Chapter VI: Literary Devices and Tools of Criticism
Achebe's book, *Arrow of God* explores the intersections of Igbo pagan tradition and European Christianity. Set in the village of Umuaro at the start of the twentieth century, the novel tells the story of Ezeulu, a Chief Priest of Ulu. Shocked by the power of British intervention in the area, he orders his son to learn the foreigners' secret. As with Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* and Obi in *No Longer at Ease*, Ezeulu is consumed by the resulting tragedy.

*Arrow of God* is set in rural Nigeria during the 1920s in a southern part of the country where the Igbo people reside. The novel begins with a war between two neighboring regions of rural Igboland: Umuaro and Okperi. Though we don't know the boundaries of Okperi, we do know that Umuaro is made up of six villages. These six villages are linked by their worship of a common god, Ulu.

The people of Umuaro start a war with Okperi over land they want to claim; they are encouraged to start the war by a wealthy man named Nwaka, who challenges Ulu. This war is launched against the advice of Ulu's chief priest, Ezeulu. The colonial administration steps in to stop the war and rules in favor of Okperi after discussing the matter with Ezeulu, the one man in Umuaro who tells the truth. Captain Winterbottom, a British colonial official who commands the local station, breaks and burns all the guns in Umuaro, becoming a legend. Meanwhile, the people of Umuaro become angry with Ezeulu because he didn't take their side.

Five years later, life in Umuaro has returned to normal. Sort of. Christian missionaries have made major inroads into society, establishing converts and trying to
show that the old gods are ineffective. Ezeulu is sending his son Oduche to church, to be his eyes and ears, and to learn the ways of the white man. Animosity between Ezeulu and Nwaka and their respective villages has grown to the point called kill and take the head. In other words, things have gotten to the point where men in the two villages try to kill each other using poison. Nwaka is fortified and strengthened by his relationship with Ezidemili, the high priest of the god, Idemili. Though Idemili is a lesser god in comparison to Ulu, the competition between the two priests is dividing Umuaro, creating suspicion and ill will among brothers.

But the competition isn't limited to within the Igbo religion; the missionaries call the Christian Igbo, including Oduche, to kill the sacred python. Oduche chickens out at the last minute, putting the snake in a box instead, but his family discovers the terrible deed when he's at church. Doing anything to the royal python is considered an abomination. The royal python belongs to the god Idemili, and as soon as the priest of Idemili hears about it, he sends a messenger to chide Ezeulu, and to ask what he intends to do to purify his house. Ezeulu responds by telling Ezidemili to die and the matter rests there, uneasily.

The colonial administration has commissioned a new road to be built, connecting Okperi with Umuaro. They've run out of funds, but still need to complete the road, so Mr. Wright, the overseer, petitions to conscript labor. He receives permission and Umuaro is the unlucky recipient of the demand for free labor. One day, Ezeulu's son Obika is late getting to work. He had too much palm wine to drink the day before. But when Mr. Wright whips him, it stirs up the resentments of all the
men. Though they grumble among themselves, they are never able to come to a decision about what to do.

Because Ezeulu assumes that Obika has done something to deserve the whipping, he precipitates a crisis in his own household. Edogo, his oldest son, gets to thinking, and decides that the old man's propensity to choose favorites among his sons has created a problem. He believes that Ezeulu has tried to influence Ulu's decision about which son will be the next priest. By sending Oduche to learn the religion of the white man, Ezeulu has essentially taken Oduche out of the running. And Ezeulu has trained Nwafo in the ways of the priesthood, so he's clearly staking his claim on Nwafo as the one Ulu will choose. But Edogo begins to wonder what will happen if Ulu doesn't choose Nwafo, if he chooses Edogo or Obika. It will create conflict and division in the family and Edogo, as eldest son, will have to deal with it. He goes to Ezeulu's friend, Akuebue, and asks him to speak to Ezeulu.

Akuebue finds that Ezeulu is not receptive to a talk about the divisions within Umuaro, blaming the people of Umuaro for the white man's arrival. The people of Umuaro try to blame Ezeulu because he told the white man the truth when Winterbottom stepped in to stop the war between Okperi and Umuaro.

Ezeulu is also unreceptive to reports of divisions within his own household. He admits that he sacrificed Oduche, not so much to put him out of the running for the priesthood, but because he sees the threat to Umuaro and to the Igbo posed by Christianity. Such a situation requires the supreme sacrifice, that of a human being.

Meanwhile, Captain Winterbottom has been under another kind of stress. Indirect rule is the ideology that rules the day and he is under direct orders to find a
chief for Umuaro. He decides that Ezeulu is just the man for the job, and sends a messenger to fetch Ezeulu. Ezeulu refuses to come, saying that the Priest of Ulu doesn't leave his hut, and dispatches the messenger back to Winterbottom with the message that if he wants to see Ezeulu, he'll have to come visit Ezeulu. Winterbottom issues an order for Ezeulu's arrest and sends two policemen to fetch him.

The next day, after consulting with the elders and men of title in Umuaro, Ezeulu decides to set out for Okperi, to find out what Winterbottom wanted. His heart is angry because Umuaro continues to blame him for the white man's presence, and because they don't show Ulu proper respect. His archenemy, Nwaka, continues to challenge Ulu and the people do nothing about it. The two policemen sent to arrest Ezeulu pass him on the way, but don't realize it until they reach his compound and learn that Ezeulu has gone to Okperi.

