) *“Okonkwo was popularly called the “Roaring Flame”. As he looked into the log fire, he recalled the name. He was a flaming fire. How then could he have begotten a son like Nwoye, degenerate and effeminate ? Perhaps he was not his not son. No! he could not be. His wife had played him false. He would teach her ! But Nwoye resembled his grandfather, Unoka who was Okonkwo's father. At Nwoye's age Okonkwo had already become famous throughout Umuofia for his wrestling and fearlessness.”*

Symbolism can take many forms in literature

1. A figure of speech where an object, person, or situation has.
2. The actions of a character, word, action, or an event that have a deeper meaning in the context.
3. In metaphor, there is an additional meaning to a word. For example, Time is money, rainfall is happiness, and life is a roller – This is symbolic expression because it indicates that there will be ups and downs in life. (Denise Lowery, 2013, p. 12) exemplifies that: *“What do we mean when we say, ‘John's eyes are too big for his stomach!’?”*

Certainly, we don't mean to say that John's eyes don't physically fit inside his stomach. Native speakers of English have a life time of exposure to English Language and culture that helps them understand figurative, symbolic, and idiomatic expressions, which are based on

symbolism or metaphor. The expression means that John puts more food on his plate than he can eat. But what about the learner of English as a foreign language (EFL) ? How does he/she acquire the tools needed to unlock the puzzle of figurative speech in English ? Figurative or symbolic expression relies heavily on metaphor to convey its message. Metaphor, in turn, often relies heavily on culture for its meaning (Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

Summary of the Article

Chinua Achebe inserts symbols in his writing to allude a feeling, mood or attitude without directly stating the perspective or mood instead. Symbolism is supplemental orientation to the story. Farlex, (2012) demonstrated that Symbolism is an artistic movement that tries to express abstract or mystical ideas through symbolic use of images. Roads symbolize the visible exploitative means linking Africa to Europe.

Symbolism was largely reaction against naturalism and realism, anti-idealistic styles which were attempts to represent reality in its gritty particularity, to elevate humble and the ordinary over the ideal. Juris (1967) believes that Symbolism is a reaction in favor of spirituality, imagination, and dreams. Symbolists believe that art should represent absolute truths that could only be described indirectly. They wrote in metaphorical and suggestive manner, enduring particular images or objects with symbolic meaning. Jean Moreau's (1886) published the 'Symbolist Manifesto' announced that symbolism was hostile to plain meanings, declamations, false sentimentality, and matter-of-fact description – its goal was to clothe the ideal in perceptible form.

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