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Encyclopedia > Chinua Achebe

Chinua Achebe

Chinua Achebe speaking at PEN World Voices in 2006

Born	November 16, 1930 (age 77) Nneobi, Nigeria
Nationality	Nigerian
Writing period	1958-present
Notable work(s)	"The African Trilogy" - Things Fall Apart , No Longer at Ease , Arrow of God

Chinua Achebe (pronounced / t n w t e be /^[1]), born **Albert Chinualumọ** [November 16, 1930](#), is a [Nigerian](#)^[2] [novelist](#), [poet](#) and [critic](#). He is best known for *[Things Fall Apart](#)* (1958), which is the most widely-read book in modern [African literature](#).

Raised by Christian parents in the [Igbo](#) village of [Ogidi](#) in south [Nigeria](#), Achebe won a scholarship for undergraduate studies. He became fascinated with world and traditional African cultures, and began writing stories as a university student. He worked for the Nigerian Broadcasting Service and soon moved to the metropolis of Lagos, where he gained worldwide attention for *Things Fall Apart* in the late 1950s; his later novels include *A Man of the People* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964), *A Man of the People* (1966), and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987). He wrote his novels in [English](#) and has defended the use of English, a language of colonialism, as a language of literature. In 1975, his lecture *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"* was the focus of controversy, for its criticism of [Joseph Conrad](#) as "a thoroughgoing imperialist".

When the region of [Biafra](#) broke away from Nigeria in 1967, Achebe became a [Biafran independence](#) and served as ambassador for the people of the new nation to the United States, the Americas, and Europe. As starvation and violence took its toll, he appealed to the people of the Americas for aid. When the Nigerian government retook the region in 1970, he joined the political parties but soon resigned due to frustration over the corruption and inefficiency of the government. He lived in the United States for several years in the 1970s, and returned in 1990 after being partially disabled.

Achebe's novels focus on the traditions of Igbo society, the effect of Christian colonialism, and the clash of values during and after the colonial era. His style relies heavily on the oral tradition and combines straightforward narration with representations of folk stories, proverbs, and oratory. He has also published a number of short stories, children's books, and essay collections. He is the Charles P. Stevenson Professor of Languages and Literature at [Bard College](#) in [Hudson, New York](#).

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Biography

Achebe's parents, Isaiah Okafo Achebe and Janet Anaenechi Iloegbunam, were members of the [Protestant Church Mission Society](#) (CMS) in [Nigeria](#).^[4] The elder Achebe stopped practicing the traditional religion of his ancestors, but he respected its traditions and sometimes incorporated some of its rituals into his Christian practice. Chinua's unabbreviated name, Chinualumogu, means "my behalf" (^[5]), was a prayer for divine protection and stability.^[5] The Achebe family had three surviving children, named in a similar fusion of traditional words relating to the Igbo: Okwuofu, John Chukwuemeka Ifeanyichukwu, Zinobia Uzoma, Augustine Nduka Okeke, and Nwanneka.^[5]

Early life

Chinua was born Albert Chinualumogu Achebe in the [Igbo](#) village of Nneobi, c. [1930](#).^[5] His parents stood at a crossroads of traditional culture and Christian influence, which had a significant impact on the children, especially Chinualumogu. After the younger children were born, the family moved to Isaiah Achebe's ancestral village of [Ogidi](#), in what is now the state of [Anambra](#).^[2]

Storytelling was a mainstay of the Igbo tradition and an integral part of the community. Chinua's mother and sister Zinobia Uzoma told him many stories as a child, which he repeatedly requested. His education was furthered by the collages his father hung on the walls of their home, as well as almanacs and numerous books – including a prose adaptation of [A Midsummer Night's Dream](#) (c. 1590) and an Igbo version of [The Pilgrim's Progress](#) (1678).^{[6][7]} Chinua also eagerly anticipated traditional village events, like the frequent [masquerade ceremonies](#), which he recreated later in his novels and stories.^[8]

EDUCATION



Map of Nigeria showing regional divisions. Adapted from the [Igbo region](#).

In 1936 Achebe entered St Philips' Central School. Despite his protests, he spent a week in the religious class for young children, but was quickly moved to a higher class when the school's [chaplain](#) took note of his intelligence.^[9] One teacher described him as best handwriting in class, and the best reading skills.^[10] He also attended [Sunday](#) and the special evangelical services held monthly, often carrying his father's banner. He erupted at one such session, when [apostates](#) from the new church challenged [Tenets](#) of Christianity. Achebe later included a scene from this incident in [Things Fall Apart](#).

At the age of twelve, Achebe moved away from his family to the village of [Nekede](#) from [Owerri](#). He enrolled as a student at the Central School, where his older brother was. In Nekede, Achebe gained an appreciation for Mbari, a traditional art form with gods' protection through symbolic sacrifices in the form of sculpture and collage. When he came to change to secondary school, in 1944, Achebe sat entrance examinations and was accepted at both the prestigious Dennis Memorial Grammar School in [Onitsha](#) and the prestigious Government College in [Umuahia](#).^[15]

Modelled on the British public school, and funded by the colonial administration, the Government College had been established in 1929 to educate Nigeria's future elite.^[15] It had high standards and was vigorously egalitarian, accepting boys purely on the basis of merit. The language of the school was English, not only to develop proficiency but also to give a common tongue for pupils from different Nigerian language groups.^[16] Achebe described the school as ordered to "put away their different mother tongues and communicate in the language of the colonisers".^[17] The rule was strictly enforced and Achebe recalls that his first experience was asking another boy to pass the soap in Igbo.^[16]

Once there, Achebe was double-promoted in his first year, completing the first year in one year, and spending only four years in secondary school, instead of the standard five. He was unsuited to the school's sports regimen and belonged instead to a group of six pupils. So intense were their study habits that the headmaster banned the recreation of five to six o'clock in the afternoon (though other activities and other books were allowed).

