

CHINUA ACHEBE'S ROMANTICS AND THE LIMITS OF DISCOURSE

Amechi N. Akwanya

Research Scholar, Department of English & Literary Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

Many readings of Chinua Achebe's novels come with expectations as regards the protagonists, that they would be pushing the cultural/nationalist agenda. To those whose expectations are not met, the tendency is to unleash moral judgments on these characters. Reading with an 'open' mind, on the other hand, really amounts to reading against the backdrop of the whole literary tradition, which would allow the spotting of similar and contrasting features to exist in other literary works. Attempting such a reading is what enables us to see shared features with whereby there is a literary tradition. Such is the romantic traits we see reappearing in the characters. In this paper, we shall explore the way in which the romantic traits of the characters in Achebe's novels reflect in their judgments and actions, and often in the key choices (proairesis) on which the sequence gains a definitive orientation, namely, in Achebe, the tragic turn.

KEYWORDS: Discursive Formations, The Law of Necessity, Practical Discourse, Romanticism, Tragedy

Article History

Received: 15 Jun 2019 | Revised: 28 Jun 2019 | Accepted: 04 Jul 2019

INTRODUCTION

Many scholars feel ambivalent towards Achebe's characters, especially those who mentally search the literary text for 'structures-of-appeal', and 'offers-of-identification' (Jauss, 1982, p. 144). Achebe reports in *Hopes and impediments* of a reader of *No longer at ease* not long after publication, expressing a wish that Obi Okonkwo should have gone ahead and married his fiancé, Clara, despite her *osu* status (1988, p. 28). Going against the cultural tradition in that way which forbids a so-called 'free-born' to marry an *osu* would probably have given Obi significance in the eyes of that reader. On the other hand, Okonkwo of *Things fall apart* and Ezeulu of *Arrow of God* have attracted negative comment, as some object to them because they disapprove of the actions these characters perform. Here Bernth Lindfors (2014) presents Okonkwo's person profile. He is:

An ambitious individual whose achievements as an athlete, farmer, and warrior had quickly earned him a prominent place in his community but who also had a number of personal flaws—a hot temper, a contempt for less successful men, a tendency to treat his wives and children harshly. Above all, he relentlessly sought to prove himself a manly man, not a weakling like his father. These negative, antisocial traits put him on a collision course not only with the new religion and the colonial governing authority but also ultimately with his own community, a conflict that led inexorably to his demise. (2014, p. 85-86)

The qualities are stacked in two columns, positive and negative. The unspoken question is how to *respond* to this man.

Similarly, Ezeulu of *Arrow of God* is discussed in terms of what ought and what ought not to be. In Julia Udofia's 'Arrow of God and the Sanctity of Spiritual Values', for instance, we read:

And so, Ezeulu believes that the judgement against his people in the dispute is a vindication of Ulu's position in the matter; a divine will come true. Akuebue, who though is Ezeulu's friend, is also his severest critic emphasizes this in the sacred yam episode that Ezeulu is stubborn but cannot eat the sacred yam out of season and thereby invalidate its spiritual import. (2014, p. 109)

As to *A man of the people* and *Anthills of the savannah*, there is much less ambivalence. The commentators take a hard position against one character and a favorable position towards another, believing that they are adequately guided by the narrator to do so, or by reason of the moral standing of the particular character and his actions. Some like J.O.J. Nwachukwu-Agbada(2016) think that they are similarly guided in their readings of *Things fall apart* and *Arrow of God*. Hence:

Both Okonkwo of *Things fall apart* and Ezeulu of *Arrow of God* pride themselves of being endowed with the masculine principle. Whereas Okonkwo is subtly condemned by Achebe for his raw masculine brutality, Ezeulu is an intellectual bigot, an opinionated dogmatist. (p. 43)

Achebe himself had, however, affirmed in an interview that he *rather liked* the narrator of *Aman of the people*, not because of the things he had done, but because he was *honest* (see *Conversations with Chinua Achebe*). On that same basis, he could well have *liked* both Okonkwo and Ezeulu. Both those heroes are subjects of actions many scholars find objectionable. But there is no doubt that they are both honest.

There are often issues of general poetics that are relevant for the study of Achebe's works but are rarely brought to view in the criticism. Real literary ideas and values can often yield interesting readings and bring out significant findings compared to the frequently encountered ethical considerations, which either yield a moral judgment on the character or a suspension of judgment because of moral ambivalence. It is not certain that moral judgment is helpful in literary criticism. As Aristotle writes:

Likewise, the poet, while showing irascible and indolent people and those with other such character traits, should make them nonetheless decent, as for example Homer made Achilles good though an epitome of harshness. (1995, p.83)

Okonkwo is portrayed in all his harshness and rashness, but that need not render him obnoxious.

This paper brings up the notion of Romanticism as an issue in general poetics that is relevant in reading Achebe's novels. In this case, Achebe's characters are not seen in terms of 'representation of reality' as *mimesis* is understood in Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: The representation of reality in western literature*, but as *congealed images* from poetry's repertoire (Claude Levi-Strauss 231). The specific image here is the *romantic*. In the figuration, this congealed image embodies the characters' self-perception, the way they see the situations facing them, and the habits of thought reflected in their inter-person interactions both in public utterances and dialogue, the last provisionally treated in this paper as *practical discourse*. We shall see in the analysis whether dialogue in all the cases meets the requirements of practical discourse and the ways in which the character's romantic traits affect his participation in discourse.

