ALDOUS HUXLEY ON THE ART OF SEEING

Oana Mureşan
Senior Lecturer, PhD, "Iuliu Haţieganu" University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Cluj-Napoca

Abstract: In "The Art of Seeing" (1942), the English writer Aldous Huxley pays homage to the American ophthalmologist W. H. Bates, and to his method of visual re-education. The author himself used this method successfully to treat his defective vision caused by a serious eye condition he had contacted in his teens. This paper explores the underlying principles which form the basis of the Bates method, and presents some of the responses the book produced.

Keywords: Aldous Huxley, Bates method, visual re-education, alternative treatment, defective vision.

In 1942, Aldous Huxley, the renowned English writer who was then living in the United States, wrote a book on Bates' method of visual re-education, a controversial alternative medicine therapy that, as shown in the book, helped the writer improve his eyesight considerably. In the preface of the book, Huxley motivates his decision to write this book as an act of "gratitude to the pioneer of visual education, the late Dr. W. H. Bates, and to his disciple, Mrs. Margaret D Corbett, to whose skill as a teacher I owe the improvement in my own vision" (p. viii)[1].

Firstly, he explains what caused him to try this method, after realizing that orthodox treatment could not prevent his eyesight from worsening at a fast pace. Thus, in 1920, at the age of sixteen, he contracted *keratitis punctata*, a very serious eye condition which left him almost blind for eighteen months, and afterwards with severely impaired vision due to opacities in the cornea, hyperopia and astigmatism. He could only read with the help of a powerful magnifying glass, and later of "greatly strengthened glasses" (p. vii), which caused him considerable strain and fatigue.

Deeply concerned about the rapid deterioration of his eyesight, in 1939 he fortuitously learned of an alternative method of visual re-education and of a teacher who was using it successfully and decided to experiment it. In only two months his eyesight improved dramatically – he could read without glasses, strain or fatigue and "the opacity in the cornea […] was beginning to clear up." (p. viii), Huxley describes his vision, at the time of writing *The Art of Seeing*, as being "about twice as good as it used to be when I wore spectacles, and before I had learned the art of seeing" and explains that "the opacity has cleared sufficiently to permit the worse eye, which for years could do no more than distinguish light from darkness, to recognize the ten-foot line on the chart at one foot." Huxley attributes all this remarkable improvement in his eyesight to the alternative treatment he followed – which some critics of the book (Hartridge 1943, Duke-Elder 1943) disagree with –, though the writer admits that his vision was still "very far from normal" (p. viii). As a result of this treatment, Huxley no longer needed glasses, but he still used a powerful magnifying glass to read in low-light conditions (for example, to read the menu in a restaurant), as Basnayake (2004) points out.

The author then lists other books that were published on the same subject and mentions what his essay brings new to the field. His objective was "to correlate the methods of visual education with the findings of modern psychology and critical philosophy," in order to demonstrate "the essential reasonableness of a method, which turns out to be nothing more nor less than the practical application of the problems of vision of certain theoretical principles universally accepted as true."

[1] This and subsequent quotations are from *The Art of Seeing*, Montana Books, Publishers, Inc., 1980 [1942].

BDD-A29570 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:57:33 UTC)

(pp. viii-ix) He points out that ophthalmology does not apply these principles because if focuses only on the physiological and not at all on the mental side of vision. This point is discussed further in the second section of the book. Moreover, the writer asserts that his case was not singular and that thousands of people benefited from this form of treatment by simply following the rules of "the Art of Seeing". Therefore, Huxley adds, the ultimate purpose of the book was to popularize this "Art".

The book is divided into eighteen chapters: the first five present scientific facts underlying both the orthodox treatment of visual defects and the visual education proposed by Dr. Bates and his followers; in the next seven chapters the writer explains in detail the various techniques used in this form of treatment; then Huxley focuses on the mental side of seeing and on techniques that are specific to treating the most common visual defects (myopia, hyperopia, astigmatism, squint); also, the author suggests ways of applying the rules of the art of seeing to some common difficult situations for people with impaired vision, such as reading and watching movies; in the last chapter he highlights, based on scientific evidence, the importance of lighting conditions for people with defective sight, and gives advice on how to "make use of the best illumination available" (p. 155). Finally, in Appendix I, the author details the importance of proper posture in correcting myopia and mentions F. M. Alexander, whose technique for correcting posture Huxley himself used successfully for backache relief.

In the first chapter, "Medicine and Defective Vision", the author refers to the Latin aphorism "Medicus curat, natura sanat" (the doctor treats, nature heals) in order to point out the purpose of medicine which is, in his view, "to provide sick organisms with the internal and external conditions most favorable to the exercise of their own self-regulative and restorative powers." (p. 1) Thus, he argues, medical treatment relies on the self-healing powers of the organism, under favorable conditions.