In Okperi, Winterbottom suddenly becomes ill. The African servants decide that Ezeulu must have a lot of power because Winterbottom is struck ill only after he issues the warrant for Ezeulu's arrest. So when Ezeulu arrives, the servants are afraid. They don't want to lock him up as ordered; instead, they pretend that the guardroom is a guest room and try to make him comfortable.

On this first night in Okperi, Ezeulu has a vision and realizes that his real battle is with his own people, not with the white man at all. In his vision, he sees Nwaka challenge Ulu, and the people spitting on him (Ezeulu), saying he is the priest of a dead god. He begins to see that the white man has been able to take advantage of Umuaro's division to sow further seeds of destruction. He hopes Winterbottom detains him for a long time, so he can better plan his revenge.
Ezeulu is detained for a couple of months. First, Clarke decides to teach him a lesson by making him wait. Then he offers Ezeulu the position of chief, but Ezeulu refuses. Angry, Clarke claps him in prison, and Winterbottom commends him, saying he should keep Ezeulu locked up until he learns to cooperate. But Clarke begins to suffer pangs of conscience, realizing that he doesn't have a legitimate reason to keep Ezeulu imprisoned. He's relieved when he hears from Winterbottom's superior advising against creating new Warrant Chiefs. This gives Clarke the excuse to let Ezeulu go.

Ezeulu returns home. Everybody is glad to see him again and Ezeulu realizes that his anger was directed not against his real neighbors but against an idea that they were mocking Ulu and disrespecting Ezeulu. Nevertheless, he lays low and sets his plan in action. When the time for announcing the Feast of the New Yam comes, he fails to announce it. His assistants come to ask if he's forgotten his duties. He gets mad and sends them away.

Next, the elders of the village come and ask, gingerly, why he hasn't announced the Feast of the New Yam. Ezeulu tells them that he has three sacred yams left. He can't announce the Feast of the New Yam until he has finished all the sacred yams. He was unable to eat the sacred yams while imprisoned in Okperi, and now he has to follow the rules – one yam a month. The men are horrified. If they wait three months before they are allowed to harvest their crops, the crops will be ruined and the people of Umuaro will suffer widespread famine.

The elders tell Ezeulu that he should just quickly eat the yams and if there are any repercussions, they will ask Ulu to let it descend on their heads, not Ezeulu's. But
Ezeulu is steadfast. Such a thing is unheard of. And anyway, no matter what their intentions are, as chief priest he will be the one to suffer the consequences of breaking the rules. He can't do it. They must wait.

The Christian catechist, Mr. Goodcountry, recognizes this as an opportunity. He says that anybody who wants to offer their yams to the Christian god instead, so they can harvest their yams, will receive the protection of the Christian god as well. As people begin to suffer, they do just that. Meanwhile, Obika – who is sick – is asked to help in the funeral preparations for Amalu, one of the elders in the village who had died some months back. He helps with one of the funeral rituals by carrying the mask for Ogbazulobodo, the night spirit, and chasing after day. He runs so hard and so fast, however, that he drops dead when he returns.

The people say it is a judgment against Ezeulu. His god, Ulu, has spoken: Ezeulu has become stubborn and proud, and the god has not sided with his priest against the people. But it was a bad time to humiliate the priest. It allowed the people to take liberties. That year, many of the yams were harvested in the name of the Christian god; and the crops reaped afterwards were also reaped in the name of the Christian god. As Arrow of God comes to a close, it seems that worship of the Christian god has replaced that of Ulu.

The main character in this novel is Ezeulu, who is chief priest of the god Ulu, of the village of Umuaro. Ezeulu comes into conflict with himself in a quest to hold on to power despite his high age and the break-through of the British colonial administrators. Ezeulu wants to control both his people and the British administrators. Ezeulu believes the clan will silently follow him and the British will respect him.
Hereto he sends his son to the white man's missionary school where the boy adopts the new religion and sacrileges his own. Ezeulu will not punish him despite the wishes of the clan.

Achebe's novel shows that men cannot fight society’s will and that the latter can bring a man to insanity.

**The View of Meta-fictional Discourse**

And just as Magda resists the easy pastoral poetry to which she is drawn, Coetzee himself resists the easy option of that heady expansion into the as-if mentioned earlier in the novel. His apartheid-era fiction is marked by a reluctant abnegation of certain artistic forms: a gesture that is explained in his comments on the situation of the contemporary author in one of the interviews from *Doubling the Point*.

He speaks of the pathos, in the humdrum sense of the word, of our position: writers today are like children shut in the playroom, the room of textual play, looking out wistfully through the bars at the exciting world of the grownups, one that we have been instructed to think of as the mere phantasmal world of realism but that we stubbornly can’t help thinking of as the real.¹

This intriguing comment suggests that Coetzee is not fully enamored of the anti-mimetic and meta-fictional techniques that he himself deploys: he speaks of the impasse of anti-illusionism while recognizing almost regretfully, the necessity for such techniques. In the history of the novel, he argues, meta-fiction is a marking of time.
It is surely no coincidence that this condition of marking time of waiting is the same morbid condition so often associated with white South Africans living in the uncertain age of what Nadine Coetzee has described as the interregnum.

Thus, while acknowledging the paradoxical nature of such a move, we may localize Coetzee’s atopic strategies and recognize not only a historical but also an ethical impulse behind his anti-illusion-ism. For it was specifically as a white South African under apartheid that Coetzee felt he should refrain from pastoral indulgences and indulge in metafiction; and it was as a novelist writing within a particular troubling historical configuration that he felt he should avoid producing what he describes in an essay on Beckett as the daydream gratification of fiction.