Achebe started to explore the school's "wonderful library".^[20] There he discovered [Washington's Up From Slavery](#) (1901), the autobiography of an American former slave. "I found it sad, but it showed him another dimension of reality".^[19] He also read [Gulliver's Travels](#) (1726), [David Copperfield](#) (1850), and [Treasure Island](#) (1883). He was also interested in colonial derring-do such as [H. Rider Haggard's Allan Quatermain](#) (1887) and [John Carter](#) (1910). Achebe later recalled that, as a reader, he "took sides with the white man against the savages"^[20] and even developed a dislike for Africans. "The white man was strong and intelligent and courageous. The savages arrayed against him were sinister and cunning. I hated their guts."^[20]

A 2007 street scene in Ibadan



A 2007 street scene in [Ibadan](#) 

UNIVERSITY

In 1948, in preparation for independence, a new university opened.^[21] Known as the [University of Ibadan](#), it was an associate of the [University of London](#). Achebe obtained the entrance examination that he was a Scholar in the university's first intake and was to study [medicine](#).^[21] After a year of gruelling study, he decided science was not for him and switched to [English](#), history, and [theology](#).^[22] Because of his family's financial field, however, he lost his scholarship.

He received a government [bursary](#), and his family also donated money – his father Augustine even gave up money for a trip home from his job as a civil servant so that Achebe could continue his studies.^[23] From its inception, the university had a strong English influence and many famous writers amongst its alumni. These include [Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka](#) and [Chinua Achebe](#).

[Amadi](#), poet and playwright [John Pepper Clark](#), and poet [Christopher Okigbo](#). wrote a piece for the *University Herald* entitled "Polar Undergraduate", his work used irony and humour to celebrate the intellectual vigour of his classmates.^[2] Other essays and letters about philosophy and freedom in academia, some of which appeared in another campus magazine, *The Bug*.^[26] He served as the *Herald's* editor during the year.^[27]

While at the university, Achebe wrote his first short story, "In a Village Church", which details of life in rural Nigeria with Christian institutions and icons, a style which influenced his later works.^[28] Other short stories he wrote during his time at Ibadan (including "Conflict with the New" and "Dead Men's Path") examine conflicts between [modernity](#), with an eye toward dialogue and understanding on both sides.^[29] A professor named Geoffrey Parrinder arrived at the university to teach [comparative religion](#) and to explore the fields of Christian history and African traditional religions.^[30]

It was during his studies at Ibadan that Achebe began to become critical of European culture in Africa. He read Irish novelist [Joyce Cary's](#) 1939 book *Mister Johnson*, about a character who (among other things) works for an abusive British store owner. Achebe read the African protagonist as a sign of the author's cultural ignorance. One of his criticisms was to the professor that the only enjoyable moment in the book is when Johnson

After the final examinations at Ibadan in 1953, Achebe was awarded a second-class degree. Not receiving the highest result possible, he was uncertain how to proceed and returned to his hometown of Ogidi to sort through his options.^[32]

Teaching and producing

While he meditated on his possible career paths, Achebe was visited by a friend who convinced him to apply for an English teaching position at the Merchant's College. It was a ramshackle institution with a crumbling infrastructure and a meagre library built on what the residents called "bad bush" – a section of land thought to be haunted by spirits.^[33] Later, in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe describes a similar area called the "bad bush" where the Christian missionaries are given a place to build their church.^[34]

As a teacher he urged his students to read extensively and be original in their writing. Since he did not have access to the newspapers he had read as a student, so Achebe made his own news in the classroom. He taught in Oba for four months, but when an opportunity arose to work for the Nigerian Broadcasting Service (NBS), he left the school and moved to [Lagos](#). The NBS, a radio network started in 1933 by the [colonial government](#),^[37] assigned Achebe to the Talks Department, preparing scripts for oral delivery. This helped him master the subtle nuances between written and spoken language, a skill that helped him later to write realistic dialogue.^[38]

The city of Lagos also made a significant impression on him. A huge [conurbation](#), the city teemed with recent migrants from the rural villages. Achebe revelled in the social and political activity around him and later drew upon his experiences when describing the city in his 1960 novel *No Longer At Ease*.^[39]

While in Lagos, Achebe started work on a novel. This was challenging, since novels had been written in English, although [Amos Tutuola's](#) *Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) and [Ekwensi's](#) *People of the City* (1954) were notable exceptions. While appreciating the work of others, Achebe worked hard to develop his own style, even as he pioneered the creation of the modern African novel itself.^[40] A visit to Nigeria by [Queen Elizabeth II](#) in 1956 brought issues of politics to the surface, and was a significant moment for Achebe.^[41]

Also in 1956, Achebe was selected for training in London at the Staff School run by the



[Broadcasting Corporation](#) (BBC). His first trip outside Nigeria was an opportunity to gain technical production skills, and to solicit feedback on his novel (which was later published in London). In London he met a novelist named Gilbert Phelps, to whom he offered the manuscript. Phelps responded with great enthusiasm, asking Achebe if he could show it to his editor. Achebe declined, insisting that it needed more work.^[42]

Things Fall Apart

Main article: [Things Fall Apart](#)

Back in Nigeria, Achebe set to work revising and editing his novel (now titled *Things Fall Apart*). A line in the poem "[The Second Coming](#)" by [William Butler Yeats](#)). He cut away sections of the book, leaving only the story of a yam farmer named Okonkwo. He improved various chapters, and restructured the prose. By 1957 he had sculpted the novel. He took advantage of an advertisement offering a typing service. He sent his only handwritten manuscript (along with the £22 fee) to the London company. After several months without receiving any communication from the typing service, Achebe's boss at the NBS, Angela Beattie, was going to London for her annual leave; he asked her to contact the company. She did, and angrily demanded to know why it was lying ignored in London. The company quickly sent a typed copy to Achebe. Beattie's intervention was crucial. Achebe continued as a writer. Had the novel been lost, he later said, "I would have been discouraged and would probably have given up altogether."^[43]



A spiral stack of the 1994 Anchor Books edition of [Things Fall Apart](#)