The writer further explains that the current medical treatment of defective vision eliminates the symptoms, but not the causes of the condition. Therefore, in the treatment of visual defects the above-mentioned Latin aphorism seems not to be true, as the treatment of choice is, in general, the prescription of artificial lenses, and therefore *Nature* is eliminated from the healing process. Moreover, in spite of this treatment, the condition often deteriorates and the eyes "tend to grow progressively weaker and to require progressively stronger lenses for the correction of their symptoms." His conclusion is that either visual defects are incurable, and "can only be palliated by mechanical neutralization of symptoms" – which is the orthodox opinion – or "something is radically wrong with the current methods of treatment." Importantly, the author stresses that he does not refer to acute diseases of the eyes, with are treated with medication or surgery, but to "those much more commonplace visual defects which are now treated by means of lenses." (p.2)

The writer consistently supports his arguments and explanations with examples from the literature. Thus, he refers several times to Dr. Matthew Luckiesh's book *Seeing and Human Welfare* (1934), pointing out some relevant ideas and experiments the American physicist presented in this book. Dr. Luckiesh, who conducted and published pioneering research on light and vision, was considered to be "the father of the Science of Seeing" (http://ead.ohiolink.edu/xtf-ead/view?docId=ead/OCLWHi2641. xml;query=;brand=default). Interestingly, this book has been recently reprinted (in January 2019) by Forgotten Books, which publishes rare and classic books. In it, Dr. Luckiesh, quoted by Huxley, compares glasses with crutches, which are valuable for treating symptoms, but "do not deal with causes". The doctor also claims that most eye defects are preventable or can be improved or cured "by adequate and proper conditions" and that even refractive defects induced by abuses "are not necessarily permanent" (p. 3); all this based on the fact that "eyes have various recuperative powers, at least to some degree." Therefore, "correction of the abuse" by "improving seeing conditions" proved to be beneficial (p. 4).

However, Dr. Luckiesh's book only focuses on the importance of lighting for people with defective sight, Huxley observes. Although essential, it is not enough, he argues, to "merely ameliorate the external conditions of functioning". As they do when treating other parts of the body,

BDD-A29570 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:57:33 UTC)

doctors should also attempt to improve "the internal conditions" by working both "on the physiological environment of the sick organ" and "on the physical environment outside the body" (p. 4). Huxley uses examples from other medical fields to clarify and support his points, such as the use of crutches in orthopedics – they are only palliative aids, whereas doctors concentrate mostly on improving the internal conditions of the affected limb (e.g. by rest, massage, application of light and heat). The psychological factor also plays an important part in the process of recovery, involving the patient's "coordination of mind and body". Also, a good teacher, who uses the right technique, can help a patient recover completely by means of education. Huxley wonders why, if this is possible for crippled legs, it couldn't be applicable to defective eyes, a question to which "the orthodox theory provides no answer" (p. 5). Therefore, Huxley considers that the orthodox theory is "implausible", and only universally accepted due to "the force of habit and authority". However, there are people whose experience contradicts this theory and Huxley is one of them:

> By the greatest of good fortune I was given the opportunity to discover by personal experience that eyes do not lack the *vis medicatrix naturae*[2]; that the palliation of symptoms is not the only treatment for defective vision, that the functioning of sight can be re-educated towards normality by appropriate body-mind coordination, and finally that the improvement in functioning is accompanied by an improvement in the condition of the damaged organ. (p. 5-6)

Moreover, Huxley mentions that his conclusion is not based solely on his personal experience, but confirmed by many other cases of visual re-education that he observed.

In the second chapter, "A Method of Visual Re-Education", Huxley introduces Dr. William H. Bates (1860-1931), whom he presents as "a New York oculist" (i.e. ophthalmologist) who, being "dissatisfied with the ordinary symptomatic treatment of eyes", decided to search for a "way of re-educating defective vision into a condition of normality." Dr. Bates' conclusion, based on his work with numerous patients, was that "the great majority of visual defects were functional and due to faulty habits of use", which were related to "a condition of strain and tension", affecting both the body and the mind. (p. 7) Dr. Bates found that appropriate techniques could relieve this strain, which lead to improved vision and self-correction of refractive errors. Practicing those techniques built "good seeing habits", which often resulted in completely restored vision. According to Huxley, Dr. Bates' method proved to be successful because it is an "aetiological" rather than symptomatic "method of training imperfect sight […], which does not confine itself to the mechanical neutralization of defects but aims at the removal of their physiological and psychological causes." (p. 8)

Huxley explains that the Bates method remained unrecognized by the medical profession because of the following: charlatanism (there were charlatans among the practitioners of the method due to lack of control and proper education); the force of habit, authority, and professionalism; "vested interest" (the profitable industry manufacturing optical glass); empiricism (oculists and optometrists never witnessed self-regulation and cure as described by Dr. Bates); the theory at the core of the method, considering that the eye's accommodation to near and distant vision occurred not in the lens – as was the accepted hypothesis at the time (and which today is a proven fact) –, but "by the lengthening and shortening of the globe as a whole." (p.12)

The author considers that the Bates method works because it is based on "the same principles as those which underlie every successful system ever devised for the teaching of psycho-physical skill" (p. 14) (e.g. acting, singing, violin playing, golf, mental prayer). A key element is to "learn to combine relaxation with activity", to do everything without strain, and to never work under tension. Next, he presents the two types of relaxation: passive and dynamic. Huxley argues that passive relaxation ("a state of complete repose") is not sufficient, and that we also need conscious dynamic relaxation, that he defines as "the state of the body and mind which is associated with normal and natural functioning." (p. 15)

[2] (L.) the healing power of nature

BDD-A29570 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:57:33 UTC)

The third chapter of the book is dedicated to the process of seeing. Huxley considers that seeing is a process which involves not only sensing (through the eyes and the nervous system), but also selecting and perceiving (in the mind) – the three occurring simultaneously –, and that memory plays an important part in perception. Hence, seeing involves the eyes, the nervous system and the mind, all three functioning as a whole. Consequently, "anything which affects one element in this whole exercises an influence upon the other elements." (p. 17) While the orthodox treatment of defective vision addresses only the physiological mechanism of the eye and the nervous system, the Bates method focuses on the mental elements as well, because "any improvement in the power of perceiving tends to be accompanied by an improvement in the power of sensing and of that product of sensing and perceiving which is seeing." (p. 22) Thus, "many of [Dr. Bates'] most valuable techniques are directed specifically to the improvement of perception and of that necessary condition of perception, memory." (p.23)

