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THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF AMOS TUTUOLA, CHINUA
ACHEBE AND WOLE SOYINKA, IN ENGLAND AND
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The University of North Carolina at Greensboro,
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THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF AMOS TUTUOLA,

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IN ENGLAND AND AMERICA,

1952-1974

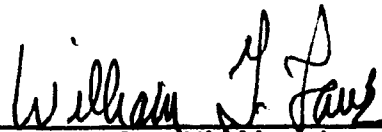
by

EBELE OFOMA EKO

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
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of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Greensboro
1974

Approved by

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "William Lane", written over a horizontal line.

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ABSTRACT

EKO, EBELE OFOMA. *The Critical Reception of Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka in England and America, 1952-1974.* (1974)
Directed by: Dr. William Lane. Pp. 276.

This study examined and compared the critical reception in England and America of three internationally known African writers, Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. It was hypothesized that because of England's world-wide colonial relationships and close ties with Nigeria, and because many English critics have taught in Nigerian universities, English reception of these writers would differ considerably from that in America: reflecting more tolerance for different cultural values and for background elements; a deeper insight into the significance of the works in their context; and generally more perceptive commentaries. It assumed that American distance from Nigeria would be reflected in American critics' relative lack of interest in the cultural backgrounds of the works, in colonial themes and in comparatively more parochial attitudes.

As background information, the study reviewed sample African and non-African views on critical standards for evaluating African works. Africans generally resent foreign critics who treat African literature in English as a mere extension of English literature. They insist that their literature be judged in context and purely on its own merits as works of art, while recognizing the deep influences of African cultures, forms, techniques, and world view. Most non-African critics agree with

these views in principle, if not always in practice. Some argue that African literature in English must be judged by Western canons of criticism.

The study compared English and American reception of Tutuola, Achebe and Soyinka in popular reviews, scholarly articles, critical surveys, and book-length studies. The course of their reputations was also charted. Tutuola's began high and started falling with the publication of his fourth book, but Achebe's and Soyinka's are still growing.

English critics proved, as expected, to be generally more receptive and sometimes more enthusiastic than Americans about Tutuola's non-standard English, Achebe's re-creation of traditional way of life, and Soyinka's Nigerian background and allusions to Yoruba gods and beliefs. Also as expected, writers were better received in academic articles than in reviews. There were no remarkable differences otherwise in English and American praise for Tutuola's imaginative and graphic adaptation of Yoruba folklore; Achebe's objective and terse style, and his simple but forceful language; Soyinka's confidence and skillful integration of traditional and modern theatrical elements. Both sides equally complained about the loss of "primitive magic" in Tutuola's later books, about what some regard as Achebe's over-emphasis on background descriptions and over-use of proverbs, and about Soyinka's complex plots, metaphysical subtleties and a tendency towards grandiloquence. Contrary to expectations, American articles on these writers were more numerous and more diversified. These studies attest to a growing interest and augur well for Tutuola's re-assessment, as well as increased appreciation for Achebe

and Soyinka.

In conclusion, the study emphasized the need for greater cosmopolitan outlook among foreign reviewers and critics, and through them the readership, for a deepening and broadening of criticism through research, which in turn would give greater weight to critical opinions, to the mutual benefit of African writers and those who read or interpret them.

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PREFACE

A study of the literary reputations of the three Nigerian writers Tutuola, Achebe, and Soyinka might seem premature at this stage in their lives. At 54, 44 and 39 years of age respectively, they presumably have many productive years ahead, and might yet produce better works. Some would therefore wait till the end of their literary careers to evaluate them more fully. Critical evaluation is a continuous literary process, however, and therefore of great importance at any stage in a writer's career, both for present information and as invaluable record for future studies.

What this study entails has been very clearly laid out by Professor Altick in his essay, "Tracing Reputation and Influence." According to him, "The study of reputation begins, obviously, with contemporary reception, whether of a single work or of an author's book-by-book production from the beginning of his career to its end. If a poem was an immediate success, what did it contain that so delighted its first readers? If it failed, what ideas or literary qualities either alienated the audience or, at best, left it indifferent? What specific features of style and content were most commented upon?"¹

This study attempts to document as fully as possible the contemporary reception of each of the three writers in England and America.

¹Richard D. Altick, The Art of Literary Research (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1963), pp. 93-94.

Relevant documents include (a) immediate reviews that greeted the works of art as they first came off the press and remarks made on the spur of the moment, very often too short to be of much importance for a critical evaluation, but interesting for the attitudes behind the remarks; (b) essays by critics, who presumably had time to read, digest and judiciously evaluate these works; (c) closer examination of these works in books of critical survey; and (d) book-length interpretative studies on individual authors. Each writer's international popularity is partly measurable by the number of translations of his works into foreign languages, their adaptations into plays, operas and movies, and where available, by the sales records.

By separating English critics from American critics this study consciously hopes to compare and contrast their views on, and attitudes towards the three writers in particular, and African literature in general. The colonial relations that Nigeria had with England, but not with America, supposedly left their mark on English sensibility that will become apparent in the course of this investigation.

Any study of critical evaluations of African works written in European languages can hardly brush aside the touchy and controversial issue: by what critical canon should African works be evaluated? Judging the answer to this question relevant to the ultimate character of a critic's evaluation of African works, I have presented as background information a sample of opinions from Africans and non-Africans on the application of strictly western standards to the assessment of African works.

The term "English" in this study covers opinions of all citizens

of the British Isles and Ireland. "American" refers to citizens of the United States of America. A few very pertinent studies by Canadian citizens are also included. Where nationality could not be verified, I have been guided by the periodicals carrying the articles.

Although this study is limited to three Nigerian writers of English expression, its perspective is ultimately wider than that of only three writers. Tutuola, Achebe and Soyinka, in that order, were the first three West African writers in English to win enthusiastic international acclaim. Others have joined them since then, but they still remain among the most discussed and written about by African and Western critics alike. Secondly, they are among the most versatile writers in Africa today. Between them, practically every genre is covered and well represented. Achebe is best known as a novelist, having published four successful novels. He has equally proved himself with two collections of short stories, two volumes of poetry and a large number of essays. Soyinka, best known as a playwright and director, has published ten plays, two novels, three books of poems and many articles and essays. Tutuola has published six books.

Each writer, in a way, represents a landmark in the growth of Nigerian literature of English expression. The publication of The Palm-Wine Drinkard in 1952 by Amos Tutuola, a writer of very little formal education, marked the beginning of modern West African literature in English. It unleashed a linguistic controversy which has not been resolved in two decades. His reception makes a most interesting study in attitudes, as well as an excellent comparison with the reception of the other two university-educated writers.

Achebe's publication of Things Fall Apart in 1958 brought special pride and a sense of achievement to African literature, and opened, as it were, a new literary horizon for a generation of young aspiring writers. As Ama Ata Aidoo, a young Ghanaian writer puts it in an interview, ". . . this is the reason why I love Achebe: that, you know, he gave so much--to me anyway he gave so much in confidence."²

Unlike Achebe, who graduated from the University of Ibadan, Soyinka spent long years away from home and began his writing career overseas. Like Achebe, he is firmly attached to traditional roots. With the publication of his Three Plays in 1963, a new dimension was added to West African literature--"confidence," "brilliance" and "sophistication" were the terms most commonly applied to him. Tutuola, Achebe and Soyinka are each masters of their own media, but the differences in the flavor and thrust of their works make good comparative bases in the study of how they appeal to English and American critics.

²Ama Ata Aidoo interviewed by Maxine McGregor. African Writers Talking, eds. Dennis Duerden and Cosmo Pieterse (New York: Africana Publishing Co., 1972), p. 26.

CHAPTER I
TOWARDS A CRITICISM OF AFRICAN LITERATURE

A well-known Ibo fable recounts the story of the hen who was too sleepy to attend an important general meeting of all animals. "Anything you decide will suit me fine," said the hen as she settled back to sleep. With no hen present to defend herself, the animals conveniently decided that any further sacrifices would be made with the blood of hens. This is often the fate of those who, for whatever reasons, fail to participate in affairs that directly affect them. Such would not have been the case if the hen were present to represent her interests as some Africans have done with regard to defining and criticizing their literature.

The appearance and phenomenal growth of African literature of European expression in the last quarter of this century and especially since the independence of the various countries, have attracted a number of European and American critics. In a field very much dominated by them even up to the present, some appear to operate under the old colonial assumption that Europe knows what is best for Africa because Africa can boast of no literary tradition worthy of serious attention. The lack of documented canons of criticism with precise definitions and time-tested standards has encouraged a free-for-all attempt to define, delimit and evaluate this rather strange literature in familiar language. Those who view it as an extension of Western literature try to fit it within Western traditions as efficiently as they can. Others who support change in

attitude and approach have come to realize that Africa has too many cultures inspiring different literatures to fit within that tradition. Commentaries by English and American critics, who consider African writings part of Western literature, will be followed by representative views of some African writers and critics on the issue. These will be followed in turn by a sampling of non-African views which in general appear to echo and sympathize with what Africans are saying.

An oft-quoted proverb in Achebe's works points out that "those who bring home ant-ridden faggots must be ready for the visit of lizards." In other words, Africans who are writing in European languages and are being published in Europe and America should expect the original users of those languages to evaluate and criticize their works. As Gerald Moore, the English critic, puts it: "We have been given this literature and we intend to examine it."¹

In exercising this prerogative, non-African critics have made statements, suggestions and assertions which have frequently resulted in complaints and counter statements from Africans. Chinua Achebe touches the heart of the issue for African writers when he observes: "The question then is not whether we should be criticized or not, but what kind of criticism. We as writers cannot of course choose the kind of criticism we shall get. But surely we can say why we hate a lot of what we get."²

The general character of criticism can in part be anticipated in

¹The Chosen Tongue (London and Harlow: Longmans, Green and Co., Ltd. 1969), p. xxiii.

²"Where Angels Fear to Tread," Nigeria Magazine, No. 75 (Dec. 1972), p. 61. Hereafter cited as Nig. M.

the guidelines a critic sets up for his evaluation of African literature. In the preface to his book Mother is Gold, Adrian Roscoe proposes: "A basic critical viewpoint must be established. If an African writes in English, his work must be considered as belonging to English letters as a whole, and can be scrutinized accordingly."³

Strongly in support of the views expressed by Roscoe, John Povey, an American critic, defends his demand for the application of Western standards on the grounds that African writers are not only deeply influenced by Western literature but are also writing primarily for a Western audience.⁴ Using J. P. Clark's poem "Abiku" to illustrate his point, Povey explains:

It is not necessary that we know the precise motivation for his [Clark's] mood nor, though this is more dangerous an assertion, it may not be necessary for us to even know the significance of "Abiku" . . . "child of the spirits." It is not even required that we learn much of the apparently urgent desire for the child in the African social context . . . Rather in tone and theme this poem is universal . . . This African poem is humane and familiar and because of this its feeling is available to all who read it sympathetically.⁵

³Mother is Gold: A Study in West African Literature (London: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. x.

⁴John Povey's remarks have been fully recognized as a major problem by African writers, but denied by many. See for example Chinua Achebe, "The Novelist as Teacher," New Statesman, 29 January 1965, p. 161. He observes that Things Fall Apart in the cheap paperback edition in 1964 alone sold about 800 copies in Britain, 20,000 in Nigeria, and about 2,500 in all other places. The same was also true of No Longer at Ease, he said.

⁵"Canons of Criticism for Neo-African Literature," in Proceedings of a Conference on African Languages and Literature Held At Northwestern University April 28-30, 1966, eds. Jack Berry, Robert P. Armstrong and John Povey (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966), p. 81.

By implication, Povey is interested in what is "universal" in African works as opposed to local beliefs and experiences. The more a poem treats "universal" themes, the better it will be read "sympathetically."

Another critic, Anthony Astrachan, essentially agrees with Povey's statement from the standpoint of the so-called "New Criticism," which assumes a creative work should provide amply for its evaluation without recourse to the external milieu of the work. He contends that, "If a novel gives me a society and individuals with manners, good or bad, that is enough. I may be able to provide more profound insights into Nigerian novels as I learn more about the world out of which they were written, but I can still make valid criticism of the novels . . . of the world within the novel without knowing too much about Nigeria or Africa. All I have to do is read the book."⁶

The English critic Robert Green begins his essay "Criticism of African Literature" by saying that African novelists are often read and discussed as if they were Europeans or Americans, writing in a Western aesthetic tradition, or as if their ancestors were Longinus and Aristotle. Such a remark would appear to anticipate a different conclusion from those of Roscoe, Povey and Astrachan. Having made such a statement, however, Green surprisingly observes that "we should apply the same critical criteria to Laye or Beti as to Bellow or Golding."⁷ Seemingly putting his belief into practice, he praises Achebe's Things Fall Apart and Arrow of

⁶"Does It Take One to Know One?" Nig. M., No. 77 (June 1963), p. 133.