In 1958 Achebe sent his novel to the publisher Heinemann in London. It was sent to several houses; some rejected it immediately, claiming that fiction from African writers had no market in England. It reached the office of [Heinemann](#), who was then in London until an educational adviser, Donald M. Grant, visited England after a trip through West Africa. Grant forced the company's hand with his statement: "This is the best novel I have read since the war."^[44]

Heinemann published 2,000 hardcover copies of *Things Fall Apart* on [17 June 1958](#). According to [The Guardian](#), the company was "in preparation for release."^[46] The book was well received by the British press, and received

positive reviews from critic [Walter Allen](#) and novelist [Angus Wilson](#). Three days after publication, the [Supplement](#) wrote that the book "genuinely succeeds in presenting tribal life for the first time." The [Observer](#) called it "an excellent novel", and the literary magazine *Time and Tide* wrote "Achebe's style is a model for aspirants".^[47]

Initial reception in Nigeria was mixed. When Hill tried to promote the book in Nigeria, he met with scepticism and ridicule. The faculty at the University of Ibadan was divided over the value of a worthwhile novel being written by an alumnus.^[48] Others were more supportive. The magazine *Black Orpheus* said: "The book as a whole creates for the reader a sense of Ibo life that the plot and characters are little more than symbols representing a life irrevocably within living memory."^[49]

In the book Okonkwo struggles with the legacy of his father – a shiftless debt collector – as well as the complications and contradictions that arise when white men enter the village of Umuofia.^[50] Exploring the terrain of cultural conflict, particularly the tension between Igbo tradition and Christian doctrine, Achebe returns to the themes of his earlier work from his own background.

Things Fall Apart has become one of the most important books in [African literature](#). Over 10 million copies around the world, it has been translated into 50 languages, making Achebe the most translated African writer of all time.^{[52][53]}

Marriage and family

In the same year *Things Fall Apart* was published, Achebe was promoted at the charge of the network's eastern region coverage. He moved to [Enugu](#) and began administrative duties. There he met a woman named Christie Okoli, who had just and joined the NBS staff when he arrived. They first conversed when she brought a pay discrepancy; a friend of hers found that, although they had been hired separately, she had been rated lower and offered a lower wage. Sent to the hospital for an appendectomy afterwards, she was pleasantly surprised when Achebe visited her with gifts and

Achebe and Okoli grew closer in the following years, and on [September 10, 1961](#) they were married at the Chapel of Resurrection on the campus of the University of Ibadan.^[55] Christie Okoli described their marriage as one of trust and mutual understanding; some tension arose from time to time due to conflicts about attention and communication. However, as their relationship progressed, Achebe and wife made efforts to adapt to one another.^[56]

Their first child, a daughter named Chinelo, was born on [July 11, 1962](#). They had another daughter on [December 3, 1964](#), and another boy named Chidi on [May 24, 1967](#). When the children were attending school in Lagos, their parents became worried about the world view they presented regarding race – expressed at the school, especially through the mostly white teachers who presented a prejudiced view of African life.^[57] In 1966, Achebe published his first novel, *Chike and the River*, to address some of these concerns.^[58] After the [Biafran War](#), they had another daughter on [March 7, 1970](#), named Nwando.^[59]

No Longer at Ease and fellowship travels

In 1960, while they were still dating, Achebe dedicated to Christie Okoli his second novel, *No Longer at Ease*, about a civil servant who is embroiled in the corruption of Lagos. The protagonist is the grandson of *Things Fall Apart*'s main character, Okonkwo.^[60] Drawing on his own experiences, Achebe writes about Obi's experiences in Lagos to reflect the challenges facing Nigeria at the threshold of Nigerian independence. Obi is trapped between the expectations of his clan, his home village, and larger society. He is crushed by these forces (like his father) and finds himself imprisoned for bribery. Having shown his acumen for Igbo culture, Achebe demonstrated in his second novel an ability to depict modern Nigeria. Later that year, Achebe was awarded a [Rockefeller Fellowship](#) for six months of travel, which he called "the first important perk of my writing career";^[62] Achebe set out for a tour of [East Africa](#). One month after Nigeria achieved its independence, he travelled to [Kenya](#), where he was required to complete an immigration form by checking a box indicating his ethnicity: European, [Asiatic](#), [Arab](#), or Other. Shocked and dismayed at being forced into an "Other" identity, he found the situation "almost funny" and took an extra form as a souvenir.^[63] Continuing to [Tanganyika](#) and [Zanzibar](#) (now united in [Tanzania](#)), he was frustrated by the [paternalistic](#) attitude he observed among non-African hotel clerks and social elites.^[64]

Achebe also found in his travels that [Swahili](#) was gaining prominence as a major African language. Radio programs were broadcast in Swahili, and its use was widespread in the countries he visited. Nevertheless, he also found an "apathy" among the people toward literature written in Swahili.^[65] He met the poet [Sheikh Shaaban Robert](#), who complained of the difficulty he had faced in trying to publish his Swahili-language work.^[66]

In [Northern Rhodesia](#) (now called [Zambia](#)), Achebe found himself sitting in a bus to [Victoria Falls](#). Interrogated by the ticket taker as to why he was sitting in the back, he replied, "if you must know I come from Nigeria, and there we sit where we like in the front."



A map of East Africa showing the outlines of Kenya, Tanzania, and Zanzibar. A scale bar at the bottom indicates 0 to 1000 kilometers.

the waterfall he was cheered by the black travellers from the bus, but he was so sad that they felt unable to stand up to the policy of [segregation](#).^[68]

Two years later, Achebe again left Nigeria, this time as part of a Fellowship for Creative Writers awarded by [UNESCO](#). He travelled to the [United States](#) and [Brazil](#). He met with other authors from the US, including novelists [Ralph Ellison](#) and [Arthur Miller](#).^[69] In Brazil, he met other authors, with whom he discussed the complications of writing in [Portuguese](#) and how that the vibrant literature of the nation would be lost if left untranslated into a language.^[70]

Voice of Nigeria and African Writers Series

Once he returned to Nigeria, Achebe was promoted at the NBS to the position of Director of Broadcasting. One of his first duties was to help create the [Voice of Nigeria](#) radio broadcast which made its first transmission on [New Year's Day](#) 1962, and worked to maintain a national perspective during the turbulent era immediately following independence.^[71] He was put to the test when Nigerian Prime Minister [Abubakar Tafawa Balewa](#) declared a state of emergency in the Western Region, responding to a series of conflicts between officials of various states. Achebe became saddened by the evidence of corruption and silencing of political opposition.

