

Dead Men's Path



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CHINUA ACHEBE

Chinua Achebe was born on November 16, 1930 in Ogidi, Nigeria. The fifth child of Isaiah Okafor Achebe, a Christian catechism teacher, and Janet Ileogbunam, he was born into a privileged and educated family and christened Albert as a homage to Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert. Nevertheless, Chinua Achebe's first language was Igbo, 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. He grew up listening to Igbo language and traditional stories. This allowed him to develop a strong affinity for Igbo culture, which he continued to appreciate as he learned and became fluent in English. Though he excelled in his secondary studies and matriculated into University College of Ibadan to study medicine, he ultimately switched to a liberal arts curriculum and studied history, religion, and English instead. Around that time, Achebe was stirred up by the growing nationalist sentiment and calls for independence, so he began to go by his Igbo name "Chinua," a name whose long form "Chinualumogo" means "My spirit come fight for me." It was also in college where he began to publish stories like "Dead Men's Path," which explores the community upheavals and cultural tensions that occur as a result of the colonial presence of foreign powers, like the British Empire, 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 culture. As his writing career took off, he worked as a professor in schools in Nigeria and the United States. He published his last novel in 1987, three years before a car crash in Lagos left him paralyzed from the waist down. Achebe died in 2013 in Boston, Massachusetts.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Chinua Achebe began writing at a time of great turmoil on the African continent. Massive movements for independence were occurring all around him. The African nation of Ghana, for example, was the first African nation and British colony to gain independence in 1958, just five years after Achebe published "Dead Men's Path," and in the same year he published his most acclaimed novel, [Things Fall Apart](#). Many African nations followed, including Achebe's own home country, Nigeria, in 1960. The 1960s saw Achebe's newly independent country heading into new terrain as political and ethnic tensions and military coups made the future of the country uncertain (his fourth novel, [A Man of the People](#), explores the realities and

hardships of the newly independent country closely). Nigeria eventually entered a civil war, known as the Biafran war, from 1967-1970 due to the fact that the Igbos, an ethnic group of Nigeria, wanted to claim their independence and become the independent state of Biafra. Achebe openly supported the Igbos and was integral in lobbying for and on behalf of the seedling Biafran government before the rebellion was crushed and the Civil War ended.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Throughout his luminous career, Achebe's work dealt with the conflict between colonized people and colonial figures. It is perhaps for this reason that Achebe continues to be hailed as the father of African Literature. He paved the way for African and other writers to talk about the legacy of colonialism from their point of view, outside the western perspective, while developing a nuanced and effective way of expressing it. One of these writers is Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, a Kenyan author whose novel [A Grain of Wheat](#) continues to be a postcolonial classic. Like Achebe's work, it deals with cultural clashes that occur in the lives of colonized people who live at the intersection of indigenous and western cultural expectations. [Death and the King's Horseman](#) by Wole Soyinka, a fellow Nigerian writer, also explores themes such as cultural identity, a community's pull towards western modernity, and the disruptive and lasting effects that can occur when sacred indigenous rights are violated in the name of progress. Additionally, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, one of the most widely recognized Nigerian writers of today, not only explores many of the same issues as Achebe in her writing, but she also directly pays homage to him by beginning her debut novel, [Purple Hibiscus](#), with an allusion to one of Achebe's most influential books, [Things Fall Apart](#). Finally, Toni Morrison, Nobel Prize winner and one of the premier American writers of our time, has cited Achebe as one of her literary inspirations, proving that Achebe's footprint in the literary world extends beyond Africa and remains steadfast more than fifty years after he debuted his works.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "Dead Men's Path"
- **When Written:** 1953
- **Where Written:** Nigeria
- **When Published:** 1953
- **Literary Period:** Postcolonial
- **Genre:** Fiction, short story
- **Setting:** A British African colony (most likely Nigeria) in 1949
- **Climax:** A woman dies in childbirth after Michael Obi, the

zealous headmaster refuses to reopen an ancestral path.

- **Antagonist:** The short story does not have a traditional antagonist, but Michael Obi's actions do alienate him from the villagers, leading to the major conflict of the story, the closing of an ancestral path and the subsequent death of a woman during childbirth.
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Children's Writer. Chinua Achebe is also a children's writer. He published *Chike and the River*, the first of his children's stories in 1966. It tells the story of a boy named Chike who moves from a village to a big city to live with his uncle.

Prestigious Prize. Chinua Achebe won the Man Booker Prize in 2007. It is one of the highest and most renowned literary prizes in the English-speaking world.



PLOT SUMMARY

Michael Obi is appointed the headmaster of the Ndume Central School by the Mission authorities, a religious colonial and gubernatorial organization. The Ndume Central School is still considered unprogressive and has yet to modernize, prompting the Mission Authorities to see Obi's youth and energy as an advantage to the struggling school. Obi carries the weight of this responsibility with arrogance and sees his own secondary education as a point of pride that will ensure his success as the headmaster of the school.

Obi's wife, Nancy, celebrates his promotion and together they make plans to modernize the school by planting **gardens** and beautifying the school grounds. Nancy and Obi also deride the older educators who do not share their progressive mindset while preparing to lead the school towards a new modern direction; they view these old educators as unsophisticated and unfit for teacher positions. Meanwhile Nancy daydreams of being the revered "queen" of the school and prepares to lead it by example.