⁷"Under the Mango Tree: Criticism of African Literature," New African Literature and the Arts I (New York: Thomas Crowell Co., 1970), p. 97.

God for what he perceives as "the unity and certainty of a European novel . . . a Western structure and logic."⁸

Most Africans loudly complain and reject the apparent implications of such opinions, interpreting them as subtle denials of the major influence of African cultural traditions and backgrounds in African literature. Suspicions are aroused that Europeans generally still dismiss Africa's past as having no cultural traditions or creative arts that merit serious attention. Furthermore, they argue that a call for the application of purely Western standards on the part of Westerners assumes that these standards are synonymous with universal ones. Speaking to this issue, Achebe says: "We sometimes make the mistake of talking about values as though they were fixed and eternal . . . The monopoly of Western civilization . . . Of course values are relative and in a constant state of flux."⁹ Jacques Rabemananjara, a well-known poet from Malagasy, puts it even more bluntly: "We say to you [the West], a universal form from which we are absent was truncated and we do not accept it."¹⁰

The very significant cross-cultural influences on most African writers of European languages cannot be and are not being denied by Africans for the sake of strengthening their side of the argument. Their recognition of this important fact was well articulated by the late

⁸Greene, p. 98.

⁹"The Role of the Writer in a New Nation," Nig. M., No. 81 (June 1964), p. 158.

¹⁰"The Negro Theatre at the Theatre of Nations," World Theatre, 9 (1960), 351.

Christopher Okigbo:

I belong, integrally, to my own society just as, I believe, I belong also integrally to other societies than my own. The truth is that the modern African is no longer a product of an entirely indigenous culture. The modern sensibility, which the modern African poet is trying to express, is by its very nature complex; and it has complex values, some of which are indigenous, some exotic, some traditional, some modern. Some of these values are Christian, some non-Christian.¹¹

In spite of this acknowledged Western influence by which John Povey justifies the application of Western canons, many Africans complain of its insufficiency. Joseph Okpaku literally warns that, "The present practice of judging African literature by Western standards is not only invalid, it is also potentially dangerous to the development of African arts. It presupposes that there is one absolute artistic standard and that, of course, is the Western standard. Consequently, good African literature is taken to be that which most approximates Western literature."¹²

Not every African writer, however, is of this opinion. Cyprian Ekwensi, a Nigerian writer, for example expresses faith in "universal" standards as adequate guidelines for non-African critics:

Surely literature is universal . . . the central subject of all literature . . . is universal. Human nature, subject to environmental and other factors, is basically the same the

¹¹ Christopher Okigbo interviewed by Robert Serumaga, Cultural Events in Africa, No. 8 (July 1965), p. 1.

¹² "Culture and Criticism," Journal of New African Literature and the Arts, No. 1 (1966), p. 13. Hereafter cited as JNALA.

world over. There is therefore no reason why a critic reading about human nature should not be free to express his own views provided he does not exceed the bounds of his own knowledge. By this I mean that he must apply universal principles of criticism. It is when he begins to dabble outside this orbit that he creates resentment.¹³

Ekwensi, however, delimits his statement when he calls attention to the possible "dabbling" outside the orbit of one's knowledge. Such criticisms have been pointed up by Achebe and another Nigerian writer, J. P. Clark. In essays only four months apart, each of them names three categories of non-African critics he has come across and by and large to whom he objects.

Clark's first category is made up of those critics who are only attracted to the "exotic" but are indifferent to works that do not satisfy their craving for the "unspoilt." Among this group he includes some of Amos Tutuola's critics, "Lisping and lapping the poor fellow out of breath until he got out of step with the flow of The Palm-Wine Drinkard that had brought them upon him. 'Oh, the man has begun taking lecture notes from Wolsey Hall,' they complained and swept aside The Brave African Huntress and all the old master's later efforts. 'His language is not African anymore,' they further wept . . ."¹⁴

Clark's second category includes anthropological critics who would conveniently lump together three very different calibres of writers like Ekwensi, Achebe and Nzekwu as explorers of the theme of cultural

¹³"Problems of Nigerian Writers," Nig. M., No. 78 (Sept. 1963), p. 218.

¹⁴"Our Literary Critics," Nig. M., No. 74 (Sept. 1962) p. 79.

conflict with no differentiation in the qualities of their various works. "Which of them knows his homework?" asks Clark.¹⁵ The third group he describes as those who would accept everything a so-called expert tells them because of their limited knowledge of the works and their backgrounds.

Achebe's quite different categories include the "peevisly hostile"; those amazed that Africans are able "to write at all, and in their own language too"; and a third group who realizes the folly of the other two and consciously try to evaluate the works seriously. This group's faults are, he thinks, a tendency towards dogmatism.¹⁶

Even more far-reaching in its implications than complaints about inadequate criticism is Ama Ata Aidoo's strong belief that only people from the same cultural background as the African writer can adequately judge the worth of his books. She is convinced that, for example, "nobody else but the English critical world could say that John Osborne is a good playwright."¹⁷

Aidoo's sentiments are shared by a large number of Africans, not only as a warning against dogmatic pronouncements by certain non-African critics, but also as an expression of desire and hope that the critical "mantle" will ultimately descend and remain on the shoulders of African critics. Achebe, for example, gives voice to such African hope when he states:

¹⁵Clark, p. 80.

¹⁶"Where Angels Fear To Tread," p. 61.

¹⁷Aidoo interviewed by Maxine McGregor, p. 25.

No man can understand another whose language he does not speak (and 'language' here does not mean simply words but a man's entire world view) . . . This naturally applies in reverse, although our position is somewhat stronger because we have a good deal of European history, philosophy, culture, etc., in books. Even so, I would not dream of constructing theories to explain "the European mind" with the same "bold face" that some Europeans assume in explaining ours.¹⁸

In his essay "The Criticism of Modern African Literature," the Nigerian critic Abiola Irele cites Irving Howe's definition of criticism: "That which offers seemingly endless possibilities for the discrimination of values, the sharing of insights, the defense of a living culture."¹⁹ Irele uses such a definition to clarify what he sees as the role of a critic vis-à-vis African literature. Paraphrasing Howe's definition, he observes that criticism is first an attempt at making reasoned judgments on literary works based upon fairly clear and definite criteria. Secondly, the critic depends much on his intuition, one that derives: "from his total experience, from his education, from his society, from his culture and, indeed, from his age . . . Literature takes place within a cultural setting, and no meaningful criticism is possible without the existence of a community of values shared by the writer and the critic which the critic later, in turn, makes meaningful to the writer's larger audience."²⁰

¹⁸ "Where Angels Fear To Tread," p. 62.

¹⁹ Modern Literary Criticism (New York: Dutton, 1955), p. 37. Quoted in Abiola Irele, "The Criticism of Modern African Literature," Perspectives on African Literature, ed. Christopher Heywood (London: Heinemann, 1968), p. 11.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 12.

Irele's point is that a different critical approach seems imperative because most African writers, in his opinion, strive with the conscious purpose of presenting an African experience and the best among them reflect in their works a specific mode of the imagination derived from their African background. He emphasizes the fact that African culture and oral traditions are not all in the past but are still alive, growing and transforming themselves in the present. He points to the profound influence of such culture on contemporary writers either by conscious assimilation, or through the more normal unconscious acquisition of culture.

In light of the African heritage of these writers and the manifestation of it in their works, Irele argues that the critic who refuses to recognize or consider it will "miss the finer modulations which give to the best in modern African literature interest and value."²¹

Reiterating that no literature can exist without roots or detached from the people it represents, Irele calls for a sociological approach, an effort to correlate the work with the social background for a fuller appreciation of what the writer is doing and how he is doing it, and for a better understanding of content and references. His insistence that critics see this literature for what it is, and judge it on its own terms sums up essentially what every African writer and critic has said. The issue at stake for Irele as well as for others is whether African literature continues to be evaluated as an off-shoot of Western literature or assumes its place in world literature in its own right.

²¹Irele, p. 17.

Among non-African critics, many have echoed the sentiments of their African counterparts. They vigorously argue for more serious attempts by the critic to familiarize himself with pertinent aspects of a culture that influences most of these works and, above all, for the acceptance of the fact that African literature is not a slavish imitation of Western literature but a different entity demanding evaluation accordingly. Speaking specifically in answer to Anthony Astrachan's remarks, Austin Shelton, an American critic, challenges them as unworthy of a serious critic of African literature:

One fundamental mistake inherent in this attitude as well as its basically self-centered injustice, is the failure to distinguish between the casual reader and the serious student of African literature. How does one know if the manners are good or bad? What is knowing too much about Nigeria or Africa? The casual reader might pick up a work of African literature and read it for its effect upon him as he reacts to it according to his own system of values. Any "valid criticism" which he might make certainly cannot be put to an objective test, but rather will depend upon what he construes as the "world within the novel" . . . that is, his "valid criticism" will depend upon his subjective and uninformed response to the work as he experiences it without reference to any other information. But this is not what the reader does, even casually, in his reading of European literature. As a European, he brings to that other literary experience a whole life of information and awareness of the values of European culture in general. . . . Thus, such an attitude about the reading of African literature can give only short shrift to that literature.²²

Shelton's point has been more succinctly made by another American

²²"Critical Criteria for the Study of African Literature," Literature East and West, 12 (1968), 7.

critic, Robert P. Armstrong in conclusion to his paper on criticism. He calls for a frank admission on the part of critics that they are dealing with a new literature that will shape its own forms, dictate its own diction, and express its own values. What is needed, he says is a determined analysis of the nature of this new literature by those most able to handle it.²³

In the opening chapter of his book, The Emergence of African Fiction, Charles Larson explains why "frank admission" of problems is necessary. He states that some critics and reviewers in this field who have been trained in anthropology, sociology, or political science are often naive about literature. Some qualify as critics because they have been missionaries or Peace Corps Volunteers. The few who are literary critics are often quite unfamiliar with non-Western writing. This last group, in Larson's view, attempts to force unfamiliar works into a Western mold and become unsympathetic when such works refuse to fit the mold.²⁴

No matter what views and opinions individuals hold concerning approaches to criticism of African literature, few will probably disagree with Bernth Lindfors' assessment that "literary criticism remains the most underdeveloped of African arts."²⁵ The reason, in his opinion, is that

²³"African Literature and European Critics," Paper presented at the 7th Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, Chicago (October 1964), p. 11.

²⁴The Emergence of African Fiction (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), p. 13.

²⁵"Approaches to Folklore in African Literature," Afrikan Folklore, ed. Richard Dorson (New York: Doubleday, 1972).

most critics remain essentially outsiders to the finer and more sensitive nuances of African culture despite their impressive credentials as long-term residents of Africa, professors of literature or anthropology, and genuinely interested students of African culture. Lindfors, like Shelton, Armstrong, Larson and many others, recognizes the need for a different critical attitude and approach and he in turn calls for admitting limitations and for making a conscious attempt to be as well informed as possible.

Fully aware of such considerations, African critics, unlike the hen of the fable, have not been indifferent as Europeans have tried to define African literature and approaches to its criticism. Their voices have been loud and clear, some confident, even assertive, others apologetic and pleading but all revealing a fundamental concern for an African literature that can stand its ground beside other literatures of the world as an autonomous body of writing rather than an extension of European literature.

As a result of African critics' presence and persistent demands throughout these discussions, non-African opinions are changing. Some still argue for the total application of Western critical standards to the exclusion of all other considerations. Many others, however, through better acquaintance with this literature, have come to different conclusions. They counsel caution, refrain from dogmatism, and demand more research as essential ingredients for a healthy and meaningful growth in the still very open and promising field of African literary criticism.

In a literary world so strongly dominated by the West, two factors appear essential for an African work in English to achieve international

recognition: first, it must be discovered and promoted by a European; and second, it must satisfy prevailing literary tastes in Europe and America. In 1896, the first notable anthology of African oral literature was published with a foreword by August Seidel in these words: "A wild African! A black beast! Fancy him actually thinking and feeling, his imagination proving creative! More than that even, fancy him having a sense and appreciation of poetic form, of rhythm and rhyme! It sounds quite incredible, yet it is true."²⁶

In 1952, Faber and Faber discovered Tutuola and Dylan Thomas heralded The Palm-Wine Drinkard with comparative surprise: "A brief thronged, grisly and bewitching story--written in English by a West African."²⁷ Achebe was discovered in 1958 by Heinemann and Soyinka by Oxford University Press in 1963, and later by Rex Collings. These writers achieved fame partly because of the famous publishing houses backing them, but mainly because aspects of their writings appeal to Western readers and critics. Each writer, although strongly rooted in traditional cultures and values, has managed to transcend the local, and achieve a measure of universality (or what the West says it is). Achebe and Soyinka are among those African writers and critics resisting Western domination of African literature. It is, nevertheless, a fact that, at least for the present, their reputations are largely based upon their reception by English and American critics.

