

Before You Read

World Literature
Africa



Civil Peace

Meet Chinua Achebe

(born 1930)

The story is our escort; without it, we are blind." Chinua Achebe (ə chā' bā) wrote these words to stress the importance of keeping Africa's precolonial stories and culture alive.

Achebe was born in Ogidi, Nigeria. His family was Ibo and Christian. While growing up, Achebe experienced traditional village life. After graduating from University College in Ibadan, he worked for more than ten years for the Nigerian Broadcasting Company. Achebe left this job in 1966 partly because of political problems that led to civil war in Nigeria in 1967. The Ibo, one of Nigeria's largest ethnic groups, tried to separate from Nigeria to form the independent Republic of Biafra. Achebe worked for the Ibo cause and represented Biafra as a diplomat.

He has since taught in universities in Nigeria, Massachusetts, and Connecticut. Throughout his career, he has authored five novels, as well as many essays, poems, and children's stories. He was also the director of Heinemann Education Books Ltd. (now called the Heinemann African Writers Series) and helped develop series to foster publication of African and Caribbean writers.

"It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters."

—Chinua Achebe, from *Anthills of the Savannah*

The African Voice Achebe writes in English so that his stories will have a wider audience.



However, his themes revolve around the people of Africa, their struggles under colonial rule, and their fight for independence. Achebe combines the rhythms and speech patterns of the Ibo with the English language so that English readers will gain a sense of the African people and culture. Achebe writes about his people honestly, detailing both the good and the bad. By communicating his messages about life, Achebe has preserved the African storytelling tradition.

Civil War and Civil Peace Achebe wrote radio programs that supported the Biafrans during the Civil War, but he could not bring himself to write novels during the war. He did, however, write three short stories about the war. "Civil Peace," which provides a true-to-life description of the region after the war, is one of those stories.

The title of Achebe's most popular novel, *Things Fall Apart*, is an allusion to the William Butler Yeats poem "The Second Coming." Achebe's novel, a powerful account of a "strong" man whose life is dominated by fear and anger, is recognized as a masterpiece of modern African literature.

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Literature and Reading Preview

Connect to the Story

If a disaster occurred today, what would you save to ensure your “happy survival”? Respond to this question in your journal.

Build Background

Nigeria, located on the western coast of Africa, is the most densely populated country on the continent. Once a British colony, it became an independent nation in 1960. The Nigerian civil war began in 1967 when the Ibo tried to separate from Nigeria to form the Republic of Biafra. After years of bloody battles, the Ibo were forced to surrender in 1970. This story takes place in Nigeria shortly after the end of the war.

Set Purposes for Reading

Big Idea Encountering the Unexpected

As you read “Civil Peace,” ask yourself, How does Jonathan Iwegbu experience both joy and sorrow in encountering the unexpected?

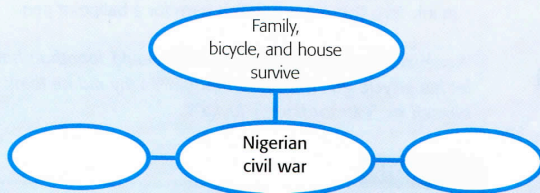
Literary Element Dialect

A **dialect** is a variation of a language spoken by a region often within a particular group of people. Understanding a writer’s use of dialect will give you a richer sense of a scene or character. As you read, ask yourself, How does Achebe use dialect to illustrate both British and African elements in Nigeria?

Reading Strategy Analyze Historical Context

When you **analyze a story’s historical context**, you think of how the characters and events in the story are affected by what is taking place at the time the story is set. As you read, ask yourself, How does living through the Nigerian civil war affect Jonathan Iwegbu’s life?

Tip: Analyze Effects Use a web diagram like the one below to list the effects of the Nigerian civil war on Jonathan Iwegbu’s life.



Learning Objectives

For pages 64–71

In studying this text, you will focus on the following objectives:

Literary Study: Analyzing dialect.

Reading: Analyzing historical context.

Vocabulary

commandeer (kom' ən dēr') *v.* to seize for use by the military or government; p. 66 *The general commandeered the commercial airplane for the battle.*

amenable (ə mē' nə bəl) *adj.* responsive; able to be controlled; p. 66 *After being sedated, the animal was amenable to being treated by the veterinarian.*

retail (re' tāl) *v.* to sell directly to consumers; p. 67 *The farmer retailed his produce door to door.*

fortnight (fôrt'nīt) *n.* two weeks; p. 67 *The festival lasted for a fortnight, not just the usual week.*

edifice (ed' ə fis) *n.* a building, especially a large, important-looking one; p. 67 *The castle was an impressive edifice.*

Tip: Connotation and Denotation

As you read, it often helps to look beyond a word’s dictionary meaning and consider the emotions and other suggestions that the word conveys.