Romanticism and Modalities of Mimesis

Although the ancient notion *mimesis* is universally recognized as the constitutive function in art, much of the

disagreements within criticism also hinge on that concept. This is why it is important to underscore what *mimesis* is not. As Paul Ricoeur explains, '*mimesis* does not mean the duplication of reality; *mimesis* is not a copy: *mimesis* is *poiesis*, that is, construction, creation' (*Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* 141). What is enunciated here is Paul Ricoeur's reading of Aristotle's *Poetics*, a reading which picks up what may be called the mainstream in European philosophy. That '*mimesis* is *poiesis*', which is the key statement, in effect introduces obscurity in the concept *poiesis* which has always been simplistically translated as 'poetry'. It means that *poetry* is not just a subtype of literature. If *mimesis* is the characterizing function of art, *poiesis* is art itself. Martin Heidegger thus bluntly states: 'The nature of art is poetry' (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 72), which may be reversed as follows: 'All art as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is, is, as such, *essentially poetry*' (70); and lest the point be missed, he writes: 'all art is in essence poetry' (70). In the early nineteenth century, G.W.F. Hegel had offered what might seem an explanation in these terms:

Poetry in this matter appears as the total art because, what is only relatively the case in painting and music, it repeats in its own field the modes of presentation characteristic of the other arts. (*Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* 627)

In Aristotle's own analysis, the weight is on the concept *poieô*(to make), which every art does, using contingent matter:

So Art, as has been stated, is "a certain state of mind, apt to Make, conjoined with true Reason;" its absence, on the contrary, is the same state conjoined with false Reason, and both are employed upon the Contingent matter. (*Ethics*, Book 6.IV 133)

What Ricoeur is saying that '*mimesis* is not' is probably the outcome of compounding and reduction of divergent interpretations of the concept *mimesis* by the ancients, from Alcidas's 'mirror of human life', cited in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, and 'deprecated' by him (Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis* 133n) and Parrhasius's 'imaging/modelling of the visible world' (122) – which seems to be the basis for Horace's advice to the one 'skilled in imitative arts' (*doctumimitatorem*), 'to look to life and manners for a model, and draw from thence living words' (Horace 317-18), to Plato's idea of making 'semblances' or 'simulacra,' (Halliwell 136). What appears to have been excluded is Aristotle's idea of making based on probability, as it does not seem to feature at all in medieval criticism.

Representation was briefly used in twentieth-century theory and criticism to translate Aristotelian *mimesis*, but in the usage of some scholars, it did not appear to signify a shift in meaning from 'imitation' or copy, as in Auerbach's *Mimesis*, where 'representation' effectively substitutes Parrhasius's 'imaging/modeling of the visible world'. But there were some creative ideas for rendering *mimesis* during the twentieth century. Such is the concept of *play*, which was first introduced by Friedrich Nietzsche in the late nineteenth century concerning which we read in Eugen Fink's *Nietzsche and Philosophy*: 'In truth, the human artistic endeavor is a play in which humans themselves are only characters and appearances' (18). Hence parody is a modality of *mimesis*. Often the *characters* are well-known in the literary tradition, like the Romantics we see in this article.

Romanticism as a literary movement is contemporary with realism and has accompanied it throughout its history. The rule of *the real* may be roughly dated to the early 17th century following the attempted destruction of essentialist philosophy under the weight of criticism by a variety of emergent philosophies: rationalism, empiricism, nominalism, nihilism, etc. That was when science became possible. But art which always reserves a room for the unexpected and the apparently trivial and marginal could not unthinkingly give itself away to the rule of the real. In art, rather they often unaccountably erupt with volcanic force. As Chinua Achebe puts it:

Art must interpret all human experience, for anything against which the door is barred can cause trouble. Even if harmony is not achievable in the heterogeneity of human experience, the dangers of an open rupture are greatly lessened by giving everyone his due. (*Hopes and Impediments* 44)

In any event, seventeenth-century art found room for the double perspective in Romanticism.

Romanticism as a Discursive Formation

Romanticism and realism are associated with post-Enlightenment Europe. The period is *post*-Enlightenment, not because Enlightenment actually rolled to a stop on some definable date, or ever ceased. That great movement that transformed Europe from the rule of tradition and superstition and unquestioning acceptance of one's 'station' in life as if of divine order to a new awareness of the capabilities of reason to reconstruct the world and leverage on one prop or another to reposition the self, the capacity to change perception itself, may have provoked an ideology like Romanticism as a rebalancing movement. Historical movements never come to an end: they evolve and may intervolve with new ones, changing their outfit in the process. However, the 1783 French Revolution, which according to the historians is partially a consequence of the Enlightenment, had a traumatic effect in Europe, with much soul-searching especially in other countries outside of France. In terms of date, Romanticism comes on the heels of that Revolution; and the high-water mark of English Romanticism is considered to cover the period from about 1798 to about 1830 (see Fletcher, 2002). Romanticism involves disillusionment with the preceding age, which may have over-delivered on expectations and had yielded a Revolution attended by a Reign of Terror, which was well underway by 1793.

