

No longer at ease by Chinua Achebe

Plot Overview

Obi Okonkwo is a young man, about twenty-six years old, who returns to Nigeria after studying in England at a university for four years. *No Longer At Ease*, begins with a trial against Obi that takes place a while after his return, and the novel then works its way backward to explain how Obi has come to be charged with accepting a bribe.

The Umuofia Progressive Union (U.P.U) has given Obi a scholarship to study law in England, a scholarship that Obi has to pay back upon his return. And, thus, he leaves for England, stopping in Lagos on the way out. While in England, several things happen to him. First, he changes his course of study to English and abandons law. Secondly, he finds himself nostalgic for home, writing poems about Nigeria. Finally, he meets a girl named Clara at a dance in London but fails to make a good impression. However, the girl is Nigerian also, and on Obi's boat ride back home, after nearly four years in England, he meets Clara once again. This time, they begin a relationship.

Once back in Nigeria, Obi stays, once again, in Lagos with his friend Joseph, trying to find a job and a place of his own. He also visits his own home village of Umuofia. Obi is quickly given a post on the Scholarship Board of the Civil Service and is also quickly introduced to the world of bribery, which is a world he wholeheartedly rejects with a strong idealism at first. This is indicated early on when a man offers Obi money in order for Obi to "pull strings" for his little sister's scholarship. Obi is appalled and rejects the offer, only later to be met at home by the little sister herself who offers Obi her body in return for the scholarship favor. Again, Obi rejects this offer.

Although Obi begins his life in Nigeria in an honest way, events do not go as he has planned. First, Clara tells him that she cannot marry him because she is an *osu*, an outcast. Obi decides to ignore this and go against what most of his fellow countrymen believe to be a major transgression of custom, and he decides he will marry her anyway. Still, his economic hardship worsens, given that he has to send money home and that he is in debt. Obi then receives a letter from his father telling him that he must go home.

When he arrives at home he sees that his mother is very ill. And, his parents tell him he must not marry Clara because she is an *osu*. In fact, Obi's dying mother gives him an ultimatum: she tells him that if he insists on marrying Clara, he must wait until she is dead because if he marries Clara while she is alive, she will kill herself.

Obi, therefore returns back to Lagos and tells Clara all that has transpired. Clara becomes angry and breaks off the engagement, afterwards hinting at the fact that she is pregnant. It is at this point when Obi arranges an abortion. He does not have the money and needs to borrow it. Complications arise out of the operation, and Clara is hospitalized, after which she refuses to see Obi.

Obi then returns to work, only to be notified that his mother has died. He does not go home for the funeral, and the U.P.U. discusses this failure on Obi's behalf as a sign of his not having cared about his mother's death. The truth, however, is that he was terribly saddened by her death, feels terrible remorse and guilt, and has entered into a state of mental unrest. However, Obi awakes from this unrest with a new sense of calm. He feels like a new man, and it is at this point that he takes his first bribe, not without a certain degree of guilt.

Obi allows this acceptance of bribes to become habitual. He continues to take bribes until the end of the novel, when Obi decides he cannot stand it anymore. He has paid off all of his debts and can no longer be a part of the corruption. It is at this moment, however, when he has taken his last bribe, that he is caught, which brings us back to the beginning of the novel.

Chapter 1 Summary

The novel begins with the trial of Obi Okonkwo, who we find within this first chapter is accused of having taken a bribe. The courtroom is full and the case seems to be a very popular one—everyone in Lagos, Nigeria, has been talking about it and is going to witness it in court on his/her day off. Obi seems to be indifferent most of the time until tears come to his face when his "education" and his "promise" are mentioned.

The novel then jumps to a scene between Mr. Green, Obi's boss (who is also a crown witness in the case) and a member of the British Council, who are playing tennis and having drinks. It is mentioned that it is strange for Mr. Green to be playing tennis because he is always working; however, this day was different because he was playing with a friend from the council. Mr. Green, an Englishman in Nigeria, claims that he is not surprised at Obi's behavior because, according to him, "Africans are corrupt through and through."

The story jumps again to a meeting of the Umuofia Progressive Union. Achebe explains that Obi was from a town called Umuofia in Eastern Nigeria. It is also explained that for those who leave the village (which many inhabitants call a town) in order to work elsewhere in Nigeria, there is always a local branch of the Umuofia Progressive Union.

The Union is meeting to discuss the case of Obi Okonkwo, which, it becomes clear, is a "lost case." By way of back flashes, we become aware that the Union had been paying for Obi's legal services even if it was against the will of many of its members. The Union and Obi were not on good terms, but it was the duty of the Union to assist its "brother."

Furthermore, we see that the Union had raised money for a scholarship years ago for its brightest young man to go and study in England. Obi had won the scholarship and was asked to study law. The scholarship was more a loan than a grant, because it had to be repaid upon the student's return to Nigeria. Also, Obi had, against the will of the Union and to its anger, changed his studies from law to English.

The narrative then goes further back to when it was time for Obi to go to England to study. It was a huge occasion in the town for one of its young men to go and study in

England and, therefore, his father, Isaac Okonkwo, made a big feast for his son's farewell. Isaac Okonkwo, the reader is informed, is a Christian, a catechist, in fact. He only has one wife and named his son Obiajulu, which meant "the mind at last is at rest." The reason for this name is that Isaac was happy to have had a boy after so many girls. The feast was Christian in tone, blessings were handed out, and Christian prayers said. Songs were sung to Obi, and kola nuts were offered.

Chapter 2

Summary

When Obi is in England, he misses Nigeria. It is the first time the country becomes "more than just a name" for him. He even writes nostalgic poems about his home while he was away. On his return, however, things are not as he had remembered them, he has been away for almost four years and his memory has failed him somewhat.

On his return from England he went to Lagos, where he has passed through on his way to England as well. As a little boy he has heard of Lagos, of its piles of money, its lights, its cars, its fast-paced life—an image that has stayed with him long after his first visit on his way out of Nigeria. On that first visit he has stayed with an old schoolmate named, Joseph Okeke, who is a clerk in the Survey Department and who has not had the same kind of education Obi has had and would continue, at that point, to have in England. On that first visit, Joseph tells Obi about the lifestyle in Lagos, and the dancing, and the women. Lagos has made such an impression that it is what he thinks of when he writes nostalgic poems about Nigeria during the cold winters in England.

On his return, however, Lagos is different, some parts are even unrecognizable. The novel jumps to a moment shortly after Obi's return, when Obi is waiting for his girlfriend, Clara, who is buying fabric in the slums of Lagos. While he waits for Clara, Achebe gives a vivid description of the slum surrounding Obi—the remains of a dog on the street that has been run over by a taxi, street vendors, meat stalls, etc. It is at this moment when he recalls his nostalgia for Lagos. However, when Clara returns, Obi does

not understand why she shops in the slums. Following the episode in the Lagos slums, the narrative moves with the couple, in the car, toward Ikoyi (a kind of suburb) where they live. Ikoyi has once been a European reserve, but some Africans with "European posts," such as Obi, live there now.

The minor quarrel that follows in the car, after Clara finishes her purchases, illustrates the differences between Obi and his girlfriend. Clara wants to go to the movies, which Obi does not like to do. And Obi likes to read poems to Clara, which she is bored by and often did not understand. Clara is upset and not speaking with Obi because she has wanted to go see a film, which Obi does not consent to doing. This seems unfair since Clara has pleased Obi in doing things she has not liked to do in the past. For instance, she has gone to lunch to meet with one of Obi's friends, Christopher, whom Clara does not like. Christopher is "educated," in the same way Obi is. Christopher is the kind of friend with whom Obi can have arguments, and Christopher always takes the opposite view, stubbornly. At that particular meeting they speak about the corruption within the civil service and the bribery that went on, which Obi shows himself to be wholeheartedly and idealistically against.

