

6ET04 A LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE COURSEWORK

FOLDER TWO

**Reflections in Literary Studies:
Post-colonialism, language and identity.**

“A colony always wants to escape from history. It longs for its own authenticity, the element it had before history came to disfigure it.”

Seamus Deane writing on “The Communication Cord.”

“Africans did not hear of civilization for the first time from Europeans.”

Chinua Achebe, “The Role of the Writer in a New Nation”, *Nigeria Magazine* 81, 1964, (page 157).

“Thus Babel was a second Fall, in some regards as desolate as the first. Adam had been driven from the garden; now men were harried, like yelping dogs, out of the single family of man. And they were exiled from the assurance of being able to grasp and communicate reality.”

George Steiner, “After Babel”.

“There it was, in the very words. Force was his job. If he was a soldier he was as much a part of that cruelty as the man who wielded the whip.”

Kate Grenville, “The Lieutenant”.

To what extent, and how effectively, are these views of the colonised and the coloniser reflected in “Things Fall Apart” and “Translations”?

All four assessment objectives apply for this unit and have equal weighting.

*"But I am haunted by the human chimpanzees I saw along that hundred miles of horrible country. I believe...they are happier...more comfortably fed and lodged under our rule than they ever were. But to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel it so much, but their skins...are as white as ours."*¹

The above is an extract taken from a letter penned in 1860, by the English novelist Charles Kingsley as he travelled in Ireland. In four short lines we are presented with an Englishman's view of colonialism's role in taming the world's 'savage' peoples. It is only through responses to colonialism, such as Achebe's "Things Fall Apart" and Friel's "Translations", that a voice is finally returned to the colonised. Both works present the devastating and invasive nature of colonialism from inside a pre-existent and long established culture, working to show a colonised people "in human terms what happened to them, what they lost."² It is said that history is written by the victors, a literary tradition Achebe and Friel seek to reverse.

In the words of Imani Countess of the TransAfrica Forum, "Things Fall Apart exposes the destruction of African culture... during the colonial rule... it emerged as an important cultural voice of Africa's independence movement."³ "Things Fall apart" was published in 1958, two years prior to Nigerian independence. The impending conclusion of British rule presented a critical situation for Nigerian cultural identity. The title of Achebe's 1964 Article for Nigeria Magazine, "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation",⁴ illustrates his desire to revive a sense of Nigerian national identity, separate from that constructed by British colonial influences.

While Achebe utilised the medium of a novel, Friel chose the medium of a play. The first performance of "Translations" took place in the Guildhall, Derry, on Tuesday 23rd September 1980. Friel's play was to be the first production of the Field Day Theatre company, established by Friel and actor Stephen Rea earlier that same year. Field Day sought to explore Irish cultural identity in an attempt to address the unsettled political situation in Northern Ireland at the time. The original audience would have drawn parallels between the onstage presence of occupying British sappers (and Friel's ominous hint of revolutionary activities presented by reference to the mysterious Donnelly Twins), and the ideological struggle plaguing Irish politics at the time. Staged only eight years after the Bloody Sunday Massacre of 1972, and at a time when Unionists and Nationalists were locked in an active struggle concerning the future shape of Irish politics, the theme of national identity present in "Translations" struck a chord with the audience. Field Day's production gave rise to polarized interpretations. While the newspaper 'Ireland and the Arts' perceived an account of "the historical disjunction caused by the forced shift of Irish speech from the Gaelic language to English,"⁵ 'The Sunday Tribune' saw the play as a treatise concerning "the failure of a people to cherish and preserve the riches of their culture."⁶

The 'Guardian' Newspaper has labelled Achebe, "The founding Father of the African novel in English."⁷ in line with Jean Paul Sartre's infamous exhortation, "Since the oppressor is present in the language that Africans speak...they will use that language to destroy him,"⁸ Achebe challenges the British colonial oppressor in their mother tongue. Achebe, however, was to use the language on his terms, "it is important first to learn the rules

¹ Postcolonial Literatures in English, C.L. Innes

² Achebe: "Prospective Commitment in African Literature," George D. Nyamindi, University of Buea, Cameroon