Civil Peace

Chinua Achebe



Jonathan Iwegbu counted himself extraordinarily lucky. “Happy survival!” meant so much more to him than just a current fashion of greeting old friends in the first hazy days of peace. It went deep to his heart. He had come out of the war with five inestimable blessings—his head, his wife Maria’s head and the heads of three out of their four children. As a bonus he also had his old bicycle—a miracle too but naturally not to be compared to the safety of five human heads.

The bicycle had a little history of its own. One day at the height of the war it was **commandeered** “for urgent military action.” Hard as its loss would have been to him he would still have let it go without

a thought had he not had some doubts about the genuineness of the officer. It wasn’t his disreputable rags, nor the toes peeping out of one blue and one brown canvas shoes, nor yet the two stars of his rank done obviously in a hurry in biro,¹ that troubled Jonathan; many good and heroic soldiers looked the same or worse. It was rather a certain lack of grip and firmness in his manner. So Jonathan, suspecting he might be **amenable** to influence, rummaged in his raffia bag and produced the two pounds

1. The stars signifying the officer’s rank had been hand-drawn in ink. *Biro* (bi’rō) is a British term for a ballpoint pen.

Analyze Historical Context Why would Jonathan have let his bicycle go “without a thought”? Why did he think of himself as “extraordinarily lucky”?

Vocabulary

commandeer (kom’ən dēr’) *v.* to seize for use by the military or government

Vocabulary

amenable (ə mē’ nə bəl) *adj.* responsive; able to be controlled

with which he had been going to buy firewood which his wife, Maria, **retailed** to



Visual Vocabulary
A raffia bag is one woven from the fibers of the raffia palm tree.

camp officials for extra stock-fish and corn meal, and got his bicycle back. That night he buried it in the little clearing in the bush where the dead of the camp, including his own youngest son, were buried. When he dug it up again a year later after the surrender all it needed was

a little palm-oil greasing. “Nothing puzzles God,” he said in wonder.

He put it to immediate use as a taxi and accumulated a small pile of Biafran money ferrying camp officials and their families across the four-mile stretch to the nearest tarred road. His standard charge per trip was six pounds and those who had the money were only glad to be rid of some of it in this way. At the end of a **fortnight** he had made a small fortune of one hundred and fifteen pounds.

Then he made the journey to Enugu and found another miracle waiting for him. It was unbelievable. He rubbed his eyes and looked again and it was still standing there before him. But, needless to say, even that monumental blessing must be accounted also totally inferior to the five heads in the family. This newest miracle was his little house in Ogui Oversight. Indeed nothing puzzles God! Only two houses away a huge

concrete **edifice** some wealthy contractor had put up just before the war was a mountain of rubble. And here was Jonathan’s little zinc house of no regrets built with mud blocks quite intact! Of course the doors and windows were missing and five sheets off the roof. But what was that? And anyhow he had returned to Enugu early enough to pick up bits of old zinc and wood and soggy sheets of cardboard lying around the neighborhood before thousands more came out of their forest holes looking for the same things. He got a destitute carpenter with one old hammer, a blunt plane and a few bent and rusty nails in his tool bag to turn this assortment of wood, paper and metal into door and window shutters for five Nigerian shillings or fifty Biafran pounds. He paid the pounds, and moved in with his overjoyed family carrying five heads on their shoulders.

His children picked mangoes near the military cemetery and sold them to soldiers’ wives for a few pennies—real pennies this time—and his wife started making breakfast akara balls² for neighbors in a hurry to start life again. With his family earnings he took his bicycle to the villages around and bought fresh palm wine which he mixed generously in his rooms with the water which had recently started running again in the public tap down the road, and opened up a bar for soldiers and other lucky people with good money.

At first he went daily, then every other day and finally once a week, to the offices of the Coal Corporation where he used to be

Encountering the Unexpected Why was Jonathan surprised by the condition of his bicycle?

Vocabulary

retail (re’ tāl) *v.* to sell directly to the consumer
fortnight (fōrt’ nīt) *n.* two weeks

2. Akara balls are ball-shaped bean cakes.

Analyze Historical Context What do the actions of Jonathan’s family members show?