Analysis

When Obi is in England he realizes the importance of his homeland. This is one of the main issues that have arisen within the genre of post-colonial literature. Although it is not Achebe's main concern in the novel because Obi is only away in England for a bit under four years, it is still important and worth mentioning because Achebe does choose to spend time on the subject. Obi misses home and writes romantic, lyrical poems about Nigeria during the winters in England. However, "the Nigeria he returned to was in many ways different from the picture he had carried in his mind during those four years." Salman Rushdie, an Indian post-colonial writer, has written an essay entitled "Imaginary Homelands," in which he talks about the homelands that arise in the memory of those who are no longer home. Obi's Nigeria, while in England, is very much one of these "imaginary homelands," fictionalized, in many ways, through memory. On his return to Nigeria Lagos is almost a strange place and Umuofia an even stranger one. When he

returns to Lagos he sees the slums he has not been to and the nostalgic poem he wrote about nature and how "sweet" it is to lie under trees under the "tender glow of the fading sun," is juxtaposed against the dead carcass of a dog—the dogs that taxi drivers hit for good luck. This juxtaposition is meant to parallel the juxtaposition of memory versus reality. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that Obi still seems optimistic at this point, and it is we that feed strongly on this juxtaposition in the form of foreshadowing. There is other foreshadowing in this chapter such as that of the relationship between Clara and Obi. It is apparent that they are different and although it will also become apparent that they do have love for each other, this beginning quarrel is a sign of problems to come, problems that will unfold as the novel unfolds. The argument, to put it in simplistic metaphoric terms, revolves around the fact that Clara likes the movies and Obi likes T.S. Eliot. Interestingly enough, both of these "likes" are "Western," obviously a result of colonialism. We later find out that Clara also has one great thing in common with Obi—that she too studied abroad in England (she studied nursing).

The final piece of foreshadowing that exists in this chapter is that the discussion that Obi and Christopher has is about bribery in the civil service. This is a subject that will persist throughout the novel until Obi's arrest and trial. Here, however, Obi is at the beginning of his "journey" toward change, and he is still idealistic, finding the corruption in the higher echelons of service disgusting.

Another important piece of information that the reader should grasp about this chapter is the social status of Christopher, Clara, and Obi. It is apparent that they are of a high class because of their European education and posts. They, like the Europeans in Africa, also have servants and stewards. This is, of course, ironic because it is in fact their country after all. The fact that they are prosperous because they have the posts that the outsider has had for years is another paradox of colonialism. Times, however, are changing as is evidenced by the following comment: "The second generation of educated Nigerians had gone back to eating pounded yams or garri with their fingers for the good reason that it

tasted better that way. Also for the better reason that they were not as scared as the first generation of being called uncivilized."

Chapter 3

Summary

This chapter goes back in time to Clara and Obi's meeting. They first meet in London at a dance organized by the London branch of the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons. Obi finds her incredibly attractive, but they do not interact much with each other. They have one dance together—Obi is fluttering and nervous, stepping all over Clara. Nevertheless, eighteen or so months later, they meet again because Clara is on the same ship home to Nigeria as Obi.

They meet at the docks but Clara is unreceptive. The trip goes smoothly, at first, and Obi, although he is not receiving Clara's attention seems to be happy about his first sea voyage. He looks out onto the water and enjoys his meals, wishing however, for Clara's attention. After a while, Obi becomes seasick and Clara, who has paid him no attention until then, appears at his cabin door with some tablets for his seasickness. He is appreciative and surprised and is quite happy, even though he is trying his best to employ a rehearsed calm. Clara speaks to him and Obi, and when Obi shows concern for her not having enough tablets for herself she explains that she is a nurse and has already given them out to two other passengers.

The next morning Obi thanks Clara again as he looks out onto the sea. As Clara and Obi exchange greetings Mr. Macmillan, another passenger, falls on the deck. Obi tells Macmillan not to worry, that he himself had almost fallen earlier, and they become friends after that.

Obi and Macmillan converse, have drinks, and discuss Clara and Obi's education, among other things. Macmillan asks him what his name means because he has heard that African names all mean something. Obi tells him that he cannot say for all African names, but Ibo

names are often long sentences; however, Obi never tells him directly what his own name means.

The boat anchors, and two young men appear on a small boat and claim they will dive for money. The people on the boat throw the money into the sea, and the boys catch every single bit of it. Later, after dinner, they all (Clara, Mr. Macmillan, and Obi) go ashore together at Funchal in the Madeiras. While ashore they drink wine and see gardens and parks, Macmillan buys trinkets for home, and Clara and Macmillan are formally introduced.

Upon their return to the ship, Macmillan says he must write some letters. Clara says she will write letters too, but Obi tells her that she has time since letters to Nigeria cannot be posted until Freetown anyway. Clara and Obi are, therefore, left alone and have their first kiss. It is Obi who kisses Clara first, but she is, for some reason hesitant. She kisses him a second time but tells him he must leave because people are coming. She also seems to want to say something that she cannot.

Clara and Obi do not have a successful meeting. It seems that, from their beginning, Achebe is foreboding their unhappy ending. When they meet for the first time, Obi steps all over Clara while attempting to dance with her. Later, they meet on a boat where the waters are unstable, as is evidenced by Obi's seasickness. They meet on watery ground, both literally and figuratively. And, when Obi finally kisses Clara, Clara seems hesitant. She says "You don't—" as if she wanted to tell him something she is unable to. She seems hesitant and asks him to leave even though she is also attracted to him as is shown when she, herself, kisses him back a second time.

Still, however, there are similarities between the two that are important to mention at this early beginning. First of all, both of them have studied in England. Clara has studied nursing. They are both Ibo peoples who have studied abroad. They exist somewhere between the English language and culture and their own African and Nigerian traditions. It is important that Clara, when she offers Obi tablets for his illness, speaks to him in Ibo. Obi believes that this gesture offers a kind of connection. And though Clara has given

others tablets and has assisted others, she has spoken to *him* in Ibo. It is apparent that Macmillan, for instance, also thinks Clara is quite beautiful. He too is attracted to her, but Clara chooses Obi perhaps because of their similar backgrounds—backgrounds that make it easier for them to know each other.

Language is important here. Right before Clara comes to Obi's cabin, Clara has been talking to an Officer from Ibadan who is talking to Clara about the difference between language and dialect. This directs us to watch out for language. And then, just following this, there is the episode in which Clara speaks to Obi in Ibo. It is as if both Clara and Obi's language of the heart is the language of home. It is interesting to note that Obi's name is Ibo spelled backward. Perhaps this is to say that Obi's world is turned upside down. While in England he is a Nigerian living in England, and while in Nigeria he is a young man belonging to a generation that is caught between cultures.

Another important section of this chapter is when Macmillan and Obi are talking over drinks. Macmillan is English and going to Nigeria so he must be involved somehow in the colonial government, unless of course he is merely a tourist. Nevertheless, he is not like the arrogant, imprudent "Mr. Green." He is curious, and he asks Obi many questions regarding what he has studied and what his name means. But he does not seem to look down on Obi. Obi does seem, however to be, understandably, defensive at one point. For instance, when Macmillan asks him what he studied in London, Obi wants to know why he is asking this question. It is also in this section that Obi's age comes to the fore: at this point in the novel Obi is twenty-five and Clara is about twenty-three, according to Obi's guess.

Chapter 4

Summary

The boat arrives in Lagos. At Customs, Obi is told his Radiogram will have a duty-fee. The clerk, however, says that he will lower the price of the duty, but he may not give Obi a receipt. Obi is offended by the bribe and rejects it. Nevertheless, he ends his episode with the Customs clerk by saying: "Dear old Nigeria.... "

The Umuofian Progressive Union (Lagos branch) is not meeting him at the docks. Obi explains that if the boat had been a mail boat everyone would have been there to greet him since it is that people in Lagos always go to meet the mail boats. The Umuofian Progressive Union does, however, have a reception for Obi. It is a large gathering held on a Saturday in honor of Obi's return after having studied in England. His fellow Umuofians are very proud of having someone from their village that studied in England and the president gives a long, and spirited speech about Obi and about knowledge. He does so in a full and formal English, which the members of the Union like very much. At the reception, Obi makes several "mistakes." First, he arrives in a short-sleeved shirt because of the heat. Everyone else is dressed properly. Second, when he speaks to the people, after the president, he uses a simpler and less formal English, unlike the admired and complex English of the president.

After the reception, Obi's friend Joseph takes him to dinner at a restaurant where there are a few Africans and many Europeans. When they arrive at the restaurant, Obi is told that it may be owned by a Syrian; this statement is later proven wrong when the owner appears. The owner is an old Englishwoman, who is loud and unsteady. Obi asks if there is Nigerian food, and Joseph is surprised that Obi wants to eat pounded yams and bitter leaf soup. Obi says, out loud and in English, that he is tired of "boiled potatoes."

Obi is somewhat bothered that his friend Joseph has not told him to stay with him (as he had done previously before going to England). Instead, Obi is staying at a hotel in which he was placed by the Umuofia Progressive Union. Joseph says, during their dinner,

without Obi having actually mentioned any of this, that he has only one room ... Obi, however, tells Joseph that all of that is nonsense and that he is leaving the hotel to stay with Joseph anyway. Joseph is happy about this, even though he tells Obi that people will think poorly of the situation—people will look down upon a college graduate who has just returned from England sharing a room in his neighborhood.