Obi and his wife eventually lead the school by emphasizing high-quality teaching and planting beautiful gardens on the school grounds. However, one evening Obi sees an old woman from the village walk through the school compound and through the school gardens. Upon following her footsteps, he finds a little-used **path** that leads from the school to the village. Obi confronts another teacher about the path, who tells Obi about its importance to the villagers and notes that there was a huge outrage last time the school tried to close down the path. Nevertheless, Obi decides to construct a fence to prohibit the path from further use in fear that the Government Education Officer will see signs of its use during a coming inspection.

A few days later, the village priest visits Obi to try to get him to

change his mind about the path, citing the path's importance to the culture and history and explaining that it is because of the path that their ancestors can visit them and new children can be born. Obi refuses to reopen the path, emphasizing that it is his job to "eradicate" beliefs and actions that are pagan in nature and go against the modern goals of the school—in fact, he wants his students "to laugh at" pagan beliefs.

Two days later, a woman dies during childbirth, which the villagers see as their punishment for the closing of the path. A diviner reveals that "heavy sacrifice" will be necessary to satisfy the ancestors angered by the path's closing. Obi wakes up the next morning to see that his gardens and much of his school grounds have been utterly destroyed. That day, a white Supervisor visits the school for the inspection. He writes a scathing report about the school grounds and the "tribal-war situation" that has sprung up between the school and the villagers, largely due to Obi's "misguided zeal."



CHARACTERS

Michael Obi – Twenty-six-year-old Michael Obi is protagonist of the story and Nancy Obi's husband. As the new headmaster of the Ndume Central School, most of his time is spent antagonizing the village community for their use of a prohibited **path** that runs through the school grounds, worrying about the school's appearance, and wondering whether or not the Missionary Authority, the colonial organization that appointed him headmaster, will be pleased with the way he has modernized the school. Obi often discredits or ignores the advice of fellow teachers and respected members of the surrounding village—particularly the village priest—in favor of his own ideas about modernity. Despite the fact that these ideas oftentimes come into stark opposition with the cultural history and traditions of the community at large, Obi is often too prideful and stubborn to change course even as tensions rise between him and the villagers. Obi's decision to prohibit the use of the village's sacred ancestral path to make the school a respected institution in the eyes of the colonial authority backfires and ultimately leads to his downfall, as well as the destruction of his beloved school. His unwillingness to merge the "pagan" traditions of the community with his "modern" ideas eventually lead the colonial authorities to give him and the school a bad status report due to the discord he sowed in the community in trying to alienate them from their culture.

Village Priest – An elderly religious authority in the village and one of Michael Obi's major critics. He makes the most ardent case against Obi's prohibitions on the village community's ancestral traditions, noting that access to the **path** that runs through the school grounds is crucial to the community. His intervention comes at a time when tensions are on the rise between Obi, the school, and the villagers. As one of the older people in the village, he reminds Michael Obi that his

prohibitions on the villagers' customs go against the teachings and practices of the community as well as their fathers and forefathers. He is the voice of reason and the consciousness of the community all at once as he tries to safeguard their practices from Obi and his dangerous modern ways, steeped in colonialism, before it is too late.

Nancy Obi – Michael Obi's wife. Like her husband, Nancy Obi is excited by his promotion and by the opportunity to make the Ndume Central School a place of modernity with beautiful **gardens** that speak to its sophistication. She is incredibly infatuated with rank and takes her husband's promotion as an opportunity to elevate herself in the eyes of her peers. She gives herself the title of "queen of the school" and sees it as a sign of her and her husband's refinement. Like Michael, Nancy dreams of making the school into a place of new ideas modeled after the colonial institutions she seeks to emulate.

Government Education Officer / White Supervisor – The white government official, presumably employed by the Mission authorities, who visits Ndume Central School for a routine inspection. He happens to arrive the day after the grounds get destroyed—likely by the angry villagers—and thus writes a "nasty" review about the sorry state of the school. He also sharply criticizes Obi's "misguided zeal," which the Supervisor believes was the catalyst for the "tribal-war situation" that has come about between the school and the village.

TERMS

Mission Authorities – The Mission authorities are the colonial, religious, and gubernatorial body that appoints **Michael Obi** as the headmaster of the Ndume Central School. They set the agenda of the school that Michael Obi and his wife, **Nancy** are trying to meet.



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.



MODERNITY AND PROGRESS

Chinua Achebe's "Dead Men's Path" tells the story of Michael Obi, a "young and energetic" educator who accepts the position of headmaster of the Ndume Central School. Ndume is an "unprogressive" institution (presumably in British-ruled colonial Nigeria), and Obi is appointed specifically because of his outspoken rejection of "the narrow views" of older teachers. His wife, Nancy, shares

his passion for the "modern methods" and decides almost immediately that everything in the new school "will be just *modern* and delightful." Obi's enthusiastic push towards modernization backfires, however, after he insists upon barring locals' access to a sacred ancestral **footpath** that cuts through the school's campus. Through the resultant conflict between Obi and the villagers, the story suggests the perils of disrespecting meaningful markers of tradition in the name of a subjective Western ideal of modernity.

