Top of Form

Bottom of Form

## No Longer at Ease Summary Notes and Analysis

***Introduction***

[*No Longer at Ease*](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease) is [Chinua Achebe](https://www.gradesaver.com/author/chinua-achebe)'s second book and part of what is commonly referred to as the African Trilogy; this includes [*Things Fall Apart*](https://www.gradesaver.com/things-fall-apart) and [*Arrow of God*](https://www.gradesaver.com/arrow-of-god). The title comes from T.S. Eliot's [*Journey of the Magi*](https://www.gradesaver.com/journey-of-the-magi). Some critics discern autobiographical elements in the text.

The novel was published in 1960, which was the year Nigeria became independent from Great Britain. It explores the themes of the effects of colonialism on the Nigerian people, the Nigerian character, political and individual corruption, religion, exile, and redemption. Critic Eustace Palmer describes the book as about the Nigerian generation who "having been exposed to education in the western world and therefore largely cut off from their roots in traditional society, discover, on their return, that the demands of tradition are still strong, and are hopelessly caught in the clash between the old and the new."

The main character in the novel, [Obi Okonkwo](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#obi-okonkwo), is the grandson of the protagonist in Things Fall Apart, Ogbuefi Okonkwo, who experiences the pacification of the Igbo people by the English. The events of No Longer at Ease are set about sixty years later. Those of the third novel, Arrow of God, take place between pacification and independence.

Reviews were mostly positive, but some critics noted that Achebe's characters were rather flimsily drawn. The book is s often unfavorably compared to Things Fall Apart, Achebe's masterpiece.

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

## Plot summary

The novel begins in the present with Obi at his trial for bribery, and then works backward to tell how he arrived there. For the sake of clarity, the short summary will talk about his life chronologically.

Obi grew up in the village of Umuofia, Nigeria. He had a happy childhood with his multiple siblings and parents. His father converted to Christianity, and his mother did so to appease him, but Obi was never very religious. He was very close to his mother.

As a young man, the Umuofia Progressive Union awarded him a scholarship to study in England. They hoped he would be a lawyer but he chose to study English instead. Before he left everyone gave him a party and the village pastor warned him to keep to his studies and stay out of trouble.

On the ship back from England to Nigeria after his studies were completed, Obi met a bewitching girl named [Clara](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#clara). She was cold to him but they eventually kissed.

Obi arrived in Lagos and was shown around by another young man named [Joseph](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#joseph). The Union feted him, although he felt like he kept making mistakes like not dressing well or speaking well. He interviewed for a job and when asked if he would accept a bribe, replied indignantly to the chairman of the committee that it was not a useful question.

He traveled to Umuofia before the results of his interview came in. The village gave him a huge reception and was immensely proud of him. Some of the older men warned him to be careful in the white man's world and spoke of the lack of greatness of current Nigerian men.

Obi's mind was mostly on Clara, whom he had started dating and planned to marry. She was very secretive and he did not know why he was not able to tell people about them.

Obi received a job in the senior service in the scholarship office. He did not care for his boss, an Englishman named [Mr. Green](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#mr-green), who expressed negative opinions of Nigerians, but he soon became friends with Miss Tomlinson, the secretary.

Obi spent most of his time with Clara and his friends, such as the louche [Christopher](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#christopher), Joseph, and a high-ranking Nigerian politician, the [Hon. Sam Okoli](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#hon-sam-okoli). He found himself in a great deal of money trouble, as he continually received bills and could not find a way to pay for them. Once Clara gave him a mysterious fifty pounds to help him out, but he decided not to use it and it was accidentally stolen from his car.

He had asked the Union for an extension on his debt (the initial scholarship to England had to be repaid), but they expressed hesitation about the rumors of whom he was dating. It seemed that Clara, as she had tearfully broken it to Obi, was an ‘osu’, meaning a member of a cursed family whose ancestor was given to the gods. No Nigerian found her an acceptable choice for Obi to marry, but he stubbornly insisted he would marry her. He raged at the Union and told them to butt out of his life. Unfortunately, his pride, then, kept him from getting the extension on his debt and it continued to snowball. An opportunity came up for him to accept a bribe but he chose not to.

Obi's mother grew ill and he traveled to visit her. There his father privately asked about Clara and expressed his reservations, but Obi tried to tell him that because he was a Christian he could not care about Clara's osu status. His mother, however, told him firmly that he could only marry her after she died, and if he married her beforehand she would kill herself.

Shocked, Obi said nothing but cut his trip short and returned to Lagos. When he told Clara what had happened she gave him her ring and called off the engagement. Unfortunately, she was pregnant, and the two had to seek out an abortion for her. Abortions were criminal and they could only get one from a doctor who charged a high fee.

Obi dropped Clara off and she and the doctor left, but he felt bad and tried to go after them. His searches for Clara finally led him to the hospital, where it turned out she had complications from the surgery. All in all, she was in the hospital for five weeks. She would not speak to Obi, and left Lagos.

Obi also learned his mother had died. He decided not to go to the funeral since it would be a long trip and she was already dead. He cried for a bit but his grief passed quickly. Nigerians, including many from the Union, came to him in Lagos to mourn with him.

When scholarship season started up again, Obi's defenses were down because of Clara's departure and his mother's death. He accepted a bribe and then began taking more and more. When he finally decided to stop, he was apprehended and arrested.

He loses his case. Everyone wonders why a young man with such promise would take a bribe.

Chapter Summaries

Summary

Chapter 1

Obi Okonkwo is in the court at his trial, listening idly to the judge. He shows very little interest until the judge wonders aloud how a young man with so much promise could have done this. Weeks earlier a similar statement had left Obi unmoved, as he had lost his mother and Clara left, but now unwanted tears leap to his eyes.

Mr. Green, Obi’s boss, plays tennis with a British Council man and observes that he can believe why the young man did it, because all Africans are corrupt. It is no wonder given their climate and proclivity for disease.

In Lagos, the Umuofia Progressive Union holds an emergency meeting to try to figure out what to do. They were the ones who had sponsored Obi’s education, and paid his legal fees for this trial. Now they are meeting again because the case was lost. They think the boy is foolish, but he is one of them and it is silly that he should go to prison for a bribe of twenty pounds. One man blames the boy’s lack of experience and says bribes are common everywhere.

Obi had received the scholarship five years ago. The Union has scholarships for young men of promise; they were sent to England for their studies. It was hoped Obi would be a lawyer to help them in cases against neighbors, but he did not and received another civil post. When he came back, he was a type of celebrity. His going away had caused a big commotion. His parents gave a reception with a large feast, and the pastor gave a speech. He turned to Obi and told him not to be beguiled by the white man’s country, and to wait for enjoyment; rather, he should work hard and ignore the pleasures of the world for a time.

Chapter 2

Obi has been in England for four years. England is where he first realized Nigeria was more than a name to him. He remembers as a boy in Umuofia hearing a soldier talk about Lagos and its bright lights and motorcars.

He first went to Lagos on his way over to England, where he spent time with Joseph Okeke, a clerk in the survey department and a fellow countryman. Joseph met Obi when he arrived and talked on and on about dancing and girls and the city. The second day Obi took a walk because Joseph had a girl at his place; the girl was scintillating but left a bad taste in his mouth.

Years later, just back from England, Obi waited for Clara while she gives her seamstress fabric. They were in a slum in Lagos, which was a part of the city that Obi never knew existed. He thought that this is the real Lagos.

He and Clara drove through the dirty, noisy streets. He almost hit a wayward cyclist.