²⁶ Geschichten und Lieder der Afrikaner (Berlin, 1896), Quoted in Janheinz Jahn, Neo-African Literature (New York: Grove Press, 1968), p. 55.

²⁷ Dylan Thomas, London Observer, 6 July 1952, p. 7.

CHAPTER II

AMOS TUTUOLA

Amos Tutuola was undeniably the first West African writer of English expression to win considerable international recognition. The publication of The Palm-Wine Drinkard in 1952 marked the beginning of modern Nigerian literature and apparently took the literary world by surprise. An important review by Dylan Thomas launched the book on its way to fame and the author on his way to becoming one of the most controversial writers of modern African literature.

Tutuola had only six years of formal education. He was working as a messenger at the Labour Department, Lagos, Nigeria, when he wrote his first book. The hand-written manuscript was sent to the United Society for Christian Literature, which passed it on to the distinguished publishing house of Faber and Faber. On May 2, 1952, The Palm-Wine Drinkard was published and became an instant success. A year later, Grove Press issued an American edition. Within three years it was translated into French, German, Italian and Serbo-Croatian. The book has been translated into ten European languages to date.¹

Obviously surprised and encouraged by his success, Tutuola went

¹According to a letter to me from Faber and Faber, 8 August 1974, these are published translations of The Palm-Wine Drinkard: Croatian, Czech, Danish, Finish, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Norwegian and Swedish with Romanian in preparation. Other references to translations are verified from the same source.

on to publish five more books in a similar genre. Each was a completely new story with a beginning and a conclusion, and none was sequel to the other. My Life In the Bush of Ghosts appeared in 1954. The same year, Grove published an American edition with a foreword by Geoffrey Parrinder, English professor at University College, Ibadan, Nigeria. It has been translated into Japanese and Serbo-Croatian. Simbi and the Satyr of the Dark Jungle, published in 1955, has been translated into Dutch and Russian. In 1958, Faber brought out Tutuola's fourth book The Brave African Huntress which tells the story of a huntress' search for her brothers imprisoned by hostile pigmies in the bush. In 1962 came the publication of Feather Woman of the Jungle, to be re-issued in 1968. It took the form of an old chief's reminiscence as he entertains his village for ten nights with tales of great adventures. The sixth and latest work, Ajaiyi and his Inherited Poverty came out in 1967. It tells of two orphaned children trying to make a living and get out of debt with the aid of numerous witch doctors, witches and wizards.

The Palm-Wine Drinkard was adapted as a Yoruba opera by Kola Ogunmola in 1968. The stage version of The Drinkard in the original Yoruba with parallel English translation was first performed in April 1963 at the Arts Theatre of the University of Ibadan, with Kola Ogunmola as the Drinkard. It was an immense success with the public, especially African intellectuals, and received an excellent review from Soyinka.² It must be admitted that much of the success was the result of excellent

²See Molly MaHood, "Drama in New-Born States," Presence Africaine, 32, No. 60 (1966), 38. For the review see Wole Soyinka, "Amos Tutuola on Stage," Ibadan, No. 16 (June 1963), pp. 23-24.

stage artistry on the part of Kola Ogunmola and the artist-designer Demas Nwoko, as well as the talented performance by members of Ibadan School of Drama. The success of the opera in Nigeria was later interpreted as evidence of the self-consciousness of educated Nigerians who enjoyed Tutuola in the secrecy of vernacular but were acutely embarrassed by what he exposed of them in his non-standard English.³

Tutuola's Reception in Critical Reviews

Perhaps no work ever received such diametrically opposed reactions as did Tutuola's The Palm-Wine Drinkard. The initial sharp differences in views between African and non-African reviewers of this work have become so well publicized as to form an integral part of many reviews and critical studies of Tutuola. On this ground, it is helpful to briefly review Tutuola's African reception.

Most non-African reviewers and critics have based their judgment of Tutuola's African reception on two negative letters to the Editor of West Africa magazine in 1954 by two Nigerian readers. Babasola Johnson's letter, dated April 10, asserts that The Drinkard should never have been published, because its language is foreign "to West Africans, and English people, or anybody for that matter."⁴ He calls it a "strange lingo," largely a translation of "Yoruba ideas into English" with words "taken

³See Adrian Roscoe, Mother is Gold (Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 112.

⁴West Africa, 10 April 1954, p. 322.

from the dictionary at random." He also claims that Tutuola is hardly original, having borrowed extensively from D. O. Fagunwa, a very popular Yoruba vernacular writer of folk literature.

A second letter dated June 5 came from Adeagbo Akinjogbin.⁵ He was suspicious of the praise being poured on Tutuola by Western critics, and charges that most Europeans are pleased to believe all sorts of fantastic tales about Africa, because of their profound ignorance about the continent. It is his belief that Tutuola's books, containing "some of the unbelievable things in our folklores," are meant to appeal to Europeans and confirm their weird concepts about Africa. He argues that since Tutuola is no academic man, it is likely that something other than his high literary standard has attracted many European and American readers. Admitting that he has not read the books, Akinjogbin says that he gathers they have no literary value nor do they show marks of "possible future development." Another reviewer calls Tutuola's decision to write in English "daredevilry," and "unflagging belief in himself."⁶ In a 1963 letter published in Transition, The Ghanaian writer, Christina Aidoo asks, "has Tutuola anything besides a good imagination and bad grammar?"⁷

"Less educated" Nigerians were believed to react very differently to Tutuola from the educated and more image-conscious ones. According to

⁵"Letter to the Editor," West Africa, 5 June 1954, p. 513.

⁶Olawole Olumide, "Amos Tutuola's Reviewers and the Educated African," New Nigerian Forum, 1, No. 3 (October 1958), 5-16.

⁷Letter in Transition, 4, No. 10 (1963), 46.

Gerald Moore in one article concerning a lecture experience, students reacted with "delighted wonder and amusement" to extracts from The Drinkard and clamored for copies to buy.⁸ There has been a tendency among foreign critics to make too much of the few well-publicized unfavorable letters on Tutuola without mentioning the many favorable reviews he received from other Nigerians.

Even before Dylan Thomas' review appeared, Cyprian Ekwensi reviewed the work with understanding and appreciation. He writes:

The whole story is a happy mixture of West African folk tales . . . Tutuola has, however, added his own touch of the story teller by setting his action not in the past, but in a mixture of the present, future and past. . . . The language is simple and if it sometimes lapses into the ungrammatical, it is graphic in places and musical in many. . . .⁹

In reply to Johnson's letter, another reader, Ade Sodipo, sharply disagrees with his objections and describes Tutuola as a writer with literary merit whose "romantic style" perfectly matches the folktale genre he is working in.¹⁰ A fellow Yoruba writer, Wole Soyinka, was among many who have come to recognize Tutuola's significance. He comments that of all Tutuola's novels, "The Palm-Wine Drinkard remains his best and the least impeachable. This book, apart from the work of D. O. Fagunwa who writes in Yoruba, is the earliest instance of the new Nigerian writer gathering

⁸"Amos Tutuola: A Nigerian Visionary," Black Orpheus, 1 (Sept. 1957), 34.

⁹"A Yoruba Fantasy" West African Review, 23 (1952), 713.

¹⁰"The Books of Amos Tutuola," West Africa, 5 June 1954, p. 195.

multifarious experience under, if you like, the two cultures, and exploiting them in one extravagant, confident whole."¹¹ In a more recent re-assessment, Omolara Leslie says that in his skillful minting of material Tutuola has "chosen from all and sundry," to make "something beautiful, new and undeniably his own."¹² In a recent interview with me, Chinua Achebe says of him: "In fact he has created a new language, a new way of looking at the world."¹³

In a 1962 review of Feather Woman of the Jungle in Times Literary Supplement, an English critic gives a vivid description of the reception that greeted Tutuola's first two books. He recalls that their appearance caused a "literary sensation." In his words:

There had been nothing quite like them before and the strangeness of the African subject matter, the primary colors, the mixture of sophistication, superstition and primitivism, and above all the incantatory juggling with the English language, combined to dazzle and intoxicate. Novelty seekers, propagandists for colored races, professional rooters for the avant-garde--any avant-garde, anywhere and at any time--were alike delighted, and none more vociferously than the thinning ranks of the Apocalypse.¹⁴

Geoffrey Parrinder's "Foreword" to My Life in the Bush of Ghosts

¹¹Wole Soyinka, "From a Common Backcloth: A Re-assessment of the African Literary Image," The American Scholar, 32, 3 (Summer 1963), 360.

¹²"The Palm-Wine Drinkard: A Re-assessment." Journal of Commonwealth Literature 9 (1970), 48-56. Hereafter cited as JCL.

¹³Achebe interviewed by Ebele Eko. Amherst, Massachusetts, 16 March 1974.

¹⁴"The Mixture as Before," Times Literary Supplement, 25 May 1962, p. 369. Hereafter cited as TL.

suggests other interested groups of readers as well:¹⁵ the ordinary reader who finds it a fascinating "pure story"; anthropologists and students of comparative religious interest in unrecorded mythology of West Africa on the nature of death, fear, and disease as well as evidences of "culture contact"; psychologists trying to understand the thoughts of Africa; and even scientists, who, Parrinder claimed, would find the work of "scientific value."

One of those from the "thinning ranks of the Apocalypse" led the way in England. On July 6, 1952, Dylan Thomas gave an enthusiastic review of The Palm-Wine Drinkard and set the stage for its warm reception in England and beyond.¹⁶ He describes it as a "brief, thronged, grisly and bewitching story, or series of stories--about the journey of an expert and devoted palm-wine drunkard through a nightmare of indescribable adventures, all simply and carefully described, in the spirit-bristling bush. . . ." He adds that "nothing was too prodigious or too trivial to put down in this tall, devilish story written in young English." Such a fascinating summary from so important a poet as Dylan Thomas was sufficient to make Tutuola quite popular overnight. Dylan Thomas was obviously delighted with the work as pure fantasy in a wonderland of marvels, monsters, witches and magic.

Commenting briefly on the content and language of The Palm-Wine Drinkard, in a review entitled "Nightmare" (1954), V. S. Pritchett

¹⁵"Foreword," My Life in the Bush of Ghosts (New York: Grove Press, 1954), pp. 9-15.

¹⁶"Blithe Spirits," London Observer, 6 July 1952, p. 7.

characterizes the novel as West African imagination 'working with a lazy freedom in the English language.' The soft, amazed voice of Tutuola, he says, "led us easily out of real life into a fantasy life as barbarous, bloody and frightening as the masks of the tribal ceremonies."¹⁷ Pritchett seems to imply that "bad grammar" and other linguistic eccentricities in the book are at least in part the result of Tutuola's taking too much freedom with the language. "The soft, amazed voice" is obviously another way of describing the oral quality of Tutuola's language, his shyness, naiveté and total lack of inhibitions, in a voice so earnest as to "easily" lead the reader. He says for example that "Mr. Tutuola's first paragraph knocks one flat." The parallel Pritchett draws between tribal masks and the barbarous elements in the fantasy life could imply a certain confusion in the critic's mind between tribal life represented by the masks and the fantasy life described. If this interpretation is correct, it would substantiate the fears so vividly, even if wrongly, expressed in Akinjogbin's letter.

Pritchett suggests that Tutuola's endless fancy is far more than local in its significance, expressing rather "the unconscious of a race," as well as nightmare elements in the European unconscious. Its ageless quality makes a strong impression on him which he describes thus: "Tutuola's voice is like the beginning of man on earth, man emerging, wounded and growing. He is not the specimen of the folk-lorist and anthropologist, but a man living out a recognizable human and moral ordeal." Pritchett's final statements inevitably leave the impression that the

¹⁷"Nightmare," New Statesman and Nation, 6 March 1954, p. 291.

critic somehow equates Tutuola with the drinkard in his story, and suggests that the fantasy lived by him might indeed form some part of "a recognizable human and moral ordeal." One would infer from his statements that Pritchett was pleased with Tutuola because his fantastic creation reflects in certain ways his preconceived image of Africa and its tribal ceremonies.

Tutuola's English is the subject of Tom Hopkinson's comment in his review of Langston Hughes' An African Treasury.¹⁸ He seems excited by the trend of what he calls the new "mad" African writing. Tutuola is to him the example par excellence in West Africa of those who "don't learn English" or "study the rules of grammar; they just tear right into it and let the splinters fly." Hopkinson's seeming delight with Tutuola's splinters is no exception. A possible explanation could be the one offered by Gerald Moore in his critical article, "Amos Tutuola, a Nigerian Visionary." Speaking of those Nigerians embarrassed by Tutuola's "mistakes" he says, "Their ears, being less sensitive than those of an Englishman to all that has become jaded and feeble in our language, are likewise less able to recognize the vigour and freshness that Tutuola brings to it by his urgency of expression and refusal to be merely correct."¹⁹ It is this "novelty" of language, this "vigour and freshness" that Hopkinson describes so graphically.