Though it is never stated explicitly, the setting is implied to be Achebe's native Nigeria at a time when the nation's independence from British rule is still more than a decade away. This is the complicated colonial terrain that Obi encounters by accepting the position of headmaster and by seeking to impose his ideas about progress and modernity. When the story begins in 1949, the British govern Nigeria as a protectorate. It is important to note that while the British, during this time, left the day-to-day activities of the colony to the Native elites, they nonetheless played a huge role in policing conduct, ways of dress, social norms, religion, and education in the name of bringing the colonial subjects out of the past and into a modernity based on European ideals. Indeed, the fact that Obi has been appointed by the Mission authorities, the religious colonial body that spearheaded the creation of the school, reveals that progress is primarily signified by a rejection of traditional paganism and an embrace of Christianity. Thus, modernity is not an objective marker of progress but rather a measurement of how well a community adheres to Western sensibilities.

This, expectedly, creates conflict with indigenous traditions and a clear rift between Obi and the community he has been sent to serve. Obi is set in his ways to the point that, though he is relatively young, he haughtily thinks of himself as the best person for the job because it will "be a grand opportunity [...] to show these people how a school should be run." Obi cannot help but laud himself for how the position separates him from the other teachers at the school, whom Achebe hints are also from the "backwards" community by describing them as "older" and "less educated." This suggests that Obi finds his colleagues' modern sensibilities lacking: in short, they have not internalized the *modern* teachings of British colonial rule adequately enough for Obi. This again presents visions of "progress" as mere means to erase cultural history rather than actually improve peoples' lives.

Upon finding evidence of a pagan ritual near school grounds, Obi promptly prohibits the use of an ancestral footpath that connects the community's village shrine to their place of burial because of its violation of the "modern" values of the school. When questioned about this act of disrespect, Obi cites the irrationality of the villagers' beliefs as a reason for his actions: "Dead men do not require footpaths. The whole idea is just fantastic." This implicitly presents the villagers' belief as

juvenile. Seeking to tie modern values with the future progress of the community, Obi uses the closing of the footpath as a way to ensure that the school will serve as bastion of a narrowly defined “modernity,” based on British values, for the children of future generations to come. Nevertheless, the villagers ultimately reject Obi’s plans for modernity. In protest, they tear down the hedges near and around the footpath, trample the **gardens**, and destroy a school building so that Obi wakes up “among the ruins of his work.” While this may at first seem like a victory for the villagers, the story doesn’t end here. Rather, it ends with the image of the white supervisor taking stock of Obi’s failure, particularly why it may have happened, and reporting back to the Mission authorities. This gives the impression that the work of modernity will continue with or without Obi, because it is a project that is deeply embedded within the colonial authorities who make the true decisions behind the scenes. In light of this, the villagers’ victory over Obi feels less like an overwhelming mandate for preserving indigenous customs in the face of modernity and more like a brief hiatus in the inevitable colonial project.



EDUCATION AS A COLONIAL WEAPON

Education is a recurring point of contention in Achebe’s “Dead Men’s Path,” a story that centers around the Ndume Central school and its zealous new headmaster, Michael Obi. Readers’ first introduction to the Ndume school prefaces what is to come later in the short story. Achebe presents the school as markedly “unprogressive,” and later as a school that is “backward in every sense of the word.” For this reason, the school is of particular importance to the Mission authorities, the religious colonial body that spearheaded the school’s creation and which appoints the “young” and “energetic” Michael Obi as its new headmaster. Obi assumes his responsibility with the pride and zeal of someone who is intent on re-making the school into a “place of beauty” with “high standard teaching,” modeled after his own “sound secondary school education.” Together with the Mission authorities and his wife, Nancy, Obi dreams of the school not as a place of objective academic instruction, but as an extension of their colonial education. In other words, the school is meant “to instruct,” rather than “to educate,” the next generation of colonial subjects; the story implies that it will teach them what to think rather than how to think for themselves. The story thus reveals how, when controlled by a colonial power, educational institutions can be used as a weapon—namely, as a means to remake colonial subjects in the image of the colonizer.

By setting the story in a school and centering a teacher as its protagonist (or, perhaps, as its villain), Achebe establishes educational institutions as foundational to the spread of colonialism, foregrounding the major and controversial role colonialism will play in village. Eager to please his superiors, Obi thus comes to the village with a rigid sense of how things will be

done. He and Nancy attempt to remake the school from the ground up in order to make it a more respected institution, one that adheres strictly to colonial ideas despite villagers’ protests. As a result, Obi and Nancy’s views about how the school should be run are arrogantly limited. Indeed, he and his wife are scornful of the teachers who do not share Obi’s ideas about how to instruct the children. Obi is especially eager to become a respected educator in a field he feels is oversaturated with “old and superannuated people [...] who would be better employed as traders in the Onitsha market.” This suggests that he believes that those unwilling to embrace the dictates of colonialism shouldn’t be teachers at all. Ironically, Obi—the man tasked with managing the school—is distinctly uninterested in learning from or adapting to his circumstances and fails to ever question or meaningfully interrogate his own orders. This strongly suggests that the school Obi runs will not be a site of active learning, but rather one in which students are spoon fed unchallenged colonial ideology. At the same time, the fact that Obi and Nancy themselves are presented as such prideful, misguided characters serves as an implicit critique of the colonial educational system at large, which is clearly utterly disconnected from its students.