Obi lived in Ikoyi, another part of Lagos. He asked Clara why she is moody. She responded that Obi needed to leave her alone. He knew why she was mad –she asked him to go to the movies with her but he did not like the violent films she does and had declined. She retorted to him that she lets him read his poems to her, so he ought to come to the films. She had also gone to a lunch with him and a friend of his, Christopher, whom she did not like. The men debated young men versus old men in politics, with Obi supporting the idea of more jobs being given to young men straight from university. He claimed they are less prone to bribes.

Chapter 3

Obi and Clara did not fall in love at first sight. He tried to talk to her at a dance and she brushed him off. He then saw her eighteen months later on the ship returning to Nigeria. She was talking to an elderly woman and an administrative officer named Macmillan. Obi said hello and that they had met before, but she did not seem pleased.

The next day Obi watched the sea, pleased that he was not seasick. At dinner, Clara sat one seat away but did not speak to him.

In the evening the sea became wild and a storm broke. Clara knocked on his cabin door and gave him some pills for sickness, as she was a nurse. He had planned to be cool to her but could not, and wondering if her speaking in Ibo meant intimacy.

On deck the next day Macmillan came by, but slipped and fell on the deck. Obi helped him up and the men became friends. They discussed how beautiful Clara was.

The ship arrived at the Madeira Islands and anchored at sunset. Macmillan, Obi, and Clara went onshore together, walked around, and drank wine. Macmillan left to write letters and Obi and Clara passionately kissed. She said she would hate herself in the morning, but kissed him anyway.

Chapter 4

When Obi first came back to Nigeria after his years away, there was a big reception arranged for him by the Umuofia Progressive Union. Obi remembered his first mistake was not being dressed properly.

The Secretary of the Union read an address and spoke of how proud they were to have Obi back. He spoke of the scholarship program, and how the beneficiaries were to pay it back. People clapped for the Secretary and were impressed by his English. Obi, by contrast, spoke rather blandly.

The chairman asked Obi if he found a job, and Obi replied that he had an interview coming up. The vice president wondered if maybe Obi should have spoken to someone beforehand, and the president says white men do not take bribes. The others are unconvinced.

Joseph took Obi out afterward. Obi did not want to drink but Joseph insisted. Obi watched an old white lady totter about the room and sit in her corner. He wondered why the hotel the Union put him up in was not very luxurious and told Joseph he was going to come stay with him. Joseph was pleased.

They talked of the Nigerian people and Joseph reminded Obi of the time when he had written a letter to Hitler during the war. Obi laughed and mused that he did not know what came over him.

Later a handsome and boyish man, the eligible bachelor the Hon. Sam Okoli, arrives at the club. Obi thinks he can make out Clara in the man’s car.

Chapter 5

Obi had presented his theory about young men needing to replace corrupt old men in the Nigerian public service in London, and it was now also borne out by his interview. He sat before one European and three Africans and ended up talking with the Englishman about Graham Greene and the nature of tragedy. The man annoyed him with his viewpoint, and then because he asked Obi if he wanted the job so he could take bribes. Obi said it was a ridiculous question because even if he did he would not tell the board that.

Later Joseph told him he was foolish for saying that. The two men talked about marriage, for Joseph had just bought a wife. Obi scoffed that he would never pay for a wife. While waiting for the results of the interview, Obi visited his hometown of Umuofia. He traveled first class on a mammy wagon. He sat near the driver and a young woman and her baby. Loud traders sang bawdy songs in the back.

The driver was pulled over by policemen and Obi tried to meddle, which made the driver have to pay a higher bribe to the officers. The driver refused to talk to Obi after that.

He sat and mused, listening to the words of the traders’ songs and wondering why Clara said he could not tell people about her yet. After all, she did talk about wanting to marry him.

When Obi had first returned from England, it was “almost a festival” (54). A car came to pick him up, and before they left he visited the lively Onitsha marketplace. All along the road to the village music-makers played for Obi. It looked like it might rain, and some wanted it to so Isaac Okonkwo, Obi’s father, might realize Christianity had made him blind.

Obi had longed for Nigeria when he was in London. He loved talking to Ibo-speaking people there, and felt ashamed when he encountered an African of another tribe and had to speak English; he did not want people to assume he “had no language of one’s own” (57).

Hundreds of people came to the reception. He was asked about how far the white man’s country was. Mr. Okonkwo and an old man argued about kola nuts; Mr. Okonkwo said they would eat them, but not sacrifice them to idols.

Obi was not Christian but knew a bit about it. He did not like how in Christian sermons the audience could not reply.

The men said they were glad Obi did not bring back a white wife, and that he was still a son of Umuofia, not one of the “empty men who become white when they see white, and black when they see black” (61). Some men even said he was his grandfather, returned. Odogwu said there were no great African men anymore, and “Greatness is now in the things of white men” (62).

Analysis

Achebe makes it clear from the beginning that he intends his reader to have to do a bit of work putting together the pieces of the story; he begins in the present day at Obi’s bribery trial and then jumps back in time to various points in his history. This non-chronological telling, as one contemporary reviewer wrote, “is rather erratic to start with, but is soon beautifully perfected.” Achebe starts with Obi’s failure and then works backward to see just how a young man with so much promise could arrive there.

In these first five chapters, we learn why Obi was able to travel to England –he was given a prestigious scholarship from the Umuofia Progressive Union with the hope that he would bring honor to his kinsmen as well as return to be a lawyer who could help the Union with cases. In one of many disappointing moments for the Union, Obi decides not to be a lawyer but to attain a degree in English and then a job as a civil servant in the scholarship division. One of the main themes of the novel, then, is the tension between the village of Umuofia’s pride in Obi and the sense that he has strayed from their culture and community.

This is also observed in the first of many unheeded warnings Obi receives regarding his future, here delivered by a pastor on the eve of his departure. Mr. Ikedi cautions, “We are sending you to learn book. Enjoyment can wait. Do not be in a hurry to rush into the pleasures of the world” (13). Subsequent chapters reveal the contrast between this warning and Obi’s actions. Similarly, at the end of his going-away reception, Achebe writes of the gifts Obi received, noting they were “substantial presents in a village where money was so rare, where men and women toiled from year to year to wrest a meager living from an unwilling and exhausted soil” (13). In a later chapter Achebe writes of Obi’s recognition that the Union men have little money either but scraped together enough to give him the scholarship. Both of these moments set up a contrast between the sacrifices made for Obi, and his witless squandering of vastly larger sums of money.

The account of Obi’s return from England also provides Insights into his character and foreshadows his eventual downfall. His first mistake, as he notes, is that “Everybody expected a young man from England to be impressively turned out” (36), but he was not. His second mistake was his unimpressive speech to the Union; it was as if he was not even grateful for his scholarship and his opportunity. Other examples of Obi’s shortsightedness include an episode from his past – his letter to Hitler – and one from his return visit to Umuofia. In the latter, his lack of understanding about his own Nigerian culture places him in an uncomfortable situation when his attempted intervention on behalf of the mammy-wagon driver leads to greater problems.

A few of the reasons for Obi’s louche life are Introduced in these chapters: his friends, Joseph and Christopher, and Clara. The young men are unsurprisingly interested in girls and leisure, with Christopher throughout the text offering smug and amoral opinions on matters ranging from bribery (it is not morally wrong) to abortion (the young women he accidentally impregnates need to take care of the situation themselves). As for Clara, it is difficult to know what to make of her, as Achebe does not provide much information about her except as viewed through Obi’s eyes. More about her background, such as her status as a member of a low caste because of her grandfather’s religious role and her possibility of engaging in prostitution, becomes clear later in the novel and make her more sympathetic, but from the first she is depicted as moody, callous, and complicated.