Vocabulary

edifice (ed’ ə fis) *n.* a building, especially a large, important-looking one

a miner, to find out what was what. The only thing he did find out in the end was that that little house of his was even a greater blessing than he had thought. Some of his fellow ex-miners who had nowhere to return at the end of the day's waiting just slept outside the doors of the offices and cooked what meal they could scrounge together in Bournvita tins. As the weeks lengthened and still nobody could say what was what Jonathan discontinued his weekly visits altogether and faced his palm wine bar.



Visual Vocabulary
Here a queue (kyū) means a line of people.

But nothing puzzles God. Came the day of the windfall when after five days of endless scuffles in queues and counter queues in the sun outside the Treasury he had twenty pounds counted into his palms as *ex gratia*³ award for the rebel money he had turned in. It was like Christmas for him and for many others like him when the payments began. They called it (since few could manage its proper official name) *egg rasher*.

As soon as the pound notes were placed in his palm Jonathan simply closed it tight over them and buried fist and money inside his trouser pocket. He had to be extra careful because he had seen a man a couple of days earlier collapse into near madness in an instant before that oceanic crowd because no sooner had he got his twenty pounds than some heartless ruffian picked it off him. Though it was not right that a man in such an extremity of agony should be blamed yet many in the queues that day were able to remark quietly on the victim's carelessness,

3. Something that is awarded *ex gratia* (eks grāsh' ē ə) is given as a favor rather than as a legal right. The Latin word *gratia* means "kindness."

especially after he pulled out the innards of his pocket and revealed a hole in it big enough to pass a thief's head. But of course he had insisted that the money had been in the other pocket, pulling it out too to show its comparative wholeness. So one had to be careful.

Jonathan soon transferred the money to his left hand and pocket so as to leave his right free for shaking hands should the need arise, though by fixing his gaze at such an elevation as to miss all approaching human faces he made sure that the need did not arise, until he got home.

He was normally a heavy sleeper but that night he heard all the neighborhood noises die down one after another. Even the night watchman who knocked the hour on some metal somewhere in the distance had fallen silent after knocking one o'clock. That must have been the last thought in Jonathan's mind before he was finally carried away himself. He couldn't have been gone for long, though, when he was violently awakened again.

"Who is knocking?" whispered his wife lying beside him on the floor.

"I don't know," he whispered back breathlessly.

The second time the knocking came it was so loud and imperious that the rickety old door could have fallen down.

"Who is knocking?" he asked then, his voice parched and trembling.

"Na tief-man and him people," came the cool reply. "Make you hopen de door." This was followed by the heaviest knocking of all.

Maria was the first to raise the alarm, then he followed and all their children.

Encountering the Unexpected What visitors might be at the door? Are Jonathan and his wife completely surprised? Explain.



Children Dancing, c. 1948. Robert Gwathmey. Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in. The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, OH.

View the Art Inspired by African culture and Pablo Picasso, Gwathmey uses vibrant colors and symbolic abstraction to tell stories about his subjects. How might this painting reflect Jonathan and his family's outlook on life?

*"Police-o! Thieves-o! Neighbors-o! Police-o!
We are lost! We are dead! Neighbors, are you
asleep? Wake up! Police-o!"*

This went on for a long time and then stopped suddenly. Perhaps they had scared the thief away. There was total silence. But only for a short while.

"You done finish?" asked the voice outside. "Make we help you small. Oya, everybody!"

*"Police-o! Tief-man-o! Neighbors-o! we done
loss-o! Police-o! . . ."*

There were at least five other voices besides the leader's.

Jonathan and his family were now completely paralyzed by terror. Maria and the children sobbed inaudibly like lost souls. Jonathan groaned continuously.

The silence that followed the thieves' alarm vibrated horribly. Jonathan all but begged their leader to speak again and be done with it.

"My frien," said he at long last, "we don try our best for call dem but I tink say dem all done sleep-o . . . So wetin we go do now? Sometaim you wan call soja? Or you wan make we call dem for you? Soja better pass police. No be so?"

"Na so!" replied his men. Jonathan thought he heard even more voices now

Analyze Historical Context Why does no one in the neighborhood respond when the thieves pound on Jonathan's door? Why do the thieves call for the police?

Dialect What does the term "soja" mean? Why are this and other words presented here with unusual spellings?

than before and groaned heavily. His legs were sagging under him and his throat felt like sandpaper.

"My frien, why you no de talk again. I de ask you say you wan make we call soja?"

"No."

"Awrighto. Now make we talk business. We no be bad tief. We no like for make trouble. Trouble done finish. War done finish and all the *katakata*⁴ wey de for inside. No Civil War again. This time na Civil Peace. No be so?"

"Na so!" answered the horrible chorus.