Because the school is meant to be a place to further colonial ideology at the expense of indigenous practices, Obi and the villagers’ diverging views become glaringly obvious once Obi prohibits the villager’s use of an ancestral **footpath**. That he scorns this path as being an inappropriate use of the school grounds emphasizes his narrow and limited view of education; he has come to tell villagers how things will be rather than to participate in an active exchange of ideas. This is further reflected by the fact that, instead of listening to the protests of other teachers who advise against the path’s closing, Obi worries only about what the Government Education Officer would think if he were to find the footpath open during his visit. Additionally, Obi is scandalized by the thought of what would happen if the villagers, invigorated by their illicit use of a prohibited footpath, “decide to use the schoolroom for a pagan ritual during the inspection.”

Both thoughts show that Obi centers the thoughts of the Education Officer and the Mission authorities more than the villagers in his decision to close the footpath because they are the colonial agents that his curriculum aims to emulate. Despite the fact that the school is supposed to serve the village as an educational institution, it is in fact a weapon of the colonial authorities who rule it through Obi from the shadows. Furthermore, when the village priest appears later to make an appeal for the footpath, Obi dismisses him in much the same way he dismissed the previous teachers. This time, however, he says that he will not reopen the footpath because “the whole purpose of our school is to eradicate just such beliefs as that [...] our duty is to teach your children to laugh at such ideas.” Obi’s commitment to giving his students a “sound” *colonial*

education is especially evident here. He envisions education as a mechanism through which the children learn to scorn anything that does not adhere to British colonial values and teachings.

Obi's conflict with the members of the village community plainly reveals the tensions that stem from his singular and often miscalculated way of educating the students. His educational goals for the community take their cues from colonial figures like the Education Officer and the Mission authorities, who have a vested interest in seeing Obi's students educated in ways that will make them more acceptable in the eyes of other colonial institutions. Obi's prohibition of the path makes sense in light of this; he sees it as a threat to the success of the Mission's goal of instructing the community to respect and laud colonial practices alone.



CULTURAL HISTORY AND IDENTITY

For much of Chinua Achebe's "Dead Men's Path," the cultural practices of the villagers are under attack by Michael Obi, the new headmaster of

Ndume Central School, and his wife, Nancy. While Nancy does not directly involve herself with the running of the school, she models herself and her actions after the British while scorning the customs of the villagers. Likewise, Obi, zealous in his endeavor to make the school into a place where students can forge a new identity outside of their communal and ancestral history, decides to close a sacred **footpath** he views as a hindrance. Despite reports of "the big row some time ago" when other educators had previously attempted to close the footpath, Obi continues with his plans to do so, alarmed by the idea of the school denigrating itself by being used as a "thoroughfare" for a pagan ritual. When a woman dies in childbirth shortly after, Obi must come to terms with the repercussions of attempting to forcefully erase a community's way of life. The death of the woman reveals the stakes of Obi and his wife's project. For the villagers, their way of life—their very essence—is tied irrevocably to the upholding of their ancestral practices. To be stripped from their past is to be stripped from a vital connection to who they are as people.

Both Nancy and Obi are buoyed by the opportunity to make their vision for the school a reality, though their unwillingness to accommodate the villagers' input and traditions almost immediately begins to alienate the village community from its way of life. Obi and Nancy design the school as a place of newness, where anyone can break from the old and the "rank" and boldly imagine themselves as someone different. This subtle message of embracing the "new" is meant to hasten the process of alienating the younger generation of villagers from their community and their connection to their past. To do this, Nancy and Obi go as far as to separate the school from the rest of the village by planting a **garden** that "came to life [...] and blossomed" until it "marked out the carefully tended school

compound from the rank neighborhood bushes." This further creates a physical rift between the cultural practices of the past and the possibility for new traditions and new identities that the future promises.

Nancy herself is not immune to this concept of re-creating oneself at the expense of one's past, community, and cultural identity. In fact, she boldly embraces it and begins "to see herself as the admired wife of the young headmaster, the queen of the school," an image that draws parallels with the British monarch (whose rule readers can assume the village community is under, given Achebe's background and the Igbo names of the characters and the setting). Nancy's investment in idolizing a colonial figure reveals that she seeks to participate in a cultural tradition different from that of the village, underscoring her own flimsy understanding of the importance the community places on their indigenous ancestral culture. Together, these details underscore how the embrace of this new way of life represented by the school requires a forceful break with one's history.