Before they leave the restaurant, they go into the lounge area. Joseph wants to order beer, but Obi refuses. From the window of the lounge Obi and Joseph could see the Minister of State, Sam Okoli, exiting his car, and Clara is with him. It shocks Obi to see her with the Minister of State.

This chapter highlights the differences between Obi and his fellow countrymen on his return from England. First, there are the mistakes Obi makes at his reception. First he arrives informally dressed and then he speaks in an informal English. Obi does not realize that he must dress a certain way and because it is hot, he simply wears short sleeves. He speaks English with less formality (an English of "is" and "was") because he is used to the language, and it is not strange to his tongue. Obi has gone away for just under four years, and it is apparent that there are things he has forgotten, rules he has missed out on learning, and discrepancies in his and his countrymen's beliefs and customs.

There is also the issue of how others treat him because of his English education. The Umuofian Progressive Union is proud of their "son," who has brought status to Umuofia because of his studies. There are actions, however, that surprise Obi and that he is not happy with. He cannot understand, for instance, why he cannot stay with his good friend instead of a hotel booked by the Union. It is surprising to Joseph that someone of Obi's new status would even want to share a room where he lives. Because the young man who returns from England almost immediately has a new post and occupies a new class in society, the Union and others look down upon such things to Obi's discontent. Furthermore, Joseph is also surprised that Obi wants to eat Nigerian food, when Obi is, in fact, starving for Nigerian food and even nostalgic for it, being tired of English food.

Another subject that arises once again in this chapter is that of bribery. At Obi's reception, the chairman of the UPU asks Obi whether he has been offered a job by the government. The Vice President says that he will have no problem getting a job because he has just come home from England and then says that, were it not for that, he would have suggested that they "see" someone. To "see" someone, obviously means to offer someone a bribe. Moreover, the very same people that are appalled at Obi's behavior (at the beginning of the novel after the trial) also appear to participate, hypocritically, in bribery. They later claim not to have accepted such behavior from someone with an education like his. The conflict of what Obi feels and does in opposition to what is expected of him comes strongly to the fore of the novel, and while it has always been present, it is illustrated heavily in this chapter.

The presence of the European in Nigeria is also quite apparent in this chapter. The restaurant Obi and Joseph go to is owned by an English woman. It is important to note that Achebe's description of the old, loud, bossy, and fumbling, Englishwoman is anything but flattering. The restaurant is not only owned by a European but is also populated mostly by them. This will recur over and over again in the novel. Achebe does this to illustrate the extent of the colonialist's hand, scope, influence, and mere presence in Africa.

Chapter 5.

Summary

At the beginning of the chapter, Obi's theory of corruption in the Nigerian government is exposed. He claims that as long as there are "old Africans" running public service positions, there will be corruption. Obi believes that the young and university educated need to begin to take up those posts. During his interview for the Public Service Commission, Obi meets one of these "old Africans."

The board interviews him, and all goes well except for the fact that one of the men, the man who represents one of Nigeria's three regions, is asleep. As it turns out the chairman

of the commission is an admirer of poetry, and so the two men (the chairman and Obi) have a long exchange about literature and the nature of tragedy that makes him look very good in the eyes of his interviewers. All the interviewers take a positive image of Obi, except the "old African," who angers Obi by asking him whether he wants the position in order to be able to take bribes. Obi becomes upset and leaves the interview on a bad note. When he tells Joseph about what had happened, Joseph tells him it is a mistake to become angry during an interview. He says that one cannot afford to become angry when one is in the position of needing a job. Obi rejects this mode of thinking and calls Joseph's mentality "colonial."

While Obi is waiting for his response from his interview, he decides to visit his old village of Umuofia. On the way, the police stop the wagon on which he is riding first class. At some point, the driver's mate is about to offer the policeman money, but the policeman fears that Obi holds a high governmental position and rebuffs the man offering him the bribe—only to take it later and at a higher price.

On his way to Umuofia, Obi sits in the front with the driver (it is this that qualifies as first class) and thinks about many things. He wonders why Clara, to whom he is engaged, will not allow Obi to tell his parents about her yet. He also ponders how to fix the corruption in Nigeria (after the incident with the driver's mate and the police). Obi falls asleep for a while, and after waking up he listens to the song of the traders, a song sung in his native tongue. But he understands it for the first time after translating it in his mind into English.

When Obi arrives in Umuofia, there is a huge welcome. A jeep is blasting local music, and bands are playing. There is a gathering in his house, and there are discussions about how far away the "white man's country" is and questions and hugs. There are also discussions about Christianity versus local religion, because Obi's father is a Christian. There is a scene in which an elder wants to offer a kola nut, but Obi's father is against blasphemous offerings. Nevertheless, a somewhat comic compromise is reached, and the

kola nut is offered in a Christian fashion, so as to bring together both religions and traditions.

Analysis

This chapter shows Obi to be an idealistic young man who wants to bring change to his homeland. The chapter opens with Obi's theory against corruption. He wants the younger generation, who has studied at universities and knows better how to get along in a changing world, to take the place of the older Africans, whose mindsets are antiquated. He also poses himself, without compromise, against bribery. When, the police are about to take a bribe in the wagon on the way to Umuofia, Obi verbalizes his discontent and tells the driver's mate he should not have to give money to the police. Nevertheless the man who was going to give the bribe thinks of Obi as unlearned in the ways of the world because he is a "university boy."

Obi not only differs in opinion with the man in the wagon but also with his own friend, Joseph. For example, early in the chapter, after Obi has had his interview, Joseph tells Obi that he should not have become angry in the interview because he was looking for a job and someone in his position cannot afford to become angry. Obi claims that this is a "colonial" mindset, which is an insult. Achebe is particularly upfront in his social and political criticism of colonialism in this chapter. The aforementioned statement on Obi's behalf is one example. Another example occurs when Obi is back in Umuofia and, while thinking to himself, says inwardly that the British should "come and see men and women and children who [know] how to live, whose joy of life had not yet been killed by those who claimed to teach other nations how to live." This is a harsh criticism of England's empire and her colonial pawns.

Again, it is obvious that there is no set place for Obi to fit in. He must forge his own way, but it is difficult and almost impossible. In fact, his fate may very well be like the nature of tragedy he discusses in this chapter. During his interview for the Public Service Commission, Obi says "tragedy is never resolved." Perhaps, as it will be seen later in the novel, that is Obi's plight. Perhaps his plight is to live a life of struggle where he is never

"at ease." Perhaps it is because he is at an in-between through which he must suffer, making an easier path for the generations that are to follow.

Finally, there is the issue of Christianity that arises at the end of the chapter. The people of the town do not understand Obi's father's beliefs and think that he should be taught a lesson for not giving an offering to the town's rainmaker so that it would not rain on Obi's homecoming. However, Obi's father does not believe in such traditional practices because he has converted to another religion, the religion of the colonizer, in fact. One of the most beautiful and humorous episodes in the book arises out of a moment of mixture and compromise. An elder uses the kola nut as an offering, but he incorporates Obi's father's ways and offers it in a Christian fashion. Although it may seem somewhat mocking at the beginning, it is more a playful and united conglomeration of the two cultures. The moment is illustrative of what can save someone like Obi and the generations that are to follow: an embracing of differences. Instead of being ill at ease in the in-between, one can survive and be happy in finding the beauty inside the complexity of two cultures combined.

Chapter 6

Summary

The narrator opens the chapter by saying that Obi's homecoming is not actually as happy as he has hoped. He was saddened by the state of his parents, especially that of his mother who has aged drastically in the four years he has been away. She has been sick episodically, but he has not expected to see her so thin and sickly. His father is also sick, and it is obvious that they do not have enough money for food and necessities. His parents have many responsibilities, including that of the church fees (his father is a catechist) and school fees for their two youngest children.

While at home, Obi stays up with his father after everyone else has gone to bed. Obi looks around and notices the trouble his family has gone through to make their home special for his arrival—they have chalked the walls and rubbed the floors, for instance,

gestures which move Obi. During their conversation, his father asks him if he has had time to read the Bible while in England. Obi knows his father is asking him this because he has stumbled over his verses that evening while reading aloud. Obi responds that he had (though he had not and did not even believe in the same God his father did) but that the Bible he read was in English.

Obi recalls memories of growing up, while he is in the house of his childhood and of his siblings. He remembers reading the Bible with the family, and he remembers a particular time when his mother told him folk stories. His father had forbidden his mother to tell the children folk stories because though she, too, was a devout Christian, she seemed to enjoy these folk tales. In any case, there was a particular exercise in school called "oral" in which the teacher would call on a student and the pupil would have to recite a folk story for the whole class. Obi loved this class but feared it at the same time because he did not know any folk stories. Obi was embarrassed when it was his turn because he could not say anything. That day he went home to tell his mother who told Obi to wait until his father was gone (to his church meeting), and it was then that she told him a story, which he was successfully able to recite to the class some weeks later.