Judging from English reviews that greeted The Palm-Wine Drinkard,

¹⁸"Afro-English Awakening in Our Time," London Observer, 17 Sept. 1961, p. 28.

¹⁹Moore, 34-35.

there was no mistaking the genuine enthusiasm of the reviewers over the book in general and its language and style in particular. There was an apparent consensus that Tutuola had produced something imaginatively substantial in this first literary surprise from West Africa.

John V. Murra of Cornell University reviewed The Palm-Wine Drinkard under a title lifted from Pritchett's review: "The Unconscious of a Race" (1954).²⁰ A good part of the review is concerned with commenting upon the rejection of Tutuola's work by many West African readers as represented by the letters of Johnson and Akinjogbin. He roundly condemns their attitude as evidence of colonial mentality and a regrettable belittling of Nigeria's rich oral tradition. Murra offers an explanation for the puzzle and shock which Western delight with Tutuola had brought to some Africans. He claims that to those who gained their excellent English or French at the cost of neglecting their own language, "all this recognition for translating Yoruba ideas in almost the same sequence as they occur to his mind must indeed be a puzzle and a shock."²¹

Murra's strong belief is that independence will bring with it a greater pride in oral tradition and a better recognition of Tutuola's great contributions. Murra is especially pleased with the "graphic" and terse quality of Tutuola's style, claiming that his written English is identical to his spoken one. In a direct echo of Johnson's letter, Murra notes that, "Turns of phrase which so charm the Western reader are frequently literal translations from the Yoruba."²² Johnson meant his remark

²⁰"The Unconscious of a Race," Nation, 25 Sept. 1954, pp. 261-262.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 261.

to be derogatory, but Murra strongly approves it as not only appropriate but also poetic. There is little doubt that Murra is as charmed as any other "professional rooters for the avant-gard." Tutuola's works in his opinion, deserve to be the foundation for a new Nigerian literature.

Reviewing The Drinkard in the New York Times Book Review, Selden Rodman calls Tutuola "a true primitive," and compares the effect of his book to that of certain "primitive painters."²³ The pleasure a sophisticated reader will derive from his un-willed style and trance-like narrative," he says, "is akin to the pleasure generated by popular painters like Rousseau or Obin." Rodman points to the work's sensuous appeal claiming that, "only a dullard who has buried his childhood under several mountains of best-selling prose could fail to respond to Tutuola's naive poetry." He sees in its primitive nature something that could appeal to the innate and child-like spirit in every man.

Under the title "African Primitive," Lee Rogow in Saturday Review characterizes The Drinkard as "a fantastic primitive," written in an English "with inflections and phrasings which make it sound like a new-born language, just as the new scale of Debussy made his compositions into a new kind of music."²⁴ He agrees with Rodman's comparison of the work to Henri Rousseau's paintings, seeing in it "the same sense of wild innocence the mystery peeping through the jungle, the vivid imagery, the surprising grace note, the energy, and the force."²⁵ He finds "the

²³"Tutuola's World," New York Times Book Review, 20 Sept. 1953, pp. 5, 29.

²⁴"African Primitive," Saturday Review, 17 Oct. 1953, pp. 30, 44.

²⁵ibid., 44.

primitive interplay of language and meanings" very interesting, but stresses that as a story, The Drinkard is disconnected and unabsorbing.

Rogow points to the work as proof of Freud's theory of the collective unconscious. According to him, "numerous portions of this fable are a rag-bag of mythological elements recalling legends from the Greek, American Indian, Norse, Mayan, etc. Thus 'The Palm-Wine Drinkard's' journey becomes for the reader a fantastic and evocative trip through the dream jungles of the unconscious."²⁶ Rogow seems to suggest that the universal elements in The Drinkard, as well as the freshness of its language give the work considerable stature, despite its limited merit as a story.

Anthony West in The New Yorker, on the other hand, finds little of interest in The Drinkard, besides the naive and unself-conscious manner of Tutuola's narrative. In his judgment, it is "an enjoyable piece of effervescence" taken much too seriously by the publisher who calls it "a novel from Africa," and by an unnamed distinguished critic who declares that "it explores a path American writers might profitably follow."²⁷ West mainly stresses that Tutuola is not a novelty in any true sense and that his fame is due to circumstantial luck. West is seemingly unsurprised by anything in the book: "Mr. Tutuola, like Daisy Ashford is a natural storyteller, and his principal strength is much the same, the lack of inhibition in an uncorrupted innocence."

Tutuola's style and brand of English which so delighted English

²⁶Rogow, p. 44.

²⁷The New Yorker, 5 Dec. 1953, p. 206.

critics because of their vigor and freshness, barely impresses West. He describes the style instead as the result of Tutuola's scrambling together the inventive freedom of the novel with the rigid form and freedom of embroidery of his native folktale and letting it "flow onto paper." The content as well has nothing new to offer: "They will seem startling and new only to those who were not lucky enough to be raised on the old fashioned nursery literature," he claims. West concedes that Tutuola's total lack of inhibitions gives the book a charming, pristine quality. In a commentary that recalls a similar emphasis on primitivism in other American reviews as well as in Pritchett's, West says, "One catches a glimpse of the very beginning of literature, that moment when writing at last seizes and pins down the myths and legends of an analphabetic culture." At the end of a brief extract he remarks: "This sounds naive and barbaric, and it is."

Since Tutuola, according to West, is novel neither in style nor content except by being "naive," "primitive," and "barbaric," he explains his success as unrepeatably good luck:

It is only possible to envy Mr. Tutuola his good luck in being a castaway on a little island in time where he can be archaic without being anachronistic. His situation, however, is unique, and it would be fatal for a writer with a richer literary inheritance to imitate him. . . . The Palm-Wine Drinkard must be valued for its own freakish sake, and as an unrepeatably happy hit.

West's claim that anyone brought up on Western folklore would "meet one familiar character after another in Mr. Tutuola's story," raises the important critical question, also taken up by later critics, of how familiar Tutuola is with Western myths and tales and to what extent, if any,

he is influenced by them.²⁸

In The New Republic, John Henry Raleigh is also concerned with the question of influence. He calls The Palm-Wine Drinkard "a fantasy with allegorical overtures, [which] seems to be equally beholden to the primordial bush world of West Africa . . . and to the British civilization."²⁹ Raleigh follows his brief synopsis of the book with the observation that it possesses "an imagination that is valuable and that seems to be progressively eradicated as civilization advances." His review ends with a warning which is to prove prophetic in its accuracy. He fears that the writer of The Drinkard will inevitably be repetitious and boring if he writes again in a similar genre.

The Grove edition of The Palm-Wine Drinkard for American audiences, thus, was deemed important enough to be reviewed in leading newspapers and magazines. An examination of these reviews reveals that Americans were less enthusiastic over Tutuola than were the English and their emphases were quite different. His language was by and large overlooked, except for Lee Rogow's mention of the "newborn language" and Selden Rodman's reference to the "naive poetry" of a "true primitive." Few reviews, on the other hand, failed to mention the primitivism and primordial nature of the work. Rogow stressed the identification of Tutuola with his primitive hero, "the primitive play of language," and the primordial roots of the tales in a universal unconscious. Anthony West thought it reflected "an analphabetic culture," not only naive but

²⁸See Ann Tibble's view in African/English Literature (London: Peter Owen, 1965), pp. 95-101.

²⁹The New Republic, 14 Dec. 1953, p. 21.

"barbaric," qualities he thought contributed to making Tutuola's familiar tales almost unique. His feeling that this was a lucky unrepeatable "happy hit" for Tutuola was echoed by Raleigh's warning that a second performance in the same genre would inevitably be repetitious and put reviewers off. Judging from the American reception of The Palm-Wine Drinkard, with the exception of Murra's, the book might well be described in Anthony West's words as "an enjoyable piece of effervescence taken a great deal too seriously" by some, namely the English.

According to the reviewer in the Times Literary Supplement, Tutuola's second book My Life in the Bush of Ghosts enjoyed similar favorable and enthusiastic reception as did the first.³⁰ His admirers found in it those elements which had thrilled them before: a mixture of primary colors, superstition and primitivism, and his special English. Reviewing the book favorably in the New Statesman and Nation, V. S. Pritchett calls Tutuola a man of exceptional imagination, who describes universal experience "in a way that will be deeply interesting to psycho-analysts and anthropologists . . . [and] has the immediate intuition of a creative artist working by spell and incantation."³¹ He finds in the work what he refers to as moments of "Alice in Wonderland, Bunyan and the Bible, and a groping, Christian jubilation." In Pritchett's opinion, the main strength of the story lies in the earnestness of tone and total lack of self-consciousness which most critics emphasized in the first book. "In its simple seriousness," he remarks, "the marvellous is domesticated."

³⁰"The Mixture as Before," TLS, 25 May 1962, p. 369.

³¹New Statesman and Nation, 6 March 1954, p. 291.

In his Foreword to the book, Geoffrey Parrinder praises it as both original and highly imaginative.³² More specifically he comments: "His direct style, made more vivid by his use of English as it is spoken in West Africa, is not polished or sophisticated and gives his stories unusual energy."³³ He is impressed by Tutuola's ability to take over the traditional mythology and fit it into his own unique pattern, and to take ancient beliefs and "impregnate" them with modern touches. In Black World an American critic simply described the book as a "nightmarish story" which combines the writer's "extraordinary imagination and the genuine mythology of West African tribal life."³⁴

By the time The Brave African Huntress was published in 1958, the novelty of Tutuola was evidently wearing thin.' V. S. Naipaul in the New Statesman asks with some irritation: "In what other age could bad grammar have been a literary asset? And how has it preserved its wonderful badness?"³⁵ Naipaul briefly disposes of the book by describing it as "the most straight forward and thinnest of Tutuola's works," lamenting that it lacks "the primeval nightmare fascination of earlier books." In obvious reference to Pritchett's earlier review, he charges that there is little in this new book "to attract the psychoanalyst and the anthropologist." His unsympathetic conclusion is finally based on the question

³²Parrinder, p. 10.

³³ibid.

³⁴Black World, 20, No. 4 (Feb. 1971), 68.

³⁵New Statesman, 5 April 1958, p. 444.

of Tutuola's English: "Were it not for the difficult language, the book could be given to children," he writes. Naipaul apparently wants Tutuola's English to change but for him to hold to his established subject and his naive way of telling it.

Writing in New York Herald, Gene Baro confesses that he is a Tutuola fan, fascinated by the strange world he evokes.³⁶ "Tutuola grips the imagination," declares Baro, both by the content as well as the language of his work. The language strikes him specially as vivid and poetic, and quite often suggesting various levels of meaning. He good humoredly asks, "Can we afford to shake the juju of high literary criticism against a writer who is capable in 'The Brave African Huntress' of such expressions as 'I was so sad as the rat which was sent to the cat.'" Baro, nonetheless, finds the book less successful than earlier ones: "Gluttonously one asks for more imagination, for wilder creatures and episodes. One's attention flags here and there in the long jungle chase . . ."³⁷

Another reviewer was less favorable. "If Amos Tutuola were a native New Yorker instead of a native West African," he declares, "his dreams would no doubt be exorcised on an analyst's couch." He laments that many of these interesting dreams are in a way lost to the reader because "the author has not really learned to communicate." He blames the work's "flat matter-of-fact tone" for a crucial loss in suspense and dramatic effect.³⁸

³⁶"Nigerian Storyteller's Strange World," N. Y. Herald Tribune Review, 25 Jan. 1959, p. 6.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸R. V., "Adebisi's Odyssey," N. Y. Times Book Review, 2 Nov. 1958, p. 41.

Contrary to the views of many other critics, the reviewer fails to find any relationships between Tutuola's world and Western mythology or even Yoruba deities. The "weird adventures" remind him instead of "gruesome nightmares and of the fact that none of us is far removed from savagery." Like many other reviewers of Tutuola, however, he observes that the writer's inadvertent bad grammar "lends a certain picturesque quality to the book," although he feels that this does not help to illuminate its meaning.

Simon Raven, in the Spectator, begins his review of The Feather Woman of the Jungle by recalling the charms of the first book. He recalls that Tutuola in that book delighted many people by the "natural" poetry of his unself-conscious and semi-literate English.³⁹ But now, Raven is convinced that Tutuola's idiom in the new book has changed: "it has become deliberately childish. One can only assume that he has out-grown its uses, and hope that he may find a more mature means of expression to match his undoubted powers of imagination."

Like Naipaul, Raven longs for the nightmare quality of The Palm-Wine Drinkard, "the brew of popular imagination which dealt lavishly in Freudian creatures and colors . . ." It is the naiveté he misses the most because, he says, Tutuola's naiveté tarnished after the first book, and for that reason the next three novels were less successful. In his opinion, that quality has all but evaporated through Tutuola's pruning of earlier nightmarish adventures, and his use of structure reminiscent of A Thousand and One Nights is strong evidence that Tutuola's ample

³⁹Spectator, 4 May 1962, p. 597.

imagination and "child-like" style are both being smothered for good.