The village priest's intervention into the closing of the footpath, however, suggests that the community fears that Obi and Nancy's choices will create discord within their community and alienate them from traditional practices they have relied on for generations. The priest explains the historical significance of the footpath by arguing that it is what has connected the community to their forefathers, and that without it, they would not be the same people. He punctuates his pleas to Obi by reminding him that the "the whole life of the village depends on it. Our dead relatives depart by it and our ancestors visit us by it. But most important, it is the footpath of children coming in to be born..." This suggests that the footpath is the bridge between generations, a tether to bind the past with the present and the future, even in the face of change, so that the community can remain true to their identity. Obi, however, haughtily refuses to reopen the footpath and instead suggests that they construct another, "skirting" the school's premises this time because he is sure the ancestors won't "find the little detour too burdensome." Obi ignores the significance of the priest's pleas, choosing instead to undermine the spiritual and cultural role the path plays in the community in favor of embracing the "newness" that his school promises. Unfortunately, what Obi does not realize is that this newness is premised on undoing the strong cultural bonds that connect the village to their past and their ancestors—the things that make them who they are. Obi fails to realize that embracing the new promises of the school comes with the risk of socializing a new generation to view their parents' past traditions contemptuously. This possible rift between the past and the future would carry the risk of creating holes in their community.

After a woman dies in childbirth, however, the villagers reject Obi's plan and forcefully reopen the footpath as a way to

recover their ancestral tradition and sense of identity. The woman's death spurs the village diviner to call for "heavy sacrifices to propitiate ancestors insulted by the fence" and mitigate the risk of further irreconcilable damage to the community and its way of life. In retaliation, the villagers get to work destroying the prohibitions on the footpath so that Obi wakes up to find most of his work ruined, with the "beautiful hedges torn up not just near the footpath but right round the school [and] the flowers trampled to death and one of the school buildings pulled down." The appeasement of the ancestors seems to rest not only on the footpath being reopened, but also on the physical destruction of Obi and Nancy's project—the school—as a symbol of the dangers of attempting to cut a community from their sense of history, culture, and identity. Furthermore, the reopened path symbolizes the endurance and continuity of the community's traditions and sense of self, while the destroyed school grounds and garden reveal the vulnerabilities and fault lines of new practices that seek to sever ties to traditional customs that keep a community linked to their culture and their past.

happen because of the path's closure. This suggests that the overall prosperity of the community rests on protecting and sustaining the villagers' affinity to the path and its links to their ancestors, culture, and identity.



GARDENS

The gardens in the school represent Nancy and Michael Obi's "modern" hopes for the school, which are grounded in guidelines from the colonial government. They plant the gardens to add beauty and sophistication to the school grounds and because it complements their "progressive" plans due to their identification of it as a thing of elegance. Eventually the gardens and the hedges are set up so that the school is clearly separated from the rest of the village, effectively demarcating the sophisticated part of the community from the unsophisticated, lowly, and "rank" parts. However, after the conflict between Obi and the villagers reach an impasse, the gardens are ruined due to Obi's unwillingness to open up the villagers' ancestral **path**. The ruined gardens at the end of the story visually represent the dashed dreams of Nancy and Obi. Furthermore, it represents the failure of the type of modernity that Nancy and Obi championed, a modernity built on abusing and discarding one's cultural identity in favor of colonial codes of conduct.



SYMBOLS

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



PATH

The path, which runs through the school grounds and connects the village's shrine and burial site, symbolizes the unbreakable link between the villagers and their cultural history. It is for this reason that the village priest reminds Michael Obi during a visit, that it is the path by which their ancestors visit them and the path through which new babies come into the world. In other words, the path grounds the villagers with a deep knowledge of their history and an appreciation of their forefathers and their future sons and daughters. It is very telling that even when hedges and **gardens** are built around the school to cut off the villagers' access to the path, Obi still finds an old woman willing to navigate her way through the school's hedges to find it.

When Obi tries to close the path with fences, a woman in the village dies in childbirth—a manifestation of the ancestors' anger at Obi's prohibitions. The woman's death is significant and fitting; as the community believes that the path is the way through which new babies come into the world, but the path is now closed off, the woman cannot successfully deliver her baby. After, much of Obi's school is destroyed, presumably by the villagers, who believe they must appease their angered ancestors to regain some semblance of balance to the community. Most of the negative events of the story, like the death of the woman and the subsequent damage to the school,



QUOTES

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

Dead Men's Path Quotes

☞ He had many wonderful ideas and this was an opportunity to put them into practice. He had had sound secondary school education which designated him a "pivotal teacher" in the official records and set him apart from the other headmasters in the mission field. He was outspoken in his condemnation of the narrow views of these older and often less-educated ones.

Related Characters: Michael Obi (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 70



Explanation and Analysis


Michael Obi begins his new assignment as headmaster arrogantly, believing that he will be great in the role because of his background. He immediately distinguishes himself from other teachers, who he believes are less capable of

teaching the students because of their “narrow” views. This means that Obi sees his views as more progressive, expansive, and modern in nature, a stubborn and conceited belief he brings into his relations with the other members of the school and the village as a whole, which has disastrous outcomes. Obi’s stubbornness unsurprisingly produces tension within the story as he repeatedly attempts to forcefully stymie any thought, idea, or practice that deviates from *his* wonderful “modern” ideas.

“We shall do our best,” she replied. “We shall have such beautiful gardens and everything will be just modern and delightful...” In their two years of married life she had become completely infected by his passion for “modern methods” and his denigration of “these old and superannuated people in the teaching field who would be better employed as traders in the Onitsha market.”