This critique has been suggested in general terms by David Attwell, who notes that in Dovey’s discussion of In the Heart of the Country the Hegelian master-slave dialectic is entirely stripped of its historical and political aspect, that is, of the implication that such goals as freedom and self-realization are attainable only in a just society.

The problem becomes even clearer if one looks closely at some of Dovey’s curiously reductive readings of passages from Coetzee’s early work. An example is her gloss of a key moment in Life and Times of Michael K, the passage in which the starving Michael K meditates on the minimal and ahistorical and meta-fictional way he would like to live on the land:

I am not building a house out here by the dam to pass on to other generations. What I make ought to be careless, makeshift, a shelter to be abandoned without a tugging at the heart-strings. . . . The worst
mistake, he told himself, would be to try to found a new house, a rival line, on his small beginnings out at the dam.²

Dovey’s reading of this rather touching passage renders it almost mechanically self-referential. Michael K’s improvised dwelling place becomes nothing but an allegory for the operations of Coetzee’s novel: This text in particular must not be too close to Coetzee’s own meanings; he must be able to abandon it, without a tugging at the heartstrings, to the successive meanings which new readings will generate.

For all its apparent openness, this allegorical reading is one that discourages any more specific interpretation. But even if we do take K’s invisible, traceless, self-erasing mode of living on the land as a figure for a certain mode of writing, we must remember that K himself recognizes that it is the context of war, the times of Michael K, if you will, that demands this strategy:

“What a pity that to live in times like these a man must be ready to live like a beast. A man who wants to live cannot live in a house with lights in the window. He must live in a hole and hide by day. A man must live so that he leaves no trace of his living. That is what it has come to. Drifting habitation as a literary strategy must likewise be seen in relation to a particular historical condition.”³

A similar point can be made in relation to Dovey’s reading of another important meditation in Life and Times of Michael K, which occurs when, after a vicious assault on the Jakkalsdrif labor camp, K ponders the relationship between parasite and host:
Parasite was the word the police captain had used: the camp at Jakkalsdrif, a nest of parasites hanging from the neat sunlit town, eating its substance, giving no nourishment back. Yet to K lying idle in his bed, thinking without passion (What is it to me, after all? he thought), it was no longer obvious which was host and which parasite, camp or town. . . . What if the hosts were far outnumbered by the parasites, the parasites of idleness and the other secret parasites in the army and the police force and the schools and factories and offices, the parasites of the heart? Could the parasites then still be called parasites? Parasites too had flesh and substance; parasites too could be preyed upon. Perhaps in truth whether the camp was declared a parasite on the town or the town a parasite on the camp depended on no more than on who made his voice heard loudest.⁴

Dovey relates this passage, predictably, to J. Hillis Miller’s argument in The Critic as Host. The term ‘parasite,’ she ventures, comes to signify as a locus of substitution and refers to the way in which Coetzee’s novel, which is parasitic in relation to the previous texts which it deconstructs, will in turn become the host to successive parasitic readings.

While it is certainly possible to understand acts of reading and interpretation, thematized in the second section of the novel, where the medical officer reads, or invents, the story of Michael K, in terms of the relationship of host and parasite, I find myself wanting to insist that atopic reading, the punning etymology which turns the parasite into a locus of substitution, misses something.
It universalizes the term’s reference, and in so doing flattens out the operations of a text that seems to ask questions with urgent ethical implications for South Africa in particular.

The term emerges from Coetzee’s discussion of the South African pastoral in *White Writing*, where literary genre is treated as not so much a metafictional strategy, or temporary home for the writerly hermit crab, as a kind of social dream work, expressing wishes and maintaining silences that are political in origin.

“The idea of the generically and ideologically determined dream topography offers us a spatial concept that is both more stable and more historically responsive than drifting habitation. It avoids, moreover, the vague appeal to personal experience that inevitably adheres to the notion of a sense of place, and underscores instead the importance of discursive codes and cultural maps.”

The essays in *White Writing* are mainly concerned with two rival dream topographies, two rival versions of the pastoral tradition in South Africa. They are, if you will, the maps, the ideological blueprints, this genre has projected on the land.

Both of these projections are already sketched out in Coetzee’s review of Ross Devenish and Athol Fugard’s *The Guest*, a film based on a painful period in the life of the Afrikaans poet and morphine addict Eugène Marais, during which he was ordered by his doctor to go cold turkey on a remote Transvaal farm.

To the dismay of the film’s director, who no doubt expected wholehearted support from intellectuals for his contribution to the very short list of art films produced in apartheid South Africa, Coetzee’s comments were acerbic. He observed that
the film’s representations of the white man’s relation to the land were patched together from flattering myths designed, however unconsciously, to keep certain irresolvable inconsistencies from view.

Marais’s hosts, the Meyers of Steen-kampskraal, are presented via a visually seductive mise en scène of whitewashed walls, dark vertical frames of doors and windows, a dinner table in the glow of lamplight: by interiors reminiscent of the classic Dutch painters, and by settings that gleam with Rembrandt browns and golds. This visual coding, Coetzee points out, serves to imply that the Meyers are no rootless colonials but, simultaneously, rude children of the African soil and heirs to a venerable European tradition.