In his review of Feather Woman of the Jungle in the New Statesman, Neal Acherson directly touches on Naipaul's and Raven's discomfort. "Certainly," he says, "some of Tutuola's admirers seem to wish that West African writing could go back to a stage of half-sophisticated transition . . . but the truth is that no writer as acclaimed as the author of 'The Palm-Wine Drinkard' can stay half-sophisticated for long, and this latest novel shows that his effects are a good deal more calculated than they used to be."⁴⁰ The title of Acherson's review "Tall, Devilish," from one of Tutuola's enthusiasts, Dylan Thomas, is probably intended to imply similar solidarity. His opening commentary about "educated Nigerians who often groan with irritation at the British for fussing over Tutuola" lends further support to this view, but the reviewer lacks the enthusiasm and excitement of Dylan Thomas.

Another reviewer in the Times Literary Supplement criticizes Tutuola for qualities which critics have praised, rejecting the book for the opposite reasons that Simon Raven gives. The title "The Mixture as Before" clearly indicates the reviewer's belief that there has been no noticeable difference in content, style or language since Tutuola's first book. He warns that the same mixture which has made the first work a "literary sensation" can in no way satisfy "the more critical 60's."⁴¹ The critic argues that the exotic delight which Tutuola

⁴⁰ "Tall, Devilish," New Statesman, May 1962, p. 683.

⁴¹ TLS, 25 May 1962, p. 369.

provided for different groups in 1952 has become an annoying and boring repetitiveness by 1962: Increasingly, he says, 'one's reaction was one of irritation, a desire to say 'so what?' in quite the rudest way, and to protest against what is dangerously near a cult of the faux-naif.' Like Naipaul, he has expected certain improvements in style, even a change of genre. In his opinion, Tutuola has remained a prisoner of his exotic imagination, producing "the same mixture," which has become less and less a novelty.

Tutuola seems to have found again some of his old magic in his latest work Ajaiyi and His Inherited Poverty. The reviewer in the Times Literary Supplement calls him an African Piers Plowman, whose story brings to mind Bunyan and the Harrowing of Hell. Commenting on the uniqueness of his language and style he says: "Part of the delightfulness of his work stems from the beauty of a working-class man asserting himself, his own instinctive taste operating on scraps of the colonizers' literature and on old African tales and proverbs, criticizing and blending his sources into a unity. Always the voice is that of a man with little schooling who talks marvellously."⁴²

In his retrospective review in 1970 of the works of Tutuola and Soyinka entitled "Two Nigerian Writers: Tutuola and Soyinka" Bruce King, an American, echoes the prevailing opinion on Tutuola's literary reputation. He sees that after The Drinkard, Tutuola's other works "less convincingly represented the interplay of human and spirit worlds; what was

⁴²"It Was Like That," TLS, 18 Jan. 1968, p. 53.

once a genuine product of the imagination became mannered and self-conscious."⁴³ He does not, however, include Tutuola's latest book among these. He believes that although Tutuola is a "more technically competent" and a "more purposeful writer" than before, Ajaiyi and His Inherited Poverty shows much of the original imagination of the earlier works. He characterizes the work as "uneven, engaging, sometimes brilliant, repetitious, didactic, and occasionally flat."

King views Ajaiyi as not only an imaginative adaptation of Yoruba myths and legends but also, because of its Christian didacticism, as Tutuola's criticism of his tribal culture. According to his moral and religious interpretations, "Ajaiyi's travels are meant as a journey from pagan materialism and cruelty to Christian morals and charity, a journey from the tribal past to the modern world of individualized conscience."⁴⁴ King suggests that Tutuola is here expressing "an important area of the African psyche" and that the Creator, seen as good and merciful, stands for Western culture, while tribal gods, depicted as fierce, cruel and blood thirsty, represent the African culture which Tutuola is supposedly rejecting in favor of Christianity and the West. If this is true, it would certainly represent a radical departure from Tutuola's unemotional and neutral attitude towards the pagan background of his other books. Here also is the assumption that Tutuola is speaking his mind through Ajaiyi or is Ajaiyi himself.

⁴³"Two Nigerian Writers: Tutuola and Soyinka," Southern Review, 6 (1970), 843-848.

⁴⁴ibid., 844.

Whether Tutuola's new didacticism represents a conscious change of direction or not, there is little doubt that King is favorably impressed by Ajaiyi on that account, as well as what he sees as Tutuola's return to the rich and creative imagination of his earlier books. Other reviewers were quite favorable, but the rally came too late, and not strong enough to change the image of a writer-in-decline which the middle works earned him.⁴⁵

Judging from the downward trend of Tutuola's reputation after he hit the pinnacle of his fame with The Palm-Wine Drinkard, it is hard not to agree with Anthony West in The New Yorker that it proved to be "an enjoyable piece of effervescence" for reviewers. They soon believed, as Gerald Moore did, that by the publication of the fourth book "the magic had leaked away." Several explanations are possible. The several groups which so warmly received The Palm-Wine Drinkard were drawn to it by specific interests and by the freshly new qualities in the work. Novelty seekers reveled in his exotic and primitive tales. "Propagandists for the colored races" were pleased with this literary product of British civilization, a native writing in English, however imperfectly. They hoped for grammatical and stylistic improvements with time and experience. "Rooters for the avant-gard" envisaged him as the founder of Nigerian literature by virtue of his reliance on Nigerian oral tradition. Tutuola's growing tendency to borrow names and terms from Western culture was an immense disappointment.

⁴⁵C. Wordsworth, Manchester Guardian, 14 Dec. 1967, p. 11; A. Goldman, Listener, 14 Dec. 1967, p. 792.

The evidence suggests that the first reviewers of Tutuola rated him so highly in originality, imagination, and naiveté in their initial outburst of enthusiasm that later reviewers reacted to this and tended instead to underrate his later achievement.

An important factor in the trend of Tutuola's reception was time. From 1952 until 1958 when Achebe's Things Fall Apart was published, Tutuola had virtually the English West African literary scene all to himself. By 1958, he ceased to be a literary novelty. Cyprian Ekwensi had published two novels, although not as internationally well known, but Achebe's first book was of such import that much critical attention was diverted from Tutuola to him. Other writers joined the arena in quick succession, and Tutuola was never again to enjoy the very favorable reception he got for his first two works.

Although English reviewers were initially Tutuola's greatest admirers, they were also among the severest critics of his later books. Significantly, hardly any English critics cared to write articles on him once his reputation started falling, and other African writers started publishing. Americans, on the other hand, were slow in warming up to Tutuola, but even with the appearance of Achebe and Soyinka, they never abandoned him. Tutuola was to receive his warmest reception in American articles.

Tutuola's Reputation in the Critical Journals and Critical Introductions

According to a well-known Ibo proverb, "Wisdom is like a goatskin bag, every man carries his own." Even so, each critic has brought to his evaluation of Tutuola's works his own experiences, literary biases, personal views and approaches, theories and lines of argument. All these and probably much more besides, have their parts in ultimate assessments. Approaches have been almost limitless, and it is not always possible to determine the specific point of view of every critic. Some are very general and impressionistic, some linguistically, esthetically or stylistically inclined. Some are comparative mythologists, others symbolists, and yet others moralists. Some critics are analytical and methodical in their essays, others satisfied with summaries and few broad commentaries. Whatever the approach, every critic's hope has obviously been that his article would shed a little more light of understanding on Tutuola's works.

Geoffrey Parrinder, lecturer at the University College, Ibadan, in his Foreword to the New York edition of My Life in the Bush of Ghosts, 1954, explains the nature of Tutuola's stories, saying they are genuinely African myths, "such as are told in countless villages round the fire or in the tropical moonlight." He claims that the author has not only fitted traditional mythology into his pattern, but actually has lived them over in his imagination.⁴⁶ On the question of where to draw the

⁴⁶ Geoffrey Parrinder, "Foreword," My Life in the Bush of Ghosts (New York: Grove Press, 1954) pp. 9-15.

line between Tutuola's imagination and actual life as he has observed it, Parrinder does little to allay such fears as those expressed in Akinjogbin's letter. "If anyone doubts that there is fear in African life," he says, "Tutuola's story should convince him of its reality. The unknown bush with its frightful spirits stretching out their tentacles, . . . is a dreadful place . . . and is believed in by millions of Africans today."⁴⁷

Parrinder is equally clear on the unique qualities of Tutuola's language and style and his significance for Nigerian literature. He describes his writings as "original and highly imaginative," his style as "direct," "vivid," unsophisticated, and energetic. With less than prophetic insight, however, he sees in Tutuola's style "the beginning of a new type of Afro-English literature," giving the rather false impression that he is typical of what is to be expected from West Africa. Later critics like Collins and Murra, however, have shared Parrinder's views that Tutuola was a founder of a new Nigerian literature.⁴⁸

Parrinder above all is convinced that Tutuola is a real discovery, a writer in whom diverse interest groups can find common interests: lovers of "pure story," scientists, anthropologists, students of comparative religion, psychologists following the teaching of Jung on mythology and the archetypes of the unconscious. Parrinder has probably done most to introduce Tutuola to the public. By the same token, his strong opinions

⁴⁷Parrinder, p. 11.

⁴⁸See Harold Collins, Critique, 4, No. 1 (Fall 1960), 28; and John Murra, Nation, 25 Sept. 1954, p. 262.

about him have invariably influenced certain trends and assumptions in Tutuolan criticism.

Gerald Moore was one of the earliest and probably the most important English critic of Amos Tutuola. He was previously a tutor in Extra-Mural Studies at Ibadan University. His first long paper "Amos Tutuola: A Nigerian Visionary," (1957) is an interpretative criticism of the writer's first three books.⁴⁹ His approach can be characterized as that of a comparative mythologist, because he proposes that Tutuola is a visionary story-teller rather than a novelist and that the plots of his works are variants of the familiar heroic monomyth: "Departure-Initiation-Return." His method is to examine Tutuola's linguistic and aesthetic achievements in light of this mythic context. Many of his remarks have since become commonplace in Tutuolan criticism and a few even famous.

Rejecting the view of critics who describe Tutuola's works as novels, Moore sees that his affinities are more with Bunyan, Dante, and Blake rather than with the Western novel. He regards him as "a visionary writer," one who manages to impose remarkable unity on his random material through the intensesness of his imaginative vision. In this regard, Tutuola is in Moore's judgment, "something much rarer and more interesting than another novelist." He argues that, as a visionary writer, Tutuola lives through his material in his imagination before putting it down, citing as proof Tutuola's answer to the question about the order of events in his tale: "Because that is the order in which I came to them."⁵⁰

⁴⁹Gerald Moore, "Amos Tutuola: A Nigerian Visionary," Black Orpheus, 1, (September, 1957), 27-35.

⁵⁰Parrinder, p. 11.

Furthermore, he shows through closer comparison with Bunyan that both writers are men of little formal education who create by seizing "images of the popular imagination."

Moore summarizes and analyses parts of the plots of Tutuola's first three books to demonstrate his theory that each episodic plot is a variation of well-known Western heroic monomyths and quests but does not suggest that these have had direct influence on him. Rather, he establishes several parallels. The Drinkard's quest to capture Death, is compared to the descents of Gilgamesh, Orpheus, Heracles or Aeneas into the underworld. He sees resemblances between Tutuola's birth of the half-bodied baby from the swollen thumb and the Western Tom Thumb. He parallels the meeting with Faithful Mother to "meeting with the Mother Goddess," the White Tree to Ygddrasil, the Bo Tree to the tree of knowledge, and the sojourn in the belly of the Happy Creature to the motif of Jonah in the whale's belly. Tutuola's adventures, according to Moore, are more than local or African in implication, they are symbolic. They stand in a way for the "journey into the racial imagination; into the sub-conscious, into the spirit world that everywhere co-exists and even overlaps with the world of waking reality."⁵¹

In accordance with this theory, Moore interprets the structure of My Life in the Bush of Ghosts as "a kind of extended initiation" or rite of passage," in which the incredible series of adventures strongly recalls Alice in Wonderland. The theme of Simbi and the Satyr of the Jungle, a wealthy girl's desire for suffering, is in his argument, another

⁵¹ Moore, 27.

way of expressing "life-renewing, regenerating experiences . . . the mythic version of the law of the Conservation of Energy, intuitively apprehended,"⁵² and a theme clearly exemplified in Sir Gawayne and the Green Knight and in Wynnere and Wastcoure. By relating several adventures and themes in Tutuola to more familiar Western myths, he seems to support the Freudian theory of the human unconscious.