Of course, the larger reason for Obi’s lack of a moral center derives not from the company he keeps but from the legacy of the English in Nigeria. More will be discussed in later analyses, but the tension between colonizer/colonized, white/black, and past/future is introduced by the conversation at Obi’s reception. There is also a divide between the Christians, like Obi’s father Isaac, and those who adhere to traditional African religion. The men discuss “greatness”, with one of the older men comparing Obi to his grandfather (a comparison that does not stand, unfortunately), and commenting, “Today greatness has changed its tune…Greatness is now in the things of the white man. And so we too have changed our tune” (62). It is an ambivalent statement, as Odogwu clearly acknowledges the changes brought about by the white man and his acceptance that the younger generation of Nigerians will need to be a part of the white man’s world, but that that does not mean they will be great like their ancestors. These are prescient words, as Obi turns out to not b

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

### Chapter 6

The aged appearance of Obi’s parents marred his homecoming. He sat up one night with his father, who told him that there was going to be a special prayer service at church for him. Obi wondered why that was necessary, but did not say aloud the reality that he did not believe in his father’s god anymore. He lied to his father about how much he read his Bible, but he did not feel bad because sometimes a lie was better than the truth.

He thought of his mother, a devout woman who, while Obi suspected would prefer to tell the folk stories from her childhood, wholeheartedly committed herself to her husband’s faith. [Isaac Okonkwo](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#isaac-okonkwo) was more than Christian, though, as he was a catechist. His wife was very zealous in carrying out her duties.

One day at school Obi was called on to give one of the folk stories of his culture. He could not, as he did not know any, and was made fun of. He told his mother when he went home, and she gave him one to tell. The next time Obi was called up, his story of the leopardess and the sheep was successful, and he even felt called upon to embellish a little bit.

Obi also reflected on his sisters. He got along with [Janet](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#janet), [Esther](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#esther), and [Agnes](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#agnes), but not the sister closest to him in age, [Charity](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#charity). He then thought about how he needed to be responsible for his family, and decided to commit part of his salary to his parents. His thoughts turned to [Clara](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#clara) and he wondered why she did not want him to tell people they planned to marry.

That evening, the rain poured down and Obi fell asleep.

### Chapter 7

Obi’s first day in the civil service was memorable, just as the day he first attended the bush mission school in Umuofia was memorable. There was a white man named [Mr. Jones](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#mr-jones), who was the Inspector of Schools, who carried out surprise visits to the school. One day the children saw him yelling at the headmaster, Mr. Nkuda, who had the audacity to punch Mr. Jones and send him to the ground. This was stunning, as Mr. Jones was a white man.

Obi’s first day of work brought him face-to-face with his boss, [Mr. Green](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#mr-green). The man was stern, curt, and unfriendly, and Obi decided he did not like him.

Obi bought a new car, a Morris Oxford, as soon as he started working. He also learned he would receive a sixty pounds allowance. He was thrilled, and called up Clara. They decided to show the [Hon. Sam Okoli](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#hon-sam-okoli).

Clara was now the Assistant Nursing Sister. Obi lived with [Joseph](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#joseph) but now planned on getting his own place.

Obi and Clara went to visit Sam. Obi was no longer jealous of him because he had no designs on Clara, and in fact planned to marry her best friend. They sat in his luxurious sitting room and talked. Sam remarked that the white men should leave the country. He also bragged that he used to have a Nigerian working for him, but now he has a white man who calls him 'sir'.

On the way home Clara was depressed but would not tell Obi why. He thought about how he had never believed in love before her, thinking it overrated and an invention of the English. Clara finally cried out that she could not marry him because she was an osu. Obi told her that was nonsense.

When he got home, Obi told joseph was had happened. Joseph told him he was lucky to have found out now, but was stunned when Obi told him he still planned to marry her. Joseph asked him if he knew what an osu was, insinuating that because of Obi’s upbringing and studies in England he was a stranger.

Obi said he would marry her no matter what. After all, why should it matter that her ancient relation was dedicated to serve a god and his descendants had to be considered an outsider caste?

The next day Obi picked up Clara and they bought an engagement ring and a Bible, the latter being traditional. They then went shopping. Obi started out energetic but lost interest.

Back at his flat Joseph expressed his disapproval, but asked about what marriage customs they would follow. He warned Obi that his decision would affect generations, and that, “in the future when we are all civilized, anybody may marry anybody. But that time has not come. We of this generation are only pioneers” (86).

Obi thought about his parents and his close relationship with his mother, assuming she would support his marriage.

### Chapter 8

The Union held its first meeting but Obi could not go. He did, though, attend the second meeting. Joseph was excited to go with him so he could share in the glory of Obi’s new car. The car did indeed get a lot of attention when it showed up near the end of the meeting.

The discussion of the day was Joseph Udo, a messenger in the Postal Service who was fired for sleeping on the job. It also appeared that he had not paid back a bribe from his early days in the Service. He was asking for ten pounds to look for a new job. The Union debated and agreed to give him the money, as well as putting in a good word for him for a new job.

The next item was one censuring the President for Obi’s reception. Young men who felt that they were stuck drinking palm-wine, not beer, brought it up. The conversation became acrimonious and went on for a while.

Finally Obi was called on to say something. He thanked them for their warm welcome and tried to make a joke. He also started talking in all Ibo and then brought in English, for which they were impressed. He came to the main point of his speech, which was to ask if he could have a four months’ reprieve before paying back his debt. Most people seemed to support this but some did not. [The President](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-president) warned him about Lagos, saying he should have money to pay the debt if he lived a frugal and moral life rather than giving into the pleasures of the city. He said he would give him a year’s extension, but remarked that he heard rumors about Obi going around with a girl of doubtful ancestry.

Obi flew into a rage and refused the President’s extension, claiming he would start paying the debt back right away. The group tried to calm him but he fled the room.

### Chapter 9

Obi found out that working for Mr. Green was not that bad. He was rarely there, and the secretary, Miss Tomlinson, was nice. He was careful, however, not to say or do anything improper, since secretaries were often planted to spy on Africans.

He began letting his guard down over time. It started when Clara visited and Miss Tomlinson was full of compliments and questions.

One day a man named [Mr. Mark](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#mr-mark) came to see Obi. He spoke in Ibo when he saw Miss Tomlinson in the room, but occasionally had to use English words and thus kept his voice down. He spoke of his sister, who recently passed her School Certificate in Grade One and wanted to apply for a scholarship to study in England. As Obi was the secretary of the Scholarship Commission, he hoped he could get help.

Obi was annoyed and did not want to entertain the idea of influence or bribery. He sent the man away. Afterward he was pleased with himself, feeling that he had won his first battle. He knew bribes were tricky and that refusing them could cause problems, but he wanted to keep his hands clean.

He was, however, experiencing money problems. After paying his debt to the Union and sending money to his parents, he had little left.

There was a knock on the door and he thought it might be Joseph. He mused on how he was angry with Joseph for telling the President about Clara. Clara herself was furious.

It turned out to be a girl named Elsie Marks, the sister of the man who visited him. Obi was not inclined to be very helpful, but the girl apologized for her brother and seemed very smart. Obi knew how important scholarships were, and how the process could be unfair. European posts were second to being European, and this girl could be very capable.

While they talked Clara came in. She acted friendly to Elsie but by her mannerisms and speech conveyed her sophistication.

Elsie said she better go and Obi volunteered to drive her. After Obi and Clara dropped her off, Clara laughed and said she was pretty. Obi told her not to act like a child. Later, after Obi told her about the girl’s brother, Clara said she was too harsh on him. After all, the brother only offered a bribe and the girl offered her body, which was a more serious offense, yet Obi was entertaining her and serving her drinks.

### Chapter 10

Mr. Green took an interest in Obi’s affairs only once, when he told him he would be receiving a big insurance bill for his car. The day actually came, and Obi was distressed at how large it was. He was also frustrated because an employee, [Charles](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#charles) Ibe, had borrowed money from him and told him he could not yet pay him back.