The limited contexts in which we see the family, moreover, make it difficult to raise certain troubling questions about the running of this African farm. Coetzee spells these questions out: If the Meyers run a cattle farm, why do they never talk about cattle? Where do the African-farm laborers who materialize out of nowhere for a single fifteen-second sequence live? How do the Meyer men spend their time when they are not eating? (DP) The film, Coetzee implies, confines itself to the terrain permitted by the ideological horizons of the Afrikaans pastoral, within which the Meyers and their farm stand as emblems of goodness, simplicity, and permanence.

As far as the film’s presentation of the poet goes, Coetzee argues that yet another myth applies: that of the Genius in Africa, the man for whom consciousness is pain, and for whom the African landscape is a murderous mother-goddess, who
silently rejects the alienated poet-suppliant, though he tragically adores her stony bosom.

Marais’s glamorously dystopian relationship with the land is, of course, no less ideologically fraught than the rough-hewn arcadia of the ordinary Afrikaners. In fact, it allows Coetzee to articulate for the first time an idea that will become one of the crucial arguments of *White Writing*: for the majority of South Africans, people for whom Africa is a mother who has nourished them and their forebears for millions of years, a poetic stoicism makes no sense at all: South Africa, mother of pain, can have meaning only to people who can find it meaningful to ascribe their ‘pain’ (‘alienation’ is here a better word) to the failure of Africa to love them enough. An aesthetic preoccupation with the land, however restrained or even tragic, thus masks a resistance to thinking about South Africa in sociopolitical terms.

In *White Writing*, these two sets of codes or mythic maps of Africa, the one arcadian, the other dystopian, are examined in more elaborate and more generally applicable ways. Coetzee describes the first dream topography as follows: a network of boundaries crisscrossing the surface of the land, marking off thousands of farms, each a separate kingdom ruled over by a benign patriarch with, beneath him, a pyramid of contented and industrious children, grandchildren, and serfs.

In this conception of South African territory, the farm, the very soil, in fact, is imagined as a wife to the fathers and sons, who all merge into a single mythic husband-man. This dream topography may be identified with the plaasroman, and with the more nostalgic and romantic aspects of the Afrikaner volkskultuur generally speaking.
It is the mythic space not only of novelists like Van Bruggen or Van den Heever but also of countless movies, stories from popular magazines like Huisgenoot, old soap operas on Springbok radio, and so forth.

What is key to Coetzee’s conception, however, is the fact that this imagined topography involves a mode of writing of the most material sort: the furrows of the plow assume the character of a signature, a letter of ownership, a title to the land. In the optic proposed by the plaasroman, the pastoral activities of plowing, digging, building, fence-making, even the construction of those Cape Dutch houses in the classic shape of the letter H, a shape Magda tries to read in *In the Heart of the Country*, are all to be regarded as acts of inscription.

**The Struggle between Change and Tradition in *Things Fall Apart***

As a story about a culture on the verge of change, *Things Fall Apart* deals with how the prospect and reality of change affect various characters. The tension about whether change should be privileged over tradition often involves questions of personal status. Okonkwo, for example, resists the new political and religious orders because he feels that they are not manly and that he himself will not be manly if he consents to join or even tolerate them. To some extent, Okonkwo’s resistance of cultural change is also due to his fear of losing societal status. His sense of self-worth is dependent upon the traditional standards by which society judges him. This system of evaluating the self inspires many of the clan’s outcasts to embrace Christianity. Long scorned, these outcasts find in the Christian value system a refuge from the Igbo cultural values that place them below everyone else. In their new community, these converts enjoy a more elevated status.
The villagers in general are caught between resisting and embracing change and they face the dilemma of trying to determine how best to adapt to the reality of change. Many of the villagers are excited about the new opportunities and techniques that the missionaries bring. This European influence, however, threatens to extinguish the need for the mastery of traditional methods of farming, harvesting, building, and cooking. These traditional methods, once crucial for survival, are now, to varying degrees, dispensable. Throughout the novel, Achebe shows how dependent such traditions are upon storytelling and language and thus how quickly the abandonment of the Igbo language for English could lead to the eradication of these traditions.

Okonkwo’s relationship with his late father shapes much of his violent and ambitious demeanor. He wants to rise above his father’s legacy of spendthrift, indolent behavior, which he views as weak and therefore effeminate. This association is inherent in the clan’s language, the narrator mentions that the word for a man who has not taken any of the expensive, prestige-indicating titles is agbala, which also means woman. But, for the most part, Okonkwo’s idea of manliness is not the clan’s. He associates masculinity with aggression and feels that anger is the only emotion that he should display. For this reason, he frequently beats his wives, even threatening to kill them from time to time. We are told that he does not think about things, and we see him act rashly and impetuously. Yet others who are in no way effeminate do not behave in this way. Obierika, unlike Okonkwo, was a man who thought about things. Whereas Obierika refuses to accompany the men on the trip to kill Ikemefuna, Okonkwo not only volunteers to join the party that will execute his surrogate son but
also violently stabs him with his machete simply because he is afraid of appearing weak.

Okonkwo’s seven-year exile from his village only reinforces his notion that men are stronger than women. While in exile, he lives among the kinsmen of his motherland but resents the period in its entirety. The exile is his opportunity to get in touch with his feminine side and to acknowledge his maternal ancestors, but he keeps reminding himself that his maternal kinsmen are not as warlike and fierce as he remembers the villagers of Umuofia to be. He faults them for their preference of negotiation, compliance, and avoidance over anger and bloodshed. In Okonkwo’s understanding, his uncle Uchendu exemplifies this pacifist (and therefore somewhat effeminate) mode.