In the second section of the book, the author offers a detailed description of the techniques employed by Dr. Bates and his followers, starting with relaxation. The most important technique of passive relaxation is that which Dr. Bates called "palming", in which the palms cover the closed eyes without touching them, in order to exclude light from the eyes. The subject is advised to remember "pleasant scenes and incidents" from their life, which should be "in movement" (so as to avoid "mental staring", which implies "fixation of the eyes"); in this way "the field of vision" will become "uniformly black", and the "organs of vision" completely relaxed (p. 43-44). Huxley also explains why palming is an effective eye-relaxation technique, combining both passive and dynamic relaxation – through the use of memory and imagination. Other visual education techniques described in this section are blinking, breathing, sunning, central fixation, flashing, and shifting. Huxley offers clear and concise instructions on how to use them effectively, to assist the readers who cannot benefit from the guidance of a teacher of the Bates method.

In the penultimate chapter we find out that "the movies can be used to improve defective vision" (p. 149), an idea supported by the arguments presented in the essay *Vision and Design* (1920) by the English painter and critic Roger Fry. Based on these arguments and examples, Huxley states that "it is possible to make use of the movies to improve our vision for object and events in real life", based on the fact that being a spectator and not an actor, one sees "more and more clearly" (p. 150).

The last chapter focuses on the importance of lighting conditions. Huxley advises people with defective sight to read "in full sunlight" whenever possible, with "periodical brief sunnings and palmings", and to "always make use of the best illumination available". (p. 155) He also explains why fluorescent lighting, throwing "almost no shadows" – which are elements of contrast, important to normal seeing – affects some people's vision, and offers advice on how to counteract this problem.

The reactions to Huxley's book were varied, but the author's arguments seem to have shaken, at the time, public confidence in the orthodox methods of treating visual defects (Hartridge 1943). Accordingly, the medical community found it necessary to respond to the "allegations" made in the book, demonstrating their lack of scientific basis. The book received harsh criticism from highly ranked professionals in the field, such as Dr. Hamilton Hartridge, professor of physiology at the University of London. In an article published in *The Lancet* in 1943, Dr. Hartridge argues against the allegations Huxley made in his book against the practice of ophthalmologists in his time: that they only treat the eye, to the detriment of a holistic approach; that they prescribe glasses that only neutralize the symptoms, and in time the visual defect worsens; that they regard the alternative methods of visual re-education (such as that of Dr. Bates) as being unorthodox, thus depriving patients of the possibility of more rapid recovery. Professor Hartridge (1943) counters these accusations in a very convincing way and tries to reconstruct Aldous Huxley's case, as presented in the book, but on scientific bases.

Similarly, at an annual meeting of the American Academy of Optometry in New York from December 1951, the American optometrist Elwin Marg showed that the Bates method is based on a

BDD-A29570 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:57:33 UTC)

number of theories that are considered by most eye specialists to be false. For example, Bates did not believe that in distance viewing eye accommodation occurred in the lens, but was convinced that the phenomenon was produced by a change in the size of the eyeball, a theory that, as Marg (1952) pointed out, was invalidated by all research in the field.

Among the proponents of the Bates method, Aldous Huxley appears to be the most prominent, displaying an enthusiasm based on his own experience of successful treatment, while retaining a reserve to the theory underlying the method, which could or not be accurate (Marg 1952). Although Huxley was familiar with the specialists' disapproval of this theory, what was of importance to the writer was not the accuracy of the scientific hypothesis of the method, but the "art of seeing". In his view, this Art goes beyond the physiological mechanisms of the eye, entering the field of psychosomatic medicine:

> [M]y concern is not with the anatomical mechanism of accommodation, but with the art of seeing – and the art of seeing does not stand or fall with any particular physiological hypothesis. Believing that Bates' theory of accommodation was untrue, the orthodox have concluded that his technique of visual education must be unsound. Once again this is an unwarranted conclusion, due to a failure to understand the nature of an art, or psycho-physical skill. (p. 12-13)

In conclusion, *The Art of Seeing* is intended to be more than a defense of the Bates method. It does not insist on the accuracy of the theories underlying the method, but emphasizes the efficacy of a holistic approach to treating visual defects, since, regardless of whether the theories of the Bates method are scientifically accurate or not – and visual scientist have refuted them from the start (Marg 1952) –, in practice, according to the author, the method has proven its usefulness in certain situations, and the case of Aldous Huxley is a written testimony to that.

Nevertheless, the medical world remained skeptical, with critical reactions not only rejecting the method itself, but also attacking those who promoted it. Thus, for example, in a review of Aldous Huxley's book, the eminent Scottish ophthalmologist Stewart Duke-Elder strongly condemns the theories outlined in the book as being largely erroneous. However, he admits that the method proved effective in the case of Huxley and other patients suffering from "similar functional afflictions" (Duke-Elder 1943: 635). The physician concludes that the book is worthless, or even dangerous if taken seriously by people with severe eye conditions such as glaucoma or retinal detachment, which require specialized medical intervention. On the other hand, an examination of more or less recent reviews or comments by readers of Huxley's book who have applied the methods described in the essay reveals that, almost eighty years after its publication, *The Art of Seeing* continues to arouse a certain interest in the general public.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Basnayake V. 'Fifty per cent terrific! fifty per cent non-existent': Aldous Huxley and medicine. *Ceylon Medical Journal*. 2004; 49(4):142-144.