Related Characters: Nancy Obi (speaker), Michael Obi

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 71



Explanation and Analysis

Like her husband, Nancy is extremely happy with Obi’s new job assignment and wants to support his modern vision for the school. She also reveals that denigrating the past customs and traditions of the community is an important activity in their relationship—which suggests it is a superficial marriage.

Part of the way she wants support him is by adorning the school with gardens to make it a place of beauty in addition to a place of modernity. She forms a causal relationship between those things believing that for something to truly be modern, it must also be beautiful, fresh, and give the appearance of vibrancy and thus youth. This connects to her and her husband’s disdain for anything old: customs, ideas, and even older teachers, whom they don’t see as valuable and experienced, but rather “superannuated” and *passé*.

“I was thinking what a grand opportunity we’ve got at last to show these people how a school should be run.”

Related Characters: Michael Obi (speaker), Nancy Obi

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 71-71

Explanation and Analysis


Michael Obi continues to be arrogant in his belief that he knows what is best for the school and the students. With support from his wife, who also believes in the sanctity of their “progressive” vision for the school, he begins to plan for a future school that deviates from the school’s current course. Obi is also a bit paternalistic in the way he alludes to the “people” whom he can now show how to run a school. It implies that these people don’t know what they are doing and need his help or else the school will fail without him. Michael is unable to even consider the possibility of engaging the ideas of the older, seasoned educators or the village community, as he dreams of making sweeping changes to the school.

“The path,” said the teacher apologetically, “appears to be very important to them. Although it is hardly used, it connects the village shrine with their place of burial.”

“And what has that got to do with the school?” asked the headmaster.

Related Characters: Michael Obi (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis


Obi confronts a teacher about the villagers’ continued use of an old footpath, but he is unsatisfied with the teacher’s support for the villagers’ use of the footpath. Obi views the footpath as a crude custom and does not want it associated with his school in any way, since he has built his school up in his mind as a modern refuge separate from the more unprogressive and backward leanings of the community as a whole. The path’s use, regardless of its cultural importance to the community, jeopardizes Obi’s goals for the school. The school, after all, is meant to be a place of sophistication and modernity. To Obi, these outdated views about the footpath are not only backward but also dangerous if they spread to the students. It is for that reason that Obi decides to close the path, which leads to even more heightened


tension between him and the villagers.

Obi's response asking what this footpath has to do with the school also reveals how he sees the school as being outside of the community, rather than part of it. To him, the school has nothing to do with the villagers' customs and beliefs; it's an institution designed, in fact, to separate villagers from their indigenous identities. Obi's inability to see how everything in this community is connected is part of his failure to effectively govern the school.

“This path was here before you were born and before your father was born. The whole life of this village depends on it. Our dead relatives depart by it and our ancestors visit us by it. But most important, it is the path of children coming in to be born...”

Related Characters: Village Priest (speaker), Michael Obi

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 73


Explanation and Analysis

The village priest tries to get Obi to see reason and understand the cultural significance of the path after Obi prohibits villagers from using it. He reveals that the path's impact goes beyond the physical and is a spiritual tether to their relatives who have passed, as well as a tie to their future relatives. In other words, the path adds continuity to their lives and their culture and keeps them grounded within a large network that spans generations. This shows that the path is a link to who they have been and who they will be in the future. It is important to note that the priest does not challenge Obi's modern curriculum, but simply advocates for the path to be reopened. This reveals that while Obi does not believe in blending the old ideas of the villagers and his own new ideas, the priest does. He believes that the school can continue with its new curriculum even if the path is re-opened.

“The whole purpose of our school,” he said finally, “is to eradicate just such beliefs as that. Dead men do not require footpaths. The whole idea is just fantastic. Our duty is to teach your children to laugh at such ideas.”

Related Characters: Michael Obi (speaker), Village Priest

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 


Page Number: 73


Explanation and Analysis

True to character, Michael Obi is dismissive of the priest's argument that the path should be re-opened. Obi does not see the ways in which past customs can serve a community even as they embrace the new ideas and practices that colonial institutions introduce to them. In addition to being dismissive, Obi is downright rude to the priest. He insults the idea that the path represents an important tether to the community's past and to their dead relatives. Once again, Obi is intent in drawing a distinction between old practices he views as outdated and unprogressive and his own newer ideas that he believes will bring the community out of their backwardness. Obi implies that the priest should be grateful that he will “eradicate” such views from the children he will teach. In this way, Obi suggests that the way to end the conflict will be by creating a generation of children who dismiss or forget the customs of their older relatives.

“What you say may be true,” replied the priest, “but we follow the practices of our fathers. If you reopen the path we shall have nothing to quarrel about. What I always say is: let the hawk perch and let the eagle perch.”

Related Characters: Village Priest (speaker), Michael Obi

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 73-74

Explanation and Analysis



The priest shows some nuance in his analysis of the conflict over the path, nuance that Obi does not seem capable of. The priest acknowledges that Obi's way of seeing the world might be “true,” but that does not make the priest's own way of seeing the world any less true. The priest seems to believe that both ways—the old customs of the village and Obi's new modern curriculum—can exist together peacefully as long as Obi stops taking such harsh measures to stymie the old customs in favor of his own narrow views.