When Obi is finally settled into bed, he is unable to fall asleep. The reason for this is that he is worrying about his responsibilities. He feels that he must give his parents money from his weekly salary because they can no longer afford to live on their own. They used to plant their own crops and his mother used to make soaps and oils to sell, which she is now too old to do. Obi thinks about all the money he will have to distribute from his salary such as the twenty pounds to pay back his loan and the money to assist his family as well as his younger brother's school fees. At the end of his train of thought, he thinks to himself that it will all work out and begins to think of Clara. He wonders, once again, why it is that he is unable to tell his family about her. The chapter ends with a downpour of rain in the middle of the night.

Analysis

In this chapter Achebe uses his literary technique to set up a metaphor for Obi's position. The story of Obi as a young boy not having a folk story to tell in class is a perfect

metaphor that extends throughout the entire novel. Obi, while growing up, is being brought up by Christian convert parents in an African society. This combination is forever evident in Obi's life. Even though he is brought up Christian and his mother is forbidden to tell him folktales, Obi loves these folktales. It is perhaps this very love of storytelling that ironically caused him to study English at the university. This is ironic because the progression comes full circle. Obi disobeys his father's Christian (English) religion in order to go back to his African roots (folktales) only to, in the end, study English in England. Obi's listening and telling of the folk stories in class, and his remembrance of such a thing, forms an important moment in the novel. It is very much like the moment in the last chapter (Chapter 5) when he listens to the song of the traders in the wagon. The song is in Ibo, and it is a song he has heard again and again but only really understands when he is able to translate it into English. Nevertheless, he is forced to stop thinking analytically because he gets caught, somewhat, in the "spicy" singing of the traders. It is as if his heart is drawn to the song and as if his heart understands the song in the same way it understood the folktales, even if his mind is somewhere else.

Another important literary device used in this chapter is that of foreboding. We understand that Obi is nervous and worried about all that he must pay out of his salary every month. He feels responsible for his parents' wellbeing and for the continuing education of his younger brother. He also needs to repay his debt to the Union. After all of these thoughts he is relieved by his thoughts of Clara, only to be brought out of that relief by a nagging curiosity about why he cannot tell his parents about their engagement.

This suspicion is followed by rain. The rain here in the end of the chapter is both refreshing and overwhelming at once, as water is. It is refreshing in much the same way that being home is refreshing. This is illustrated within the chapter by Obi's happy memories of childhood. He remembers his playfulness with his sisters and his love for them. He had missed home terribly and now he is inside of his home, being "washed" by its tropical rain. However, this rain is not regular rain, it is a downpour, which, of course,

brings negative thoughts and connotations to our minds. We are reminded by this rain of all that has transpired in this chapter, such as the physical and financial state of his parents and whatever consequences for Obi these things may have both financially and emotionally.

Chapter 7

Summary

It is Obi's first day at the civil service. The day reminds him of his first day at the mission school in Umuofia when a white school inspector came into the school and slapped his headmaster. His headmaster had fought back, and there had been chaos throughout the school. Obi's new boss, Mr. Green, reminds him of the white school inspector. Mr. Green would never dream of doing such a thing because times have changed, claims Obi, but Mr. Green is not altogether dissimilar to that earlier white man.

Mr. Green is arrogant and patronizing. He tells Obi all on this first day to use his brain, if he has one and that he will do fine in his job if he is not. Obi spends his first day learning the administrative side of things with Mr. Omo, the administrative assistant, whom Obi calls an "old African." Mr. Omo calls Green "sir" (which Green later asks Obi to do as well), and he shudders and stumbles under the loud demands of his boss.

After a week of working at the office, Obi buys a car and is given a sixty-pound "outfit allowance," which pleases both him and Clara. Clara has also secured a job as an assistant nurse, and Obi will soon be moving into a senior service flat in Ikoyi.

The same day Obi buys his car, Clara and Obi are expected at the Minister of State, the Honorable Sam Okoli's home for drinks. Okoli no longer threatens Obi because Okoli is not interested in Clara, he is merely her friend. In fact, Okoli is marrying Clara's best friend. Okoli has a nice home, one of the "minister's homes" built by the government for 35,000 dollars. This is the first time Obi and Sam are formally introduced. Over drinks, the three of them talk about the Minister's radiogram and about the "white man," saying

that he has done some good things for Nigeria, but that now he must go. This is an opinion that Okoli verbalizes twice.

In the car, after drinks and on the way to dinner, Clara and Obi are alone. Clara is upset but will not tell Obi why. Clara says she is not hungry, but they have dinner anyway, neither talking, nor eating very much. It is at this point that Clara tells Obi that she cannot marry him because she is an *osu*—an outcast. Obi thinks this is ridiculous and that they shall marry anyway. Clara is very upset and crying.

When Obi comes home that night, he tells Joseph of what Clara has told him. Joseph is appalled and worried at Obi's obstinacy. Obi says he will marry Clara anyway and that no one, not even his mother, with whom he has a very special relationship, can stop him. The next day Clara and Obi buy an engagement ring and spend the day shopping together. Joseph tells Obi that no one will agree with this marriage, but Obi is positive that if he can only convince his mother, then things will be all right.

This is the chapter in which the character of the Minister of State, the Honorable Sam Okoli is developed. It is said of him, in previous chapters, that he is a well-liked politician. The only other thing we knew about the man is that he is seen, suspiciously (in Obi's eyes at least), with Clara. The suspicion is released because Okoli is engaged, and Obi actually likes him.

Okoli is a politician through and through. He says: "I respect the white man although we want them to go." This is his "political position," one that would, of course, be popular among people who want their independence. It is civil but strong. This "opinion" however is somewhat dubious later, when he's talking about the radiogram. Sam also says: "white man don go far. We just de shout for nothing" and then, as Achebe adds, "[seeming] to realize his position," he adds, "all the same they must go. This no be them country." The "white man," does not seem to *really* bother Okoli, who has become accustomed to his ways. Still, it is unfair to say that he does not really believe that they must go. Nevertheless, Achebe poses this question in our minds, making Okoli's position

shaky. It is also important to note, that like Obi and Christopher, Okoli too, an educated African, also plays with language and falls into pidgin occasionally.

Another important moment in the chapter comes when Obi says that his education has made him a stranger in his country. Obi says this when Joseph is upset and appalled at Obi's not realizing what it would mean to the Umuofians for him to marry an outcast like Clara. Obi is set apart from the Umuofians in many respects, and this is one of them. He cannot understand why it is important that Clara should suffer because of her ancestry. Joseph says it is not time for such drastic changes. He believes that there will be changes but that their generation (Obi and Joseph's) are just "pioneers." Obi says, however, that that is precisely why it should be all right for him to take such a step, since to be a pioneer means, "to lead." The changes have to begin somewhere and with someone, and Obi believes they should begin with him.

Finally there is the issue of Obi's relationship with his mother. First, Obi says that not even his mother can stop him from this marriage; a marriage that Joseph claims his entire family plus all of the Umuofian Progressive Union will be against. Obi has a special bond with his mother, and he feels that if he convinces her everything will be okay. Achebe backtracks to a moment in Obi's childhood when he had left a razorblade that he had used to sharpen pencils in the pocket of his clothing. This razorblade cut his mother's hand while she was washing his clothes. When she returned from the wash, she returned drenched in blood. This is what Obi thought of when he thought of his mother in an affectionate way: "his mind went back to that shedding of her blood." This, as the novel will illustrate, is a foreboding moment. His mother sheds blood for him, but it is also important to note that, with his razorblade, he hurt his mother unwillingly—all of this will play an important part later in the novel.

Chapter 8

Summary

The Umuofian Progressive Union holds meetings on the first Saturday of every month in Lagos. Obi has missed the last meeting, in November of 1956, because he has been in Umuofia. He is planning to attend the December 1st meeting, however, on the day that this chapter opens. Obi tells Joseph that they will pick him up at his house in time for the 4:30 meeting. When Obi arrives at Joseph's house, Joseph is disappointed by his friend's casual appearance though he does not verbalize this. Joseph, on the other hand, is dressed "impeccably" for the meeting, from top to bottom.