Moore's impressions on Tutuola's style and language are equally clear in recognizing the advantages of Tutuola's oral technique, though he blames the occasional "longeurs" of the first two books on a wholesale application of oral narrative style. He finds in Simbi a stylistic and narrative improvement over the other works. It demonstrates, he says, that Tutuola can "prune his exuberance fairly drastically without sacrificing any of the warmth and richness of his speaking human voice."⁵³ At the same time, he recognizes in Tutuola a "unique prolific genius," who has added vigour and freshness to English language through his forthright and bold expressions, his vivid images, and his "refusal" to be merely correct. He emphasizes Tutuola's unique value as an example of self-confidence to other African writers; such confidence has enabled him to dig deep within himself and the great imaginative oral tradition of his people, in order to create in "a style at once easy and energetic, naive and daring," something uniquely his own.⁵⁴

⁵² Moore, 32.

⁵³ Ibid., 34.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 35.

Parrinder's foreword and Moore's article represent rare critical discussions of Tutuola by English critics other than the examinations of his works in books of critical survey. Both critics thought very highly of the writer's power of imagination, his vividness of description and vigor of language. Significantly, each represents a different "school of argument" over Tutuola's place in Nigerian literature. Parrinder unequivocally prophesies that he is the beginning of a new kind of literature. Some critics, English and American alike, agree with him. Moore represents the opposite view that Tutuola, in spite of all his positive values, is a literary dead end. He has seemingly been proved right.

The fact that most critical articles on Tutuola have come from American critics is quite significant, especially when one remembers that most American reviewers have not been very impressed. Although reviewers have established a downward trend in Tutuola's reputation, his merit has been frequently re-assessed by African and non-African critics alike.⁵⁵ Their job has been a difficult one, because more than any other African writer, Tutuola has been subject to controversies, speculations, assumptions and uninformed interpretations. As Gerald Moore so aptly puts it: "Anyone attempting a critical assessment of Tutuola has first to hack his way through a mass of prejudice, misunderstanding and false assumption

⁵⁵See Wole Soyinka "From a Common Backcloth: A Re-assessment of the African Literary Image," The American Scholar, 32, No. 3 (Summer 1963), 360; Omolara Leslie, "The Palm-Wine Drinkard: A Re-assessment," JCL, 9 (1969), 48-56. See Bernth Lindfor's plea that dearth on Tutuolan research be ended: "Tutuola: Debts and Assets," below.

which resembles a Tutuolan jungle."⁵⁶ Quite a few critics have gotten entangled in that mass with little time and energy left to discuss other aspects of Tutuola's works.

Harold Collins is among the earliest Americans interested in Tutuola. A Professor of English, he has published articles, read papers on African literature, and written the only book-length study on Tutuola to date. His basic approach is one of defense against adverse criticisms especially from Nigerian readers and intellectuals. In an earlier article, "Founding A New National Literature: The Ghost Novels of Amos Tutuola" (1960), Collins states his intentions openly: "I should like to give my impression of the 'ghost' novels or mythical romances of the Nigerian writer Amos Tutuola and defend these remarkable works from the disparagement of his own educated countrymen, offering by the way some brash speculations on how Nigeria . . . can get itself a new national literature."⁵⁷ Collins vehemently resents what he terms general hostility against Tutuola from educated Nigerians, especially John Murra whom he quotes extensively. His method for defending Tutuola is to concede in part the objections raised and then either justify Tutuola or else show that the positive results of his techniques outweigh the negative.

To reviewer Paul Bohannon who describes Tutuola's language as "a combination of schoolboy English, officialese and West African pidgin," Collins replies that Tutuola's English, "though furiously

⁵⁶Gerald Moore, "Amos Tutuola: A Modern Visionary," Seven African Writers (Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 39-57.

⁵⁷Harold R. Collins, "Founding A New National Literature: The Ghost Novels of Amos Tutuola," Critique 4, No. 1 (Fall 1960), 17-28.

non-standard," is distinctly English.⁵⁸ Taking the offensive, Collins admits some charges of crudity of language in Tutuola by enumerating what he finds unconventional: "his neologisms, his unidiomatic verbs and pronouns, his syncopations in syntax, his fragments (the bad kind), his typographical oddities . . . his mispunctuation of indirect quotation, his lack of analysis or commentary and of developed scenes, his wooden conversational exchanges, his very loose episodic structures, his anticlimaxes." Despite such a catalogue, Collins argues that Tutuola's "clarity, directness, vigor and felicity of Anglo-Nigerian language" more than make up for the crudities. He calls his language "a perpetual delight." Like Moore before him, Collins emphasizes that Tutuola's Nigerian detractors cannot appreciate that vigor perhaps because they are not native to the English language.

On characterization, he argues that each protagonist is quite substantial and believable, especially the two women characters, Simbi and Adebisi, in whom he asserts that Tutuola has given to literature "spunky, practical, comradely Nigerian women of strong initiative and impressive militancy."⁵⁹ Collins explains that the episodic structure of Tutuola's narratives is determined and justified by the folk-tale tradition he is writing in. To the suggestion that Tutuola's stories are commonplace knowledge, he answers that his originality as a gifted artist is obvious in his ability to adapt, humanize, sophisticate, and create

⁵⁸Paul Bohannon, "Translation: A Problem in Anthropology," The Listener, 13 May 1954, pp. 261-262.

⁵⁹Collins, p. 19.

something unique out of them. His answer to the suggestion of plagiarism is that, 'we might simply say that Tutuola came by his folklore in just the same way the editors of the collections did.' It is Collins' strong opinion, as it is John Murra's, that in view of all these positive aspects in Tutuola, his works deserve to become "the foundation for a Nigerian national literature."

Like V. S. Pritchett and Anthony West, Collins points out the close parallels between the fantasy land of Tutuola's books and the "pristine, pagan, old African atmosphere," suggesting the correspondence as one reason Tutuola is embarrassing to modern Africans. Concluding that despite the infiltration of Western customs, techniques, and artifacts into his works, Tutuola is "essentially immersed in the mythical past," Collins cites the use of myth in European literatures as honorable precedent: "Any English graduate student could tell the West Africans" he points out, "how much our English literature owes to mythology, brandishing proof out of the careful studies of Douglas Bush."⁶⁰ He urges that Nigerians not be ashamed of their old way of life because "Europeans are not ashamed of their barbaric past!"

Finally, Collins agrees with Mr. Akinjogbin's fears that a heedless reader could be badly misled about Nigeria from Tutuola's works, but he sees such possibility as a social, political and public relations consideration which has nothing to do with the literary merits of Tutuola. His main concern is to look after the literary interest of the "shy" writer who will not defend himself. Citing the literary values in Tutuola

⁶⁰ Collins, p. 24.

of, creativity, humaneness, verve and gay humor, Collins remains convinced that Tutuola is indeed the beginning of something that can and should grow into a national literature.

Tutuola's closeness to oral tradition is, in part, the concern of Robert McDowell in his critical essay, "Three Nigerian Storytellers: Okara, Tutuola and Ekwensi" (1967).⁶¹ He discusses Tutuola as an excellent example of the few contemporary Nigerian writers whose writings deal almost exclusively with African value systems and characters and show deep roots in Nigeria's rich oral traditions. McDowell's approach is primarily linguistic. He is intrigued by the unique effect of Tutuola's language, his mixture of declarative and interrogative sentences, his use of "modern tropes" to give his work an air of "wild strangement" which is in perfect accord with the weirdness of the events he describes. He believes, like Moore and Collins, that Tutuola's sparse formal education is indeed to his advantage. His reproduction of the syntax and rhythms of Nigerian vernacular results in what McDowell called "provocative new English."

Tutuola's extensive use of Nigerian myths, which critics so favorably comment upon, also appeals to McDowell, who like Moore, sees the myriad events in Tutuola's adventures as symbolic experiences, initiating the quester into the mysteries of the universe. Evidently, Moore's commentaries on Amos Tutuola in Seven African Writers, was the greatest influence on McDowell's paper. He reiterates Moore's views that The Palm-Wine Drinkard is the most imaginative and least influenced of the

⁶¹Robert E. McDowell, "Three Nigerian Storytellers: Okara, Tutuola and Ekwensi," Ball State University Forum, 10, No. 3 (1967), 67-75.

books and that by the appearance of the fourth book, "the magic had leaked away." Like Murra and Collins, McDowell expresses the hope that Tutuola's achievement in oral tradition will become a source of inspiration for future Nigerian writers. He chooses to disbelieve Moore's suspicion that Tutuola's style is a 'cul de sac.' According to him, "the first three books are imaginative and replete with linguistic suggestion for other writers who have not yet drawn on the characteristics of vernacular languages to enrich their European prose."⁶²

Bernth Lindfors, editor of Research in African Literatures at the University of Texas in Austin, has been one of the strongest American advocates for Tutuola. Some of his articles on him include "Amos Tutuola and His Critics," "Amos Tutuola and D. O. Fagunwa" and a pamphlet combining the above two topics and more besides entitled "Tutuola: Debts and Assets."⁶³ Only the pamphlet will be examined. Lindfors discusses Tutuola's reception in Africa and abroad at the beginning and at the end of his study. In the middle portion he analyzes the style, structure and literary influences on Tutuola's books. The study is obviously intended to be an encompassing general introduction to Tutuola's writings and criticism for the student as well as the general reader.

The study begins with a detailed background of Tutuola's literary career and then successively discusses the trend of Tutuola criticism;

⁶² McDowell, p. 73.

⁶³ Bernth Lindfors, "Amos Tutuola and His Critics," Abbia, 22 (1969), 109-118; "Amos Tutuola and D. O. Fagunwa," JCL, 9 (1969), 57-65; "Tutuola: Debts and Assets," Tirage a part, Cahiers D'Etudes Africaines, 10, 2e Cahier (Paris: Monton & Co., 1970).

his place within and debt to Yoruba oral tradition; stages in Tutuola's development as a writer; the various possible foreign influences on him; his debt to the prolific Yoruba writer, D. O. Fagunwa; and Tutuola's unfavorable reception in West Africa.

On the state of Tutuola criticism, Lindfors charges that the writer has been unduly neglected because critics have shirked from the research necessary for meaningful analysis of his works. He notes that, almost without exception, critics have tried to draw parallels between his stories and more familiar Western works, and in the attempt to classify him, have applied a variety of familiar labels to him, most of them inadequate.

A major goal of this study is to establish Tutuola firmly within Yoruba oral tradition by examining the evidence of its influence on his writings. Lindfors finds ample evidence in The Palm-Wine Drinkard of the typical folktale hero, the episodic loosely coordinated inner structure, the cyclical narrative pattern, the oral style which preserves the flavor and rhythm of speech, and a large number of native tales--all these and more conclusively demonstrating Tutuola's heavy debt. Lindfors applies these findings to the other works by extension, on the basis that Tutuola's "method and content, have not changed much over the years."

Despite such findings, Lindfors acknowledges that enough departures from Tutuola's earlier style are evident in Simbi and the Satyr of the Dark Jungle to point to definite efforts on Tutuola's part to improve himself. These include use of third person narrator, division into numbered chapters, more developed dialogues, and more names of creatures

derived from European mythology. In comparing Tutuola and Bunyan, as many critics have suggested before, Lindfors finds many parallels but stresses that Yoruba oral tradition far more than the Bible, has inspired the storyteller. He urges more research into influences on Tutuola from books he is known to have read.

Of greater import for his study is Tutuola's debt to D. O. Fagunwa, something every critic mentions but none has explored in detail.⁶⁴ Out of his research, Lindfors finds that substantial evidence of direct influence exists in motifs and structure but less in content. Since both writers borrow from Yoruba oral tradition, Lindfors points out the difficulty of ascertaining whether Tutuola has borrowed directly from Fagunwa. On the other hand, he establishes sharp differences: Tutuola unlike the other is neither a moralist nor sentimentalist and is much more pagan than Christian in his use of background. Lindfors concludes that Tutuola has not consistently followed Fagunwa, favorably emphasizes the creative and original in Tutuola's works, and demonstrates--contrary to what other critics have claimed--that Tutuola has not plagiarized.

Lindfor's discussion of Tutuola's unfavorable reception in West Africa recognizes and answers criticisms made by earlier commentators. Much more convinced of Tutuola's significant place in Nigerian literary scene than Moore is, he claims for him extraordinary influence. He argues that Tutuola's phenomenal success has strongly encouraged such later writers as Cyprian Ekwensi and Chinua Achebe. He is convinced, moreover,

⁶⁴This most popular of Yoruba writers published over nine books from 1948 to 1951 which included three books of fiction, two travel books and four school readers. See Books from Africa 21, (April 1952), 34.

that Tutuola's lack of linguistic inhibitions has set a good precedent for subsequent linguistic experimentation by other writers.

