

Written Task 2- Literature

Category: Power and privilege

Prescribed question: How and why is a social group represented in a particular way?

Title of the text for analysis: “Things Fall Apart” by Chinua Achebe.

Part of the course to which the task refers to: Part 3: Literature--text and contexts

Outline

Introduction:

- Brief description of the plot of the novel
- Context of the novel
- Identify the social group represented: White colonialists

Main Body:

Paragraph 1:

- The impact of white colonialists on Umuofia
- Analysis of the character of Mr. Brown and the image it portrays
- Positive aspects of their occupation

Paragraph 2:

- Analysis of the character of Reverend Smith and the reflection of the colonialist Europeans
- Negative aspects, contrasting Mr. Brown

Conclusion:

- Overall image portrayed of the white colonialists
- Reason over the contrasting descriptions

How and why is a social group represented in a particular way?

The text chosen is “Things Fall Apart” by Chinua Achebe. In the novel there are several themes explored such as racism and discrimination, colonialism, change vs tradition, etc. It narrates the life of Okonkwo, a high-class man who was “well known throughout the nine villages and beyond”¹ and has a turning point on the arrival of white missionaries. There are different views of the missionaries in the novel, for a specific purpose. “The fact that the missionaries are depicted in a diverse way shows that Achebe is careful of not making the same mistakes when portraying the foreign as Westerners have done when portraying Africans as the unknown in for example Conrad’s Heart of Darkness.”². This is because “Achebe sees the benefits and the positive aspects that the missionaries brought as well as the negative ones.”³. The group which will be analyzed is the white priests.

The first character which will be analyzed is Mr. Brown. He was a white missionary but did not share the racist beliefs of other colonialists, he is patient, tolerant, friendly and respectful. He is introduced as being “very firm in restraining his flock from provoking the wrath of the clan”, which gives the impression that he is patient as well as tolerant, he would rather approach peacefully the clan than violently. Another aspect of his personality is that he is friendly to the Igbo as seen in the phrase “He made friends with some of the great men of the clan”⁴. This also

¹ Things Fall Apart, page 3

² Moseley, Kristian. Lund University, “The Portrayal of Religion in Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart”. 2017

³ Moseley, Kristian. Lund University, “The Portrayal of Religion in Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart”. 2017

⁴ Things Fall Apart, page 157

intensifies his image of a respectful man, as the clan men did not accept white missionaries, however he is an exception, not only accepting him but creating a personal relationship with him. Moreover, it is said that he frequently visited neighboring villages, showing his engagement with expanding his culture but in a respectful way. This respect is shown in the image “he had been presented with a carved elephant tusk, which was a sign of dignity and rank”⁵. Through this image, the respect he had even among the villages is vividly enhanced, as they gifted relevant elements as a sign of approval and appreciation. Mr. Brown also built a school, in which he offered his knowledge and tried to convert the Igbo. Another remarkable aspect is that “he spent long hours with Akunna in his *obi* talking through an interpreter about religion”⁶. In this phrase, his patience and tolerance are highlighted, as he could discuss peacefully with one of the great men of a village, even if he wanted to convert him, he was understanding as well as persistent. Mr. Brown was also creative, as he knew he could not convert the clan only with religion, “And so he built a school and a little hospital in Umuofia”⁷, and it had a great effect. Finally, there is the possibility as well of interpreting the name of Mr. Brown as a mix of colours, showing he does not reflect any polarity into any culture, it is a point in between the two colours, as well as conveying the idea of a stance between Igbo and European cultures. “*The influence of his Christian past on Achebe is undeniable considering the fact that he frequently referred to both the African Christians and European ones in his homeland. Still when he was a child, he experienced the distinction between to be a Christian and non-Christian in his homeland.*”⁸. Possibly Mr. Brown is a way of portraying Christianity

⁵ Things Fall Apart, page 158

⁶ Things Fall Apart, page 158

⁷ Things Fall Apart, page 159

⁸ Yiğit, Ali. “*The Conflictual Image of Christian Missionaries in Achebe’s Things Fall Apart*”. Social Sciences Institute, Fatih University, İstanbul, & Kırklareli University, Kırklareli, TURKEY. 2014.

differently due to his personal past and religious influence as half of his family was Christian and the other shared Igbo values, but neither was completely correct.

On the other hand, Mr. Brown's successor, Reverend James Smith, had a very contrasting personality to him "he was a different kind of man", he was an extremist, had a polarized view of people and religion and lacked tolerance and patience. In the metaphor "He saw things as black and white. And black was evil."⁹ We can see how he was narrow minded, had a polarized perspective of the world, evil or good. Also, the use of black and white, portray the theme of racism, as black is evil, the reader understands that he is racist and prejudges the Igbo. "Within a few weeks of his arrival in Umuofia Mr. Smith suspended a young woman from the church."¹⁰ Here the lack of tolerance and patience that Reverend Smith had are highlighted, as well as his extremist measures of punishment. In the metaphor "Mr. Smith was filled with wrath when he heard of this"¹¹ Depicts his ill-tempered personality, intolerance and large difference to Mr. Brown's approach to tribal beliefs, he disregarded their story immediately without any further investigation. Once again, he is presented as close-minded and selective in terms of religion in the indirect speech "Those who believed such stories were unworthy of the Lord's table"¹². He was not open and did not share Mr. Brown's acceptance, he had little patience and would not hesitate to remove someone from church, he did not want to convert the Igbo as he thought they were inferior. He was also publicly against Mr. Brown as he "condemned openly Mr. Brown's policy of compromise and accommodation." This statement may explain his unpopularity, also giving

⁹ Things Fall Apart, page 162

¹⁰ Things Fall Apart, page 162

¹¹ Things Fall Apart, page 163

¹² Things Fall Apart, page 163

himself self-importance as he undermines any posture that does not match his own, expanding his egocentric personality.

In conclusion, Chinua Achebe presents two completely different personalities through these characters to represent the white settlers. The reason behind these variety is not to commit the mistake of collectivizing the Europeans as all racist and intolerant, as it had happened to the Igbo, all were seen inferior and a mass of primitive people. “Achebe is very open to certain parts of what the missionaries brought with them. Mr. Brown represents the positive aspects of the missionaries, (...), while Mr. Smith represents the negative aspects of the missionaries, which caused the destruction of Igbo society.”¹³. This may be also influenced by his personal life and background.

WORD COUNT: 1000

¹³ Moseley, Kristian. Lund University, “The Portrayal of Religion in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*”. 2017

Bibliography:

- Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. Heinemann, 1971
- Moseley, Kristian. Lund University, “The Portrayal of Religion in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*”. 2017
- Yiğit, Ali. “The Conflictual Image of Christian Missionaries in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*”. Social Sciences Institute, Fatih University, İstanbul, & Kırklareli University, Kırklareli, TURKEY. 2014.