Even though Obi arrives on time, Joseph stalls him in order to arrive at the meeting once everybody has arrived, and once he is sure it is completely full. The reason for this is that Joseph wants to show off Obi's new car. There is a fine for tardiness, but it is not even recalled when Obi and Joseph make their entrance into the meeting, since Obi's brand new car overtook the crowds. The men were greeted with cheers, and Obi is seated next to the president. He is asked about his job and his car until finally the meeting takes its previous orderly shape. Those at the meeting, before Obi's arrival, have already tended to one order of business. There is a small matter of a loan on behalf of the UPU to a man who has lost his job for having slept on the job. The president of the UPU reprimands him for his behavior but, in the end, gives him the approval for his loan.

After Obi arrives there is the matter of Obi's reception to be discussed, much to Obi's surprise since he has felt that the event had gone splendidly. Apparently many of the younger men in the community have a complaint about how the elders monopolized the beer and wine. After this business is tended to lightly, the president announced that Obi has several words to share with the people of the Union. Obi thanks the Union, first and foremost, for the lovely reception they had given him and continues in thanking them for their sacrifices made in providing him with a scholarship to study in England. He then moves on to his request, which is to ask for a brief period of four months before he has

to begin to repay the loans given to him. Some members of the audience do not understand this because they believe that he is making much money in his new position, without taking into account his financial responsibilities. It is at this point that the president brings up the subject of Clara. The UPU is against Obi marrying an *osu*. Obi, however, is offended by this and finds it to be none of their business. Obi becomes too proud to continue his request and says that he will begin to pay his fees immediately and then storms out of the meeting. Joseph tries to calm him down, but Obi is obstinate and drives off.

Analysis

This chapter heightens the tension between Obi and the UPU. The UPU is *the* symbol of the village and of the faith and expectations the village places on Obi. They look up to him and believe him to be wealthy because of his position, class, and education—an education which they have provided through a scholarship/loan. The car, like the fact of Obi's study abroad, is something that the Umuofians admire; it is a symbol for which they, literally, cheer.

Although Obi is thankful for his education, he is not always truly grateful to the UPU, who are perpetually intruding on his life and whose "scholarship" was nothing more than a loan, according to Obi. Obi is at odds with the Union just as he is often at odds with tradition—the Union and tradition being one and the same for the purposes of the novel, despite the misleading name of the Union, which contains the word "progressive." Achebe places the precursor to Obi's arrival at the meeting quite intentionally. There is a man who is also asking for a loan, specifically a man who has lost his job. The Union grants him a loan but not without reprimand and intrusion into his life. In this way, the Union is very much like family, hardly ever denying but always giving their two cents before giving in to any one particular request. Furthermore, this precursor to Obi's request proves that Obi would have probably received his extension were he able to withstand the criticism of his choice for a wife. Obi, however, does not believe it is the Union's right to ask about such things and is too proud to stand there and listen to what

he believes to be backward thinking. Moreover, he barges out of the room in a fashion that the Union will hold against him later.

The character of Joseph is also further developed in this chapter. He is closer to tradition than Obi, and it is perhaps for the sole reason that he does not have the kind of education that Obi has. He looks at Obi and believes him to be underdressed for the occasion, proving that Obi does not really try to correct his "mistakes," as it was obvious he was underdressed for his reception as well, something which even Obi had noticed. Joseph brags about his friend who has studied "classics" in England, fibbing about the "classics" part because to him it sounds more impressive. And Joseph, too, looks upon Obi's car with admiration. In fact, Joseph *wants* to be the one driving with Obi in his new vehicle. He wants to be seen with him and to absorb some of the car's "glory," as he puts it. This does not mean, however, that Joseph always agrees with his friend, and, indeed, Joseph does not agree with Obi's marriage with Clara nor does he agree with Obi's barging out of the meeting. Obi, however, by the end of the chapter is just as angry with Joseph as he is with the Progressive Union, for it was perhaps Joseph that told the Union about Clara in the first place.

Chapter 9

Summary

Obi is at work at with Mr. Green's "attractive English secretary," Miss Tomlinson, whom at first he holds under suspicion of being a spy for the British. He has, since his first arrival in the office, however, begun to release his guard in front of her. This letting down of his guard begins when Miss Tomlinson meets Clara. Miss Tomlinson is truly delighted to have met Clara and seems genuine in her excitement about Obi's marriage to such a lovely woman. This raises Miss Marie Tomlinson esteem for Obi, somewhat more than at the beginning because it seems true and not forced.

While Obi is at work, a gentleman stops by and asks to see him. The man begins to speak to him in Ibo of a "semiprivate" matter because Miss Tomlinson happens to be within listening range. After little of the gentleman, Mr. Mark's request, it becomes apparent that he is offering Obi a bribe for his sister's scholarship. Obi refuses this bribe at full force and is, in fact, angered by it. He practically shows Mr. Mark the door. After he has done this, Obi is elated by his defeat of this man and his bribe. He finds that he has won some kind of victory and compares the feeling of happiness to a sexual conquest—he feels like

a tiger. It is at this point that he begins to recall what people have said to him about taking bribes and how even the Minister of State has once said that it is often worse to refuse or not follow through with a bribe than to accept it.

And it was not that Obi is without temptation, he claims, for he does have a serious economic burden on his shoulders, what with having to take out twenty pounds a month to pay back his loan, and ten pounds for his parents, as well as his brother, John's, school fees.

After a lunch of yams and soup, which Obi eats at home, someone arrives at his flat. Obi lives in an area populated by European neighbors whom he does not really know. The person who arrives is Miss Mark, the sister of Mr. Mark, who had gone to see Obi earlier in the day. Miss Mark is also offering a lightly veiled bribe—she is offering Obi her body in return for this sought after scholarship. Obi is kinder to her than he was to her brother, though he refuses her just the same. It is at this point that Clara walks into Obi's apartment.

After the episode with the young girl the couple tries to visit Sam Okoli who is not in but at a Cabinet meeting when they ring. Later in the day, Obi tells Clara all about the bribes and his rejections of them, and Clara finds the girl's offering of her body to Obi more repulsive than her brother's offer of money. Obi wonders what is worse.

Analysis

This chapter is at the literal center of the novel. If the book were to end here, Obi would be successful in what he set himself out to do: reject bribes and slowly become a building block upon which to destroy corruption. Obi would be a true hero. However, things are not as easy at that—this would merely be the kind of "happy ending" in which not even Obi, and apparently not Achebe either, believes. Obi is a successful idealist in this chapter, and he feels good about himself. In fact, Obi is elated at his conquest. "He had won his first battle hands-down," but Obi would have to be much stronger in order to continue to win the endless battles. The threat of temptation is already visible in this chapter when Obi mentions his financial stress and obligation.

Another aspect of the chapter that is important is that Sam Okoli is mentioned twice. First, Okoli is mentioned as merely the "Minster of State" and later as simply Sam. The first time, he is mentioned is when Obi refers to the Minster's "unguarded" comments about bribes being okay. It becomes apparent that the Minister is often "unguarded" when under the influence of alcohol, just as he has been on Obi's last visit to his house. The second time, Sam comes up as simply a friend. Nevertheless, the reader is reminded of his position when his steward says he is at a Cabinet meeting. Moreover, Achebe is illustrating that even men in very high positions of power, men who are apparently not altogether bad, and quite popular even, are tinged by the thread of corruption and bribery.

Then finally there is the issue of Miss Tomlinson. Miss Marie Tomlinson, the English secretary of Mr. Green, is constantly saying things about her boss like "Isn't he odd? ... But he's really not a bad man." We are constantly told this, and there are moments when it is almost believable. Nevertheless, Miss Tomlinson is immediately under suspicion by Obi because she is English. He even thinks she may be a spy planted to collect information on Africans, and, thus, he is careful around her, at first.

After having talked to her on the phone and having met her once in person, Miss Tomlinson believes Clara to be a lovely and attractive woman, and she even encourages a speedier marriage. This attitude seems genuine and sincere to Obi and is concurrent with precisely his own feelings about Clara. Moreover, he finds a connection with Miss Tomlinson because she seems to be, in many ways, an antidote to the Umuofian Progressive Union and its opinions of Clara and other aspects of his life. This is not to say that Miss Tomlinson is not nosy, because she is. She shows interest in Obi's dealings with Mr. Mark and her presence causes Mr. Mark to switch to a language he knows she will not understand. It is as if this young, English secretary satisfies, at times, Obi's English educated side.

