

The Sitting Bee - Short Story Reviews

The Voter by Chinua Achebe

In *The Voter* by Chinua Achebe we have the theme of corruption, loyalty, guilt, power, greed and tradition. Taken from his *Girls at War and Other Stories* collection the story is narrated in the third person by an unnamed narrator and after reading the story the reader realises that Achebe may be exploring the theme of corruption. As a politician Marcus has made sure that his life has improved in comparison to those who live in Umuofia. He has built himself a new home with running water yet his constituents don't have the same access to water as Marcus does. Though it is not explicitly stated that Marcus has inappropriately obtained his property the fact that he has ready and easy access to large amounts of money suggests that he may be corrupt. Also Roof on Marcus' instructions bribes some of the local elders in order to ensure that they will vote for Marcus. At no stage in the story does Roof advise the elders as to why they should vote for Marcus or what benefit electing Marcus will be to the community. The reality being that Roof is bribing the elders in order to ensure that they vote for Marcus regardless of what Marcus might and might not do for those in the village. Roof's main concern is not the elders or those in the community but Marcus himself. There also seems to be no thought given by the elders as to what the consequences of their actions (voting for Marcus) might be. Just as Marcus and Roof are corrupt so too are the local elders who are more concerned with receiving payment for their vote than they are on improving life in the village.

It may also be a case that Achebe is exploring the theme of loyalty. Not only do the elders accept a bribe in return for their loyalty to Marcus but Roof too accepts a bribe to ensure that he will vote for Maduka. Even though he spends the entirety of the story attempting to ensure that Marcus will get re-elected Roof at the end shows Marcus no loyalty. Having being swayed by the five pounds he has received in order to vote for Maduka. Which in many ways is ironic as there is a sense that even though Roof is working for Marcus he cannot be trusted by Marcus. It is also possible that Achebe is placing a spotlight on the way that elections were held in Nigeria at the time the story was written. With the possibility that corruption was commonplace. By bribing the elders of a village a politician was able to ensure that they got elected. Where many would expect an individual to be allowed to independently decide on who they should vote for this is not the case in the story. With constituents being instructed by the elders on which way to vote.

It is also difficult to say for certain as to why Roof begins to feel guilty about the prospect of voting for Maduka. However it is possible that Roof feels guilty because he is loyal to Marcus and he knows that should Maduka become elected his services will no longer be needed by Marcus. The position he holds in the village will be lost and as such he will no longer have the authority that he feels he has over others. Any power that Roof does have will be gone. He will no longer be able to benefit personally as he has been able to do while Marcus has been elected. Just as Marcus may lose any comforts he has obtained from his corruption so too will Roof. There will be no need for the elders to listen to Roof should Marcus lose the election as there will no longer be any available funds to bribe the elders with. The introduction of the *iyi* may also be important as by introducing it into the story Achebe appears to be exploring the theme of tradition. Roof is very much afraid of the *iyi* and his actions at the polling station may be triggered by his fear of the *iyi* and what may happen him should he not fulfill his promise to vote for Maduka.

The end of the story is also interesting if not ironic. By ripping his ballot paper in two and placing half of the paper in each ballot box Roof feels that he has honoured his commitment to vote for Maduka. However if anything Roof has ended up spoiling his vote with neither Marcus nor Maduka getting his vote. Despite having been bribed by one of Maduka's men and having a sense of loyalty to Marcus Roof hasn't managed to vote for either man. Something that appears to be lost on Roof with Achebe describing Roof as walking out of the polling station 'jauntily.' It might also be a case that Achebe is suggesting that an individual should be allowed to freely cast their vote without the influence of others (Elders, Roof, Marcus and Maduka). Something that has not been the case throughout the story with Roof acting as an agent for corruption in order for Marcus to continue living the lifestyle he has become accustomed to. Yet at the same time he provides no benefit to his constituents. Democracy has not been allowed to play its role due to the corruption that exists in Umuofia. The reader is also aware that when the next election arrives that too will be corrupt thanks to the actions of both Marcus and Maduka. Maduka might not win the election on this occasion but he is preparing himself for the next election. Paying for votes with money and having no concern, like Marcus, for the constituents in Umuofia.

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