This reveals that while Obi would like to think he is the one with the much more expansive view about the world, it is really the priest, the more “backward” character, who is much more nuanced and open to different ideas than Obi is.

The priest leaves Obi by alluding to the coming struggle over ideas, suggesting that only one animal—or, in other words, one school of thought—will survive, since Obi has ruined all chances of co-existence.

“I am sorry,” said the young headmaster. “But the school compound cannot be a thoroughfare. It is against our regulations. I would suggest your constructing another path, skirting our premises. We can even get our boys to help in building it. I don’t suppose the ancestors will find the little detour too burdensome.”

Related Characters: Michael Obi (speaker), Village Priest

Related Themes:  



Related Symbols: 


Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

Michael Obi is stubborn to the end and refuses to reopen the path, offering the flimsy excuse that it is “against [the] regulations” of the school. Obi is incapable of risking his modern utopia by allowing any deviant views or old backward customs to take root in his school. Because Obi chooses to ignore the path’s cultural importance and because he does not want to entertain any idea that the path really could be a tether to the community’s past, he suggests that the priest construct another path, revealing his own ignorance of the value the community places on their history and customs. To Obi, the path is a cheap fixture in the community and has no real-world value. In that case, it can easily be moved and reconstructed to fit his agenda, which he believes will be better for the villagers.

Two days later a young woman in the village died in childbed. A diviner was immediately consulted and he prescribed heavy sacrifices to propitiate ancestors insulted by the fence.

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 



Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

The ramifications of Obi’s decision to close the path become obvious. The woman’s death is a sign of the rifts within the community that Obi has unwittingly sowed by letting his stubborn vision for the school alienate the villagers from their ancient customs and traditional rites. The diviner immediately picks up on the imbalance that Obi has caused and argues that the villagers must, in effect, make a big show of apologizing to the ancestors in the form of sacrifices. Although the sacrifice the villagers must make is not spelled out, the diviner’s emphasis that the fence is what has caused the insult suggests that the fence will soon be forcefully ripped down. If the fence is forcefully destroyed, it would mean that, when forced to decide between modernity and tradition, the community will rally around their traditional customs.

Obi woke up next morning among the ruins of his work. The beautiful hedges were torn up not just near the path but right round the school, the flowers trampled to death and one of the school buildings pulled down... That day, the white Supervisor came to inspect the school and wrote a nasty report on the state of the premises but more seriously about the “tribal-war situation developing between the school and the village, arising in part from the misguided zeal of the new headmaster.”

Related Characters: Government Education Officer / White Supervisor, Nancy Obi, Michael Obi

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

The heavy sacrifices that the diviner called for leave the gardens and much of the school damaged. The gardens and hedges that both Nancy and Obi were intent on using as a sign of their school’s beauty and sophistication are destroyed beyond repair, showing that Obi’s actions were disruptive enough to produce such a violent outcome in the end. Much of Obi and Nancy’s work is destroyed in the aftermath of the woman’s death, while the path—the oldest

fixture in the vicinity—is one of the few things left standing. This reveals that older customs are better suited to weather ideological storms and challenges to their merit. In the end, true to the priest's words, the path is left standing while the school has fallen.

Additionally, the white supervisor inspects the school during this particular tense moment and writes a poor report on the school and on Obi's performance. As one of

the behind-the-scenes actors for the Mission authorities, he suggests that Obi is unfit to do the job of educating the students in the ways the colonial authority deem appropriate. While the authorities may have once looked at Obi's youth and education background as an advantage, they now see it as naivete and overzealousness. They believe that the school has failed to educate a new generation of colonial subjects under his guidance.



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.

DEAD MEN'S PATH

In 1949, the young Michael Obi is appointed headmaster of the unprogressive school, Ndume Central School, by the Mission authorities (a colonial religious body). A “young and energetic man” with lots of big ideas for the school, Obi happily accepts the offer.

Michael Obi and his wife, Nancy, immediately get to work making the school into a place where “modern” ideas will be practiced. They are passionate about this project and they scorn anyone and any idea that they feel does not adhere to their progressive values, including scorning older educators. Excited by the prospect of the school and reverent of her husband’s ideas, Nancy begins to think of herself as “the queen of the school” who will be deeply envied and admired by the other teachers’ wives. However, she is crushed when Obi tells her that the other teachers don’t have wives. She recovers from her disappointment, though, because “[h]er little personal misfortune could not blind her to her husband’s happy prospects.”

Nancy studies her husband. Although Obi is “stoop-shouldered” and looks weak, he is known for his “sudden bursts of physical energy.” He also looks fairly old—he’s twenty-six, but looks to be at least thirty years old. Obi tells his wife that he’s excited about his chance to run the school because it will allow him “to show these people how a school should be run.”

Michael Obi’s appointment reveals that his youth and ideas are of use to the Mission authorities, the colonial gubernatorial organization that defines the metrics of the school’s success. Mr. Obi’s appointment shows that his values and ideas about education and how the school should be run align closely with the Mission authorities



Obi and Nancy revere colonial ideas and practices. Thus they make it their goal to make the school into a “modern” institution, because they conflate modernity with these colonial practices, which they view as more sophisticated and progressive. Their way of thinking inflates their sense of importance and makes them feel like they have more in common with colonial figures than with others from the community. Thus, Obi and Nancy scorn other educators who dare to deviate from their progressive values, while Nancy dreams of “ruling” the school symbolically, in the same way a monarch might rule over a colony. Nancy is determined to let her husband’s prospects help her achieve a new start, despite the news that she will not be able to establish a hierarchy among the wives of other teachers.