Chapter 10

Summary

At some point Mr. Green, in his arrogant way, reminds Obi that he has to pay his insurance renewal. The chapter opens when this renewal is due, and Obi's financial situation becomes tighter than ever. In addition to his usual expenses he now has this insurance to pay, and he cannot afford it. It is at this point that he sees a piece of paper on his desk that reminds him that one of the messengers from his department, Charles, owes him money. When Obi calls Charles into his office, however, Charles says he cannot pay him back at present and will have to pay him at a later date. Obi decides that he will take out a loan from the bank and feels somewhat better about things, thinking to himself, that he should not worry because beginnings are always difficult.

Obi thinks about the time in the past year when he had asked for an extension of four months to pay back his loan, which would have helped had he not been, in the end, too proud to take it. But that is all in the past, thinks Obi, remembering that he had apologized for his behavior and had been forgiven. The Union had, in fact, told Obi that they would give him the four months after he had apologized and that he should take them, but Obi refused to do so.

He puts himself in the position of all those with lesser salaries than his own and who had taxed themselves highly just to put him through school. He also thinks about how he cannot, in any way, let those people down. He decides, therefore, to simply go to the bank and take out a fifty-pound overdraft. Since his income, which is substantially high, goes straight into the bank, it should not be a problem. Once he has received this loan from the bank, he returns to work only to find his electric bill (and a preposterously high one at that). His reaction causes Miss Tomlinson to ask him what is the matter. He thinks about the fact that next month the troubles will continue because he will have to renew his vehicle license, and he will eventually have to replace his tires which will, no doubt, last him only six months.

When he arrives home that day, Obi begins to instill financial frugality in the household. He complains about there being too much meat in his food and tells the steward he shall only give him money once a week for the market from now on. Obi also decides that there will only be one switch per bulb in the house as opposed the current two, in order to diminish the electric bill. He says also that the water heater shall not be turned on and that he will begin to take cold showers instead.

Later on in the day still, Obi has a quarrel with Clara because Clara becomes upset that Obi had not told her about taking a loan out of the bank.

Analysis

Chinua Achebe places this chapter directly after the previous one for a very intentional reason. The last chapter showed Obi as a young man full of hope and winning battles against corruption. He was strong enough to refuse bribes and even his relationship with Clara seems to be running smoothly enough. Nevertheless, Achebe juxtaposes that chapter with this one: the chapter about Obi's economic hardships. Up until now we know all about Obi's difficulties with money. We know that he must pay back his loan and give money to his parents etc, etc. However, this chapter adds to those difficulties by explaining in detail the extent of his financial responsibilities. Obi has to pay insurance premiums and license renewals, and he has to keep up his car, pay electric bills, and establish systems for giving money to the steward for food and so on just to make ends meet.

Obi finds himself in a terrible situation but is still at the point where he can find some hope through his problems. For instance, he thinks about the fact that this is just a beginning for him and that beginnings are always difficult. He also makes himself think that he cannot let his people down, and he is somewhat cheered by Charles's attitude, the man who, in turn, owes Obi money. Also, the chapter seems to end hopefully when Obi finds a poem he had written in England about Nigeria.

The poem is a nostalgic piece of writing that makes him smile. It calls for unity and purity and peace and jollity, and in a way it does well to cheer him up. It is a poem he had

written two years before and on the bottom he had written "London, July 1955." The poem both reminds us of Obi's displacement, but it helps Obi forge a new attitude to take. He finds this poem about *Nigeria*, ironically in an A.E. Housman book. Obi, like Achebe is using a British form (lyric poetry) and making that poetry his own by taking full possession of the subject matter.

Further problems arise out of Obi's relationship with Clara, a relationship that seems to be full of quarrels. They did not quarrel in the last chapter but that seems more like an exception to the rule. Clara, at this point, is upset because Obi has not told her about the overdraft, and she feels she should be told these things since they are to be married. It is obvious that Obi has a certain amount of pride and does not want to have to tell Clara about his financial problems, just as he did not want to take the extension from the Umuofian Progressive Union. The quarrels between the two of them always shed light upon both characters.

Also, as a kind of passing note, Achebe does not fail to criticize Mr. Green yet again in this section of the novel. Though this section seems more sympathetic to the UPU than others, although never fully accepting, it is still quite critical of Green. Because, although Green does well in reminding Obi of his insurance and what he will have to pay and when, Green does so in an arrogantly characteristic manner. "For one brief moment a year ago Mr. Green had taken an interest in Obi's personal affairs—if one could call it taking an interest." For, Green claims he must remind Obi because even the "educated" have not reached the level of thinking about tomorrow" in Nigeria.

Chapter 11

Summary

Obi is now on good terms with Miss Tomlinson, ever since she reacted so cheerily to Clara, as mentioned before. In fact, the two co-workers are now on a first name basis. Obi now calls her Marie and even uses flattery on her. They often talk to each other when the workload is mild, and the subject is often that of Mr. Green, their boss. Miss Tomlinson claims that Mr. Green is very different at home, that he is much more generous and that he pays for the education of his steward's sons. Nevertheless, she admits that he does say appalling things about educated Africans. Obi thinks about Mr. Green for a long while and concludes that his predicament is tragic.

At first Obi cannot understand why a man like him, who does not feel anything for the country, can work such long and hard hours for Nigeria. Then he realizes that Green does love Africa, but only the Africa of his submissive servants—that of his stewards and messengers. Obi is reminded of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and he alludes to it, claiming that someone like Mr. Green was always trying to bring light to that "darkness." He feels sorry for Mr. Green, who must have been disappointed when he arrived in Africa at not having found it dark and full of bush as he had imagined. Obi continues his train of thought by reflecting on the changes that had gone on in Africa. He, specifically, remembers how when he was a little boy it was possible for a white man to slap a black headmaster when, now, such a thing would be unheard of and most would not even think to do it.

After all of this conversation with Marie and his consequent thinking, Obi receives a parcel from Clara, delivered by someone from the hospital. Obi fears it contains the ring he has given her because the last time they had spoken she had been angry with him and they had quarreled. However, the parcel contains no such thing—it contains fifty pounds with which he can repay the bank. Obi is moved by Clara's generous gesture but feels he cannot take the money. He tries to think of ways to tell her he cannot take it while

driving from Ikoyi, where he lives, to Yaba, where she lives. When he arrives at her house he finds himself lying to her. She asks him what the bank manager had said when he returned the money. Obi lies and says that he was very pleased. The lie lasts a very short time, however, before Obi gives in to the truth. Clara is upset with Obi for not taking the money but says that she understands and that she has been thinking all afternoon that she should not meddle in his affairs. After their discussion, Clara and Obi go dancing with Christopher and his girlfriend Bisi. On their return to their car at night, Obi finds that the money, Clara's money, is missing from the car—it has been stolen.

Analysis

This chapter is very much about character—the character of people like Mr. Green and Christopher, Obi's friend. Both of these men are complex in their own way.

Mr. Green, up until now, has been more vilified than anything else. Now, we take in the information that, at least according to Marie, he is not altogether a bad man. He pays, for example, for the education of his stewards. This makes him complicated, because Green is constantly making big insults against the educated African. It is, therefore, ironic for him to participate in that which he criticizes. At the same time, it makes perfect sense, because he belongs to a generation of white Englishmen that believed they could bring light and civilization to the African "jungle" or "heart of darkness." He must have, however, been surprised to find the land to be free of the dark bush and savagery that he had imagined. He might have been able to get away with worse in Africa's distant past, and since Green's mentality does not change with the changing times he is left only to "curse and swear." Obi finds this character particularly tragic, in fact. And, in the end, Obi is very pleased with the very English analysis he has used to dissect the character of Mr. Green, as if he were a character in a novel. This of course being a wonderful irony since it is what we are doing and is also what the writer is doing to an actual character in a novel.

As for the character of Christopher, Obi's educated economist friend, he develops as a character that Achebe poses against Obi's other friend, Joseph. Joseph is not educated

and is more of a "bushman," as Obi says. They are different in many ways. For example, Joseph belongs more in the traditional African world, which is not to say that he is unaffected by the English and colonialism, because that would be an impossibility for anyone who lives in Lagos. It only means that, in comparison, Obi and Christopher are both much more the bearers of what Achebe calls a "double heritage."

Chapter 11

Finally, there is the issue of Clara and the difficulty in Obi and Clara's relationship. Just when it seems things are going well, things begin to fall apart. Obi is moved by Clara's gift of fifty pounds, but he feels he cannot take it. He lies to Clara, and then everything seems all right after he tells her the truth, only for everything to fall apart once again when the money is stolen. Not only does this strain an already problematic relationship, but it adds another layer to Obi's financial quagmire. He now owes fifty pounds to the bank and fifty pounds to Clara apart from everything else, including his debt to the UPU. Achebe is purposely and continuously adding layer upon layer of problems to heighten Obi's struggles. This is a very intentional move on behalf of the author, in order to illustrate to us how it is that Obi fell into the trap of bribery to which he says he would never succumb.