³ Imani Countess speaking at the Library of Congress event, "An evening with Chinua Achebe" 2008

⁴ Nigeria Magazine 81, 1964

⁵ National Theatre Education: "Translations"

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Sourced from Penguin Classics publication of "Things Fall Apart", 2001 edition

⁸ Sartre: "Prospective Commitment in African Literature," George D. Nyamindi, University of Buea, Cameroon

of English and afterwards break them if we wish."⁹ Achebe infuses his narrative with Ibo nouns and cultural references, making additional use of short, simple sentences. Such literary techniques effectively replicate the style of traditional Ibo storytelling. Friel, however, wrote in English as the Gaelic language had all but been eradicated in Ireland. Friel was forced to use a theatrical conceit (namely that English dialogue is meant to be in Gaelic) in order that the original Irish audience could follow the onstage action.

Through the character of Yolland, Friel presents the audience with an interpretation of the native culture as "at ease with its own conviction and assurance."¹⁰ Friel, however, is quick to de-mask Baile Beag, "you have on stage the representatives of a certain community- one is dumb, one is lame and one is an alcoholic."¹¹ The physical maiming of this community, and its material depravity, is compensated by Friel through emphasis on the rich cultural heritage preserved in the society's Gaelic. Similarly, Achebe states "any serious African writer who wants to plead the cause of the past must not only be God's advocate, he must also do duty for the devil."¹² Achebe extends this point by making specific reference to the act of infanticide committed by his protagonist Okonkwo. As such Friel and Achebe allow contemporary critics, readers and audiences to identify the colonised peoples as fellow human beings, imperfect and flawed.

In an extended essay entitled, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness", Achebe controversially accuses Joseph Conrad of presenting "Africa as 'the other world,' the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization."¹³ It is significant to note that Shakespeare's Caliban, the native in 'The Tempest', is endowed not only with speech, but with eloquent poetry, "All the infections that the sun sucks up, From bogs, fens, flats, on Prosper fall, and make him By Inch-meal a disease!"¹⁴ By contrast, the African leader presented by Conrad speaks strikingly few lines in the entire novel. It is this colonial treatment of the African peoples that Achebe seeks to remedy.

Similarly, through Lancey's un-intentionally humorous attempt to describe a map, Friel reversed the theatrical tradition that used an Irish stage presence for comedic effect. This is an issue raised not only by Friel, but by Roy Foster and L.P. Curtis, who have described 19th century depictions of the Irish as childlike and effeminate.

For the title of his ground-breaking work, Achebe drew inspiration from "The Second Coming" by Irish Poet W.B. Yeats:

"Things Fall Apart; the centre cannot hold,

*Mere Anarchy is loosed upon the world"*¹⁵

Drawing on Yeats's vision of history moving in cycles, Achebe's novel documents the disintegration of traditional Ibo cultural traditions, and the rise of Christianity in Africa.

Both Friel and Achebe examine the irreconcilable gulf that exists between the colonised and the coloniser, shown in "Things Fall Apart" through the murder of white missionaries, and in "Translations" through the ill-fated love affair between Yolland and Maire. Friel illustrates that attempts to transcend this established tribal line lead to devastating consequences for both sides, "you don't cross those borders casually."¹⁶ Following Yolland's disappearance the audience is left contemplating Lancey's declaration, "We will proceed until a

⁹ Achebe: "Prospective Commitment in African Literature," George D. Niyamndi, University of Buea, Cameroon

¹⁰ "Sporadic Diary," Brian Friel, p.59

¹¹ "Talking to Ourselves", Brian Friel talks to Paddy Agnew, Magill, December 1980

¹² Achebe: "Prospective Commitment in African Literature," George D. Niyamndi, University of Buea, Cameroon

¹³ Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness"

¹⁴ The Complete Works of William Shakespeare, Abbey Library, 1978

¹⁵ "The Second Coming", Yeats: sourced from "The Oxford Library of English Poetry, Volume II, Darley to Heaney."