Chinua Achebe, right, meeting with [Langston Hughes](#) in 1962

In 1962 he attended a conference of African Writers at the [Makerere University College](#) in Uganda. There he met with important literary figures from across the continent and the world, including Ghanaian writer [Kofi Awoonor](#), Nigerian playwright and poet [J. P. Clark](#), and US poet-author [Langston Hughes](#).

Among the topics of discussion was an attempt to define whether the term [African literature](#) ought to include work from the [diaspora](#), or be composed only of people living within the continent itself. Achebe indicated that it was a "significant question",^[73] and that scholars would do well to wait until a body of work had accumulated enough to judge. Writing about the conference in several journals, Achebe highlighted the importance of community among African writers, and the literature of Africa, and highlighted the importance of community among writers on the continent and beyond.^[74]

While at Makerere, Achebe was asked to read a novel written by a student (Janet Mock as [Ngugi wa Thiong'o](#)) called *Weep Not, Child*. Impressed, he sent it to Alan Hill, who published it two years later to coincide with its paperback line of books from [Penguin](#). Hill indicated this was to remedy a situation where British publishers "regarded West Africa as a place where you sold books." Achebe was chosen to be General Editor of the [African Writers Series](#), which became a significant force in bringing [postcolonial literature](#) from Africa to the rest of the world.^[75]

As these works became more widely available, reviews and essays about African literature from Europe – began to flourish. Bristling against the commentary flooding his country, Achebe published an essay titled "Where Angels Fear to Tread" in the December issue of *Nigeria Magazine*. In it, he distinguished between the hostile critic (entirely negative), the naive critic (entirely positive), and the conscious critic (who seeks a balance). He lastly critiqued African writers from the outside, saying: "no man can understand another man if he does not speak (and 'language' here does not mean simply words, but a man's point of view)."^[76]

Arrow of God

Achebe's third book, *Arrow of God*, was published in 1964. Like its predecessor, it explores the intersections of Igbo tradition and European Christianity. Set in the village of Ulu in the twentieth century, the novel tells the story of Ezeulu, a Chief Priest of Ulu. In response to British intervention in the area, he orders his son to learn the foreigners' secret language. In *Things Fall Apart* and *Obi in No Longer at Ease*, Ezeulu is consumed by the

The idea for the novel came in 1959, when Achebe heard the story of a Chief Priest of Ulu being executed by a District Officer.^[77] He drew further inspiration a year later when he viewed ancient objects excavated from the area by [archaeologist](#) Thurstan Shaw; Achebe was

sophistication of the artefacts. When an acquaintance showed him a series of officers (not unlike the fictional *Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Low* the end of *Things Fall Apart*), Achebe combined these strands of history and *God* in earnest.^[78] Like Achebe's previous works, *Arrow* was roundly praised but an edition was published in 1974 to correct what Achebe called "certain structural

In a letter to Achebe, the US writer [John Updike](#) expressed his surprised admiration at the downfall of *Arrow of God's* protagonist. He praised the author's courage to write "what Western novelists would have contrived".^[81] Achebe responded by suggesting that the hero was rare in African literature, given its roots in communal living and the fact that the characters are "subject to non-human forces in the universe".^[82]

A Man of the People

A Man of the People was published in 1966. A bleak satire set in an unnamed African country that has just attained independence, the novel follows a teacher named Odili Samalu for whom Achebe wrote who opposes a corrupt Minister of Culture named Nanga for his Parliament speech. In an advance copy of the novel, Achebe's friend [John Pepper Clark](#) declared: "Chinua is a prophet. Everything in this book has happened except a military coup!"^[83]

Soon afterward, Nigerian Major [Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu](#) seized control of the country as part of a larger coup attempt. Commanders in other areas failed to be answered by a military crackdown. A massacre of three thousand people from the north occurred soon afterwards, and stories of other attacks on Igbos began to filter into Lagos.^[84]

The ending of his novel had brought Achebe to the attention of military personnel, and he was aware of him of having foreknowledge of the coup. When he received word of the pursuit of his wife (who was pregnant) and children on a squalid boat through a series of unseen checkpoints to the stronghold of [Port Harcourt](#). They arrived safely, but Christie suffered a miscarriage. The novel ends. Chinua rejoined them soon afterwards in Ogidi. These cities were safe from military action because they were in the southeast, part of the region which would later [secede](#).

Once the family had resettled in [Enugu](#), Achebe and his friend [Christopher Okigbo](#) founded a publishing house called Citadel Press, to improve the quality and increase the quantity of books available to younger readers. One of its first submissions was a story called *How the Leopard Got His Claws*, which Achebe revised and rewrote, turning it into a complex allegory of political tumult. Its final title was *How the Leopard Got His Claws*.^[86] Years later, a CIA intelligence officer told Achebe, "of all the things that came out of Biafra, that was the most important."^[87]

Civil War

In May 1967 the southeastern region of Nigeria broke away to form the Republic of [Biafra](#); in July the Nigerian military attacked to suppress what it considered an unlawful rebellion. Achebe's partner, [Christopher Okigbo](#), who had become a close friend of the family (especially of Achebe's son, young Ikechukwu), volunteered to join the secessionist army while simultaneously working at the press. Achebe's house was bombed one afternoon; Christie had taken the children to visit her sick mother, so the only victims were his books and papers. The Achebe family narrowly escaped disaster several times during the war. Five days later, Christopher Okigbo was killed on the war's front line.^[88] Achebe was shaken considerably by the loss; in 1971 he wrote "Dirge for Okigbo", originally in Igbo and later translated to English.^[89]