Language is an important theme in *Things Fall Apart* on several levels. In demonstrating the imaginative, often formal language of the Igbo, Achebe emphasizes that Africa is not the silent or incomprehensible continent that books such as *Heart of Darkness* made it out to be. Rather, by peppering the novel with Igbo words, Achebe shows that the Igbo language is too complex for direct translation into English. Similarly, Igbo culture cannot be understood within the framework of European colonialist values. Achebe also points out that Africa has many different languages: the villagers of Umuofia, for example, make fun of Mr. Brown’s translator because his language is slightly different from their own.

On a macroscopic level, it is extremely significant that Achebe chose to write *Things Fall Apart* in English, he clearly intended it to be read by the West at least as much, if not more, than by his fellow Nigerians. His goal was to critique and emend
the portrait of Africa that was painted by so many writers of the colonial period. Doing so required the use of English, the language of those colonial writers. Through his inclusion of proverbs, folktales, and songs translated from the Igbo language, Achebe managed to capture and convey the rhythms, structures, cadences, and beauty of the Igbo language.

Along with these many motifs in the novel portray the struggle between change and tradition. The concept of chi is discussed at various points throughout the novel and is important to our understanding of Okonkwo as a tragic hero. The chi is an individual’s personal god, whose merit is determined by the individual’s good fortune he lack thereof. Along the lines of this interpretation, one can explain Okonkwo’s tragic fate as the result of a problematic chi, a thought that occurs to Okonkwo at several points in the novel. But there is another understanding of chi that conflicts with this definition. According to this understanding, individuals will their own destinies. Thus, depending upon our interpretation of chi, Okonkwo seems either more or less responsible for his own tragic death. Okonkwo himself shifts between these poles: when things are going well for him, he perceives himself as master and maker of his own destiny; when things go badly, however, he automatically disavows responsibility and asks why he should be so ill-fated.

In their descriptions, categorizations, and explanations of human behavior and wisdom, the Igbo often use animal anecdotes to naturalize their rituals and beliefs. The presence of animals in their folklore reflects the environment in which they live, not yet modernized by European influence. Though the colonizers, for the most part, view the Igbo’s understanding of the world as rudimentary, the Igbo perceive these
animal stories, such as the account of how the tortoise’s shell came to be bumpy, as logical explanations of natural phenomena. Another important animal image is the figure of the sacred python. Enoch’s alleged killing and eating of the python symbolizes the transition to a new form of spirituality and a new religious order. Enoch’s disrespect of the python clashes with the Igbo’s reverence for it, epitomizing the incompatibility of colonialist and indigenous values.

Achebe being a supreme artist uses many symbols to portray the conflict between change and tradition. Achebe depicts the locusts that descend upon the village in highly allegorical terms that prefigure the arrival of the white settlers, who will feast on and exploit the resources of the Igbo. The fact that the Igbo eat these locusts highlights how innocuous they take them to be. Similarly, those who convert to Christianity fail to realize the damage that the culture of the colonizer does to the culture of the colonized.

The language that Achebe uses to describe the locusts indicates their symbolic status. The repetition of words like settle and every emphasizes the suddenly ubiquitous presence of these insects and hints at the way in which the arrival of the white settlers takes the Igbo off guard. Furthermore, the locusts are so heavy they break the tree branches, which symbolizes the fracturing of Igbo traditions and culture under the onslaught of colonialism and white settlement.

Okonkwo is associated with burning, fire, and flame throughout the novel, alluding to his intense and dangerous anger, the only emotion that he allows himself to display. Yet the problem with fire, as Okonkwo acknowledges is that it destroys everything it consumes. Okonkwo is both physically destructive, he kills Ikemefuna
and Ogbuefi Ezeudu’s son, and emotionally destructive, he suppresses his fondness for Ikemefuna and Ezinma in favor of a colder, more masculine aura. Just as fire feeds on itself until all that is left is a pile of ash, Okonkwo eventually succumbs to his intense rage, allowing it to rule his actions until it destroys him.

**The Destruction of Fictional Illusion**

The second and rival dream topography Coetzee describes is one in which South Africa is imagined as a vast, empty, and silent space, older than man, older than the dinosaurs whose bones lie bedded in its rocks, and destined to be vast, empty, and unchanged long after man has passed from its face.

In this conception of Africa as the oldest and most daunting of continents, the task of the human imagination is to conceive not a social order capable of domesticating the landscape, but any kind of relation at all that consciousness can have with it.

Such a conception generates a poetry of empty space: a failed but stoic lyricism. The literary tradition associated with this disheartening topography originates with Schreiner’s negative pastoral Story of an African Farm (the classic of phase two literature in Stephen Gray’s scheme) and is then continued by a succession of English-language poets.

Although its key tropes are absence, silence, and the failure of language, this topography of desolation must also be apprehended as a form of writing. Though it does not inscribe the land with the obvious sig- natures of culture and cultivation, it does project on it an inscrutable blankness.
In this blankness, much the same blankness that fascinated Conrad’s Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* when he pored over maps as a boy, Coetzee sees evidence of the exercise of a certain historical will: a desire to see as silent and empty, a land that has been, if not full of human figures, not empty of them either; that is arid and infertile, perhaps, but not inhospitable to human life, and certainly not uninhabited.