The literary movements that accompanied the Enlightenment were mainly neo-Classicism or pseudo-Classicism and realism. The first was literature for the enlightened, or at least those with classical education. Peter Rabinowitz (1980) seems to have precisely this kind of situation in mind in his 'What's Hecuba to Us? Audience's Experience of Literary Borrowing' in which the case is made that the deployment of names, concepts and phraseology, scenes, idioms, and so on from the literary past is an indicator of the writer addressing a special audience expected to be able to make out the citation and thereby become conscious of the artistic design. The neo-Classicalists effectively romanticized ancient Greek and Roman art, especially the latter, portraying it as highly organized in every way. But the concern of neo-Classicism was with poetry, narrowly defined. Their view, incorporating a passage from Dryden's *Essay of dramatic poesy*, was 'that poetry was brought to perfection by the ancients, "therefore they who practice afterward the same art are obliged to tread in their footsteps, and to search in their writings the foundation of them"' (Sambrook, 2005, p. 75). Their values which comprise their standards of judgement of poetry are 'truth, nature, and simplicity' (p. 113). These same values Romanticism sought in an environment unspoilt by man and 'distan[t] from everyday business' (Curran, 1986, p. 145).

Early eighteenth-century Romanticism preferred poetry that was spontaneous – whether when 'recollected in tranquillity' (Wordsworth), or in the presence of the natural situation or object, which appears to be Keats's way, as in 'Ode to the Nightingale' and 'To Autumn'. Similarly, it preferred for heroes humans who were spontaneous, like Lord Byron's Don Juan. Spontaneity was for that movement a mark of genuineness and truth. According to Nicholas Riasanovsky,

No one will fathom nature who possesses no sense of nature, no inward organ for creating and dividing nature, who does not, as though spontaneously recognize and distinguish nature everywhere, who does not with an inborn creative joy, a rich and fervent kinship with all things, mingle with all of nature's creatures through the medium of feeling, who does not feel his way into them. (1992, p. 49)

For Riasanovsky, clearly, the Romantic is a person – the artist himself; and Romanticism is associated with certain kinds of writer-personalities: they have an ‘inward organ for creating and dividing nature’ and will ‘spontaneously recognize and distinguish nature every where’. As a poetic movement, it is taken for granted that this person possesses not only a ‘sense of nature’, but a style of writing, which is not his own private style as such, but that of the movement. The clustering of values in some literary concepts has been remarked by Sambrook (2005), where he writes that:

Each genre had an appropriate style, form, and function, corresponding to some different aspect of nature, though critics might differ as to the detail of such correspondence: for instance, pastoral is related to historical factors by Rapin and to general human psychology by Fontenelle. (p. 116)

Romantic literature is the style itself and can be seen in the Romantic poets’ productions, whether in narrative, lyric, or drama. That style is time-bound and, as far as the historical evidence goes, belongs to a specific space.

However, there are such great romantic personae as Don Quixote and Emma Bovary who do not belong to the time and space historically assigned as *Romantic*. Therefore, although Romanticism is a movement and a style, with known dates, the concept is wider in reference than what is designated in the period studies. Romanticism may, in fact, be treated as a discursive formation which, according to Michel Foucault, ‘is defined if one can show how any particular object of discourse finds in it its place and the law of emergence; if one can show that it may give birth simultaneously or successively to mutually exclusive objects, without having to modify itself’ (1972, p. 44). Don Quixote, Goethe’s Young Werther, and Flaubert’s Emma Bovary from different ages and nations may all be thought of as coming out of the same spirit of Romanticism. Similarly, there are characters with romantic traits in each of Chinua Achebe’s major novels. To this extent *Don Quixote*, *The sorrows of young Werther*, *Madame Bovary* and the novels of Chinua Achebe to be discussed in this paper share the same discursive formation.

Dis-Ease With the Real

As a discursive formation, Romanticism renders characters *story*, which means that they have a density derived from the literary tradition, and their reactions are at least to some extent influenced by this baggage which they bring with them to the scene of action. Some scholars restrict the reference of ‘tradition’ with regard to Achebe to the Igbo culture. But the citations, ‘things fall apart’ (W.B. Yeats) and ‘no longer at ease’ (T.S. Eliot) which serve as titles of novels in Achebe’s *oeuvre* suggest that to the writer himself, the literary tradition is not to be left out in the reference of *tradition*. Ikem Osodi of Achebe’s *Anthills of the savannah* is in these terms one of the most Romantic of his characters, Obi Okonkwo of *No longer at ease* being a romantic of a different sort in that he is a dreamer, living half of the time in the world of the imagination. The first brush Obi has with *reality*, however, is what it takes to put him out of play.

With Ikem, there is no such divide between inner life and the outer. He has the spontaneity of the Wordsworthian poet and fully committed to what he is doing at the given time. Making for the Presidential Palace in the sweltering heat of a Kangan afternoon, because of the Abazon delegation to the Head of State, he is caught up in heavy traffic. Then he notices:

One twitch of motion working its way down the line towards him. He awaited it eagerly but when it got to him he saw it amounted to no more than a miserable meter’s progress. So he decided it was not worth the trouble of a gearshift. Save it up and add it to the next incremental move and you will have a nice ride of two meters. Besides, irritating the clutch unnecessarily can lead to... The car behind him blared its horn so loud that he fairly jumped on his seat and out of his heat-

haze reverie; he looked and saw through his rear-view mirror a man in great anger, his perspiring head thrust out of his yellow taxi-cab, gesticulating wildly to him to move on. Other cars and drivers were joining now in the blaring and shouting protest. He decided to ignore them all and protect the precious little space ahead of him, even if the heavens should fall! (p. 28)

Ikem is mentally ready for a fight if the protester wanted one. So the following taxi-cab that has managed to edge out from behind him and tries to squeeze into the space in front finds a private-car owner ready for him, whatever it may take. The cab driver ultimately gives up the contest. But there is something Ikem gets out of this contest, besides winning a friend in the cabman:

Ikem heaved a very deep sigh and then, gallant in victory, pronounced it the work of the sun. We are parboiled as farmers do their rice to ease the shelling. Thereafter we take only five minutes to cook.