Bedford S. *Aldous Huxley: A Biography*. 2nd Edition. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002.

Duke-Elder S. Aldous Huxley on Vision. (Review). *BMJ*, May 22, 1943; 1(4298):635-636.

Hartridge H. The strange case of Mr. Huxley's eyes. *The Lancet*. 22 May 1943: 657-658.

Huxley, A. *The Art of Seeing*. Seattle: Montana Books, Publishers, Inc., 1975 [1942].

Huxley L. *This Timeless Moment: A Personal View of Aldous Huxley*. 2nd Edition. Berkeley, CA: Celestial Arts, 2000 [1968].

Marg E. "Flashes" of clear vision and negative accommodation with reference to the Bates method of visual training. *American Journal of Optometry and Archives of American Academy of Optometry*. April 1952;128:1-18.

Sawyer D. *Aldous Huxley: A Biography*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002.

https://www.amazon.com/Art-Seeing-Aldous-Huxley/dp/B0006CLUC4.

http://www.seeing.org/

BDD-A29570 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:57:33 UTC)

BDD-A29570 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:57:33 UTC)

THE CLASH OF CULTURES IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S „THINGS FALL APART" (1958) – THE WESTERN INFLUENCE

Adina Campu
Ph.D student., „Transilvania" University of Brașov

Abstract: This paper focuses on "Things Fall Apart" (1958) which is Chinua Achebe's first novel, almost certainly the African book that is most often read by Western readers and a staple in courses on African literature and culture. My central concern is to illustrate how Western and African cultures became entwined and how the influence went both ways. In most of his writings Achebe pleads for the preservation and revival of African cultural values. According to him African resources need to be regained and the fragmented colonial subjects need to be reconstituted in order that African people should acquire a sense of direction and identity. However, here I demonstrate that Achebe too, uses Western cultural strategies to convey these ideas as Western values have permeated everything African and elements of Sameness can no longer be ignored.

Keywords: culture, Sameness, African, Western, language.

1.Introduction

"Things Fall Apart" is Achebe's first novel, published in 1958, almost certainly the African novel that is most often read by Western readers and a staple in courses on African literature and culture worldwide. For most readers, the most memorable part of the book is its vivid evocation of Igbo society at the time of the first major incursions of British colonialism into the Igbo lands at the beginning of the twentieth century. Achebe has made it clear that his main purpose was to provide African readers with a realistic depiction of their pre-colonial past, free of the distortions and stereotypes characteristic of European accounts.

"Things Fall Apart" can be divided into three basic segments. The initial section, spanning the first thirteen chapters, is largely concerned with providing the readers with a vivid picture of the traditional way of life enjoyed by the inhabitants of an Igbo village before the invasion of the British. The second part of the book concerns the protagonist's exile, during which both the British colonial administration and Christian missionaries make significant progress in displacing the traditional way of life in Umuofia. In Chapter 20 the protagonist, Okonkwo, returns to Umuofia, beginning the third and final part of the novel, in which he helps to lead a futile and ill-fated attempt to resist this cultural destruction, leading to his death by suicide.

The central concern of this paper is to illustrate how Western and African cultures became entwined and how the influence went both ways. In most of his writings Achebe pleads for the preservation and revival of African cultural values. Indeed, African resources need to be regained and the fragmented colonial subjects need to be reconstituted in order that African people should acquire a sense of direction and identity. However, here I demonstrate that Achebe too uses Western cultural strategies to convey these ideas as Western vales have permeated everything African.

2.The Western Influence

2.1.The Title of the Novel

BDD-A29570 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:57:33 UTC)

Achebe believed that the Western knowledge of the world is as culture based and time bound as any other type of knowledge. The title of the novel is taken from a poem by the Irish poet William Butler Yeats called *"The Second Coming"*[1], which also provides the epigraph of the novel.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity. (Yeats, "*Michael Robartes and the Dancer"* 10)

This is one of the most frequently taught poems in the English language that has provided titles for many modern works. Achebe, like Yeats, presents in vivid terms his interpretation of the cyclical view of history. In Yeats's work, the vision of human history provides a succession of *"gyres"*[2] or epochal cycles. The first of these cycles, the pre-Christian era, gives way to the age ushered in by the nativity of Christ, which in turn will be followed by another and more terrifying unknown cycle. Achebe's novel, like Yeats's poem, presents the vision of human history as a series of epochal cycles but from an African rather than European perspective. The first of Achebe's cycles, Igbo tribal life before the coming of the British to Nigeria near the end of the nineteenth century makes way for the beginning of twentieth century Europeanization of Africa with all its implied consequences for still another era – the future of postcolonial Africa.

In "*Things Fall Apart"*, Achebe at once recapitulates and reverses Yeats's vision of historical process. It is indeed ritual, the crucial daily traditions that hold together a vital Igbo culture, that the book shows being swept away. Under the overwhelming tide of a violent colonialism, ceremonies *"of innocence"* - like the villagers' willful suspension of disbelief in order not to recognize the village elders animating the masks of the *"egwugwu"* - can no longer be sustained. The order that has held together the present age is weakened, and the future is threatening to destroy it all. In Achebe's version, however, the *"blood-dimmed tide"* emanates neither from the lower classes nor from the dark parts of the globe, but from the very Europe Yeats saw as custodian of civilization. It is not an inevitable process, but one set in motion purposefully. Achebe's ironic reversal of Yeats is not quite as complete as it might first appear. Yeats, after all, is not an English poet but an Irish one. Further, he is an Irish poet with an extensive history of opposition to English colonial rule in Ireland. Therefore, despite his generally retrograde politics, Yeats does, in fact, serve as an important predecessor for a number of later anti colonial and postcolonial writers.