Despite Obi’s small weak frame, he carries himself with the confidence of someone who knows without a doubt that his modern ideas are what’s best for the students. His premature aging suggests that something is wrong with his lifestyle, though. Perhaps his ideas and values are exhausting him, preventing him from living a good life.



At the school, Obi and Nancy emphasize a “high standard of teaching” and work together to make the school grounds beautiful with the rich and carefully-tended **gardens** of Nancy’s dreams. The flowering hedges of the gardens eventually demarcate the school compound from the nearby village, which is outlined by “rank” shrubs.

One day, Obi sees an old woman cross the school compound, wander through the **gardens**, and walk down an “almost disused **path**.” Obi becomes angry and confronts a teacher about the path’s use. The teacher, “apologetically,” explains the path’s cultural importance: how it links the village shrine to the villagers’ “place of burial.” Obi challenges him by asking about the path’s usefulness to the school, but the teacher responds by warning Obi of the “big row” that occurred when others attempted to close the path a while ago. Obi, nonetheless, is scandalized by the thought of the Government Education Officer witnessing signs of the “pagan ritual” during his inspection in a week’s time. Thus, Obi promptly shuts the path with a fence, prohibiting its use.

The village priest, an elderly man who “walk[s] with a slight stoop,” visits Obi a few days after the **path**’s closing. He attempts to get Obi to change his mind and recognize and respect the deep significance the path has in the community, their lives, and their identity as people now and for generations to come: “Our dead relatives depart by it and our ancestors visit us by it. But most important, it is the path of children coming in to be born...”

With a “satisfied smile,” Obi refuses the old village priest’s request and declares that he would like to not just eliminate such pagan ideas and traditions from the students at his school, but also encourage the students to actively ridicule them. Preparing to leave, the priest says that they must “let the hawk perch and let the eagle perch.” Obi reiterates that allowing the villagers to use the school **path** is “against our regulations,” but he suggests that the village make another path outside of school grounds, claiming that the ancestors won’t “find the little detour too burdensome.” Speechless, the old priest leaves.

The high standard of teaching that Obi and Nancy emphasize is meant to adequately instill in the students a strong affinity for the modern ideas that they themselves deeply cherish. Thus, while high in standard, the teaching at the school is not objective in value. Rather it is meant to push for an understanding of modernity and progress through the eyes of colonial institutions. The school is meant to be a place where children deviate from the ways of the past and their parents; the garden’s demarcation becomes a visual symbol of the separation of the village and its past ways from the school and its future potential.



Obi is angered by the man’s actions because he sees it as an affront to the steps he has taken to make the school orient itself towards progress and modernity. To Obi, anything that deviates from his modern ideas and practices is intolerable and must be prohibited before it has a chance to spread and garner the attention of powerful figures like the Government Education Officer. The importance of the path to the community and the disruption it might cause in the villagers’ lives is merely collateral damage to Obi.



The village priest’s advocacy on behalf of the path reveals that, despite his physical shortcomings, he will use every bit of his limited energy to advocate for the history and rites of his community. The costs of the path’s possible closure are too high for the priest to not intervene.



Obi relishes antagonizing the village priest, which reveals the lengths he is willing to go to dismiss the ideas of those of the community he deems old and unprogressive in their ways. Moreover, Obi appears to want to use the incident of the path as a teaching moment for the students to get them to understand why ancient customs must not be tolerated to this extent. Though the priest is thwarted, he seems to allude to a coming battle between the newness that Obi and the school represent and the past ways that the path and the village represent.



A woman in the village dies two days later while giving birth. A diviner is called, and he prescribes that the village complete “heavy sacrifices” to satisfy the ancestors, who, he suggests, let the woman die because they were insulted by the prohibitions on their **path**.

Obi wakes up the next morning and sees the school in shambles: the **gardens**, the hedges of the school, and even a school building have been destroyed

Shortly afterwards, a white government Supervisor arrives to inspect the school. He pens a “nasty report” about Obi, the dilapidated school grounds, and the “tribal-war situation” that Obi had unwittingly started because of his “misguided zeal.”

Rites and customs are an organic thing for the community and a huge part of their sense of self. A part of them died with the closing of the path, which the woman’s death alludes to. The heavy sacrifices are meant to reclaim some of the damage Obi’s prohibitions have made in the community.



The battle that the priest alluded to happens and Obi’s school is left in shambles, presumably by the villagers and/or the priest who most likely did it as a way of standing up for their ancient traditions, their community, and their way of life. The outcome, of course, is that all of Obi and Nancy’s carefully cultivated modern fixtures are destroyed so that almost nothing is left.



In the eyes of the Mission authorities, Obi has failed to live up to the promise of teaching the students how to be good colonial subjects, and instead instigated a war between ancient traditions and modernity.





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