That night he composed his Hymn to the Sun. (p. 30)

What is recollected in tranquillity here is not chiefly the struggle, which he pronounces 'the work of the sun', because there is something somewhat embarrassing in it. He has, in fact, had an encounter with the Sun as a divine form. What comes back is this encounter. The recollection is also the 'un concealment', as Heidegger (1949, p. 334) would say, of this divinity, which has now become the recipient of a hymn of praise.

Ikem reports that Chris calls him a romantic (*Anthills of the savannah*, p.39). But the sense of romantic here is as opposed to 'realistic'. Thus he perceives that friend of his as 'an artist who has the example of Don Quixote and other fictional characters to guide him' (p. 119), while he himself is obviously *realistic*. But Ikem believes that he is connected both to reality and to the ordinary people, although he has actually spent his entire life in circles where the ordinary people are rarely seen. Yet they comprise the 'source of stability and social meaning' (p. 142). Ikem does not know how well he and Chris agree on this point.

Unlike Chris who we never see interrogate himself on the level of his sharing and understanding of the common people, Ikem does face the potential absurdity of a middle-class, or even upper-middle-class individual claiming to be connected with what the ordinary people are experiencing:

What about renouncing my own experience, needs, and knowledge? But could I? And should I? I could renounce needs perhaps, but experience and knowledge, how? There seems no way I can become like the poor except by faking. What I know, I know for good or ill. So for good or ill, I shall remain myself, but with this deliberate readiness now to help, and be helped. Like those complex, multivalent atoms in Biochemistry books, I have arms that reach out in all directions—a helping hand, a hand signaling for help. With one I shall touch the earth and leave another free to wave to the skies. (ibid)

Ikem wants to be a Man of the People, but not in the irony-laden sense of Chief Nanga of *A man of the people*. He wants to enter into a give-and-take relationship with them, although what he will give is not specified. He is inconsistent, however, in his assessment of the Kangan situation. On the one hand, he produces a penetrating analysis, albeit in the narrator's report of his consciousness, that the ruling cadre is not connected to the masses of the people, and neither one nor the other seems to be going anywhere. The idea of 'nation-building' by which he had been persuaded to return to the country, whereas he could have stayed on in Europe, doing what he likes doing, free-lancing, writing and giving poetry readings, after spending time in his home country has now become 'Such crap!' (p. 91). As far as the narrative goes, apart

from the erratic white man Mad Medico, he is the one who says of the President that 'right now he is still OK, thank God' (p. 46). But he also expresses scorn for 'Naive romantics [who] would have us believe that this heart at the core is in perfect health. How could it be?' (p. 141) – the heart of the nation, he means. So in his own view, there are others who are romantics, but the identity of these others is not revealed.

Again as far as the narrative goes, neither Ikem's romantic assessments of the nature of the crisis facing the country and the way forward nor Chris's *realistic* ones can save the situation. But they fail for different reasons. Ikem thinks that the problem is that the President is not getting good advice and that he can supply it from outside the government by his 'crusading editorials' in the *National Gazette* which he edits. But as for the President himself, 'right now he is still OK, thank God'. Chris's 'realistic' assessment, on the other hand, is that Kangan's lack of a sense of direction or purpose comes from a character flaw, which makes the President rankshift priorities, which also renders him susceptible to influence from the wrong quarters and impervious to genuine advice (pp. 44-46).

However, neither of them would subscribe to the view that all would be well with Kangan if President San should leave the scene. The real problem seems to go much deeper than the President. Ikem does not know the name of the problem, only its manifestation, which he calls diversion. He suggests that governance in Kangan has been a pattern of diversion from the beginning; and he and Chris have also played this game:

'But we were too busy with our private diversionary war.'

'Don't be so hard on us; we were not alone in that. All the wars ever fought in this country were, are, diversionary. So why not the little running battles we staged now and again to keep our sanity. Do you seem to doubt my claim? All right, you tell me one thing we... this government... any of us did in the last three years... or for that matter in the previous nine years of civilian administration that wasn't altogether diversionary.'

'Well the diversion has ended,' said Beatrice.

'Has it? I'm not so sure. This letter here and all this new theatre of the absurd that Sam is directing to get rid of me and to intimidate Chris, what's it in aid of? Diversion, pure and simple. Even the danger I see looming ahead when the play gets out of hand, what has any of this to do with the life and the concerns and the reality of ninety-nine percent of the people of Kangan? Nothing whatsoever.' (p. 146)

If there is diversion going on, the President being 'still OK, thank God' is itself diversionary. His being OK or not being OK has nothing to do with the case. There is a sense of being out of touch with reality in the idea that it would have been all right for the President to follow the 'light' provided by some of his 'crusading editorials', without necessarily identifying and confronting the deep-seated problem of Kangan, the attitude that meaningful progress is possible without identifying the underlying problem, whose existence is really what renders any action taken in the political scene *diversionary*.