But first and foremost in using Yeats's European material to draw a contrast between the various periods of Igbo history, Achebe is able to accomplish two things. On the one hand, through manipulating the Yeatsian theme about the changes inevitable in human history, the novel succeeds in showing that the sense of historical decay, continuity, and rebirth is not only characteristic of the European tradition but also of the African tradition. On the other hand, by exploiting this European literature and historiography, ironically Achebe is able to reverse the white's man narrow definition of culture and history.

[1] This is a poem included in the 1921 verse collection entitled *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* and was first printed in The Dial (November 1920).

[2] The word *"gyre"* used in the poem's first line is drawn from Yeats's book *"A Vision"*, which sets out a theory of history and metaphysics which Yeats claimed to have received from spirits. The theory of history articulated in "*A Vision"* centers on a diagram composed of two conical spirals, one situated inside the other, so that the widest part of one cone occupies the same place as the tip of the other cone, and vice versa. Around these cones he imagined a set of spirals. Yeats claimed that this image (he called the spirals *"gyres"*) captured contrary motions inherent within the process of history.

BDD-A29570 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:57:33 UTC)

2.2.Okonkwo – A Tragic Hero?

Though it is very clear that to a greater or lesser extent Achebe does use the European notion of tragedy in the construction of the protagonist of the novel literary critics have expressed divergent opinions on the subject. While some of them acknowledge that Okonkwo's fate is a tragic one and consequently he is a tragic hero, others deny him this status.

For Benedict Chiaka Njoku[3] the protagonist, Okonkwo, is a self-made man, egocentric but honest and upright who tries to secure the welfare of his polygamous family of three wives and numerous children. He is against the forces which seek to promote separate and differentiated development, such as Christianity and colonialism. The affirmation of simple life and the glorification of rural serenity are preferable to him than the near savagery, bestiality and animalism of urban existence. In spite of the obvious limitation of his traditional society, Okonkwo blames the imported forces for the misfortunes of the present state of his society The cumulative effect of the foreign forces is reflected in the degeneration of the traditional ways of life of the Igbo people. To Okonkwo, foreign influence is a threat to traditional Igbo individual integrity, and prevents individuals from responding freely to their world and to themselves. They rob the Africans of their individual, personal, and private identity and eventually transform their psyche. What Okonkwo struggles with is the same social and national consciousness found in Europe during the sixteenth, seventeenth and the eighteen centuries. Social consciousness leads to the growth of individuality and societies. The entwining of cultures, in Okonkwo's view, results in interruption and disruption of the processes of development and may intermingle with individual existences.

Okonkwo is not a hero of the western tradition, such as Achilles, Agamemnon, Ajax, Hector, Ulysses, Aeneas, Beowulf, Roland, or King Arthur. He seeks the conquest of no realms, no nation, but the sanity of domestic tranquility and security in his traditional order and mode of life. There is no quest, physical or psychic. The only psychic quest is pragmatic and is based on his desire to secure domestic happiness. His society has attained its height of popular social well-being and has been accepted by all and does not seem to desire further transformations. There is no drive for further change and there is no conflict between social and psychic existences. He sees Western civilization and Christianity as the forces that produced the influences which are the cause of things falling apart. Thus there is no synthetic development in the plot, but instead, we have a depiction of the daily life of a people at the height of social attainment. This is what shocked critics used to social dynamism. Okonkwo is, however, not too much different from the characters produced by Western sensibility, where the homogeneity in society has been reached and where human characters are trapped by the conventions of their social environment. He desires continuity not discontinuity and prefers a preordained way of life to experimentation which may result in self and social disruption.

In Njoku's view one finds in Okonkwo a clash between two different modes of perception, thinking and cultural realities. He rejects assimilation or Europeanization and loves the simple honesty and integrity of his own society. He wants to avoid the discontinuity and fragmentation characteristic of modern life in industrial societies. The traditional society provides him with an atmosphere in which he could manifest his individuality. Consequently, although Okonkwo does not achieve a typical heroic grandeur, the total effect of "*Things Fall Apart"* is heroically grand but the parts can be meaningful only in their relation to the whole story. Achebe's "*Things Fall Apart"* achieves a measure of success towards satisfying Aristotle's concept of tragic grandeur in his "*Poetics"*[4]. Firstly, Okonkwo passes from happiness to misery and is not perfectly virtuous and just.

[3] Njoku, Benedict Chiaka. *The Four Novels of Chinua Achebe: A Critical Study*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 1984.

[4] The book gives an account of what Aristotle calls poetry. He taught that poetry could be divided into three genres: tragedy, comedy and epic verse. The core of the discussion is the examination of tragedy. Aristotle teaches that: "*Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper catharsis of these emotions".*

BDD-A29570 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:57:33 UTC)

Secondly place, his downfall does not result from vice or bareness but because of a flaw of character - tragic flaw- end error in judgment. Thirdly, Okonkwo belongs to a distinguished family, being an Igbo man with titles, three wives and several children. Thus, he satisfies Aristotle's concept of the tragic hero, even though his downfall is muffled rather than dramatic.