He decided to go to the bank and overdraft fifty pounds; it was not too hard for senior servants to be able to do it. He told himself it was bound to be hard in the beginning. He wished he had taken advantage of the Union’s four-month extension, but at least the relationship was repaired now. He knew that the members had made tremendous sacrifices to get him there, and he could not show them his difficulties.

After coming back from the bank, he discovered his electricity bill on his desk and felt like crying. He went home and told his steward boy, [Sebastian](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#sebastian), about the changes he would have to make in his flat to economize. No more hot water, less electricity, and less meat were his proposed changes.

He had not planned to tell Clara but she saw something was wrong and pried it out of him. She was hurt that he did not want to tell her of his difficulties, and was cold to him for the rest of the night. He eventually left her.

Back at his flat, he pulled out a volume of A.E. Housman’s poems. His eye was caught by a piece of paper with a poem from 1955 entitled “Nigeria” written on it. The poem spoke of the noble fatherland and the noble countrymen and their zeal for life.

Obi smiled and turned to Housman’s poem, “Easter Hymn”.

## Analysis

These chapters continue Achebe’s meditation on the difficulties of being in both the white man and the Nigerian’s world; he delves into the complex layers of identity Obi and mid-20th century Nigeria must negotiate. There are distinct conflicts between Christianity and African religion, the white man’s history and narrative and the folk culture of Nigeria, the village and the city, and the differing values articulated by various figures and groups.

Obi, as ever, is poised between two worlds. He occasionally evinces a closeness to his ethnic and cultural heritage by refusing to be a Christian (although he pretends to be one for his father's sake, further emphasizing his lack of autonomy and self-awareness), delighting in the folk tales of his mother, and fondly remembering the time a brutal white man was beaten up by a Nigerian man. He reflects on a poem he wrote when he was younger that praised Nigeria and its people. He also refuses to be bribed, something he considers beneath him and the province of the old guard of Nigerians in government.

However, Obi is also very much a product of his Western education and the West’s values. He spends his money on an expensive car and derives pleasure from showing it off. He refuses to listen to his countrymen’s concerns about Clara, behaving very rudely to them. Obi's personality flaws begin to be more apparent. He is spendthrift and materialistic, preferring to show off to those around him. He is terrible with his money but allows his pride to get in the way of accepting the extension, which was a rather shameful thing for him to do in the first place, as he would be able to afford all of his financial commitments if he was smarter with his purchase. Indeed, Obi's pride and lack of self-awareness are two of his most conspicuous flaws. He is too embarrassed and prideful to take the necessary steps to alleviate his debts, and his lack of self-awareness and perspicacity lead him to make the same mistakes repeatedly; his financial problems plague him until the end of the text.

Critic C.A. Babaloa writes that Obi possesses the "common vices of urban people" such as "listlessness, infidelity, isolation and vagrancy," and notes that he is "eager to fulfill his personal desires rather than the concrete hopes and aspirations of Umuofians who sponsored him abroad and are yet resolute behind his achievements."

Of course, it is not entirely fair to blame Obi for his situation. There are certain demands placed upon him and certain expectations had of him by the Union and the villagers. It is expected that, having a Western education and working in the senior service, he will live a somewhat glamorous life; but at the same time, he is warned to be parsimonious. He is far away from his home and his family and loses out on the life lessons they might instill in him. A confusing and exhausting adult life have supplanted his once relatively happy youth. Babaloa notes Achebe's metaphor of a palm-nut shell, writing, "Symbolically the vast area of Lagos cemetery intervenes between his adolescence and manhood, as between his new mode of European life and the past African existence being compared humorously to twin kernels inside a palm-nut shell." His Western education has encouraged him to discard the values and norms of the authentic life of Umuofia so celebrated in Achebe's first novel, [*Things Fall Apart*](https://www.gradesaver.com/things-fall-apart).

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

### Chapter 11

Obi and Miss Tomlinson, or Marie as she requested to be called, were now very good friends and talked a great deal. She often spoke of [Mr. Green](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#mr-green), and Obi grudgingly thought to himself that his boss was not so bad. He clearly valued duty, which was odd because he was working for a country he did not believe in. It was said he put in his resignation when Nigeria almost became independent, but removed it when the country remained under England. He loved Africa, but it was the Africa of his steward boy and garden boy. Obi thought of Kurtz from [*Heart of Darkness*](https://www.gradesaver.com/heart-of-darkness).

Obi received a letter from [Clara](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#clara) and opened it, trembling lest he find the ring. Instead there were fifty dollars and a letter urging him to cancel his overdraft. Obi wondered how she came by the money, and although touched, knew he could not keep it. However, he knew the bank manager would find it weird if he brought his money back. He later admitted to her he could not take it back but felt uncomfortable. She apologized for meddling.

That evening they went to [Christopher](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#christopher)'s house. Clara liked him now but was wary of how he always had new girlfriends. The one tonight was [Bisi](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list" \l "bisi). The four went dancing at the Imperial. In between dancing himself, Obi watched the dancers. He saw three groups: those who looked odd and alien, those who held each other close and barely moved, and those who were ecstatic, intricate, and free.

They eventually ended the night and Obi and Clara went to the car to drive home. They discovered Clara's money, which Obi had left in the car, was missing.

### Chapter 12

Obi received word after Christmas that his mother was ill, but he assumed his parents wanted him home because somehow word leaked out about Clara.

At work that day Mr. Green complained to Obi about how useless educated Nigerians were because they were greedy and cared only about themselves and their families, rather than the millions of countrymen dying from disease. Obi barely listened.

Later he went out with Christopher and two Irish girls, who were teachers at the local convent. They had a grand night on the town and Obi kissed his girl. Unfortunately, the Mother saw the girls come home with two African men, so later the girls told them that they had to be careful about seeing them again. Christopher's crack about the girls being "daughters" annoyed them.

On a drive Christopher talked about his new girlfriend, Flora, and how much he wanted to marry her. Obi brought up Elsie Marks and the two men debated her situation. It seemed she made it to the scholarship and was in England. Christopher said she was not innocent and obi should have slept with her. Obi believed she would remember him as the one virtuous man, but Christopher said she probably thought he was impotent. Christopher believed there was no harm in going to bed with a girl who asked for it.

### Chapter 13

Obi received two weeks off to visit his parents. On the night before he left, Clara helped him pack. She then became sad and began to cry, telling him she could not marry him. He was stunned. She told him his parents would not want him to marry an osu, and he retorted that it was because she did not want to be with a man who could not pay his insurance. She became upset and called him a naughty boy for saying that, and that he needed to apologize.

Obi planned to visit his parents for only one of the two weeks because he did not have enough money to stay the full length. Everyone in the village would expect him to act a certain way and he knew his funds would not make it.

Obi arrived at home and asked for his mother. He reflected on his parents' rooms. His father loved everything European, which included the written word. He kept all his papers and cherished them. His mother's room was filled with mundane things.

He stepped in to see her and she said she was doing better. She asked after all the people she knew. Obi felt like his heart was breaking as she spoke.

That night some village women came by singing, and Mr. Okonkwo wanted to close the window because it was heathen music. Obi's mother decided to sit by the window and listen. The song was about blood being thicker than money.

### Chapter 14

Obi and his father stayed up late talking. He asked how often Obi saw his kinsmen in Lagos. He then turned to Clara and said simply that Obi could not marry her.

Obi tried to use Christianity as his weapon, explaining how he and his father know the Gospel and the girl's osu status was irrelevant. His father still pointed out how much of a shame it would be, but by the time Obi left he felt like his father was weakened and that he had made the first real connection with him in twenty-six years.