What divides Chris and Ikem with respect to the situation in Kangan, according to Chris, is 'style not substance. And that is absolutely unbridgeable' (p. 118). He calls what goes on in the name of governance a 'charade'. He remains at his post in the government not because he hopes to make a change, but because there is no acceptable alternative:

'And even if I were to make one hell of an effort and turn in my paper today, what do I do after that? Go into exile and drink a lot of booze in European capitals and sleep with a lot of white girls after delivering revolutionary lectures to admiring audiences seven worlds away from where my problem is. BB, I have seen that option; I have considered it and

believe me it's far less attractive than this charade here.' (pp. 118-19)

The thing being evaded has almost been named: meaninglessness. In public affairs in Kangan, there is no meaning; there is no content; there is no purpose. The solving of such a problem is at the political level, the level which as a military Head of State, Sam has arrogated to himself the responsibility for. But he does not know what to do; he does not even know that he is required to do something. The people who offer any kind of assistance from the outside are the people who give him cause for action. This unmasked assistance, especially from his oldest friends, Chris and Ikem, provokes him to stage the great diversion of his time as Head of State. He defines these two as the enemy to be pursued, hunted down, and destroyed. Achieving their destruction is the task to which he now dedicates himself.

But that the problem is deeper and systemic is reflected in the narration of the first summit of the Organization for African Unity meeting attended by Sam, the President, where he learns that being a Head of State in Africa is a 'role' in a 'drama' (p. 53). From that moment onwards, he understands that his work boils down to implementation in Kangan. Even the diversions, like the life-presidency plebiscite and the showdown with Chris and Ikem, become scenes in his show. A real catastrophe, like the draught ravaging the Abazon region, is also exploited for its dramatic possibility.

We see it also in a telling dialogue in which his overthrow is narrated:

'But how can a whole boss of State Security just disappear? Like that!'

'I believe you had already left Bassa when the boss of the State itself went missing.' Then he positioned himself as if he was talking to Beatrice and the others. 'I can give a few facts that have emerged so far. Colonel Ossai was last seen going in to see the Head of State and has not been sighted ever since. Do you remember Idi Amin? Well, according to unconfirmed reports he used to strangle and behead his rivals for women and put their head in the fridge as a kind of trophy. So perhaps Colonel Ossai is in the cooler, somewhere.'

'You don't sound too concerned about your boss,' said Beatrice. 'That's awful, you know.'

'If I told you half of what I know about Ossai you wouldn't be too concerned either.' (p. 221)

The culture of statecraft in Kangan, possibly, in Africa itself, according to this narrative, appears to be something deeply corrupted and which corrupts those who in one way or another find themselves in positions of leadership, especially people like Sam who are neither strong nor bright, the very kinds of people who become heads of state; for 'only half-wits can stumble into such enormities' (p. 46).

Ikem's thoughts both here and elsewhere are elliptical. It is hard to make out the steps that lead to the conclusion about the kinds of persons who become heads of state or the conclusion that governance and public life in Kangan are explained by the single concept, diversion. His mind works by what Ernst Cassirer calls 'the mythic power of insight' – a function Cassirer also sees to be at work in such great Romantics as Hölderlin and John Keats (p. 99). Chris, however, tends to see Ikem in terms of their everyday concerns and engagements, especially with respect to the dysfunction of government in Kangan. In all the cases, Ikem strikes him as unrealistic and impractical. When he is confronted by Ikem's poetry during the climactic moments of the Kangan crisis, he is struck not just by the romantic bard, but by the facticity the poetry embodies:

As the bus plunged deeper into the burning desolation Chris reached into his bag and pulled out Ikem's unsigned 'Pillar of Fire: A hymn to the Sun,' and began to read it slowly with fresh eyes, lipping the words like an amazed learner in

a literacy campaign class. Perhaps it was seeing the anthills in the scorched landscape that set him off revealing in details he had not before experienced how the searing accuracy of the poet's eye was primed not on fancy but fact. (p. 209)

The story of Ikem in *Anthills of the savannahs* headed 'Impetuous Son'. There is another *impetuous son* in Achebe's *oeuvre*: Okonkwo of *Things fall apart*, who is even more rash and violent in his actions. Impetuosity can go with Romantic heroes whose visions of self and of the world are in conflict, but they do not accept the use of actuality to correct the vision; instead, actuality is mentally reconfigured to conform to the vision. The great example of this kind of hero is Don Quixote.

Don Quixote belongs by date to the Baroque and early Enlightenment but was more or less inducted into Romanticism by German literary scholarship. According to Anthony Close:

Don Quixote is definitively enthroned as a classic. But what kind of classic? Satire? Parody? Comic epic in prose? The Age of Enlightenment did not come up with a satisfactory solution to these questions, until, around 1800, the German Romantics settled them once and for all by taking Cervantes's novel, together with Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, as paradigm of the genre they considered their own: the novel, and as a key text in their reconstruction of aesthetics and literary history. With this, they put an end to the Pirandellian comedy in which *Quixote* criticism had been involved throughout the eighteenth century. The notion that *Don Quixote* is the first modern novel is theirs. (p. 238-239)

Attention has already been drawn to Chris's reference to the values of the hero of *Don Quixote* in assessing the behavior of Ikem. Although the man has much less of an air of parody about him than Don Quixote and has very strong and in many cases well-founded opinions, it would seem that his mythic power of insight on occasions gets the better of him. It does so crucially in initiating the sequence of actions whereby Sam comes to the determination of 'enemies' to be hunted down and destroyed. And Sam is as out of touch here as Ikem himself trusting his thoughts on the workings of government seen from a fairly long way off more than the thoughts and perceptions of those who are nearer the scene or have observed at first hand.