Njoku's conclusion is that ultimately, Okonkwo, though a tragic hero, is only an individual and does not fully represent the spirit of the Igbo people. He is himself and his tragic fall is the result of his own choice. Achebe manages to familiarize the reader with the role of individual consciousness and introspection in a traditional Igbo society. The surprise is that contrary to opinions of visitors to the continent, it is possible to find a small rural community in Africa where peace, order and social cohesiveness prevailed. Okonkwo had every reason to be disappointed that things were falling apart, and the center could not hold.

A second position which I want to discuss is the one offered by Richard Begam. He says that *"Things Fall Apart"* is concerned not only with writing history but also with fashioning tragedy and tells us that Achebe himself made this point in an interview with Robert Serumaga[5] in which he discussed the political implications of tragedy and referred to his novel as an example of that genre. The idea that Okonkwo is a great man whose destiny is linked with that of his people is immediately established in the novel's celebrated opening:

> *Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honor to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino.* (Achebe, *"Things Fall Apart"* 1)

The larger effect of Achebe's opening is to establish Okonkwo as a particular kind of tragic protagonist: the great warrior who carries with him the fate of his people. Like Achilles, Okonkwo is *"a man of action, a man of war"*. His *"fame"* among the Igbo rests *"on solid personal achievements"*. He is a man renowned and respected for having brought home from battle five human heads; and on feast days and important public occasions, *"he drinks his palm wine from the skull of the first warrior he killed"* (Achebe, *"Things Fall Apart"* 8) Okonkwo is, in other words, identified with his community to the extent that it esteems the ethos he embodies, and while his village certainly does more than make war, it especially prizes those men who win distinction on the battlefield. This is not to say, however, that Okonkwo epitomizes all the virtues of Igbo culture, or that he is himself without fault. On the contrary, Achebe himself understands that, within an Aristotelian framework, his hero is necessarily a flawed character, to use the Greek term, of *"hamartia"*[6]. As Achebe has observed in an interview with Charles Rowell:

> *The tragic protagonist is the man who's larger than life, who exemplifies virtues that are admired by the community, but also who for all that is still human. He can have flaws, you see; all that seems to me to be very elegantly underlined in Aristotle's work.* [7]

---

[5] Serumaga, Robert. Interview *African Writers Talking: A Collection of Interviews* by Dennis Duerden and Cosmo Pieterse, eds. London: Heinemann, 1972, pp. 16-17 cited by Begam.

[6] One of the core terms in Aristotle's *"Poetics"*. It stands for miscalculation and was understood in the Romantic period as tragic flaw.

[7] Rowell, Charles. *"An Interview with Chinua Achebe"* p. 97. Achebe's views on Okonkwo as an example of an Aristotelian tragic hero are complicated, suggesting that any single theory of tragedy is not adequate to describe how the novel handles its tragic material. Thus, while Achebe rejects the idea that Okonkwo is an Aristotelian hero, he goes on to explain at length how Things Fall Apart can be read in Aristotelian terms: "Rowell: How do you respond to critics reading Okonkwo as a hero in terms of Aristotle's concept of tragedy?" "A: No. I don't think I was responding to that particular format. This is not, of course, to say that there is no relationship between these. If we are to believe what we are hearing these days the Greeks did not drop from the sky. They evolved in a certain place which was very close to Africa ... I think a lot of what Aristotle says makes sense" (p. 97). Cited by Begam.

BDD-A29570 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:57:33 UTC)

Indeed, like many of the heroes of classical tragedy, Okonkwo's behavior consistently places him at odds not only with his fellow Umuofians, but with the gods themselves *"Okonkwo was not the man to stop beating somebody half-way through, not even for fear of a goddess"*(Achebe, *"Things Fall Apart"* 33) and it comes as no surprise when, in the second part of the novel, he is sent into temporary exile for offending Ani, the Earth deity.

However, says Begam, we must admit that Okonkwo's faults are essentially virtues carried to an extreme and though he is not perfect he represents some of the best qualities of his culture. As Obierika remarks at the end of the novel *"That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia"* (Achebe, *"Things Fall Apart"* 178)

The crisis of the novel comes in the penultimate chapter when an impudent messenger, sent by the colonial authorities, orders a tribal meeting to disband. Okonkwo the warrior is moved to action and he killed the messenger. The suicide that follows is itself a profound violation of Igbo law, which strictly forbids acts of self-destruction. The question of how we should respond to Okonkwo's final deed has been examined in detail by various critics with strikingly different results. Of course, this interpretive problem largely disappears once we begin to read the novel as a tragedy. Heroic tragedy demands that he remain uncompromising and that the Igbos honor their cultural heritage by refusing assimilation. Even in this final gesture, then, Okonkwo functions as the true representative of his people. For, as he sees it, Igbo culture has willingly succumbed to its own annihilation, committing what is a form of collective suicide by submitting to the British. In taking his own life, Okonkwo has simply preceded his people in their communal destruction. Once again he has led the way.

I believe that essentially we have to distinguish between Aristotelian or traditional tragedy[8] in which there is a clear resolution of facts and modern or ironic tragedy where the fall from a high place is not obvious but concealed. Okonkwo's story as viewed from the Igbo perspective presents history in the form of classical or heroic tragedy. Okonkwo's story as viewed from the District Commissioner's perspective presents history in the form of modern or ironic tragedy. For Achebe the tragedy of the past depends on the perspective of the present. He illustrates the ambiguous relationship which postcolonial writers have with their own past and he envisions his past both as history and tragedy.

The Language Problematic

Here I intend to discuss Achebe's decision to write in English, his justification for doing this and the problems faced by a postcolonial writer writing in the language of the colonizers.