As the war intensified, the Achebe family was forced to leave Enugu for the Biafran Republic. When the turmoil closed in, he continued to write, but most of his creative work dur

form of poetry. The shorter format was a consequence of living in a war zone. he said, "something short, intense more in keeping with my mood ... All this is of our struggle."^[90] Many of these poems were collected in his 1971 book *Be* of his most famous, "Refugee Mother and Child", spoke to the suffering and l him. Dedicated to the promise of Biafra, he accepted a request to serve as for refusing an invitation from the Program of African Studies at [Northwestern U](#). Achebe travelled to many cities in Europe, including London, where he contin African Writers Series project at Heinemann.^[91]

During the war, relations between writers in Nigeria and Biafra were strained. [Pepper Clark](#) had a tense confrontation in London over their respective support the conflict. Achebe demanded that the publisher withdraw the dedication of had given to Clark. Years later, their friendship healed and the dedication was . Meanwhile, their contemporary [Wole Soyinka](#) was imprisoned for meeting wit spent many years in jail. Speaking in 1968, Achebe said: "I find the Nigerian sit had been a Nigerian, I think I would have been in the same situation as Wole S prison."^[93]

The Nigerian government, under the leadership of General [Yakubu Gowon](#), w [government](#); the two nations enjoyed a vigorous trade partnership.^[94] Addres war in 1968, Achebe lashed out at the Nigerian political and military forces tha forced Biafra to secede. He framed the conflict in terms of the country's colo Nigeria, he said, "found that the independence his country was supposed to h without content ... The old white master was still in power. He had got himself stooges to do his dirty work for a commission."^[95]

Flag of the [Republic of Biafra](#)



Conditions in Biafra worsened as the v September 1968, the city of Aba fell to and Achebe once again moved his fan [Umuahia](#), where the Biafran governm

He was chosen to chair the newly formed National Guidance Committee, cha drafting principles and ideas for the post-war era.^[96] In 1969, the group comp entitled *The Principles of the Biafran Revolution*, later released as *The Ahiara* .

In October of the same year, Achebe joined writers Cyprian Ekwensi and [Gabi](#) the United States to raise awareness about the dire situation in Biafra. They vis campuses and conducted countless interviews. While in the southern US, Ach time of the "Igbo Landing", a true story of a group of Igbo captives who drow – rather than endure the brutality of slavery – after surviving through the [Mid](#). Although the group was well-received by students and faculty, Achebe was "sl [realpolitik](#) attitude toward Africa he saw in the US. At the end of the tour, he s absolutely ruthless and unfeeling".^[100]

The beginning of 1970 saw the end of the state of Biafra. On 12 January, the m Nigeria, and Achebe returned with his family to Ogidi, where their home had l took a job at the [University of Nigeria](#) in [Nsukka](#) and immersed himself once a was unable to accept invitations to other countries, however, because the Nige revoked his passport due to his support for Biafra.^[101]

Postwar academia

After the war, Achebe helped start two magazines: the literary journal *Okike*, : fiction, and poetry; and *Nsukkascopes*, an internal publication of the University Fearless, Brutal and True").^[102] Achebe and the *Okike* committee later establi magazine, *Uwa Ndi Igbo*, to showcase the indigenous stories and oral traditio community.^[103] In February 1972 he released *Girls at War*, a collection of shc time from his undergraduate days to the recent bloodshed. It was the 100th b African Writers Series.^[104]

The [University of Massachusetts Amherst](#) offered Achebe a professorship late family moved to the United States. Their youngest daughter was displeased wi

and the family soon learned that her frustration involved language. Achebe helped her face the "alien experience" (as he called it) by telling her stories during the car trips to and from school.^[105]

As he presented his lessons to a wide variety of students (he taught only one class, to a large audience), he began to study the perceptions of Africa in [Western](#) scholarship: "Africa is not like anywhere else they know ... there are no real people in the Dark Continent, only *forces* operating; and people don't speak any language you can understand, they just grunt, too busy jumping up and down in a frenzy".^[106]



The [Univer](#)
[Massachus](#)
night

CRITICISM OF CONRAD

Achebe expanded this criticism when he presented a Chancellor's Lecture at the University of Chicago in 1975, titled *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"*. Decrying Conrad as "a thoroughgoing racist",^[107] Achebe asserts that Conrad's famous novel dehumanizes Africa as "a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity in which wandering European enters at his peril."^[108]

Achebe also discussed a quote from [Albert Schweitzer](#), a 1952 [Nobel Peace Prize](#) winner. "An African is indeed my brother," he is reported to have said, "but my junior brother surprised that Achebe would challenge a man honoured in the West for his "racialism" and recognised as a paragon of Western liberalism.

The lecture caused a storm of controversy, even at the reception immediately following it. Many English professors in attendance were upset by his remarks; one elderly professor, said: "How dare you!",^[111] and stormed away. Another suggested that Achebe was "in a bad humour",^[111] but several days later Achebe was approached by a third professor who said: "I now realize that I had never really read *Heart of Darkness* although I have taught it for years. Although the lecture angered many of his colleagues, he was nevertheless presented with an honorary doctorate from the [University of Stirling](#) and the Lotus Prize for Literature from the University of Nigeria.