This topography, the product of a particular version of the sublime, thus relies on an act of erasure. The silence the solitary poet encounters in the empty landscape, or so Coetzee reminds us, bears an uncomfortable resemblance to the myth purveyed by apartheid-era historiographers, who claimed that the land settled by the Voortrecker pioneers in the nineteenth century was open, empty, and unpeopled.

The crucial point of *White Writing*, then, is that in both of the dominant literary versions of the pastoral in South Africa, the Afrikaner novelist’s patriarchal idyll, as well as the English poet’s naturalistic lyricism, the black person, whether as the farmer of an earlier age or as the agricultural worker or even just as human presence, is obscured.

Coetzee’s meditations in this book, like his earlier meditations on *The Guest*, thus lead to a series of uncomfortable questions that strike at the heart of the South African political system. There is a fundamental blindness of the white man’s dream about the land: its blindness to the color black. They also reveal Coetzee’s characteristic critical procedure in the first half of his career: he does not read the writing so much as ask what the writing occludes, and he does not seek the truth in direct utterances so much as in evasions and omissions.
“The themes and methods deployed in *White Writing* are also evident in Coetzee’s fiction. *Life and Times of Michael K*, for instance, is both a meditation on the ideological function of the pastoral and an example of the critical strategy of subverting the dominant discourse and listening to its silences.”

That there should be connections between *White Writing* and *Life and Times of Michael K* is hardly surprising, since the novel was written concurrently with some of the essays in the critical study. Even the lines from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* that serve as the epigraph to *White Writing* indicate the two books’ overlapping concerns. These lines serve to underscore the difficulties that beset the life of Michael K, the gardener, and that have historically beset South Africa, the troubled garden colony.

“Pressing his lips to foreign soil, greeting the unfamiliar mountain and plains, Cadmus gave thanks . . . Descending from above, Pallas told him to plow and sow the earth with the serpent’s teeth, which would grow into a future nation.”

The epigraph suggests that the settler’s pastoral efforts have been synonymous with war and strife from the very beginning. The context in which Michael K finds himself likewise conflates the ideas of gardening and war, or rather forces gardening and war into an oxymoronic embrace: after all, this a novel in which people dig into the earth to plant mines, and march about in prison camps.

It is in its emphasis on the difference that class or one’s place in the economy makes that the novel’s critique of character, its explosion of roles and places, becomes a form of cognitive mapping. The narrative describes a discovery on the part
of the privileged of the hidden identities and hidden places that lie beyond the comfortable topographies of their own daily lives. There is a very famous quotation of the literary critic Tristan Tzara. He says about Dadaism:

“There is a literature that does not reach the voracious mass. It is the work of creators, issued from a real necessity in the author, produced for himself. It expresses the knowledge of a supreme egoism, in which laws wither away. Every page must explode, either by profound heavy seriousness, the whirlwind, poetic frenzy, the new, the eternal, the crushing joke, enthusiasm for principles, or by the way in which it is printed. On the one hand a tottering world in flight, betrothed to the glockenspiel of hell, on the other hand: new men. Rough, bouncing, riding on hiccups. Behind them a crippled world and literary quacks with a mania for improvement. I say unto you: there is no beginning and we do not tremble, we are not sentimental. We are a furious Wind, tearing the dirty linen of clouds and prayers, preparing the great spectacle of disaster, fire, decomposition. We will put an end to mourning and replace tears by sirens screeching from one continent to another. Pavilions of intense joy and widowers with the sadness of poison. Dada is the signboard of abstraction; advertising and business are also elements of poetry. I destroy the drawers of the brain and of social organization: spread demoralization wherever I go and cast my hand from heaven to hell, my eyes from hell to heaven, restore the fecund wheel of a universal circus to objective forces and the
imagination of every individual. Philosophy is the question: from which side shall we look at life, God, the idea or other phenomena. Everything one looks at is false. I do not consider the relative result more important than the choice between cake and cherries after dinner. The system of quickly looking at the other side of a thing in order to impose your opinion indirectly is called dialectics, in other words, haggling over the spirit of fried potatoes while dancing method around it.”

This is the context in which the modern novel grew out and this is the context in which Coetzee and Achebe write their works. The reader of July’s People is also drawn into this discovery, especially at those moments in the text that implicitly raise the question of his or her own locatedness, his or her own place in the geography of power.

The novel, which presents itself like a message in a bottle from a very distant space, also seems to ironize certain potential modes of its own reception. It ends with a curious valedictory description of July’s village, evoked, for once, in picturesque and sentimental terms, as it might appear in a photograph made for international consumption: an image of the single community of man-and-nature-in-Africa reproduced by skilled photogravure processes in Holland and Switzerland.

This image functions, I would argue, as a cautionary example of precisely the kind of facile and voyeuristic negotiation of difference discredited by the novel’s earlier references to the coffee-table book on South Africa’s racial policies and, even
more sardonically, to those photographic exhibitions in affluent South African shopping malls whose favoured subject was black township life.

The novel thus implies a challenge to its international audience: that they should devise a mode of sociospatial mapping that goes beyond a complacent learning about foreign parts and toward a recognition of the often ugly relationships between these forgotten and distant parts of the world economy and their own.

To say this is not to suggest that any sociospatial totality is actually represented in the novel. As far as the characters in July’s People are concerned, there is no ready-made chart to replace the outdated antique map of the world printed on July’s hand-me-down bedspread back in the abandoned servant’s quarters.

But it is, I think, an aspect of the novel’s rigor that it does not present a glamorized version of African pastoralism as a satisfactory post-revolutionary conceptual scheme.