Nancy Schmidt's "Tutuola Joins the Mainstream of Nigerian Novelists" (1968)⁶⁵ represents a departure from the common view. Her theory that Tutuola has become something of a social and moral critic contradicts statements that he has barely changed. In reply to criticisms that Tutuola is a freak or totally different from other Nigerian writers and completely uncommitted, Schmidt demonstrates that in his latest book Ajaiyi and his Inherited Poverty, the opposite was true. Tutuola is trying to be more contemporary in his blend of traditional and modern values, the important role assigned to Christianity, and in his use of more conventional style. According to Schmidt, Ajaiyi more than any other book anachronistically includes motor cars, airplanes, steamships and other modern artifacts although the time of the story is two hundred years ago. She notes that more scenes are set in the real world and actions are judged in terms of contemporary and Christian values more than ever before.

Secondly, she underlines the important part which Christianity and Christian values play. Besides descriptions of the Almighty Creator and his town in heaven, as well as the Devil and his disciples, the story shows Ajaiyi ultimately saved from his poverty by his adherence to the Christian ethic of selflessness and to such good works as building churches and preaching about God. Most importantly, Tutuola seems to judge his contemporary society in accordance with Christian ethics. Ajaiyi

⁶⁵Nancy J. Schmidt, "Tutuola Joins the Mainstream of Nigerian Novelists," Africa Today, 15, No. 3, (June-July 1968) 22-24.

emphasizes the usefulness of religion, demonstrates loyalty in his relationship with his sister, and indirectly condemns corruption and bribery among judges and politicians by showing the corrupt doing penance in purgatory. In Schmidt's opinion, Ajaiyi's renunciation of such behavior and values as has led politicians and judges to purgatory indicates "Tutuola's disapproval of contemporary Nigerian political life."

Compared to Tutuola's earlier books, Schmidt contends, Ajaiyi is written more in line with standard English. The unfavorable result, as she sees it, is a lessening of originality and imaginative impact of both imagery and characters. For all the above reasons, Schmidt concludes that Tutuola's Ajaiyi shows him within the mainstream of Nigerian literature in commenting and moralizing on the social climate in his country. As an anthropologist, Schmidt regrets the new direction Tutuola appears to be taking. She thinks Tutuola is unique in standing alone, and that his attempt to join the mainstream has been made at the cost of losing some of his imaginative qualities, of becoming anachronistic, and of becoming less effective in his new role as moralist.

In his theoretical and critical essay, "The Narrative and Intensive Continuity: The Palm-Wine Drinkard" (1970), Robert P. Armstrong advances the theory that the "media" of Tutuola's narrative which place it firmly within Yoruba narrative tradition--situationality, language, relationality and experience--are characterized by an episodic and dense manner of expression described as "intensive continuity."⁶⁶ Such a mode,

⁶⁶Robert P. Armstrong, "The Narrative and Intensive Continuity," in Research in African Literature, ed. Bernth Lindfors, (University of Texas, Austin, 1970), pp. 9-34.

he argues, is also common to other Yoruba arts: music, dance, sculpture, painting and oral narrative. His theory is based on the assumption that "one's method of telling a story is the same whether he does it in one language or in a very different one."

Armstrong's approach is theoretical, philosophical, esthetic, and comparative all combined. In the course of his analysis, he makes several favorable evaluative remarks on Tutuola's language, style and relationship to foreign works. While admitting some validity to Gerald Moore's comparison of Tutuola with Bunyan, Dante and Orpheus, Armstrong stresses, as Lindfors does, that more differences than similarities exist. He argues instead for an even closer resemblance with Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, especially in the episodic nature of their plots and the directness of styles: "an immediacy, a forthrightness, a freshness and a keen sense of delight, a delight particularly to be seen in the common determination to undertell the touching, the outrageous, the amusing."⁶⁷

Sharing the sentiments of Collins and Murra, Armstrong proclaims Tutuola a major artist rejected and maligned by his fellow Nigerians because of his failure to observe the norms of grammar. He sets aside such objections as evidence of mean envy and foolish embarrassment and calls The Palm-Wine Drinkard a work of great imagination: "incredibly inventive, superbly well told, touched with dignity and humor, with the poetic as well as the prosaic, with naiveté and with sophistication, with joy, with pathos, and with a strong appreciation of what is universal

⁶⁷Armstrong, p. 19.

in the human condition."⁶⁸

Like Collins, he notes other aspects of the work which separate it from the novel as known in the west: the episodic nature of the events, the one dimensionality of characters, the absence of development of interiority, and of psychological detail and language marked by assertion rather than connotation. Such qualities make the world of the book one of "hard concreteness and sharp definition," a world in which logic and planned action have limited uses. Similar limitations, according to Armstrong, exist in the work's philosophical content, range, situation and medium of experience. Only when raised to the level of Myth, he maintains, does the search take on significance for every man.

In concluding that The Drinkard fulfills the requirements of the Yoruba esthetic, Armstrong believes that his study answers the objections to "many of the characteristic 'flaws' or 'shortcomings' [which] Europeans often appear to see in the West African practice of narrative." Such an esthetic system at the level of the unconscious, he argues, affects West African writers to one degree or another and should be taken into account by responsible critics.

O. R. Dathorne "Amos Tutuola: The Nightmare of the Tribe," is also primarily concerned with Tutuola's place in Yoruba oral tradition.⁶⁹ Dathorne's approach is that of a mythologist and symbolist; he identifies Tutuola as the first Nigerian writer "to see the possibilities

⁶⁸ Armstrong, p. 20.

⁶⁹ O. R. Dathorne, "Amos Tutuola: The Nightmare of the Tribe," in Introduction to Nigerian Literature, ed. Bruce King (London: Evans Brothers Limited, 1971), pp. 64-76.

of the imaginative translation of mythology into English" and the first to attempt to "fuse folklore with modern life."⁷⁰ He does not hesitate to read symbolic meanings and allegorical implications into Tutuola's quests. Dathorne, who has also taught at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, declares with Lindfors, that Tutuola has been misunderstood and, therefore, praised and blamed for wrong reasons in England, Europe and West Africa. He disagrees with Dylan Thomas for calling Tutuola's first work "a brief, thronged, grisly, bewitching story;" with the British National Bibliography for classifying his books under "English miscellany;" and with those who refer to him as the writer of wrong English. Dathorne sees Tutuola instead as a unique writer with a marvellous ability to fuse folklore and myth with modern life.

To the accusation of plagiarism, Dathorne answers, like Collins, that Tutuola successfully re-orders Yoruba folklore while demonstrating skill in omitting irrelevant elements and adding new features. Dathorne finds Tutuola's "Wrong English" to be a deliberate adaptation to suit a character who is obviously illiterate and a palm-wine drinker. His sensible compromise, as Dathorne calls it, between "raw pidgin and standard English," is felicitous in enlivening the story and projecting it "beyond the level of sociological documentation." In his judgment, Tutuola is 'neither 'quaint' nor 'semi-literate,' neither a 'natural' nor a 'sophisticate.' He is a conscious craftsman, who knows where his own talents lie."⁷¹

⁷⁰Dathorne, p. 64.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 72.

Reading Tutuola on the symbolic level, Dathorne asserts, for example, that the drinkard's tapper symbolizes "physical and spiritual purity," and that the drinkard's adventures helped him "grow spiritually." In similar vein, he interprets the adventures of the boy in the bush of ghosts and of Simbi on two symbolic levels: as fantasy of the mind, "where the phantoms of childhood battle in a last desperate effort with the concrete realities of adult world"; or as a "transition from the innocence of a traditional way of life to the turbulence of modernity." Dathorne is as convinced that Tutuola consciously writes on this symbolic level as he is that his distorted language is conscious and deliberate.

Despite his complaints about lack of depth in Tutuolan criticism, however, Dathorne follows the practice of other reviewers in dismissing Tutuola's later works with few sentences. He claims that after The Palm-Wine Drinkard, there is "a falling off" in Tutuola's work. About My Life in the Bush of Ghosts and Simbi and the Satyr of the Dark Jungle, he complains that Tutuola fails "to relate the disorganized adventures of either protagonist within the ethical significance of the novel." He dismisses The Brave African Huntress and The Feather Woman of the Jungle as "solely concerned with the more sensational side of adventure," and as "short stories weakly linked together by a central narrator," but lacking in coherence.

In Dathorne's opinion, therefore, favorable reception of Tutuola has to be reserved for his masterpiece--The Palm-Wine Drinkard. Even though the fusion of folklore and modern life is evident in all Tutuola's works, he believes that the creative and imaginative skills needed for

effective "fusion" are most evident in the first.

Although Tutuola was first known in England and was more enthusiastically received by English than American reviewers, the reverse seems true for critical evaluations of him. More American critics have written articles about him in periodicals than the English. Of the critics discussed, three have lectured at the University of Ibadan, close to Tutuola's hometown of Abeokuta. This familiarity has presumably helped shape their appreciation of the literary tradition and social milieu of the works.

Approaches have differed widely, ranging from impassioned defense, to comparative mythology, linguistic, philosophical, interpretative and holistic approaches, as well as combinations of these. Certain general tendencies seem to have dominated most of these articles: the tendency to concentrate on the first book and quickly rush through the rest; tendency to dwell too much on Tutuola's Nigerian reception; and the tendency to go over tilled ground especially on Tutuola's language and roots in oral Yoruba traditions. There were, of course, exceptions, as there were differences in the quality of the research that went into the articles. On one thing they were all agreed, that Tutuola was a serious writer of talent and imagination.

Reception of Tutuola in Critical Surveys

As a common Ibo proverb has it, "Unless the wind blows we do not see the fowl's rump." In other words, no matter what literary gossip has said about Tutuola, Achebe, or Soyinka, each writer's literary stature can only be measured by the type of reviews, articles and books written about his works. By that criterion there is every evidence that these three writers have been considered seriously in international scholarship, especially in England and America. They have received numerous reviews, most of them favorable. Articles about their writings have appeared in a wide range of scholarly journals. Virtually every book surveying African literature published to date has devoted a chapter or a section to one, two or three of them. A brief survey of these books, both English and American, noting their scope in relationship to the space devoted to these three writers, will help put their reception in better perspective.

With the rapid emergence of creative writings from Africa, especially in the last fifteen years, critics of African literature have obviously felt the need to provide students and interested readers with critical surveys covering as much ground as possible. The result has been that nearly all such books of criticism have been panoramic in scope. Their large scopes notwithstanding, however, the author's manner of allotting space to each writer discussed is a useful indication of both his personal interest in him and of the relative importance of the writer within the context of the book.

In England, the earliest of these surveys, Seven African Writers (1962) by Gerald Moore, was a slim volume of critical studies on seven

major African writers, three writing in English, four in French.⁷² A chapter was devoted to each writer and two of the three represented in English were Tutuola and Achebe. Soyinka's first work was not published until 1963. A book of part criticism and part anthology by Ann Tibble appeared in 1965 entitled African/English Literature: A Short Survey and Anthology of Prose and Poetry up to 1965.⁷³ In her 110 page introductory survey of a large number of African writers, Tibble devotes six pages to Tutuola, three to Soyinka and ten to Achebe. In Long Drums and Cannons (1968) Margaret Laurence examines the works of eleven Nigerian novelists and dramatists.⁷⁴ In a book of six chapters, discussing several writers, she gives a chapter each to Tutuola, Achebe, Soyinka. Moore's second book, The Chosen Tongue (1969) critically surveys a large number of creative writings in English from Africa and the Carribean.⁷⁵ Out of 212 pages, he reserves ten of them to Achebe and eight to Soyinka. William Walsh's A Manifold Voice (1970) is a critical study of 212 pages on nine writers chosen from the entire British Commonwealth.⁷⁶ His choice from Africa was Achebe, to whom he devotes fourteen pages. Finally, Mother is Gold (1971)

⁷²Gerald Moore, Seven African Writers (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 39-57; 58-72.

⁷³Anne Tibble, African/English Literature: A Short-Survey and Anthology of Prose and Poetry up to 1965 (London: Peter Owen, 1965), pp. 87-89; 95-101; 101-111.

⁷⁴Margaret Laurence, Long Drums and Cannons: Nigerian Dramatists and Novelists (London: MacMillan, 1968), pp. 11-76; 97-125; 126-147.

⁷⁵Gerald Moore, The Chosen Tongue: English Writing in the Tropical World (London: Longmans, 1969), pp. 133-138; 151-154; 194-196; 177-188.

⁷⁶William Walsh, A Manifold Voice: Studies in Commonwealth Literature (London: Chatto and Windus, 1969), pp. 48-61.

by Adrian Roscoe examines the writings of major West African writers in every genre including children's books, journalism and politics.⁷⁷ In a study of 252 pages, Roscoe discusses Tutuola in fifteen, Achebe in ten, and Soyinka in thirty-three of those.