¹⁶ Friel, "Translations", Faber and Faber Plays

"Things Fall Apart" and "Translations" demonstrate that it is acts of transgression on the part of pragmatic collaborators, which deal the fatal blow to the native cultures. Frantz Fanon argues, "the settler only ends his work of breaking in the native when the latter admits...the supremacy of the white man's values."¹⁸ This is a point emphasised further by Achebe in a section of dialogue between Okonkwo and the wise tribal elder Obierika, "The white man is very clever...Now he has won our brothers and our clan can no longer act as one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart."¹⁹ In the character of Owen, Friel presents us with a man who has sold his Irish identity, working with the occupying force to Anglicise the local place names. Owen's willingness to initially allow Yolland to mistakenly call him 'Roland' compounds this sense of his willingness to forsake his Irish identity. In Garry Hynes's 2007 New York production, Owen was portrayed as a villainous figure, wearing a red coat reminiscent of the British Soldiers' military uniform, illustrating his total abandonment of Irish cultural values. I believe such an interpretation, however, goes too far. Owen clearly starts to reclaim his Irish identity, as is shown in Act 3, when he abandons the book of Anglicized place names.

Demonstrate a synthesis of factual connections in developing a line of argument to write accurate historical commentaries. Through similar and highly

Section 3-Illustrates the devastating impact of this encounter for the native peoples

This is a similar technique to that adopted by Achebe. The first paragraph of "Things Fall Apart" sees the third person narration firmly in the hands of the Ibo people. By the final paragraph, however, the District

²⁰ Friel, "Translations", Faber and Faber Plays

Commissioner has forcibly acquired this voice. The reduction of Okonkwo, the character Achebe identifies as the cultural "hero" of the novel, to the contents of a "reasonable paragraph"²¹ sees the Western eradication of the native culture become complete. A comparison can here be drawn to Sophocles' "Antigone." King Creon begins the play in a position of great personal power, but his unwillingness to adapt his state decree leads to his downfall. Okonkwo experiences a similar downfall, unable to adapt to the cultural change that took place in the period identified by Europeans as the "Scramble for Africa."

Friel and Achebe both utilise extensive references to music and dance in the opening section of their texts, illustrating the richness of the native culture. Ironically in "Translations" it is Maire (whose desire to learn English dominates the closing section of the play) who discusses both the "hornpipe" and "reel," allowing the audience access to the life of the wider Irish community, who do not appear on stage. Similarly, the first chapter of "Things Fall Apart" presents the reader with the line, "Sometimes another village would ask Unoka's band and their dancing egwugwu to come and stay with them and teach them their tunes."²²

The setting of Translations is hugely significant. While the sappers set up a temporary camp in the fields (effectively illustrating that they have no firm roots in the country), the natives have an established academic community. Through Hugh's linguistic exercises the audience is again reminded that the coloniser did not bring with them civilisation. While Hugh, Jimmy Jack and Manus engage in fluent discussion in Latin and Greek, the coloniser is forced to enter this academic setting, speechless (reliant on Owen's translations). It was to achieve this effect that I believe Friel chose the play's non-naturalistic style, having adults attend a hedge school.

Nesta Jones argues that "Translations" is about "the death of the Irish language and the implicit loss of cultural and national identity."²³ Friel, in a diary entry from 1979, identified that the play revolves around the question "How does the eradication of the Irish language and the substitution of English affect this particular society?"²⁴ Friel deals with the fundamental issue of "whether it is possible to translate satisfactorily from one language to another."²⁵ It is here that the influence of George Steiner's is most apparent. Steiner's powerful argument that "ash is no translation of fire,"²⁶ illustrates that the process of translation can never be exact. Friel furthers this point in Hugh's dialogue at the end of Act 3, "I will provide you with the available words and...grammar. But will that help you to interpret between privacies? I have no idea."²⁷

Friel was conscious that his play be seen as about language and "only language."²⁸ It is clear, however, that Translations focuses more on the concept of language as the means by which cultural identity is preserved. As Hugh's states, "it is not the...the 'facts' of history, that shape us, but images of the past embodied in language,"²⁹ (a reworked quotation from "After Babel"). For Steiner, the fate of a language was not determined by any inherent weakness, but rather by that language being out of touch with the "principal currents of intellectual and political force."³⁰ Such a statement is clearly applicable to both Friel and Achebe's texts. Friel himself maintained that the cultural climate of Baile Beag is "a dying climate – no longer quickened by its past about to be plunged into an alien future."³¹ The naturalistic staging of the 2005 National Theatre