Chapter 12

Summary

Obi receives a letter from his father, which asks for him to come home because of an "urgent matter" they need to discuss. Obi worries that this matter has to do with Clara, her social status as an outcast, and their proposed marriage. Obi has not told his family anything about the matter, but he assumes that the news has reached them somehow and that someone must have told them.

There is a brief episode in the office where Mr. Green, as usual, insults educated Africans after giving a brief and curt dictation to Marie, his secretary. Following this Obi calls Christopher and arranges to play tennis with two Irish girls, Nora and Pat who have just

recently arrived in Nigeria and who were living at the convent as Roman Catholic missionaries. Obi does not know how Christopher and the girls have met, but Obi has met them in Christopher's apartment two weeks prior. Achebe gives us a flashback of the day they met in Christopher's apartment where they danced, and Obi had tried to kiss Nora without success; she said that Roman Catholics do not "kiss like that." Finally, they drop the girls off at the convent and arrange to play tennis, which they do twice, only to forget about them for a while. Now, Obi feels like playing a game with them again, and so he arranges another game. When the two men arrive at the convent, however, the girls cannot go with Obi and Christopher. The reason is, as Nora explains, that they have been told not to become serious about African men, because they would be sent back to Ireland if the Bishop found out.

Christopher and Obi are thus left alone to discuss the girls, their behavior, and eventually bribery. First they pass by the house of Florence, whom, as his new girlfriend, Christopher wishes to marry. The problem with Florence is that she wishes to go to school, and Christopher dissuades her from doing so because she would have to go away. Obi advises that he not dissuade the girl from her education and provides a folk story to prove his point. Florence, because she wants to go away to study, reminds Obi of the Miss Mark who offered her body to him as a bribe, in return for her scholarship, which is how they begin to talk about bribes. Obi tells Christopher the story, but Christopher does not believe that it is all together wrong for a woman to offer her body in such a fashion. Obi, on the other hand, still believes it to be corrupt. They argue about this endlessly, Christopher claiming that a girl who would do such a thing is not an "innocent" girl and does not have to be treated as such. After their long discussion, Obi leaves his friend and returns to thinking about the letter his father had written to him and about the situation with Clara.

Analysis

Three main occurrences happen in this section: Obi receives an urgent letter from home, Mr. Green continues to reign above the office like a verbal, complaining, old colonial lord, and Obi and Christopher have an excursion with Irish girls.

The presence of the Irish girls in this novel has many meanings. First of all, it is important that the Irish girls are missionaries, to illustrate an ever-present Western presence and not only a presence but one that is looking to make "converts." However, the girls are also important because they heighten Obi's position as an in-between. More specifically, they are more anti-English than Obi, which makes Obi feel uncomfortable—a predicament which is a perfect metaphor for a life lived "in the middle" and, as mentioned previously, with a "double heritage." Also, when the girls say they cannot see them because they are Africans and when Christopher pokes fun of the Catholics, Obi finds himself defending Roman Catholics because, as we already know, he has grown up Catholic with his catechist father. Moreover, Obi finds himself in a confused state even among the Irish. Lastly, it is important that Achebe places the scene in which the girls tell the men they cannot go out with them in the novel. For all the times that Obi claims that Nigeria is changing, this moment exists to illustrate that there are still those that think backward and that change is not always as thorough as one would like it to be.

Furthermore, the episode with the Irish girls plays a role in Obi's relationship with Clara, because in a sense he is cheating on her. The morality and virtue he displays over certain ideas, as in not taking bribes, does not seem to apply to the way he feels about women. He does not, apparently, find it wrong to see other women while having a serious girlfriend. He obviously does not love or care for Nora, he is simply using her to take his mind off of his troubles—troubles that include Clara. His friend Christopher is also capable of having many women at a time as is evidenced by the fact that he sees three women at once. Women are an important subject matter in this section of the novel, and they begin to come up frequently. Obi believes that Christopher's girlfriend should be left to study abroad although Christopher seems not to deem it as important. Yet,

Christopher thinks that a woman offering her body as a bribe is not as horrible as Obi thinks it is. There are many mixed messages about women in this section, and it is important that they be looked at and examined if not concluded upon. From the beginning of the chapter, Obi is worried that the urgent letter he has received from home is about his doomed relationship to Clara and her outcast position in society. The narration then diverges away from this as we follow Obi on his attempt to forget his problems, only to return to these very problems—or at least a vivid reminder of these—by the end of the chapter.

Chapters 13 and 14

Summary

Chapter 13

Obi is granted two weeks of local leave so that he may go and see his father about the "urgent" business he had written his son a letter about. Before Obi leaves, Clara helps him collect his things and pack, and the night before he departs she attempts to break off the engagement once again. Obi blames himself, saying that he understands that she does not want to be married to someone who cannot manage his finances. She says that she does not want to come between him and his family and that she does not want to ruin his life. The end of their argument persuades Clara against breaking off of the engagement. Obi leaves early the next morning. He will only spend one out of the two weeks leave in Umuofia because he does not have enough money to stay longer. People will expect him to pay for things, to invite and offer, because of his large salary, and they will not understand that someone with his position in the civil service cannot afford this. Thus, he decides to only stay one week.

When he arrives in Umuofia at his home, he asks for his mother and discovers that she is very ill. She has just returned from the hospital within the last week and looks very badly to Obi who is extremely saddened by his mother's illness and appearance. At the end of the chapter there are singing women who pass by to sing for them, which is against Obi's father's will, since the women have just sung at a funeral.

Chapter 14

Obi has a conversation with his father about Clara. His father is opposed to his marriage to this woman, but Obi uses the ideas of Christianity to defend his position. He claims that with Christ there is no bondage and no judgment of the sort his father is committing and that just because their ancestors had made mistakes in the past does not mean that they have to continue to make those same mistakes, even after having been shown the "light" of the Gospel.

Obi's father is almost convinced. The next morning, however, Obi sees his mother about the same issue. His mother gives him an ultimatum that he does not have the strength to defy. Hannah, Obi's mother, says that he must wait until she is dead if he wishes to marry such a woman as Clara and that if he does not wait, she shall commit suicide. Obi is troubled by this very much and is unable to find the strength and conviction to challenge his mother, which is the most troubling thought of all for Obi.

Obi decides that he will leave early and has a final conversation with his father before he leaves. Obi's father tells him of the curse his own father placed on him when he left his house in search of Christianity, and it is with this tale that the chapter ends.

Up until now Achebe has created many chapters in opposition or juxtaposition to one another in order to illustrate the kind of life that Obi lives and has lived through the literary device of parallels and opposites. At this point in the novel, however, everything seems to take on a linear structure as the novel travels through the ends of Obi's recent past.

In chapter 13 there is quite a bit of foreboding. First, Clara begins to cry again because she believes she will ruin Obi's life and cause him family strife, which indeed she does, through no real fault of her own. Then, Obi's mother is quite ill and, at the end of the chapter, there are women who come to sing for her. However, the women that come to sing for her are the singers who have just come from a funeral. Achebe has them stop by the house as if to foreshadow Obi's mother's own death. Also, the song that they sing is relevant to Obi's own dénouement. The lyrics to the song go as follows: "For a kinsman

cannot be bought in the market, / Neither is a brother bought with money." This verse exists to remind the reader of Obi's eventual "selling" of himself ... proving this verse wrong.

Also, it is important that this is the first time in the novel that Obi cannot find enough strength within him to stand up with conviction for what he believes. He has lost his will in many ways and does not want to have his mother's blood on his head. The story about the razor blade that caught his mother's hand begins to take on a different meaning here. The blood is no longer a bond but a threat.

Finally, there are the conversations that Obi has with his father. It is important to realize that Obi uses the language of Christianity and the language of "enlightenment" (the same language he had used to criticize the colonialists) in order to convince his father that his marriage to Clara is not something that is wrong. He, like Achebe, knows how to use the tools, the language, and the culture of the outsider, of the colonizer, to his advantage. At the end, Obi's father understands and provides a parallel of his own: he tells the story of when he leaves his house with a curse upon his head for wanting to be a Christian. This is very much like the way Obi is being treated for wanting to marry an *osu*. It is almost as if Obi's father has given in and almost as if he understands. However, he claims that it is because of all of this trouble that he truly knows and understands what Christianity means. Perhaps then, Obi's father is not only telling him that he, in some way, understands, but also that he must truly understand what he is doing. Yet, Obi seems to have the conviction to fight his father, but his conviction to fight his mother is weak and dying.