In taking the actions which Sam seizes upon as 'evidence', if evidence were needed, to unleash violence, the tripwire of the sequence (*proairesis*), Ikem places himself at the center of the story as its protagonist. But it is a position he stumbles into by an error of judgment. Chris, for instance, who sees himself in Samuel Johnson's terms, as 'level with life', has not only observed from close quarters but also has personally been put on notice by the President that he is ready to do battle. But he has the following comment:

I am not saying that such a ridiculous threat is what is keeping me at my post. I mention it only to show how tricky things can become of a sudden. That's why I have said a hundred million times to Ikem: Lie low for a while and this gathering tornado may rage and pass overhead carrying away roof-tops and perhaps... only perhaps... leave us battered but alive. But oh no! Ikem is outraged that I should recommend such cowardly and totally unworthy behavior to him. (p. 119)

The result is that for all Ikem's strength of character and dignity, he rather cuts a figure as a Don Quixote kitted up as a medieval knight on an adventure for wrongs to right and avenge. He has not deliberately cut himself off from the real Sam, but the change he himself reports to have come over the President following his first Organization for African Unity meeting does not reflect at all in his decisions and actions in the lead up to the crisis. In view of this failure to allow reality to correct long-held views, the character is already out of touch and cannot achieve a meaningful effect.

Okonkwo of *Things fall apart* similarly fails to take in the fact of Abame, which had been wiped out by the colonial authorities in reprisal for the killing of a white man who had ventured into that town alone on a bicycle. He thinks that warlike Umuofia would be able to throw out the missionaries together with the district administration protecting them. Abame is the sign that in the new age of the white man warfare had changed irrevocably. The people of Umuofia have grasped this and incorporated it in decision-making, almost in an unconscious way. Okonkwo stands out in that community as one who is incapable of making out this reality for himself.

At the scene of action and in the lead up to the meeting of the elders of Umuofia to consider how to respond to the white man, Okonkwo the man of spontaneity in speech and action, whose acting, in fact, goes with his thinking, has his soul filled to bursting from traumas of abuse and humiliation, rage, desire for vengeance, and hate. Hate appears to have been the strongest of the emotions at work in him during the great crisis that would have decided the fate of Umuofia, whether it would go the way of Abame or some other. It is first announced at a moment of indignity in detention when a court messenger overhears the conversation of the men of Umuofia and comes in with swift punishment:

‘You are not satisfied with your crime, but you must kill the white man on top of it.’ He carried a strong stick, and he hit each man a few blows on the head and back. Okonkwo was choked with hate. (p. 64)

It is again highlighted at the interruption of the Umuofia meeting by the court messengers:

He sprang to his feet as soon as he saw who it was. He confronted the head messenger, trembling with hate, unable to utter a word. The man was fearless and stood his ground, his four men lined up behind him. (p. 66)

He has long ceased being able to think, of course, beyond planning his revenge (p. 64).

Even when he is not acting under the rule of passion like Okonkwo in the face of the colonialist, the tragic hero will take his course, ‘though it might mean ruin’ (Lukács, 1976, p. 434). In Achebe, however, the choice of the community itself is always survival, which means that the protagonist following his course with this kind of single mindedness will inevitably be isolated. On this point, Ezeulu is out of touch. A very wise man, undoubtedly, but with regard to his deity, the *reality* is shut out from his thinking. The rule of the deity is absolute; and he is unable to perceive that rule becoming, as *Things fall apart* says of the logic of the Trinity, insane. Here he considers the full consequences of the crisis over the three-month break in consuming the sacred yams used in telling Umuaro’s annual calendar:

Although he would not for any reason see the present trend reversed he carried more punishment and more suffering than all his fellows. What troubled him most—and he alone seemed to be aware of it at present—was that the punishment was not for now alone but for all time. It would afflict Umuaro like an *ogulu-aro* disease which counts a year and returns to its victim. (219)

Ulu has become for this Chief Priest the first beginning and the Lord of History. Ezeulu has even forgotten Ulu’s origin as an expression of the community’s will to survive and therefore instituted as a purely functional deity. His being entirely under the sway to this private mythology about Ulu is as total as Don Quixote’s subservience to the code of knight-errantry.

Under the impulse of survival, Umuaro would ultimately abandon its Chief Priest and his deity, *Umuaro*’s deity, to their fates. The choices are not as stark in *A Man of the people*, but there the impulse is the same. The people divine that with Chief Nanga, their best interests are not as threatened as they might be in other people’s hands. But this Odili, challenging corrupt Nanga for their parliamentary mandate, ‘Whose son is he? Was he not here when white men were

eating; what did he do about it? Where was he when Chief Nanga fought and drove the white men away? Why is he envious now that the warrior is eating the reward of his courage? If he was Chief Nanga, would he not do much worse?' (p. 138)

Okonkwo has full information about the destruction of Abame while in exile in Mbanta. His comment on that occasion about the men of that town is rather thoughtless:

They were fools.... They had been warned that danger was ahead. They should have armed themselves with their guns and their machetes even when they went to market. (p. 46)

In practical discourse, the participants make contributions of speech actions 'oriented to reaching understanding' (Habermas, 1994, p.50). For that reason, 'What the participants must make an object of discussion cannot simultaneously function as a standard in the discussion' (1998, p.19). Available objects of discussion include what the Abame might have done differently when faced by the lone white man; what was the meaning of their action: could it be called an act of war? On what grounds? And what they might have done differently after, since the participants in this discourse could learn from these. Okonkwo's participation in the instance of discourse in which he brings out the above is more like using the opportunity to hand down a law than to come to a shared understanding. In other words, his contribution announces a standard of behavior which the Abame should have known, a standard that can in no way be modified in the light of the narration of the event in Abame nor by the contributions of other participants. His contribution, therefore, frustrates the reaching of an understanding by the participants in the instance of discourse.