Unfortunately, Obi's mother called him to her side and said he could marry Clara only after she was dead, and that she would kill herself if he chose to marry her before then.

Obi was terribly depressed and stayed in his room all day, even though he knew the people of his village wanted to see him and thus grumbled. He realized he had no argument t combat it. He decided to return to Lagos the next day.

Upon hearing this news his father told him how his own father had cursed him when he converted to Christianity. He knew what suffering was.

### Chapter 15

Obi felt numb and dazed on the five hundred mile drive back. He almost got into a crash with two mammy-wagons, but thankfully no one was hurt.

He had thought about what to tell Clara, and once he got home he went straight there after freshening up. Obi tried to make it sound like a temporary setback when he told her. She listened silently and then took off her engagement ring and gave it to him. When he would not accept it she went outside and put it in his car.

They did not have much to say, but when Obi went to leave she said there was something she had wanted to tell him, but it did not matter and she should be able to take care of it herself.

When Obi told Christopher his story he was shocked how callous his friend was. Obi confided in him that he thought Clara was pregnant, and Christopher said he would try to find him the name of a doctor. He told a coarse story of his own about a girl he had slept with and got pregnant.

The first doctor to whom Obi and Clara went said he did not do abortions, and told them they ought to marry. Clara screamed and ran out. The second doctor told them his fee was thirty pounds and could not be changed because it was a criminal act but he was doing it anyway. He then asked Obi why he did not marry her.

## Analysis

Mr. Green is not a particularly interesting character, but he serves as an exemplar of the English view on Nigerians and the colonial endeavor. In the first part of the novel he explained how he believed Nigerians were degenerate because of their climate, and in this section Obi's reflections on how Mr. Green perceives of colonialism are telling. He ruminates on how his boss is so dutiful, even when there seems to be no reason for it, and then thinks about how he loved Africa but only in its most stereotypical fashion. He loved the Africa of steward boys and subservient blacks, not the reality of Nigeria inching closer to independence. His critical words to Obi on the laziness of the African and their constant taking of vacations indicate his own hypocrisy, as Obi, in a rare moment of boldness and forthrightness, tells Miss Tomlinson that the Nigerians are only doing what the English had always done in terms of taking time off.

Obi even compares Mr. Green to that famous literary character of Kurtz from Conrad's Heart of Darkness, which critic Philip Rogers addresses in his article on the novel. He explains how Obi puts himself in the role of the white Conrad, who would write of Mr. Green-as-Kurtz. However, as Achebe would have it, "Obi plays the role of the analytical white, who, like Kurtz or the D.C. can reduce complex human experience to words and books." Rogers compares Obi's astonishment at his boss's adherence to duty to Marlow's astonishment at the Africans' restraint and discipline. Throughout his novel Achebe seeks to turn the heart of darkness on its head, associating whiteness with the deadliness usually associated with blackness. Rogers notes that the author's "reversal of Conrad's imagery of light and darkness is most clearly seen in his contrasting of Lagos, the black city, with Ikoyi, its white (senior service) suburb; here darkness is associated with community, fertility, and life – whiteness with isolation, sterility, and death."

This point brings up two other significant ones in the text: Obi's reverence for English writers, and his and his father's love for the written word and what that means in terms of the colonial system. In regards to the first issue, Obi clearly demonstrates an affinity for the literary works of the English. He reads and/or discusses Houseman, Eliot, Graham Greene, Conrad, and W.H. Auden. The most obvious statement to make is that by reading these writers he is identifying himself strongly with the West. Rogers explains that Achebe is doing more than just this, though: he is putting Obi in that same lineage of antiheros that populate the texts of those writers. He is indecisive like Greene's Scobie, he is a "hollow man" and a self-conscious Prufrock, and he is Auden's Icarus, aiming too high and falling short. Obi's status as a man of words is, as Rogers writes, suggestive of "European education and values constitute the germ of his later alienation and betrayal of his parents' world."

In terms of those parents, Obi's father is much closer to him than his mother is, at least in terms of their relationship with the West. Obi's father is obsessed with the written word, saving every piece of paper he comes into contact with. Coupled with his Christianity, [Isaac Okonkwo](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#isaac-okonkwo) is a figure that very much idealizes the world of the white man. Rogers writes, "Isaac's print fetish...burdens his uncritical belief in the white man with ominous associations of decay and inanity...the word of white power also portends black spiritual decay and death."

Obi thinks he is much closer to his mother, but he moves as far away from her world as he can. This is foreshadowed in the childhood incident where he tells one of her folktales but cannot resist embellishing it. The incident with the knife where Obi's mother is wounded by his razor symbolizes his real wounding of her when he moves away from his heritage.

Obi's inability to stand up for Clara, both in front of his parents and during the abortion incident, reveals just how hollow he is. He remains paralyzed, unable to decide what he really wants. He lacks a moral center, something that will be clearer once he accepts the bribe.

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

### Chapter 16

Obi knew he had to pay [Clara](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#clara)'s fifty pounds back, but what was more pressing was the thirty pounds for the abortion. He dismissed the ideas of a moneylender and [Christopher](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#christopher), and decided to ask the [Hon. Sam Okoli](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#hon-sam-okoli), from whom he received the money.

The doctor accepted the fee and the doctor and Clara got into a car and drove away. Obi watched them and after a moment realized he was a fool and tried to speed after them. Frantic and sweating in the heat, he could not catch up with them. He went back to the clinic later in the day and asked the receptionist if she knew where Clara was. She curtly said ‘no’.

Obi waited and the doctor finally came in. he told Obi to come back the next morning. He said Clara was fine but she needed to be under observation in case she developed complications.

That night Obi did not want to eat dinner. He opened his Housman volume of poetry and saw "Nigeria". He crumpled up the poem and threw it on the floor. He did not read anything and went to bed.

The next morning Obi tried to force his way into the clinic after the attendant said he did not have an appointment. Finally, the doctor told him she was at a private hospital and had some complications. On his way out one of the patients in the waiting room admonished Obi for thinking he was better than everyone because the Government gave him a car.

The nurse at the hospital said Clara could not have visitors because she was very ill.

### Chapter 17

[Mr. Green](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#mr-green) asked Obi if he had had a good leave. He grumbled about how Nigerians always took so much time off, commenting, "There is no single Nigerian who is prepared to forgo a little privilege in the interests of his country. From your ministers down to your most junior clerk. And you tell me you want to govern yourselves" (174).

After he left Marie said it was a true statement. Obi agreed, but the Europeans devised the conditions when they were in the senior service and Nigerians were in junior service, but now some Nigerians were in senior service and were taking those benefits.

Obi went to go see Mr. Omo about a salary advance because he knew he had to pay Clara back. He had visited her but she turned her back to him. He felt terribly embarrassed. Mr. Omo said it was possible but he had to account for his spending on his trip.

Obi began to think about his decisions and his actions critically for the first time in his life. He wondered why he had been so prideful and did not take the four months' reprieve from his debt. He decided to stop paying it back until his money troubles went away. He knew they would all sympathize with ‘family commitments’.

A messenger dropped off an envelope. Obi did not open it yet but thought about how to write a letter to Clara. He asked her for a second chance. He went to the hospital and felt derisive of the dirt and someone vomiting.

### Chapter 18

Clara was in the hospital for five weeks, and once she got out she left Lagos. Obi never paid back her fifty pounds.

Money still plagued him; he got a notice from the Commissioner of Income Tax.

His mother also died, and people complained she did not get as good of a funeral as she deserved. People said Obi should have come home, that he was enticed by the pleasures of Lagos. One old man said he was not surprised because Obi's own father did the same thing. Blood cannot be changed.

Obi was shocked by the death. Mr. Green gave him time to go home but he did not see the point, as she would already be buried. He cried and fell asleep, sleeping through the night for the first time in years. When he awoke he felt ashamed he had not kept vigil for her. He thought of his poor father.