Chapters 15 and 16

Summary

Chapter 15

Obi begins his return to Lagos, but on the way back he gets into a car crash, swerving off of the road and colliding into a bush. Nothing, luckily, had happened to him, and he continues on his journey after several passengers on a lorry, who saw the crash, stop to see how he is.

Obi goes straight to Clara's house and tries to make the situation sound better than it is. He tells Clara what had happened at home, but he says, with false optimism, that it is only his mother's recent illness that has maddened her and that his father has practically turned over to their side. Clara does not believe him and tells him that she knew it would not work. The engagement is finally broken off, and Clara implies that she is pregnant.

Obi tells Christopher what has transpired, and Christopher says that he, himself, would never marry an *osu*. He also gives him a connection to a doctor where they may be able to get an abortion. Clara and Obi go to a doctor who says he cannot perform an abortion, and it is not until they reach a second doctor who says that he will perform the abortion (only for cash) that they are able to arrange everything. They are to arrive the next morning at the doctor's office with thirty pounds in cash.

Chapter 16

Obi is faced with the problem of where to get, first the thirty pounds for the abortion, and then the other fifty to repay Clara. He knows he cannot ask Christopher or the UPU and decides that he will ask Sam Okoli for it. Realizing, that he did not ask Christopher to keep a secret what he had told him about Clara, Obi calls him and asks Christopher not to say anything about what he has told him.

The next morning Obi drops Clara off at the doctor's. Obi has terrible thoughts and feels as though he is never going to see Clara again. The doctor tells him to come back at five

o'clock and then drives away with Clara in his car. Obi drives around in torment until five o'clock at which time the doctor has not arrived with Clara. He asks the doctor's assistant where they may be, and she has no idea. After waiting an hour and a half, the doctor arrives and tells Obi he must come back tomorrow because Clara is under observation for complications suffered because of the abortion. Obi wants to see her but is told he cannot and that he must come back in the morning.

Obi goes home and reads more A.E. Housman. He finds the poem he had written long ago about Nigeria, while he was in London except that this time he does not smile at the sight of it, he crumples it and throws it to the ground.

The next morning Obi goes to the doctor's who tells Obi the name of the hospital Clara is at, and to where Obi goes directly. Once there, however, the nurse tells Obi that Clara is very sick and that visitors are not allowed.

Analysis

It is apparent that Obi has begun to lose his faith if he has not lost it already within these two chapters. All of his troubles have piled atop him. He has lost Clara and has to find a way to pay for the abortion and to repay her fifty pounds. And later still, Obi is confronted with the worry he must face because of Clara's complications as a result of the abortion. But this is not until later, for his troubles begin to pile up even before he reaches Lagos. His mother's illness and her ultimatum have put him in a terrible state. In fact, the state is so bad that Obi cannot even concentrate on driving and crashes into a bush. He does not seem incredibly moved by the crash and is beginning to seem almost numb to his situation. When he is told that he is lucky to be alive, he does not seem to feel so.

His pleas to Clara and his explanations are without heart this time, and even she is able to recognize it because she breaks off the engagement completely this time, seeing that there is no real conviction left in his heart. He does not know what to do with himself and falls into pessimistic English poetry. The ultimate symbol of his fall, however, comes when he crumbles up the poem about joy and unity he had written in London, years ago. He throws away this poem named *Nigeria* as if he is throwing away the idealism

with which he wrote it; Obi is beginning to fall into what will eventually lead him straight into bribery.

It is also important to mention Christopher when discussing these two chapters, because he plays an important role. He is the first person Obi turns to when he is faced with the problems of his break-up with Clara and Clara's pregnancy. It is interesting that in the second half of the novel it is Christopher and not Joseph who predominates. The reason for this is because Obi is becoming more and more estranged from his family and his traditions as the novel progresses, and he believes that Christopher will understand him better, given that they received similar educations. However, Christopher disappoints Obi in this section by saying that he, himself, would never think of marrying an *osu*. Christopher says: "You may say that I am not broad-minded, but I don't think we have reached the stage where we can ignore all our customs." While in the same kind of position, Obi and Christopher have made different decisions regarding their status as in-betweens. Obi, therefore, is continuously meeting opposition, even from a friend who is supposed to understand him. This opposition is also clear when both doctors to whom Clara and Obi go ask them why they are not going to get married? Not only was he going to marry an *osu*, but now Clara is having an abortion which is also against his roots and traditions.

Chapters 17–19

Summary

Chapter 17

Obi returns to work and has to listen to Mr. Green complain about Nigerians who take breaks, implying laziness. He argues, as usual, for a little while with Marie, and then later in the morning he goes to the hospital to see Clara. He is allowed to see her but as soon as he enters the hospital room she turns her head toward the wall. He becomes embarrassed and leaves.

Obi decides that he will stop paying his loan to the town union because it has been what he calls "the root cause of all his troubles." He chides himself for having been too proud to accept the extension. Nevertheless, he says he will stop paying it until he can begin to do so again. He will have to repay the money he borrowed for the abortion and the money he borrowed from Clara first. He is not going to tell the Union unless they ask why he is not paying, at which time he will respond that he has had "family commitments."

Obi receives the unopened envelope for the letter he had sent Clara the night before. He had written a letter and dropped it off in the hospital, but Clara had not even opened it, she has simply returned it to sender. The letter simply says that he cannot believe it is over between them, and he asks for another chance.

Chapter 18

Clara is discharged from the hospital after five weeks, but Obi has been advised against seeing her. He receives a parcel from the Commission of Income Tax to whom he must pay his taxes, and to top everything off, Obi's mother dies. Although Obi is desperately saddened by his mother's death, he does not return to Umuofia for the funeral. Those in his Union spoke badly of the fact that he did not return home for the funeral and that he did not send enough money. They also say that he is just like his father who also did not go to his own father's funeral.

The Union holds a funeral gathering at Obi's house in Lagos, but Obi overhears a story implying that the Umuofians were critical of Obi's behavior. Obi goes through a period of mental torment only to arise out of it with a strange sense of calm: "The peace that passeth all understanding."

Chapter 19

Obi's guilt ends, and he feels like a new man. He no longer holds the image in his mind of his mother returning from the wash bleeding because of his razorblade. Obi now saw his mother, or remembered her rather, as a "woman who got things done."

Obi takes his first bribe, not without guilt, however. He accepts fifty pounds for helping a man's son with a scholarship. "This is terrible!" he tells himself after that first bribe.

Achebe then jumps forward in time to illustrate that he took more bribes, including those from women who exchange their bodies for favors. The bribes came and went, and he paid all of his debts, living comfortably, but guiltily. Finally, on the day he has decided to take his last bribe and never do such a thing again because he cannot stand it anymore, he is arrested.

Analysis

The novel ends at the beginning. The people of Umuofia, the judge, the British Council man everyone is asking themselves why a man of such promise committed such an act. Of course, the entire novel is answering this question by tracing Obi's life, but there are really no answers in the end. The most pessimistic aspect of the novel is that it is cyclical. Sometimes cycles can mean rebirth, but in this case, the cycle is one of repletion and endless mistakes. One might ask him or herself why it is that Achebe has done this and whether or not there can be a break in that cycle. To answer these questions is to understand the novel. Achebe has the novel be cyclical to indicate a continuous sense of desperation and even stagnation. In the end, Obi finds himself expelled from his old idealistic self and in a mode of complacency, and the circle emphasizes the danger of that complacency.

As for whether or not this circle can be broken, the answer to the question is yes. The reason for this answer is that Achebe is the person who breaks the cycle. By writing this story, Achebe forces people to stop reading at the end, inviting each of us to think about the predicaments he has narrated individually. Because we must stop and think, we, therefore, forge a new path and hopefully stop repeating the cycle. Finally, it is apparent

throughout the novel that change is occurring and that Obi is right to believe that the future of a post-colonial Nigeria is in the hands of those who can come to terms with, or an understanding of, their "double heritage."

Also, one may bring into question whether the novel itself is really altogether pessimistic. For, although Obi gets caught, he has reached a point at which he cannot take lying to himself anymore. He cannot stand the complacency of the bribe, and he has regained a guilt that has been somewhat latent. This is, in itself a positive thing, because whether or not he gets caught is not the issue. Perhaps the most important factor is that he regains a sense of conviction and a strength to fight for that in which he once believed. Still, perhaps the arrest will dampen this conviction, in which case we will have to take on his role. And yet, we see that, although he is accused of being unmoved by his present situation, Obi finds himself in tears when his education and possibilities are mentioned in court. Perhaps then, he will take these tears and turn them into something positive now that he has reached understanding.