The first comprehensive rebuttal of Achebe's critique was published in 1983 by John M. Watts. His essay "A Bloody Racist: About Achebe's View of Conrad" defends Conrad's anti-imperialist novel, suggesting that "part of its greatness lies in the power of its critique of prejudice."^[114] Palestinian-American theorist [Edward Said](#) agreed in his book *Imperialism* that Conrad criticised imperialism, but added: "As a creature of his time, he cannot grant the natives their freedom, despite his severe critique of the imperialists."^[115]

Achebe's criticism has become a mainstream perspective on Conrad's work. In the 1988 [Norton](#) critical edition of Conrad's novel. Editor Robert Kimbrough noted that "the three most important events in *Heart of Darkness* criticism since the second edition of the book..."^[116] Critic Nicolas Tredell divides Conrad criticism "into two epochs: before and after Achebe."^[117] Asked frequently about his essay, Achebe once explained that he did not want the work to be abandoned: "It's not in my nature to talk about banning books. I talk about them with the kind of understanding and with the knowledge I talk about. And read the books." ^[116]

Retirement and politics

When he returned to the University of Nigeria in 1976, he hoped to accomplish the novel he had been writing, renew the native publication of *Okike*, and further develop Nigerian culture. He also showed that he would not restrict his criticism to European targets. In a 1976 interview, he lashed out at the archetypal Nigerian intellectual, who is divided between the West and his native land "but for two things: status and stomach. And if there's any danger that he might lose his status or displeasure or lose his job, he would prefer to turn a blind eye to what is happening."

In October 1979, Achebe was awarded the first-ever Nigerian National Merit A

[James Baldwin](#) in 1955



In 1980 he met [James Baldwin](#) at a cor African Literature Association in [Gain](#). The writers – with similar political per language, and faith in the liberating pc

were eager to meet one another. Baldwin said: "It's very important that we sh finally, if I must say so, after something like 400 years."^[120]

In 1982, Achebe retired from the University of Nigeria. He devoted more time also became active with the left-leaning [People's Redemption Party](#) (PRP). In 1 party's deputy national vice-president. He published a book called *The Troubl* coincide with the upcoming elections. On the first page, Achebe says bluntly: ' is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility and to personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership."^[121]

The elections that followed were marked by violence and charges of fraud. As Nigerian politics had changed since *A Man of the People*, Achebe replied: "I thi Nigerian politician has deteriorated."^[122] After the elections, he engaged in a b which almost became a fistfight – with Bakin Zuwo, the newly-elected governo the PRP and afterwards kept his distance from political parties, expressing his dishonesty and weakness of the people involved.^[123]

He spent most of the 1980s delivering speeches, attending conferences, and w novel. He also continued winning awards and collecting honorary degrees.^[124] president-general of the [Ogidi](#) Town Union; he reluctantly accepted and begar the same year, he stepped down as editor of *Okike*.^[125]

Anthills and paralysis

In 1987 Achebe released his fifth novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, about a milit West African nation of Kangan. A finalist for the prestigious [Man Booker Prize](#) the *Financial Times*: "in a powerful fusion of myth, legend and modern styles book which is wise, exciting and essential, a powerful antidote to the cynical co 'overseas' who see nothing ever new out of Africa."^[126] An opinion piece in th said the book deserved to win the Booker Prize, and that Achebe was "a write. deserved the recognition that has already been accorded him by his sales figur instead to [Penelope Lively's](#) novel *Moon Tiger*.

On [March 22, 1990](#), Achebe was riding in a car to Lagos when an axle suddenly collapsed and the car flipped. His son Ikechukwu and the driver suffered minor injuries, but the weight of the vehicle fell on Achebe and his spine was severely damaged. He was flown to the Paddocks Hospital in [Buckinghamshire](#) England, and treated for his injuries. In July doctors announced that although he was recuperating well, he was [paralysed](#) from the waist down and would require the use of a wheelchair for the rest of his life.^[127]

Soon afterwards, Achebe became the Charles P. Stevenson Professor of Languages and Literature at [Bard College](#) in Annandale-on-Hudson, [New York](#); he has held the position for over fifteen years.^[128]

In October 2005, *Financial Times* reported that Achebe was planning to write Canongate Myth Series, a series of short novels in which ancient [myths](#) from r reimagined and rewritten by contemporary authors.^[129] Achebe's novella has for publication.

In June 2007, Achebe was awarded the [Man Booker International Prize](#).^[130] Th included US critic [Elaine Showalter](#), who said he "illuminated the path for writ



Stone Row
[Bard College](#)

seeking new words and forms for new realities and societies";^[131] and South African writer [Gordimer](#), who said Achebe has achieved "what one of his characters brilliant writer's purpose: 'a new-found utterance' for the capture of life's complexity"

Style

Oral tradition

The style of Achebe's fiction draws heavily on the oral tradition of the Igbo people, weaving folk tales into the fabric of his stories, illuminating community values in both the form of the storytelling. The tale about the Earth and Sky in *Things Fall Apart* emphasises the interdependency of the masculine and the feminine. Although his mother tell the tale, Okonkwo's dislike for it is evidence of his imbalance.^[132] beatings from his father by pretending to dislike such "women's stories".^[134]



A digital representation of the Igbo [udu](#) instrument 

Another hallmark of Achebe's style is which often illustrate the values of the He sprinkles them throughout the nar points made in conversation. Critic Ar use of proverbs in *Arrow of God* "serv echo effect the judgement of a comm individual violation."^[135] The use of st Achebe's urban novels, *No Longer at l People*, is less pronounced.^[135]

For Achebe, however, proverbs and fo sum total of the oral Igbo tradition. In philosophical thought and public perf oratory ("Okwu Oka" – "speech artist phrase), his characters exhibit what he individual excellence ... part of Igbo ct *Fall Apart*, Okonkwo's friend Obierika impassioned oratory, crystallising the significance for the village. Nwaka in *A exhibits a mastery of oratory, albeit fo*

Achebe frequently includes folk songs and descriptions of dancing in his work *No Longer At Ease*, is at one point met by women singing a "Song of the Heart in both Igbo and English: "Is everyone here? / (Hele ee he ee he)"^[138] In *Thin* ceremonial dancing and the singing of folk songs reflect the realities of Igbo tr Uchendu, attempting to shake Okonkwo out of his self-pity, refers to a song st woman: "For whom is it well, for whom is it well? There is no one for whom it contrasts with the "gay and rollicking tunes of evangelism" sung later by the w

Achebe's short stories are not as widely studied as his novels, and Achebe him them a major part of his work. In the preface for *Girls at War and Other Stori* pieces in twenty years must be accounted a pretty lean harvest by any reckoni the short stories are heavily influenced by the oral tradition. And like the folkta stories often have morals emphasising the importance of cultural traditions.^[139]