[Joseph](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#joseph) came over, as well as many other people from Umuofia. They were there to mourn his mother with him, and he felt honored by their presence. [The President](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-president) of the Union asked if they could sing hymns. Everyone was kind and did not dwell on his sorrow. Other conversations soon sprang up.

One young man named Nathaniel told a story in the corner, and it suddenly fell silent and his voice was clearly heard. It was about a tortoise that did not return home when his mother died.

Obi slept again, and his sorrow eventually vanished. He wondered at how odd death was; it had only been three days and he was already forgetting his mother. He admonished himself for humming and feeling peaceful.

### Chapter 19

Obi felt like he was metal passed through fire. He thought about his mother as a woman who accomplished things, whereas his father was a man of thought. He remembered stories from his parents' past, particularly about the white men taking over.

The season for scholarships arrived. A man came to Obi and told him about his son going to England who needed a scholarship. Obi said it was not possible, but the man asked for a recommendation. He gave Obi a wad of banknotes.

Obi sat there after the man left and stared at the notes, then covered them up with newspaper and locked the door. He mumbled to himself that it was terrible.

After that, though, Obi began taking more bribes, but he always followed through on the promises he made. He would not accept anyone who did not have the minimum requirements either. He paid off his debts.

One day he realized he could not do it anymore; it was getting too hard for him. The last briber and another man knocked on his door, asked for his name, and searched him. A police van was summoned. No one knew why he had done it, especially as he was educated. Not even Mr. Green, who usually knew everything, knew.

## Analysis

Obi’s moral downfall is complete as the novel ends. This is evinced through his dealings with Clara, his mother’s death, money, and the bribe. Clara is not a very sympathetic character in that she is cool, reserved, capricious, and most likely a prostitute. Her abortion is depicted as an example of moral decay as related to the influence of the West. However, Clara’s plight is lamentable. As a woman and a member of the osu caste, she suffers mightily. Obi’s treatment of her is also worthy of condemnation, as he does not defend her to his mother, impregnates her and foists her off on a suspicious doctor, and, while he does indeed feel bad about what happens to her for a brief period of time, he seems to feel more strongly about how disgusting the hospital is rather than how tragic it is that Clara must bear the physical and psychological effects of the abortion. His letter to her is also a model of passive-aggressiveness, which is not surprising given his behavior throughout the novel.

Obi’s hollowness is very clearly observed in the fact that he does not even want to travel home for his mother’s funeral. He tells himself, “She would have been buried by the time he got there, anyway…the thought of going home and not finding her!” (183.) He also does not contribute very much money to her funeral, for which he is privately lambasted by Umuofians. What is perhaps most disturbing, however, is how quickly Obi gets over the woman he is supposedly so close to. He is shocked and cries the first night, but then sleeps incredibly well, to the point where he feels guilty that “he could not keep as much as one night’s vigil for her” (183). He continues to sleep well, and then, quite tellingly, realizes “His mother was not three days dead and yet she was already distant…the dominant feeling was of peace” (187). Obi’s indifference is staggering, but is not surprising given his character. As the critic Philip Rogers says succinctly, “his heart is dead.”

Finally, Obi’s treatment of money and his acceptance of the bribe signify his lack of a moral center. He knows he needs to pay Clara back, but Achebe writes, “Obi’s plan to pay fifty pounds into her account had come to nothing for various reasons” (180). The reader can almost hear the derision in Achebe's voice. Obi also decides that he will not pay his debt back to the Union for a time because of “family commitments,” the vague thing he thinks will win their sympathy. Finally, the long-awaited moment comes when Obi takes a bribe from a scholarship-seeker's father. This leads him to take other bribes, and he becomes quite used to it; only then can he pay off his debts. Rogers notes that Obi's placidity extends even here, as there are many months between the loss of Clara and his mother that Obi finally takes the bribe. It is not quite an easy excuse that those traumas directly led him to take it, and there is nothing particularly special about this man and his bribe. Just like his literary hero, Scobie from Greene's [*The Heart of the Matter*](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-heart-of-the-matter), Obi does not seem to make decisions for himself – he just falls into them.

Obi does evince a bit of guilt for taking the bribes and vows to stop, but Achebe does not let him get away with it and he is arrested. This brings us full circle back to the beginning of the book, where Obi is so unaffected by his fate that he tries to maintain as false as possible a facade. It is likely the Union will help him out and he will go on his way again, but this is not a character that has learned any major life lessons.

Finally, Mr. Green's comments reveal more about the insidious situation wrought by colonialism. He ignorantly and smugly criticizes Obi for his vacation time, when, in a rare moment of defensiveness and honesty, Obi tells Miss Tomlinson that Mr. Green's views are hypocritical because the English designed them as such and only now decry them because the African uses them. Mr. Green's paternalistic attitude is also telling, as in his comment, "There is no single Nigerian who is prepared to forgo a little privilege in the interests of his country...And you tell me you want to govern yourselves" (174). This is patently absurd, for Mr. Green cares little about what Nigerians think and do, and is incapable as seeing them as anything other than childlike and selfish. And even if they were, the assumption that the English need to govern them is ridiculous. Mr. Green's comments lead the reader to understand why Obi and Nigerians like him are so devoid of morality –they are trying to embrace a world of whiteness that is hollow at its core.

***Characters***

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

## Obi Okonkwo

The protagonist of the novel, Obi is a young Nigerian man who is given a scholarship to study in London. His acceptance of a bribe constitutes the main conflict of the story. Obi is prideful, ambivalent about his culture, naïve, and selfish. He is not self-reflective and finds it difficult to take control of his life.

## Clara

Obi's enigmatic Nigerian girlfriend who is hampered by her family's osu past. She is a nurse, but there are suspicions of prostitution. . ‘***I like Master too much, but this Madam no good,’ Zaccheous, Obi’s houseboy says.***She is cool and moody, but is ultimately a sympathetic character, especially after her abortion. She leaves Pbi and Lagos after the procedure.

## Mr. Green

Obi's snooty and prejudiced English boss, who enjoys condemning Nigerians but also enjoys the vestiges of the colonial system, as it results in his racial supremacy. Obi notes he is hardworking, diligent, and dutiful, but is not quite sure what motivates him.

## President of the Union

He finds satisfaction in helping young men from the Village attain success, although it seems his efforts are often frustrated by both the men and the overall system.

## Isaac Okonkwo

Obi's father who converted to Christianity and likes the ways of the white man. Obi was always closer with his mother, but still sought his father's approval.

## Hannah Okonkwo

Obi's quiet and loyal mother who converts to Christianity for her husband but retains aspects of her own culture, such as a reverence for folk tales and firm views on Obi not marrying an osu. She threatens to kill herself if Obi does marries an osu, which is one example of how their relationship is close but dysfunctional.

## Joseph

An old friend of Obi's and a clerk in the Survey Department. He is in awe of Obi, but also disapproves of him.

## Christopher

Obi's economist friend whom he met in London. Christopher is a womanizer.

## Macmillan

A young Englishman who is an adminstrative officer in Northern Nigeria. Obi meets him on his ship returning to Nigeria and they become friends.

## Hon. Sam Okoli

A rich and handsome politician in Eastern Nigeria and Lagos, he becomes a friend of Clara and Obi's. He lends Obi money for Clara's abortion.

## Odogwu

One of the Village elders, who claims Obi is like his grandfather and claims that there are no great Nigerians anymore, as "greatness is now in the things of the white man" (62).

## Esther

One of Obi's sisters.

## Janet

One of Obi's sisters.

## Charity

One of Obi's sisters; he does not get along with her very well.

## Agnes

One of Obi's sisters.