As we have seen, Ikem discards usable evidence of attitudinal change in Sam; what we see in the above is Okonkwo discarding on the spot information he needs in forming a balanced opinion of the menace of the white man, an opinion that would have stood him in good stead in making a balanced estimation of the dangers that might threaten Umuofia's survival by following the path of revenge against the white man. That opinion would also have guided him in estimating his capacity to impact upon the white man by his actions. For those who are 'level with life', construction and reconstruction of reality is going on all the time, so that they *are* in touch; and practical discourse has a role in verifying the validity or workability of these constructions. For a Quixotic romantic, on the other hand, the construction of reality is a past event, and present reality can only be understood in terms of that past. In Achebe, the *people* are in the present. In *Arrow of God*, they are prepared to break with the past, to make it a clean break, if need be, for their own survival.

A different kind of relation to time is seen in *Aman of the people*. Here the present has aspects suggesting that key rules of sense-making hallowed by the past have decoupled or have become negotiable. A great example is a proverb about taking 'away enough for the owner to notice'. Odili thinks much about this proverb over the ruining of a shopkeeper, Josiah, said by the villagers to have 'taken away enough for the owner to notice' (p. 86). Odili's thinking has a result: in the case of Josiah's infamy, 'the owner knew, and the owner, I discovered, is the will of the whole people' (ibid). During the political campaign he is involved in, he finds this same will refusing to act on what is public knowledge:

Max began by accusing the outgoing Government of all kinds of swindling and corruption. As he gave instance after instance of how some of our leaders who were ash-mouthed paupers five years ago had become near-millionaires under our very eyes, many in the audience laughed. But it was the laughter of resignation to misfortune. No one among them swore vengeance; no one shook with rage or showed any sign of a fight. They understood what was being said, they had seen it with their own eyes. But what did anyone expect them to do? (pp. 123-124)

This election campaign, clearly, will not yield change. The people feel themselves to be in a hostage situation. They cannot draw from the past to deal with this situation. Although they understand that their vote could make a difference, they are asking, 'what did anyone expect them to do?' They are hardly the same people that had reacted so spontaneously and so effectively to bring about the ruin of Josiah, or they are alienated and morally uninvolved in the whole ongoing national political process, with the present election campaign and the political crisis that had led to it.

The people will, therefore, go through the motions of voting and will attend the rallies and listen to speeches, possibly for the entertainment value. But things are taking their course as planned by the powers that be. No change is expected, nor will they do anything to bring about a desired or acceptable outcome. The fatalistic slide inevitably ends in a crash in which opportunists pick up the pieces (144). By contrast, in *Arrow of God*, the people are more involved in trying to shape the flow of events, but with mixed results. It outstrips them and yields a catastrophe where the only ones left standing, so to say, and in a position to take advantage, are the colonial and missionary authorities.

None of the heroes we see in Achebe's works proves to be able to seize the moment and take it in the desired direction. The one exception is Beatrice in *Anthills of the savannah*. For her, rising to the occasion means building a new society from scratch. To this end, those who have lived, suffered, and changed through the crisis just ended, from all backgrounds, ethnic, religious, and social, drawn together by the force of events during the late crisis, have gathered around her. She is unafraid. We see her bracing for this task in the narrative's coda. One major sign of change is that their conversations are in the strict Habermasian sense 'practical discourse', with an object concerning which all the participants aim at reaching an understanding – and out of which there emerge shared understandings. Secondly, what the people want is now heard; and it is articulated by the old man in his prayer over kola at the naming of Ikem and Elewa's child. What they want is improvements in the conditions of human life: the widening of access to social amenities and services. This chimes perfectly with a lesson brought back from Chris at the scene of his dying: 'to beware. This world belongs to the people of the world not to any little caucus, no matter how talented...' (p. 232). There is also a lesson from Ikem, besides this one which, unknown to him, he actually shares with Chris. This other lesson is enriched by Beatrice, namely the need to value human life and be guided by ideas. What remains missing is a sense of an available passageway through which these ideas can enter into thinking at the level of decision-making. Without this, the divide complained of in *Anthills of the savannah* between the rulers and the people will remain unbridged

CONCLUSIONS

Apart from *A Man of the People* the novels of Chinua Achebe mainly turn on incident rather than on character. The character does not initiate the action of the sequence nor does a decision of his cause the sequence to change course. The tragedy often has a personal accent because the individual who attempts to influence the course of the action is defeated in this enterprise and overwhelmed by the superior force of the unfolding action. And the tragedy is *classical* in that the law of necessity is at work both in his getting involved and in his experiencing defeat. Even with respect to Obi Okonkwo of *No longer at ease*, whose significant action in terms of the sequence is the breaking of his engagement to Clara, he is always already in a bind from the moment of the engagement to Clara. The very engagement itself comes about in a way in which going through with it is the only viable course. The situations of these characters are further complicated by the fact that they are frequently misaligned to reality. Obi would know what to say or do within the space of his interior life, while reality would normally take him by surprise and leave him stammering or with no good options. The young men of *A man of the people*, especially Odili and Max have well-articulated plans for social progress, but the human community