There is little that is enabling or enviable, as Coetzee makes clear, about the worldview of July’s chief, who can only understand the post-revolutionary world in terms of petty local conflicts, or in that of the impoverished women of the village, for whom overseas is a strange, almost content less word and for whom the intercontinental planes that fly overhead signify a mobility and an expansive geography in which they have no part or place.

Nor does it seem that Maureen Smales, the most important of the novel’s white characters, gains any new sense of social or geographical locatedness. Her surroundings remain a boundlessness in which she cannot even walk so far as to take the dog around the block.
The best she can do is to improvise a very local sense of direction by mentally sticking a pin where there was no map. Yet her disorientation must, I think, be grasped dialectically. When Maureen finally realizes that she never really knew July, that his measure as a man was taken elsewhere, she confronts at last the connections between knowledge, power, and social place that ideally she should have seen long ago.

**Modernity and Education in Nigeria**

One of Chinua Achebe's main socio-political criticisms in *No Longer At Ease* is that of corruption in Nigeria. From the moment the book begins the main character, Obi Okonkwo, is confronted with the issue of bribery. From the moment he arrives at customs to the point at where he gives in to taking bribes himself, the voice of Achebe lingers in the backdrop through the words.

At first Obi is as critical as Achebe of bribery. He refuses to take bribes and also finds it necessary for himself to be a pioneer in Nigeria, bringing down corruption in government and instigating change. It seems that corruption runs rampant and that everyone in Nigeria from the white man to the Umuofian Progressive Union participates in seeing people about what they need done. Men offer money, and women offer their bodies, in return for favors and services. Obi believes that by not taking bribes he can make a difference. He had written, while at the university in London, a paper in which he theorized on what would change the corruption of high positions in Nigeria. He believed that the old Africans at the top of civil service positions would have to be replaced by a younger generation of idealistic and educated university graduates, such as himself.
Achebe, however, is not as optimistic as Obi because he has Obi fail. Achebe takes us through the path of how someone like Obi can come to take bribes. The book begins on a negative note: starting with Obi's trial. It is as if Achebe, by beginning in the end, is saying that Obi was doomed from the start. Obi's position is a difficult one. He is born in Ibo, but he has been educated in England and often feels himself a stranger in his own country. He has lost his love because of a rule of the past, he has suffered under great financial distress, he has exerted himself because of the expectations others have placed on him, and he has lost his mother. All of this brings the protagonist of the novel to fall into what he once had believed was a terrible and corrupt act. Still, Obi always feels guilt at taking a bribe, and he had decided to stop taking them. By having Obi get caught, even amid an aura of repentance and guilt, Achebe further illustrates the hypocrisy of all who have participated in bribes and now throw stones at Obi. And, at the same time, it tells us that, although he got caught, Obi is still a pioneer because he has sworn to not do it again. It may be that his beginning as a pioneer is a rough one, one that has taken a curved path, but it does not definitely mean that he cannot still lead toward change. Still, perhaps Achebe may be saying that this is not true, and that Obi, ultimately, has failed at the task he set before himself.

Whether the book is a tragedy (an unresolved situation) in Obi's definition of the word or not is up to whether we believe that it is Achebe who is the greatest pioneer in the novel. In other words, it is the author's critical voice that will lead others out of such corruption, if not by only making the world and younger generations of Nigerians aware of it.
One of the most important aspects of Obi's life is that he was educated in England. This small fact molds the way others treat him and shapes what others expect of him. At the same time, the education he holds dear is also one for which he has felt guilt and one which has often made him a stranger in his own Nigeria.

Upon his return from England, Obi is secured a position in the civil service, given a car, money, and respect. At the same time, however, he seems to be making constant mistakes because of what he has learned to be like, what he has come to understand, and what he has never learned. For instance, when Obi first arrives, he is given a reception by the Umuofian Progressive Union at which he makes several mistakes. He has forgotten how to act in his home or simply does not agree with its ways: he wears a short-sleeved shirt and sees nothing wrong with it, for it is hot, and he speaks casually in English, instead of the kind of heavy English that the Umuofians admire in the president of the Union. His education has brought him status and has placed him in a position where others expect the most and best of him. No one can understand, in the end, how a man of his education and promise could take a bribe. Of course, Achebe, says this cheekily since many who have accused him and who also hold high positions are guilty of similar transgressions. Ironically, the only thing his education did not teach him was how not to get caught.

Another important aspect of education, aside from the contradictions mentioned above, is the fact that Obi's generation uses its education as a tool, paradoxically, against colonialism. Sam Okoli, the Minister of State and also an educated man, verbalizes the position of the populace by saying that, yes, the white man has brought many things to Africa, but it is time for the white man to go. In other
words, a man like Obi can use his education to take his country back into his own hands, even if his education is something that the colonizer gave him. It is important to remember that the only way to survive in a world where two cultures have met is to allow a certain amount of mixture to be used in a positive regard.

While Obi is in England he misses his home, longs for his family, and writes nostalgic poetry about Lagos and the sun and the trees of his homeland. He even begins to feel a certain degree of guilt, at times, for studying English and not being in Nigeria with other Ibo people. Nevertheless, this English has become a part of him, one that he cannot erase when he arrives back in Nigeria.