Language is the most important element of fiction and this is reflected by the fact that quite often the quality of a work is judged by how skillfully the writer uses the language to unify the elements of fiction and by whether or not the style manages to capture readers and make them want to read it again and again. The problematic is very complex and delicate with readers who write in their second language because the writing of a piece of fiction implies more than translating one's native thematic material into another language for a foreign audience. It requires a creative effort which should result in the production of a work of art that can be appreciated in any language, including the indigenous one. Within this fierce debate African writers and critics have taken various positions ranging from continued use of foreign languages – English, French and Portuguese – to supporting national and ethnic languages of Africa.

For example, Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong[9] requires African writers to write in indigenous African languages instead of English, insisting that his own early choice of the latter

[8] In a figurative sense a tragedy is any event with a sad and unfortunate outcome, but the term also applies specifically in Western culture to a form of drama defined by Aristotle characterized by seriousness and dignity and involving a great person who experiences a reversal of fortune. Aristotle's definition can include a change of fortune from bad to good as in the *"Eumenides"*, but he says that the change from good to bad as in *"Oedipus Rex"* is preferable because this effects pity and fear within the spectators.

[9] A Kenyan author, formerly writing in English and now writing in Gykuyu. His work includes novels, plays, short stories, essays and scholarship, criticism and children's literature.

BDD-A29570 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:57:33 UTC)

was based on European cultural imposition. On the other hand Obiechina, a famous Nigerian Igbo scholar and literary critic, considers that writers should maintain the balance between African literary aesthetics and European ones. For that reason his literary studies stress the importance of mastering the English language as well as ethnic vernacular verbal arts, which, intelligently combined, can enable a writer to produce a good hybrid novel like "*Things Fall Apart"*, which evidences Achebe's mastery of the English language as well as Igbo story-telling techniques. Likewise, Lewis Nkosi urges African writers and critics to acknowledge the language crisis in modern African literature, and he traces its origin to the politics of anti colonial struggle, which required that the writers' messages be expressed in European languages that the colonizers understood. The process created a dialogue between an educated African elite and European colonial masters who excluded the ordinary peoples of Africa, the masses, from participation in literature and politics. As a result, 80 percent of the peoples of Africa became lost as a potential audience of their literature.

On the contrary, David Westley asserts that because Europeans introduced literature as a means of promoting literacy in African schools, the influence of European traditions on African literary genres is undeniable. He makes his point by explaining how the European literary influence helped Africans, especially Nigerians, to become great writers who produced great literature, and to form literary clubs for the promotion of continental and national literatures of Africa. Furthermore, modern African literature written in European languages is now studied in American and European universities.

In writing "*Things Fall Apart"*, Achebe needed a medium through which to communicate with those who misjudged Igbo culture, mainly because they did not understand the Igbo language. So he chose the English language, a medium as international as his audience. That selection of a suitable medium increased his readership, even within his native land, Nigeria. Thus, Achebe could speak to the colonized and the colonizers, as well as to the non participants in the tragic encounter between Africa and Europe. He explained his choice of the English language on numerous occasions. This was a topic particularly discussed in *"Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays"* where he defended his use of English. Here he makes the distinction between national and ethnic literatures and takes the case of Nigeria as an example where the only possible national literature is the one written in English while the ethnic literatures are written in as many as six languages – Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Eifk, Edo, Ijaw - and the number may increase. That is why he rightfully says:

> *There are not many countries in Africa today where you could abolish the language of the erstwhile colonial powers and still retain the facility for mutual communication. Therefore those African writers who have chosen to write in English or French are not unpatriotic smart alecks with an eye on the main chance - outside their own countries. They are by-products of the same process that made the new nation-states of Africa. You can take this argument a stage further to include other countries of Africa. The only reason why we can even talk about African unity is that when we get together we can have a manageable number of languages to talk in -- English, French, Arabic. . .* (Achebe, *"Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays"* 25)

Another problem that has been raised in this respect is whether people can learn to speak a second language as effectively as the first or as effectively as to use it in creative writing. Achebe's answer to this question is a definite yes. But if we talk about the ability to use a second language like a native speaker Achebe's answer is that he hopes that will not happen. Because, he says:

> *It is neither necessary nor desirable for him to be able to do so. The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He*

BDD-A29570 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:57:33 UTC)

> *should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience."* (Achebe, *"Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays"* 26)

And indeed Achebe has managed to accomplish all these – the rendering of the African experience by means of the colonizers' language and literary forms. According to Abdul Janmohamed[10] syncretism is the word that characterizes Achebe's novel. He distinguishes between oral and chirographic cultures[11] and admits that the African writer if faced with the paradox of representing the experience of oral cultures through literate language and forms. Thus, oral cultures tend to valorize collectivity over individuality and to create individual personality structures that are in fact communal and externalized, not inclined towards introspection. The externalized individual, then, is easily managed through the symbolic exchanges involved in communal ritual and practices. Writing and reading, on the other hand, are solitary achievements that tend to throw the psyche back on itself, and the knowledge that one's thoughts, when they are committed to writing, can endure in time encourages the emergence and recognition of individuality.