they must work with if their plans will see the light of day would rather choose the devil they already know than to stake their chances with the angel they do not know. In *Anthills of the savannah*, Ikem has adequate insight into Sam, the Head of State, as a charlatan, but he also holds with the Greek philosophers that human action naturally tends to 'the good'. And so since Sam is right now 'still OK, thank God', according to him, and 'the good man is apt to go right', according to Aristotle, 'and the bad man wrong' (2004, p. 46), therefore, it follows for him that all that Sam has been missing all this time is *light*. This light he is determined to provide with his 'crusading editorials', so that Sam, being basically a good man, will see and 'go right'. His 'light', however, is what enables Sam to define him as a mortal enemy to be got rid of. Similarly, Okonkwo and Ezeulu of *Things fall apart* and *Arrow of God* respectively, are following certain beliefs that are not conformable to the real historical contexts of their actions, and are either ineptly reading the 'signs of the times' or are altogether ignoring these, as if beneath their notice. They all suffer, but there is a certain poignancy to their suffering. They are not being quite *at home* in the space or time of their actions lends them the double destinations which, according to Paul Ricoeur (1974), applies to the tragic character in its classical figuration. In classical tragedy, the action is no doubt very important, but this does not obscure the enigma it unfolds in the dimension of thought; for:

If its theology cannot be thought, if it is, in the proper sense of the term, unavowable, still, what it wants to say – and cannot say continues to be shown in the basic spectacle of the tragic hero, innocent and guilty. (p.296)

REFERENCES

1. Achebe, C. (1966). *A man of the people*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.
2. Achebe, C. (1987). *Anthills of the savannah*. Oxford: Heinemann Educational Books.
3. Achebe, C. (1988). *Hopes and impediments*. Oxford: Heinemann International.
4. Achebe, C. (1995). *Things fall apart*. Everyman's Library. Knopf Doubleday Publishing.
5. Aristotle (2004). *Ethics*. Translated by J. A. Smith. The Pennsylvania State University, Electronic Classics Series. Retrieved from <http://www.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/jimspdf.htm.pdf>.
6. Aristotle (1995). *Poetics*. Translated by Stephen Halliwell. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Loeb Classical Library.
7. Auerbach, Erich (1946-1968). *Mimesis: The representation of reality in western literature*. Translated by Willard R. Trask. Princeton UP.
8. Cassirer, E. (1946). *Language and myth*. Translated by Susanne K. Langer. New York: Dover Publications.
9. Close, A. (2008). *A companion to Don Quixote*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: Tamesis. Retrieved from www.boydellandbrewer.com.pdf.
10. Curran, S. (1986). *Poetic form and British Romanticism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
11. Fletcher, R. H. (2002). *A history of English literature*. Blackmask Online. Retrieved from <http://www.blackmask.com.pdf>.
12. Foucault, M. (1972). *The archaeology of knowledge*. London: Tavistock Publications.

13. Habermas, J. (1994). *Justification and application: Remarks on discourse ethics*. Translated by Ciaran Cronin. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
14. Habermas, J. (1998). *The inclusion of the other: Studies in political theory*. Edited by Ciaran Cronin and Pablo De Greiff. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
15. Halliwell, Stephen (2002). *The aesthetics of mimesis: Ancient texts and modern problems*: Princeton UP.
16. Hegel, G.W.F. (1975). *Aesthetics: Lectures on fine art*. Translated by T.M. Knox. Clarendon Press.
17. Heidegger, M. (1949). *Existence and being*. Translated by Phil Werner Brock. Chicago: Henry Regnery.
18. Heidegger, Martin (1971). *Poetry, language, thought*. Translated by Albert Hofstadter. Harper & Row Publishers.
19. Horace (1942). *Satires, epistles and ars poetica*. Translated by H. Rushton Fairclough. The Loeb Classical Library.
20. Jauss, H. R. (1982). *Toward an aesthetic of reception: Theory and history of literature, Volume 2*. Translated by Timothy Bahti. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
21. Johnson, S. (2009). 'Preface to the Plays of William Shakespeare.' *Selected writings of Samuel Johnson*. Edited by Peter Martin. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. pp. 353-394.
22. Levi-Strauss, Claude (1966). *The savage mind*. George Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
23. Lindfors, B. (2014). 'Chinua Achebe, a puzzling pioneer'. *Okike: An African journal of new writing*, 51, 2014: 82-93.
24. Lindfors, B. (1997). *Conversations with Chinua Achebe*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
25. Lukács, G. (1976). *The sociology of modern drama*. In E. Bentley (Ed.), *The theory of the modern stage* (pp. 425-450). Harmondsworth: Penguin.
26. Nwachukwu-Agbada, J.O.J. (2016). *Chinua Achebe: Art, culture and the nation*. *Nsukka Journal of the Humanities*, 24(1), 30-84.
27. Rabinowitz, P. J. (1980). *What's Hecuba to us? Audience's experience of literary borrowing*. In S. R. Suleiman and I. Crosman (Eds.), *The Reader in the Text* (241-263). Princeton: University Press.
28. Riasanovsky, N. V. (1992). *The emergence of romanticism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
29. Ricoeur, Paul (1981). *Hermeneutics and the human sciences*. Translated by John B. Thompson. Cambridge.
30. Ricoeur, P. (1974). *The conflict of interpretations: Essays in hermeneutics*. Evanston: North western University Press.
31. Sambrook, J. (2005). *Poetry 1660-1740*. In by H.B. Nisbet and C. Rawson (Eds.), *The Cambridge history of literary criticism, Volume 4: The eighteenth century (75-116)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
32. Udofia, J. (2014). 'Arrow of God and the Sanctity of Spiritual Values'. *Okike: An African journal of new writing*, 52, 105-119.