²¹ Achebe, "Things Fall apart," Penguin Modern Classics, 2001 edition

²² ibid

²³ "Brian Friel," Faber Critical Guides, Nesta Jones

²⁴ National Theatre Education, "Translations", edited by Emma Thirlwell

²⁵ "Brian Friel," Faber Critical Guides, Nesta Jones

²⁶ National Theatre Education, "Translations", edited by Emma Thirlwell

²⁷ Friel, "Translations", Faber and Faber Plays

²⁸ Friel quoted: <http://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/SchoolofEnglish/imperial/ireland/friel1.htm>

²⁹ Friel, "Translations", Faber and Faber Plays

³⁰ Steiner quoted: National Theatre Education, "Translations", edited by Emma Thirlwell

³¹ Friel, "Sporadic Diary", page 59

production effectively conveyed this climate; the decaying farm building having obvious connotations with the terminal decline of the native culture.

Friel's innovative use of structure again becomes clear as the events of the play are contained within the timeframe of the christening and funeral of Nellie Rudah's baby (which can be seen to represent the Irish culture). While in Act 1, the Irish community have the power to christen and name the child, such freedoms have been revoked through the imposition of English by the end of Act 3. The community now mourns the death of the infant, leaving the audience feeling desolate. This notion of naming and identity being synonymous is further conveyed through Sarah, the mute girl initially without language at all. I believe that Sarah is a metaphor for Ireland herself. Just as Manus teaches Sarah to identify herself in Act 1, the Irish people can be seen to have developed a rich cultural heritage and history which gave Ireland her identity; an identity lost through the actions of the coloniser. Through the fear instilled by Lancey, Sarah loses her speech, reverting back to silence. This is similar to the Ibo's loss of the narrative voice at the end of "Things Fall Apart."

According to Edward Said, it is through cartography that the landscape is redrawn by the coloniser along commercial lines, neglecting any attachment to native culture in the process.³² In "Translations" language and the ability to name the landscape provides the British with their power. In "Things Fall Apart" the white missionaries' establish control through Christianity. Such a striking difference between the texts is reconciled through their joint emphasis on the role of education in the process of mental colonization. "Translations" is set just two years after the establishment of the first National Schools in Ireland. These schools were established to quell nationalist tendencies prominent in hedge schools, and as Friel correctly notes, all instruction was to be in English.

In "Translations" Yolland writes English place names on the strand, thus demonstrating that the colonist's hold on Ireland was not complete, and would one day wash away. The conclusion of "Things Fall Apart" provides no such assurance. Achebe remains concerned with the continuing popularity of Conrad's text among modern readers, a text "in which the very humanity of black people is called into question."³³ While progress has been made in Anglo-Irish relations, the continued appeal of "Things Fall Apart" (translated into more than 45 languages) is testament to the fact that Africa is still fighting to recover its lost cultural identity, a feat it may never truly achieve. Achebe's work has, however, inspired a generation of African authors, most notably the Orange Prize winning Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who continue to return a literary voice to the people of Africa. Both "Things Fall Apart" and "Translations" have achieved a space on the British A level curriculum, a lasting achievement that will help dissolve any glamorous images of the age of Empire.

Cumulative word count: 2993

- AO1 20 Presents a synthesis of knowledge which demonstrates a well-developed and focused understanding of the effects of cartographic focus
- AO3 20 Demonstrates a synthesis of textual connections in argued development
- AO2 20 Demonstrates a well-developed critical understanding of literary texts which enables an independent response
- AO1 20 Writes accurately with sustained accuracy and fluency, coherence and confidence; effectively producing fluent, coherent and confident writing

³² "Brian Friel", Geraldine Higgins

³³ Achebe quoted in: www.rtwclarke.net/courses

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www.rlwclarke.net/courses

<http://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/SchoolofEnglish/imperial/ireland/friel1.htm>

Further Resources

"Talking to Ourselves", Brian Friel talks to Paddy Agnew, Magill, December 1980