Use of English

As the [decolonization](#) process unfolded in the 1950s, a debate about choice of pursued authors around the world; Achebe was no exception. Indeed, because and insistence on a non-colonial narrative, he found his novels and decisions i extreme scrutiny – particularly with regard to his use of English. One school o by Kenyan writer [Ngugi wa Thiong'o](#), urged the use of indigenous African lang other European languages, he said in 1986, were "part of the neo-colonial stru progressive ideas".^[143]

Achebe chose to write in English. In his essay "The African Writer and the English Language" he discusses how the process of colonialism – for all its ills – provided colonised people with a linguistic background "a language with which to talk to one another". As his primary mode of communication with readers across Nigeria, he uses "the one central language of the colonial era".^[144] Using English also allowed his books to be read in the colonial territories.

Still, Achebe recognises the shortcomings of what [Audre Lorde](#) called "the master's language". In an essay he notes:

For an African writing in English is not without its serious setbacks. He is often criticised for writing in a style which he himself describes as "a mixture of the African and the English way of life. Caught in that situation he can do one of two things: he can either conform to the English way and contain what he wants to say within the limits of conventional English, or he can try to push back those limits to accommodate his ideas ... I submit that the latter is the more desirable. The work of extending the frontiers of English so as to accommodate African thought-patterns must do it through their mastery of English and not through their lack of it. It is not a matter of innocence."^[146]

In another essay, he refers to James Baldwin's struggle to use the English language to represent his experience, and his realization that he needed to take control of the language and expand it.^[147] Nigerian poet and novelist [Gabriel Okara](#) likens the process of language to the evolution of [jazz](#) music in the United States.^[148]

Achebe's novels laid a formidable groundwork for this process. By altering syntax and diction, he transforms the language into a distinctly African style.^[149] In some spots the repetition of an Igbo idea in standard English parlance; elsewhere it appears as a word or phrase integrated into descriptive sentences.^[150]

Themes

Achebe's novels approach a variety of themes. In his early writing, a depiction of the African continent itself is paramount. Critic Nahem Yousaf highlights the importance of these depictions. In his tragic stories of Okonkwo and Ezeulu, Achebe sets about textualising Igbo culture. The African portrayal of indigenous life is not simply a matter of literary background, he aims to produce the effect of a precolonial reality as an Igbo-centric response to a European-constructed imperial 'reality'.^[152] Certain elements of Achebe's depiction of *Apart* match those in [Olaudah Equiano's](#) autobiographical *Narrative*. Responding to Equiano was not actually born in Africa, Achebe wrote in 1975: "Equiano was born in the village of Iseke in the Orlu division of Nigeria".^[153]

Culture and colonialism

A prevalent theme in Achebe's novels is the intersection of African tradition (particularly Igbo varieties) and [modernity](#), especially as embodied by European [colonialism](#). The village of Umuofia in *Things Fall Apart*, for example, is violently shaken with internal divisions when the white Christian missionaries arrive. Nigerian English professor Ernest N. Emenyonu describes the colonial experience in the novel as "the systematic emasculation of the entire culture".^[154] Achebe later embodied this tension between African tradition and Western influence in the figure of Sam Okoli, the president of Kangan in *Anthills of the Savannah*. Distanced from the myths and tales of the community by his Westernised education, he does not have the capacity for reconnection shown by the character Beatrice.^[155]

The colonial impact on the Igbo in Achebe's novels is often effected by individuals from Europe, but institutions and



A 1901 stamp from [colonial Nigeria](#).

urban offices frequently serve a similar purpose. The character of Obi in *No L* to colonial-era corruption in the city; the temptations of his position overwhelm his fortitude.^[156] The courts and the position of District Commissioner in *Things* clash with the traditions of the Igbo, and remove their ability to participate in decision-making.^[157]

The standard Achebean ending results in the destruction of an individual and the downfall of the community. Odili's descent into the luxury of corruption and the loss of *the People*, for example, is symbolic of the post-colonial crisis in Nigeria and the emphasis on colonialism, however, Achebe's [tragic](#) endings embody the truth of fate, individual and society, as represented by [Sophocles](#) and [Shakespeare](#).^[159]

Still, Achebe seeks to portray neither moral absolutes nor a [fatalistic](#) inevitability. He never will take the stand that the Old must win or that the New must win. The truth satisfied me—and this is well founded in the Ibo world view. No single moral principle of the time, no single idea can be totally correct."^[160] His perspective is reflected in the character in *Anthills of the Savannah*: "whatever you are is never enough; you must accept something, however small, from the other to make you whole and to survive." "It is a mortal sin of righteousness and extremism."^[161] And in a 1996 interview, Achebe said, "Neither radicalism or orthodoxy is too simplified a way of viewing things ... Evil and goodness on the other hand is often tainted with selfishness."^[162]

Masculinity and femininity

The [gender roles](#) of men and women, as well as societies' conceptions of the male and female, are frequent themes in Achebe's writing. He has been criticised as a sexist author, and many call the uncritical depiction of traditionally patriarchal Igbo society, where men take numerous wives, and women are beaten regularly.^[163] Others suggest that he is merely representing the limited gendered vision of the characters, and that in his other works, he tries to demonstrate the inherent dangers of excluding women from public life.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo's furious manhood overpowers everything feminine, including his own conscience. For example, when he feels bad after killing his wife, he blames himself: "When did you become a shivering old woman?"^[165] He views all this as distasteful, in part because they remind him of his father's laziness and cowardice. In the novel, meanwhile, the women are obedient, quiet, and absent from positions of authority. This is a contrast to that Igbo women were traditionally involved in village leadership.^[167] Nevertheless, a feminine balance is highlighted by Ani, the earth goddess, and the extended definition of "Mother is supreme") in chapter fourteen.^[168] Okonkwo's defeat is seen by some as a call for the need for a balancing feminine ethos.^{[169][170]} Achebe has expressed frustration that he is misunderstood on this point, saying that "I want to sort of scream that *Things Fall Apart* is the side of women...And that Okonkwo is paying the penalty for his treatment of women. All the problems, all the things he did wrong, can be seen as offenses against the feminine."