## Mr. Jones

The Inspector of Schools when Obi was a young man. He was white, and Obi remembered how the black headmaster threw him to the ground after he had enough of the man's bluster and rage.

## Joshua Udo

A young man who was fired from his job for being caught sleeping; the Union is hearing his case at one of the meetings Obi attends. They decide to assist him monetarily and see if they can help find him a new job.

## Miss Marie Tomlinson

Mr. Green's friendly and talkative secretary, whom Obi is initially wary of but eventually befriends. She possesses negative attitudes about Africans, but cloaks them in cheerfulness and concern.

## Mr. Mark

A young man who attempts to bribe Obi on behalf of his sister, who wants a scholarship to study in England.

## Elsie Mark

A young woman who wants a Federal Scholarship to study in England. Her brother comes to Obi first, intending to bribe him, but is refused. She speaks to Obi personally at his apartment, insinuating she will sleep with him if he helps her. He does not end up recommending her.

## Charles

A messenger in Obi's department who asks Obi if he can borrow thirty pounds, and then has trouble paying it back. He is viewed by Mr. Green as a typical African.

## Bisi

One of the young women Christopher goes about with. She attends a double date with him, Clara, and Obi.

## Sebastian

Obi's houseboy.

## Florence

A young woman, whom Christopher swears he wants to marry.

## The Doctor

The man who agrees to perform Clara's abortion for thirty pounds. He is a rather insincere and slippery character.

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

# Themes

## Colonialism

Even though the subject of colonialism is not specifically dealt with in this novel, it is still pervasive and significant. The events of the novel take place in the last days of the British reign in Nigeria and reveal the tensions present between white and black society, politics, religion, and character. Achebe has very strong views on colonialism, quite obviously, and expresses them in the novel through his condemnation of whites as either grotesque, cruel, ignorant, or immoral, as well as his depiction of the negative impact white culture has on Nigerians (such as Obi). The Nigerians are clearly superior to their colonizers in their values and social mores and norms, but they still must navigate the waters of being second-class citizens in their own country. Every choice makes or has made for him is a product of colonialism.

## Identity

Obi’s background, the legacy of colonialism, and his own character and choices shape his identity. He comes from a heritage that values community, loyalty, and tradition, but moves away from those things. He takes a stand on some things, such as not accepting bribes and staying with [Clara](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#clara), but proves unable to sustain those commitments. He is weak, prideful, and ignorant. He is full of excuses for himself, and even in his moment of clarity that he thinks he has, does not truly get at the root of his inaction, his lack of a moral center. By the time the novel comes to a close, Obi's growth as a character appears limited, if visible at all. He claims to not want to take bribes anymore, but his identity is still nebulous. It is unclear where he will go after this, as he has no great passion, no great goals or strong beliefs.

## Culture

Achebe contrasts white and black culture in his novels. Here, white, English culture is depicted as soulless, deadening, immoral, and Nigerian culture is depicted as authentic, uplifting, and sustaining. Drinking, sex, dancing, and bribery are all associated with the white man's world, and the white neighborhood where Obi lives in Lagos is compared to a graveyard. Obi and his father love the written word of the whites, which, as symbolized by mounds of paper, is full of sound and fury. Nigerian culture is associated with a valuing of the past, communal support, tradition, and loyalty. However, for all of his touting of the values of Nigerian culture, Achebe does acknowledge that it is very much mired in the past and cannot yet evolve; [Joseph](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#joseph) calls himself and Obi "pioneers", and Obi realizes how ridiculous it is to either pay for a wife or be denied marriage to a wife of one's choosing. Obi is caught between two cultures, wherein lie his difficulties.

## Corruption

Corruption seems to be rife within the senior service, and, indeed, within the colonial bureaucracy as a whole. It is commonly assumed that bribery is something everyone does, both in white and black circles. There are several attempts to bribe Obi before he actually accepts it. The fact that Achebe opens his novel with the scene of Obi's trial reinforces the centrality of the issue. What is tragic, though, is that Obi did hold out for much longer than most, and his trial is practically a show trial since he is clearly a scapegoat and many, many others are guilty of bribes. The indignation rings rather false, as Achebe suggests. Obi's views on younger civil servants replacing older ones does not seem to hold up, as he himself obviates the theory. Achebe does not condemn Obi as much for this as his other traits, however, and seems ***Our people say that if you pay homage to the man on top, others will pay homage to you when it is your turn to be on top. Well, that is what the old men say.’*** Say***s Christopher as he tries to justify the top leaders being old*** suggest that it was almost inevitable given the deleterious effects of colonialism.

## Hypocrisy

Hypocrisy is rife throughout the novel, mostly displayed in the words and actions of the English. [Mr. Green](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#mr-green) scoffs at the corruption of Nigerians, in particular with their acceptance of bribes and, later, Obi's taking time off, but clearly the English are also heavy on bribery and indulgence. Obi even remarks to Miss Tomlinson that the English set up the time-off situation to benefit themselves, and then loudly complained when Nigerians were able to take advantage of it. The English love to complain about the Nigerians for the same things they do themselves or claim to value.

## Morality

Achebe mostly associates morality with the Umuofians, as opposed to the English. Obi's moral downfall, which entails his loss of connection to his hometown and his family, his consorting with louche characters, his impregnating and leaving Clara, his financial mistakes, his pride and his ignorance, and, of course, his acceptance of bribes, are both a result of his own character and the situation in which he navigates. That situation itself is informed by the legacy of colonialism, which made bribes commonplace, supported hypocrisy and incompetence, and encouraged young Nigerians to find value and power in the white man's world.

## Education

Throughout the novel education is presented as something desirable to attain. Obi is depicted almost as the savior of his village when he gets the scholarship to go abroad. People nearly prostrate themselves before him trying to get him to recommend them or some loved one to the scholarship board. Those like the [Hon. Sam Okoli](https://www.gradesaver.com/no-longer-at-ease/study-guide/character-list#hon-sam-okoli) are clearly very educated and may have something to offer Nigeria as it moves away from colonialism. Achebe is also hesitant about education, though, because he knows that one of its concomitants is a loss of connection to one's roots. Obi has difficulty with the language, with the appropriate mannerisms and wardrobe, and generally with understanding what his people want/need. Embracing education often means embracing the white man's world, which cautions doing so naively

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

“We are sending you to learn book. Enjoyment can wait. Do not be in a hurry to rush into the pleasures of the world.”

Mr. Ikedi, 12

Mr. Ikedi’s warning to Obi at the beginning of the novel (when he is about to leave for England) is only one of many warnings Obi receives. All of the warnings concern Obi’s becoming entranced by the pleasures of the world and forgetting his commitments and his morals. The warnings act as foreshadowing, as Obi indeed slips away from his heritage and his history and almost wholly embraces the world of the white man. Obi’s negative character traits are enhanced by his experiences in England and Lagos; this is exemplified in his treatment of his mother and Clara, as well as his tone-deafness to some of his encounters with Nigerians. Finally, his inability to heed the warnings leads to financial insolvency and to the taking of bribes. Perhaps if Obi had considered his elders’ words as worthy of his time he may have avoided some of the tragedies of his young life.

“That was Obi’s mistake Number One. Everybody expected a young man from England to be impressively turned-out.”

Narrator, 36

For the many warnings regarding his present and future conduct that he receives, Obi experiences as many moments of letting down the Umuofia Progressive Union and, more generally, his people. This first example Achebe provides seems to be minor –that he is not dressed very well when he attends a Union meeting after his return –but it speaks volumes as to Obi’s character and the fundamental disconnect between Obi and his patrons. He does not choose the job they’d like him to have, has trouble paying them back, chooses a girl they do not approve of, and dishonors them by accepting bribes and then getting caught. Regardless of whether or not some of those demands are unfair for Obi, he is not honoring of them and demonstrates the difficulty in adhering to their traditional views while engaging with the outside world.