"What do you want from me? I am a poor man. Everything I had went with this war. Why do you come to me? You know people who have money. We . . ."

"Awright! We know say you no get plenty money. But we sef no get even *anini*.⁵ So derefore make you open dis window and give us one hundred pound and we go commot. Orderwise we de come for inside now to show you guitar-boy like dis . . ."

A volley of automatic fire rang through the sky. Maria and the children began to weep aloud again.

"Ah, missisi de cry again. No need for dat. We done talk say we na good tief. We just take our small money and go nway-orly. No molest. Abi we de molest?"

"At all!" sang the chorus.

"My friends," began Jonathan hoarsely. "I hear what you say and I thank you. If I had one hundred pounds . . ."

"Lookia my frien, no be play we come play for your house. If we make mistake and step for inside you no go like am-o. So derefore . . ."

4. The word *katakata* may be meant to imitate the sound of gunfire. The rest of the phrase is Nigerian dialect for "that went with it."

5. An *anini* (ã nē'ē) is a small Nigerian coin worth less than one cent.

Dialect What does the author's use of dialect here add to the story?

"To God who made me; if you come inside and find one hundred pounds, take it and shoot me and shoot my wife and children. I swear to God. The only money I have in this life is this twenty-pounds *egg rasher* they gave me today . . ."

"OK. Time de go. Make you open dis window and bring the twenty pound. We go manage am like dat."

There were now loud murmurs of dissent among the chorus: "Na lie de man de lie; e get plenty money . . . Make we go inside and search properly well . . . Wetin be twenty pound? . . ."

"Shurru!" rang the leader's voice like a lone shot in the sky and silenced the murmuring at once. "Are you dere? Bring the money quick!"

"I am coming," said Jonathan fumbling in the darkness with the key of the small wooden box he kept by his side on the mat.

At the first sign of light as neighbors and others assembled to commiserate with him he was already strapping his five-gallon *demijohn* to his bicycle carrier and his wife, sweating in the open fire, was turning over akara balls in a wide clay bowl of boiling oil. In the corner his eldest son was rinsing out dregs of yesterday's palm wine from old beer bottles.

"I count it as nothing," he told his sympathizers, his eyes on the rope he was tying. "What is *egg rasher*? Did I depend on it last week? Or is it greater than other things that went with the war? I say, let *egg rasher* perish in the flames! Let it go where everything else has gone. Nothing puzzles God." 🌀



Visual Vocabulary
A *demijohn* is a large earthenware or glass bottle, encased in wicker.

After You Read

Respond and Think Critically

Respond and Interpret

1. What is Jonathan Iwegbu's attitude toward life?
2. Why did Jonathan mistrust the officer who wanted to take his bicycle?
3. In what ways does Jonathan begin to rebuild his life after the war?

Analyze and Evaluate

4. (a) What does Jonathan mean by his statement, "Nothing puzzles God"? (b) What does this statement reveal about Jonathan's character?

5. Do you think that the title of this story is appropriate, or would "Civil War" have been a better title? Explain.

Connect

6. **Big Idea** Encountering the Unexpected

What message do you think emerges from Jonathan's unexpected, but repeated, good fortune?

7. **Connect to the Author** How might Achebe's personal history have influenced his portrayals of Jonathan and the other characters?

Literary Element **Dialect**

Dialect is regional variation in language. It identifies a group of people and tells about their history.

1. What words in the text show the British influence on the Ibo's language?
2. Why do you think the thieves who rob Jonathan speak English with a heavier African accent than Jonathan does?

Reading Strategy **Analyze Historical Context**

Through **historical context**, one can clearly picture the lawless setting of Nigeria. Review the web you made on page 65. Then answer the questions.

1. How would you describe the civil peace in Nigeria?
2. How does Jonathan feel about the changes that the war has inflicted on him and his family?

Vocabulary Practice

Practice with Denotation and Connotation

Denotation is the literal, or dictionary, meaning of a word. **Connotation** is the implied, or cultural, meaning of a word. For example, the words *confused* and *flustered* have a similar denotation, but *flustered* suggests a nervous, flighty kind of confusion.

Each of these vocabulary words is listed with a word or term that has a similar denotation. Explain how the words vary in suggestions.

- | | |
|----------------------|------------|
| 1. commandeer | take over |
| 2. amenable | responsive |
| 3. retail | sell |
| 4. fortnight | two weeks |
| 5. edifice | building |

Writing

Write a List Imagine that a police officer has come to interview Jonathan about the robbery. List questions that the police officer might ask, and write what you imagine Jonathan's response might be.

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