Achebe's first central female character in a novel is Beatrice Nwanyibuife in *Aspects of a Woman*. As an independent woman in the city, Beatrice strives for the balance which Okonkwo lacks severely. She refutes the notion that she needs a man, and slowly learns about the importance of balancing the aggression of male power.^[172] Although the final stages of the novel show her functioning in a nurturing mother-type role, Beatrice remains firm in her conviction that women should not be limited to such capacities.^[173]

Legacy

Achebe has been called "the father of modern African writing",^[131] and many books have been written about his work over the past fifty years. In 1992 he became the only African represented in the [Everyman's Library](#) collection published by [Alfred A. Knopf](#). He was celebrated at the [University of Nigeria](#) by "an international Who's Who in Africa".

One observer noted: "Nothing like it had ever happened before in African literature on the continent."^[175]

Many writers of succeeding generations view his work as having paved the way. In 1982 he was awarded an honorary degree from the [University of Kent](#). At the time, Robert Gibson said that the Nigerian author "is now revered as Master by the African writers and it is to him they regularly turn for counsel and inspiration. In Africa, his impact resonates strongly in literary circles. Novelist [Margaret Atwood](#) called him a magical writer – one of the greatest of the twentieth century". Poet [Maya Angelou](#) wrote *Apart* as a book wherein "all readers meet their brothers, sisters, parents and grandparents along Nigerian roads"^[178] [Nelson Mandela](#), recalling his time as a political prisoner, called Achebe as a writer "in whose company the prison walls fell down."^[179]

Achebe is the recipient of over 30 honorary degrees from universities in England, South Africa, Nigeria and the United States, including [Dartmouth College](#), [Harvard University](#).^[180] He has been awarded the Commonwealth Poetry Prize, an Honorary Fellowship of the [American Academy of Arts and Letters](#), the Nigerian National Order of Merit (a high honour for academic work), and the [Peace Prize of the German Book Trade](#).^[181]

Some scholars have suggested that Achebe has been shunned by intellectual circles because of his rejection of Conrad and traditions of racism in the West.^[182] Despite his scholarly achievements and the importance of his work, Achebe has never received a [Nobel Prize](#), which some have considered unjust.^[183] The Nobel Committee has been criticised in the past for overlooking African writers, such as [Marcel Proust](#), [Jorge Luis Borges](#), [Vladimir Nabokov](#) and [Leo Tolstoy](#).

When [Wole Soyinka](#) won the Nobel Prize in 1986, Achebe joined the rest of Nigerian writers as the first African ever to win the prize. He lauded Soyinka's "stupendous display of talent" and said he was "most eminently deserving of any prize"^[184] In 1988 Achebe wrote for *Quality Weekly* how he felt about never winning a Nobel prize; he replied: "The Nobel Prize is important. But it is a European prize. It's not an African prize ... it's a heavyweight championship. Nigerians may think, you know, this man has been shunned, but it's nothing to do with that."^[185] Achebe's acceptance of the Mann Booker International Prize (UK), and the National Art Club's Medal of Honor for Literature (New York, USA) have been perceived as a tempering of his position on the role of international literature.

Works

Novels

- *Things Fall Apart*, (1958)
- *No Longer at Ease*, (1960)
- *Arrow of God*, (1964)
- *A Man of the People*, (1966)
- *Anthills of the Savannah*, (1987)

Short Stories

- "Marriage Is A Private Affair", (1952)
- "Dead Men's Path", (1953)
- *The Sacrificial Egg and Other Stories*, (1953)
- "[Civil Peace](#)", (1971)
- *Girls at War and Other Stories*, (1973)
- *African Short Stories* (editor, with C.L. Innes), (1985)
- *Heinemann Book of Contemporary African Short Stories* (editor, with C.L. Innes), (1985)

Poetry

- *Beware, Soul-Brother, and Other Poems*, (1971) (published in the US as *Chinua Achebe's Other Poems*, 1973)
- *Don't let him die: An anthology of memorial poems for Christopher Okigbo* (editor, with Okafor), (1978)
- *Another Africa*, (1998)
- *Collected Poems*, (2004)
- *Refugee Mother And Child*

- *Vultures*

Essays, Criticism and Political Commentary

- *The Novelist as Teacher*, (1965)
- *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"*, (1975)
- *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, (1975)
- *The Trouble With Nigeria*, (1984)
- *Hopes and Impediments*, (1988)
- *Home and Exile*, (2000)

Children's Books

- *Chike and the River*, (1966)
- *How the Leopard Got His Claws* (with John Iroaganachi), (1972)
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22. [^] Ezenwa-Ohaeto, p. 37.
23. [^] Ezenwa-Ohaeto, p. 38.
24. [^] July, p. 64; Laurence, p. viii.
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Novels: *Things Fall Apart* (1958) • *No Longer at Ease* (1960) • *Arrow of God* (1964) • *A Man of the People* (1966) • *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987)

Short stories: *The Sacrificial Egg and Other Stories* (1962) • "[Civil Peace](#)" (1971) • *Girls at War and Other Stories* (1973) • *African Short Stories* (1985) • *Heinemann Book of Contemporary African Short Stories* (1992)

Children's stories: *Chike and the River* (1966) • *How the Leopard Got His Claws* (1972) • *The Drum* (1978)

Other works: An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" (1975)

Persondata

NAME Achebe, Chinua

ALTERNATIVE NAMES Achebe, Albert Chinualumogu (birth name)

SHORT DESCRIPTION Nigerian [novelist](#), [poet](#) and [critic](#)

DATE OF BIRTH [16 November 1930](#)

PLACE OF BIRTH Nneobi, [Nigeria](#)

DATE OF DEATH

PLACE OF DEATH



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