“Real tragedy is never resolved. It goes on hopelessly forever. Conventional tragedy is too easy. The hero dies and we feel a purging of the emotions. A real tragedy takes place in a corner, in an untidy spot, to quote W.H. Auden.”

Obi, 47

Obi’s theory on tragedy may ring true for some novels and some characters, but it is rather naïve and does not, ironically, account for his grandfather’s own tragic suicide. It also does not account for some of the tragedies that befall some of the people closest to him, such as Clara. Clara certainly has her flaws, but her abortion is an unequivocal tragedy that is sudden and cruel. The procedure and her subsequent break from Obi and Lagos is not something that is mundane and continues over time; it is a rupture and a break. Obi speaks as one who does not appreciate nuance or variance.

"Greatness is now in the things of the white man."

Odogwu, 62

Although colonialism is not explicitly discussed in the novel, it clearly permeates all aspects of life for Nigerians. Odogwu gives voice to the reality that the white men who have taken over Nigeria are the ones who represent progress and modernity; they are the ones with the resources to do “great” things. Odogwu laments the lack of true greatness in his own people, but the important thing to note is that he does not seem to blame that fact on the Nigerians but on the system that has rendered them impotent in their own country. The things that they once considered great are now diminished. Odogwu realizes this and this is the reason for the compromising with the new system, as evinced in the village sending their sons to be educated in Europe.

"In that short question he said in effect that Obi’s mission-house upbringing and European education had made him a stranger in his country –the most painful thing one could say to Obi."

Obi, 82

Although Obi may not like to hear this, it is a perfect encapsulation of his plight: he is not really part of Nigeria or Europe. He is in a liminal state, caught between two worlds. His education and his living situation, job, and companions are fully of the white man's world. He loves English literature and speaks English most of the time. However, he is still connected to Umuofia and his heritage, occasionally preferring Nigerian food and remembering with fondness his childhood. This situation is one of the central conflicts in the text, and can be said to contribute to Obi's passivity and indecisiveness – he is paralyzed by his in-between-ness.

"It was clear he loved Africa, but only Africa of a kind: the Africa of Charles, the messenger, the Africa of his gardenboy and steward boy. He must have come originally with an ideal –to bring light into the heart of darkness..."

Narrator, 121

Mr. Green is a symbol of the colonizer, of the Englishman-in-Africa. His beliefs are typical of the paternalistic views of the English, who believe that they have a right to take over another country and utilize its resources and reorganize its government. Such things are done in the name of civilizing a backwards people, and bringing them prosperity and progress. Obviously, it is also rooted in ignorance, pride, and self-interest, and those who carry out the mission are often cruel, callous, and blind to the reality of their gross injustice. Mr. Green, like so many others, thinks he has a fondness for the place where he lives and works, but as Obi realizes, it is a false version of Nigeria, and one that derives from the need to fashion reality into something pleasing so as not to prick one's conscience.

"Mr. Okonkwo believed utterly and completely in the things of the white man. And the symbol of white man’s power was the written word, or better still, the printed word."

Narrator, 144

Mr. Okonkwo has almost completely embraced the world of the colonizer, as demonstrated in his Christianity and his love of the written word. These distance him from his fellow Nigerians and bring him somewhat closer to his son, who is similar in that embrace. This is simultaneously understandable as well as lamentable. There are always members of the colonized who are attracted to the world of the colonizer, and indulge in some of the same beliefs and behaviors. That is not to say Isaac is deliberately harming his community, and he still seems to be somewhat well-received, but there are clear tensions in the ways the other villagers perceive him, and he was in conflict with his own father years before. That is indeed what makes it lamentable -that he, like Obi, is very much a man of thought and cares more for the world of the English than his own.

"Obi wanted to rush out of his car and shout: “Stop. Let’s go and get married now,” but he couldn’t and didn’t. The doctor’s car drove away."

Narrator, 169

One of the most conspicuous characteristics of Obi is his passivity, his inability to act. He seems to float through life, occasionally annoyed or worried, as with money and Clara's affections, but when it comes to major, life-changing events, he does not ever seem to marshal enough courage or will to go after them. He does not defend Clara to his mother, cannot keep his spending under control, and here, waits too long to go after Clara even though he felt a prick of conscience after he saw her drive away. Obi seems to lack passion for anything, and is thwarted by his own ambivalence.

"What would be the point of going to Umuofia? She would have been buried by the time he got there anyway."

Narrator, 183

Obi's decision not to return to Umuofia for his mother's funeral -- his beloved mother, to whom he claimed to be very close -- is a low point for the protagonist. He consistently exhibits poor judgment and passivity, and this is perhaps the worst example. He appears here fully estranged from his old life -- from his mother, from his family, from his village, from his obligations, from his traditions and lineage.

" Everybody wondered why. The learned judge, as we have seen, could not comprehend how an educated young man and so on and so forth."

Narrator, 194

This statement at the very end of the book brings the novel full circle, as it is expressed at the very beginning of the novel as well. It evinces the problems inherent in the system in which Obi is. The elders of his community and the Europeans collude in their establishment of European education, employment, and lifestyle as being things to aspire to, but the realit is that all are hollow and false within the system of colonialism. Obi's own negative character traits are exacerbated by this system, and he becomes even more prideful, passive, and morally dubious. Thus, it is easy for the reader to understand why Obi does what he does, but it is not understandable to those who placed him in such a situation.

cautions against doing so naively.

**Style**

**Use of traditional African proverbs**

anger against a brother was felt in the flesh, not in the bone, said at the emergency meeting held by umoufians to discuss okonkwo’s fate…..The fox must be chased away first; after that the hen might be warned against wandering into the bush. Said in support of okonkwo’s caseBut we have a saying that if you want to eat a toad you should look for a fat and juicy one.’ the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom(said at the ceremony of okonkwo’s going for studies

**Flashbacks**

At the age of twelve or thirteen he had passed his Standard Six examination at the top of the whole province. Then he had won a scholarship to one of the best secondary schools in Eastern Nigeria

**I**n the meeting, we are told how okonkwo is chosen by the Umoufians Union to go and study law in England. They are however disappointed that he has studied English instead but hopeful that he will get a European post“….*At the age of twelve or thirteen he had passed his Standard Six examination at the top of the whole province. Then he had won a scholarship to one of the best secondary schools in Eastern.*

*The affair between He (Obi) and Clara could not strictly be called love at first sight. They met at a dance organised by the London branch of the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons at the St Pancras Town Hall. Clara had come with a student who was fairly well known to He (Obi) and who introduced them.*

***Storytelling***

*As a boy in the village of Umuofia he had heard his first stories about Lagos from a soldier home on leave from the war. Those soldiers were heroes who had seen the great world. They spoke of Abyssinia, Egypt, Palestine, Burma and so on. Some of them had been village ne’er-do-wells, but now they were heroes. They had bags and bags of money, and the villagers sat at their feet to listen to their stories. One of them went regularly to a market in the neighbouring village and helped himself to whatever he liked. He went in full uniform, breaking the earth with his boots, and no one dared touch him. It was said that if you touched a soldier, Government would deal with you. Besides, soldiers were as strong as lions because of the injections they were given in the army. It was from one of these soldiers that He (Obi) had his first picture of Lagos.*

***Description***

*The girl was one of Joseph’s new finds, as he told him later. She was dark and tall with an enormous pneumatic bosom under a tight-fitting red and yellow dress.Her lips and long finger-nails were a brilliant red, and her eyebrows were fine black lines. She looked not unlike those wooden masks made in Ikot Ekpene.*