In *"Things Fall Apart"* the writer conveys the flavor of an oral society in his style and narrative organization. We witness thus a combination of literate and oral techniques. Just as the style represents in writing the syntax and thought patterns of oral cultures, so the narrative operates on two levels: in its novelistic form the story of Okonkwo is unique and historical, yet it is told as if it were a well-known myth. The narrative acknowledges the latter fact in its opening sentence: *"Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond"* (Achebe, *"Things Fall Apart"* 1) The story of his poverty *"was told in Umuofia"*, and that of Ikemefuna's sacrifice *"is still told to this day"*. Similarly, other aspects of this narrative manifest themselves as oral tales. The white colonizers first appear to the hero in the form of stories. The reader is left with an impression that these tales are loosely connected but that the narrator of "*Things Fall Apart"* will arrange them in his own unique order. Even if the myth about Okonkwo's family is common knowledge it has to be told as if for the first time. For example, after presenting Nwoye's apostasy and after depicting for several pages the first encounter between the Christian missionaries and the Igbos, Achebe returns to Nwoye's conversation with the following sentences: *"But there was a young lad who had been captivated by Christianity. His name was Nwoye, Okonkwo's first son."* (Achebe, *"Things Fall Apart"* 127)

In oral cultures the distinction between the secular and the sacred does not exist and Achebe has to make sure that his characters do not seem foolish because they believe in the absence of that border. Therefore, he has to endow both his characters and the narrator with a double consciousness. For example, at the beginning of the legal-spiritual court where "*egwugwus"* first appear, the narrator tells us that:

> *Okonkwo's wives, and perhaps other women as well, might have noticed that the second egwugwu ad the springy walk of Okonkwo. And they might also have noticed that Okonkwo was not among the titled men and elders who sat behind the row of egwugwu. But if they thought these things they kept them to themselves. …"* (Achebe, *"Things Fall Apart"* 79)

Thus, the narrator demonstrates for us the double consciousness of the characters, while admitting to the reader that Okonkwo is *"dressed up"* as an "*egwugwu"* and then proceeding to deny that admission (i.e., Okonkwo *"was one of the dead fathers . . ."*). By maintaining a deliberate ambiguity, a double consciousness in keeping with the syncretism of a written narrative about an oral culture, the narrator refuses to emphasize either the chirographic or the oral viewpoint. The same effect is obtained through the monotony of the narrative voice and the timeless aura of the story. The voice remains unchanged even when it is retelling a folktale recounted by one of the characters. The

[10] Janmohamed, A. in the essay "Sophisticated primitivism: The Syncretism of Oral and Literate Modes in Achebe's Things Fall Apart" published in the volume *Understanding Things Fall Apart: Selected Essays and Criticism* edited by Solomon Iyasere.

[11] A culture preserved in writings. Chirography is the study of handwriting in all of its aspects: script, calligraphy, etc.

BDD-A29570 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:57:33 UTC)

chronology is extremely vague; temporal locations are designated only by phrases such as *"many years ago, years ago," "as old as the clan itself," "the worst year in living memory,"* and so on. The only specific periods in the novel are associated with ritual punishment: Ikemefuna's three years in Okonkwo's custody and Okonkwo's seven years in exile. Otherwise the novel is as timeless as one with a historical setting.

Due to his desire to maintain the oral tradition Achebe never explores deep interiorities. Thus Okonkwo remains a relatively flat character who has to be judged in terms of his narrative function. If Achebe introduces us to traditional Igbo culture through Okonkwo, he is doing so in order to show that it was civilized and, by extension, that the colonized individual need not be ashamed of his past. In this respect, the novel can be considered a skillful syncretism. Therefore the syncretism of Achebe's fiction has two important consequences: firstly, Achebe writes in English in order not to leave the representation of his society at the mercy of racist colonial writers and secondly, he manages to create a content which conveys a longing for a vanished heroic culture while the form transcends the division of the colonizer and the colonized.

Conclusions

For Achebe, an authentic African /Nigerian identity must incorporate both the European colonial heritage and the African pre-colonial traditions and culture. In this respect he is a precursor of contemporary theories of identity. In his reinterpretation of post-colonial Africa, Achebe is among the first to argue in favor of the recognition of identity as a container of multiple influences. For him the colonial experience is an inheritance, one *"grain"* among others that must be accorded due recognition, as should *"every grain that comes our way"*. The key question for Achebe is what encouragement these grains offer *"for the celebration of our own world, the singing of the song of ourselves in the din of an insistent world and song of others"* [12] This view of the unfolding identity as a song of Self and Other, a multitude of grains making up the African post-colonial experience, prefigures recent post-modern theorizing of identity as ambivalent and hybrid.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart.* London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1958.
2. Achebe, Chinua. *Morning yet on Creation Day: Essays.* London: Heinemann, 1975;
3. Begam, Richard. "Achebe's Sense of Ending: History and Tragedy in Things Fall Apart" *Studies in the Novel* 29(1997):n.pag.;
4. Iyasere, Solomon O., ed. *Understanding Things Fall Apart: Selected Essays and Criticism.* New York: The Whitston Publishing Troy, 1998;
5. Njoku, Benedict Chiaka. *The Four Novels of Chinua Achebe. A Critical Study.* New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 1984;
6. Paolini, Albert J., Anthony Elliott and Anthony Moran. *Navigating Modernity. Postcolonialism, Identity and International Relations.* Colorado and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999;
7. Yeats, William Butler. *Michael Robartes and the Dancer.* London and New York: Kessinger Publishing, 2003.

[12] Achebe, Chinua. "African Literature as Celebration: Reflections of a Novelist" *Dissent* Summer 1992, p.345 cited by Paolini, Albert J., Anthony Elliott and Anthony Moran in *Navigating Modernity. Postcolonialism, Identity and International Relations.* Colorado and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999, p. 110.

BDD-A29570 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:57:33 UTC)