Obi is in love with his native tongue, and it holds a place in his heart. At the same time, however, he is also comfortable with the English language. The struggle of language is just one of the many examples of how African tradition and English culture collide in this novel. Obi loves his family dearly, and since his family is symbolic of his roots, it can be said that he loves his roots dearly. This is not to say, however, that he will not rebel against his roots because of things he has learned elsewhere. Obi possesses the more liberal, and even European, belief that he may marry anyone he wishes, even though his family and his countrymen are opposed to it. And, even though he wishes to marry Clara in the end, despite her history, he is tied to his mother a symbolic traditional root … his blood.

It is this struggle between tradition and European ways that is evidenced throughout and that is further amplified by the European presence of characters like Mr. Green. And, aside from the obvious Mr. Green, there are also the more subtle presences of Europeans at lounges and restaurants throughout Nigeria serving English
food and importing European beers. Some of these colonial importations and introductions are good, as is evidenced by the scene about the radiogram between Obi and the Minister of State. Nevertheless, the struggle exists, and it is obvious that Achebe has a strong negative opinion about colonialism as a whole.

**Narrative Mode and Staccato Writing**

Painful as it may be, it is surely necessary for her to confront these connections and to abandon apartheid’s distorted map of human relations: a map that, as we have seen, extended no further than the suburban garden, and was deceptive even about that which its fences enclosed.

“The much-debated final scene of the novel is, then, profoundly ambiguous but not altogether hopeless. Maureen runs toward the sound of a mysterious helicopter, lured, we are told, by the illusory promise of a kitchen, a house just the other side of the next tree. In this regard her running is a retreat. But it is also true that her dash toward the helicopter dissolves all of her old attachments.”

Unlike Bam, left behind in the hut, and left behind, in a different sense, in the master bedroom, Maureen is in motion: her flight is a final abandonment of the house of the white race and the relations of affection and power that it once guaranteed. The novel thus eschews any final enclosure and seems to affirm an open-ended, transient, and migratory existence, a mode of being that is perhaps peculiarly African and also typically postcolonial. First you leave your mother’s house, and then you leave the house of the white race.
The logic of Coetzee’s early formulation of the acquisition of political consciousness finds it’s most radical transmutation in the novel My Son’s Story. In this novel, produced during the final years of the apartheid era, it is not the daughter, or even the son, who leaves the mother’s house, but the mother herself. Aila, the compelling character whom Homi Bhabha describes, almost reverentially, as the silent possessor of the strange house of fiction, of the home-in-the-world and the world-in-the-home, becomes a revolutionary, goes into exile, and finally to prison.

And as if to eliminate any lingering possibility of a return of the old domestic relations, the coloured family’s newly acquired house in a slowly integrating suburb burns to the ground.

It is also in My Son’s Story that we encounter Coetzee’s most affirmative evocation of public space: an ideal that had, as it were, gone underground since the publication of her essay Great Problems in the Street in.

The passage in question describes a mass demonstration at a funeral in Alexandra, and does so in a way that can only be appreciated fully if one recognizes in it a transformation of the topographic blueprints traced out in this chapter.

“The crowded scene in the township street is evoked in terms that simultaneously suggest both the home and the world, both belonging and liberation: Everyone home: ‘home’ the streets; a habitation without barriers, the house’s breached walls spilling inmates.”

The passage climaxes with a vision of the closeness of bodies, an expressive collectivity in which blacks and whites are organically united and class differences
(figured by the French perfume of a rich woman and the sweat of a drunk) seem to be transcended: One ultimate body of bodies was inhaling and exhaling in the single diastole and systole and above was the freedom of the great open afternoon sky.

This is one of the very rare instances in Coetzee’s œuvre in which she eschews the discomfiting poetics of the political uncanny in favor of the more assertive poetics of the revolutionary sublime. It is a vulnerable moment, to be sure, for the sublime always strains at our credulity and our notions of proportion and good taste, and it has struck some of Coetzee’s more skeptical critics as cliché.

But the street scene in My Son’s Story is nevertheless, as Dominic Head rightly observes, the effective culmination of Coetzee’s rigorous and sustained examination of South Africa’s social geography in her apartheid-era fiction. Willful symbolism, though it may be, the evocation of the street as home in My Son’s Story offers a sensual encapsulation of her most persistent intellectual concerns and political desiderata.

But, while granting Coetzee a moment of utopian indulgence, we should also consider to what extent the development of urban space in the postapartheid era has lived up to her ideal of a truly public domain where racial and class divisions have been abolished. It is fair to say that the postapartheid city though it will be affected for many years to come by the material legacy of the old racialized urban planning has since been the site of much creative ferment and many new forms of life, ranging from the terrifying to the heartening.

It has inspired a number of innovative and optimistic meditations on urban space as a nexus of crossings and fluid subjectivities rather than a grid of rigid
structural divisions and inflexible identities. But it has also seemed to many scholars that the suburbs and even the streets of the new South African city have developed, though haphazardly and through speculation and short-term economic necessity rather than centralized planning, in ways that impede the ideal of a polyglot site of bodily closeness and chance encounter.

The novelist Marlene van Niekerk has half-ironically proposed that the newly popular gyms could be seen as exemplary sites where, under the aegis of profitable franchises, black and white bodies may commingle in a new kind of deodorized, members-only collectivity. But if we leave the air-conditioned gym behind and contemplate the broader relations between inner city, suburb, and township, it can be increasingly difficult to find evidence that the old geographies of division have been erased. It is rather the case that old divisions are now articulated and justified in new terms – which is touted as the staccato writing.
References

4 Ibid. p. 149.
9 Ibid. p. 49.
10 Ibid. p. 57.