A few such books have also been published by Americans. Judith Gleason's monograph This Africa (1965) is a critical study of twenty-three African novels in French and English.⁷⁸ She discusses Achebe's works in twelve out of 176 pages. In his Africa in Modern Literature: A Survey of Contemporary Writing in English (1967), Martin Tucker briefly examines a large number of works by African, English and American writers, all using Africa as background.⁷⁹ Ten of his 262 pages are concerned with Achebe, ten with Soyinka, and four with Tutuola. Whispers From a Continent (1969) by Wilfred Cartey surveys over fifty African writers in English and French under two major themes: "The Movement Away," and "The Movement Back."⁸⁰ Out of 382 pages, Cartey reserves ten to Achebe, twenty-two to Tutuola, and twenty-six to Soyinka. Finally, Charles Larson's Emergence of African Fiction (1971) is a critical study of several West African novels, nearly all in English.⁸¹

⁷⁷Adrian Roscoe, Mother is Gold: A Study in West African Literature (Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 98-113; 121-131; 219-252.

⁷⁸Judith Gleason, This Africa: Novels by West Africans in English and French (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), pp. 81-93.

⁷⁹Martin Tucker, Africa in Modern Literature: A Survey of Contemporary Writing in English (New York: Ungar, 1967), pp. 69-72; 83-93; 110-111.

⁸⁰Wilfred Cartey, Whispers from a Continent: The Literature of Contemporary Black Africa (New York: Vintage books, 1969) pp. 80-84, 173-177; 316-341; 358-379.

⁸¹Charles R. Larson, Emergence of African Fiction (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), pp. 27-65; 147-155; 93-112; 242-258.

In a survey covering 282 pages, Larson examines Tutuola in twenty of these, Achebe in forty-eight, and Soyinka in sixteen.

Moore's chapter on Tutuola, entitled "Amos Tutuola: A Modern Visionary"⁸² is essentially the same study he had published in Black Orpheus in 1957 as "Amos Tutuola: A Nigerian Visionary," but with additional comments on The Brave African Huntress (1958). Moore notes disturbing differences in the writer's reception abroad and at home between 1957 and 1962, and charges that few readers of any color have penetrated to the sources of Tutuola's real merit and distinction. Obviously counting himself among the few, he sees Tutuola at that time as a writer of "undoubted unique genius" but one whose power is already on the decline.

This note of "decline" creeps into Moore's otherwise favorable reception of this Nigerian "visionary." As a comparative mythologist, he is disappointed with The Brave African Huntress, which shows evidence of direct borrowings from western mythology. Pointing to a catalogue of creatures with names "straight out of Grimm's Fairy Tales"--gnomes, goblins, imps, genii, etc., he calls it "a terrible letdown." He complains that the use of the word "jungle," instead of the more African "bush," sounds like a concession to foreign taste. While conceding that many episodes in the book are still Tutuola at his best, Moore registers his indignation and sorrow in the now famous sentence: "The magic has all leaked away."⁸³

By 1962 also, Moore was ready to challenge Parrinder's contention

⁸² Moore, Seven African Writers, pp. 39-57.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

in his foreword to My Life in the Bush of Ghosts that Tutuola's writing is "the beginning of a new type of Afro-English Literature." Tutuola's books, he says, "are far more like a fascinating cul-de-sac than the beginning of anything directly useful to other writers. The cul-de-sac is full of wonders but . . . is nonetheless a dead end."⁸⁴ At this time, Achebe had published two novels, *Cyprian Ekwensi* two, *Onuora Nzekwu* one, and there had been a few others from French-speaking Africa. Such evidence convinces Moore that Tutuola has little in common with other writers. Rather his true significance is in his example of confidence.

Moore's warm appreciation of Tutuola's contributions to the English language and to literature has not changed. He has come to the conclusion, nonetheless, that the writer's power was on the decline and he blames it primarily on his "misguided" attempt to appear more modern by borrowing from European mythology. Nearly every critic after Moore would echo in some way his sentiments about these borrowings.

By 1965 when Anne Tibble published her survey anthology, she was in a position to comment on five works by Tutuola, whom she regarded as the foremost Nigerian prose writer.⁸⁵ Her approach, like Moore's, was that of a comparative mythologist, but her commentaries had different implications. She is strongly convinced that Tutuola is far more widely read in European mythology and much more influenced by it than has been suspected. She claims, for example, that the quest described in The Palm-Wine Drinkard incorporates fantasies that most European children

⁸⁴Moore, p. 57.

⁸⁵Tibble, pp. 95-101.

encounter in dream or day-dream or in legends that would include Biblical, Heroic, Greek, and North European myths. In her opinion Tutuola simply mingles these with myths of a lurid Africa partly of his fervent imagination, partly from his knowledge of Yoruba folktales. She draws parallels and analogies between elements in The Palm-Wine Drinkard and those in Scandinavian, Greek, Hindu and Jewish mythologies. Her theory of Tutuola's blending African and European myths explains, she believes, the surprising decline in his imaginative power. In her opinion, the alleged falling-off between his first book and his later books occurs solely because, "there is not a sufficient number of Afro-European myths to use effectively twice."⁸⁶

Tibble points out further evidence of Tutuola's debt to previous Non-African folk and fairy tales through his inclusion of words and tropes of Western origin. In her view these elements are not only fascinating to the young but also help create his special style, which greatly impresses her by its closeness to speech and its unsophisticated and brilliantly graphic nature. Briefly commenting on the other books, she described My Life in the Bush of Ghosts as slightly less "well packed," but as well constructed as the first work. To her The Brave African Huntress can be read on two levels: as a story of emancipation for African girls and as a story about man's common fear of unknown little people, the pygmies. She condemns Moore's statement about the magic leaking away from this book as both extreme and unfair. She emphasizes again the naivety and inimitable style of Tutuola in Feather Woman of the Jungle.

⁸⁶Tibble, p. 100.

In her judgment, there is little evidence of decline in the writer's style or content: "What Tutuola's first book is then, and what his four other books are in only slightly less degree, is the most skillful, and frequently visionary blend of psychological fantasy, myth, and fable."⁸⁷

In chapter four of her Long Drums and Cannons (1968) entitled "A Twofold Forest," Margaret Laurence summarizes, analyzes, and interprets five of Tutuola's books.⁸⁸ Her study is strongly influenced by Moore's article. Like him she emphasizes Tutuola's natural talent, his spontaneity, the living voice quality of his language, the vigor, vitality of his unstudied style, and his deep roots in the Yoruba oral tradition.

Like Tibble and Moore, Laurence opens her study with comments on the contradictory reception of Tutuola abroad and at home. By 1968, however, she is able to report what Moore could not: "Nowadays Tutuola's work is recognized and admired by a whole generation of more sophisticated Nigerian writers, who no longer feel the need to deny their roots."⁸⁹ She agrees with Moore that Tutuola is out of the mainstream of Nigerian literature, "and that his work was neither contemporary nor traditional, but rather quite timeless and individual, stressing the freshness and vividness of his phraseology, his spontaneous newness of language," and his natural talent for titles that capture the imagination. Laurence also judges his style "inimitable," but rejects Tibble's suggestion that

⁸⁷Tibble, p. 101.

⁸⁸Laurence, pp. 126-147.

⁸⁹Ibid., p. 126. See for example Soyinka's assessment of Tutuola quoted in Chapter II, part I.

Tutuola's works are primarily for children.

She approaches The Palm-Wine Drinkard on a symbolic level as a journey into the spirit "in which the hero meets the monster-creations of his own mind, suffers torments, wins victories and finally returns." Like Moore, she interprets the journey into the bush of ghosts as a journey into the depths of the subconscious. She does not, however, share his enthusiastic appreciation of Simbi and the Satyr of the Dark Jungle. To her it is a weaker story though much of it is admittedly written in a "sprightly manner." Echoing Moore's disappointment with The Brave African Huntress, she says that it is "altogether thinner in texture, not so richly imaginative as his first three books." On Feather Woman of the Jungle, she reports with relief Tutuola's banishment of European-sounding monsters and asserts that his imagination is as strong as ever.

Laurence, more than any English critic before her, emphasizes Tutuola's originality in adapting Yoruba folktales and mythology. She says that he has re-created, selected and combined materials both old and new in order to produce something uniquely his own, despite influences like D. O. Fagunwa. She ends by praising Tutuola as a lone artist amazing in his courage to remain "true to an inner sight which perceives both the dazzling multicolored areas of dream and the appalling forests of nightmare."⁹⁰

In the section on Tutuola in his book Mother is Gold (1971), entitled "Tutuola: a writer without problems," Adrian Roscoe is concerned with

⁹⁰ Laurence, p. 147.

Tutuola as an eccentric among other West African writers, his deep roots in Yoruba oral tradition, his successful adaptation of these materials to recreate something new, and the superficiality of Western influence on his indigenous vision. Roscoe appreciates Tutuola as something totally unique in English literature, with no parallels and absolutely inimitable.⁹¹ To him, Tutuola is in almost every way different from other West African writers at a time when others are "committed" and didactic. Roscoe notes that Tutuola lacks awareness of cultural, national or racial affinities. Despite oblique didacticism in some of the works, especially the sixth book, Roscoe claims that Tutuola is not really interested in morals, nor is he concerned about Nigeria as a country, nor about the traumas of colonialism. In support of such a contention, Roscoe cites Tutuola's statement that, "I wrote for my own pleasure without thinking of publishing what I wrote. Also I had nothing else to do in the evenings."⁹²

Like every critic before him, Roscoe emphasizes and illustrates the oral qualities of Tutuola's language and his closeness to Yoruba oral traditions of folklore and mythology. According to his analysis, the hallmarks of Tutuola's style are rhythms of speech, repetition, as well as "broken grammar and slack-jointed syntax." The issue is, nevertheless, not how close Tutuola is to oral traditions, but how successfully he uses them in his works. Roscoe is as deeply convinced as Laurence and Moore

⁹¹Roscoe, pp. 98-113.

⁹²Quoted in Claude Wauthier, The Literature and Thought of Modern Africa, Trans. Sheila Kay, (London: Pall Mall, 1966), p. 74.

that Tutuola at his best is without rival. By comparing his tales to earlier versions, Roscoe establishes that Tutuola has extended, elaborated, selected and refashioned older tales into something unique and beautiful, even if occasionally confused and obscure.

And yet, behind the faults of grammar and syntax, and despite the handicap of a woefully limited vocabulary, a vigorous imagination is at work, boldly striding through the forests of myth and fantasy, and driving the narrative onward. . . . It is, surely, this overwhelming sense of a rich and creative imagination at work that marks the special quality of Tutuola's art, and which provides the reason for our taking him seriously.⁹³

So convinced is Roscoe of Tutuola's solid foundation in oral traditions that he refuses to be disturbed over the use of names and material objects of Western origin. He regards the modest Western influence as mere veneer which does not alter the indigenous quality of his writing but actually forms an integral part of "the seamless coat" of Tutuola's style.

Roscoe also follows the usual pattern by reflecting upon the hostile reception of Tutuola by West African readers. He claims that Tutuola was ignored because he had committed the grave sin of "ungrammatically describing" the people's inner lives for readers in the Western world, having "opened a window onto a part of the African Soul which for the moment most of his westernized compatriots prefer to keep hidden."⁹⁴ By and large, he bases his verdict on the rather common tendency among

⁹³Roscoe, p. 110.

⁹⁴Ibid., p. 112.

critics to fail to draw a line between Tutuola's fantasy and the ordinary man's state of mind and beliefs in Africa. The result is his casting Tutuola in the role of "realist," which by his own admission he certainly was not.

It is rather strange that most English studies of Tutuola have been published in books rather than in scholarly journals. In general, these studies tend to concentrate on The Palm-Wine Drinkard, on Tutuola's closeness to oral traditions, and on his unfavorable reception in Nigeria. There is strong evidence that Moore's initial article strongly influenced those who came after him although they have disagreed in parts and added more to what he said. For example, where Moore sees him as "visionary" Tibble is convinced that Tutuola is deeply influenced from abroad, and Roscoe finds elements that have isolated him from all other African writers. Only Laurence agrees with Moore's speculation that Tutuola wrote himself into a literary cul-de-sac and that his powers declined. To this, Tibble disagrees, and Roscoe thinks him glorious in his isolation from those referred to as "a generation of problem-solvers." Rather, he prophesies with Parrinder that "Tutuola's star will rise." Despite such differences of opinion, the critical consensus emphasizes Tutuola's imaginative powers in his innovations of language and his successful adaptation of oral materials and techniques.

Martin Tucker's Africa in Modern Literature, (1967) was the first American book of critical survey to examine the works of Tutuola. His method was to comment on style, interpretation, and reception. He approaches Tutuola as a mythologist whose work deals more with dream figures than with real people. Like English critics, Tucker notes the irony

of Tutuola's being ignored at home while celebrated abroad as a gifted writer, especially in France. He attributes his success abroad to the uniqueness of his works in their use of elements of mythology whose source he described as "a wonderful grab bag of Jungian, Freudian, totem, taboo and industrial images."⁹⁵

Tucker proposes a new interpretation of the works in terms of psychological progress on Tutuola's part, from a need to explore evil in the first two books, to a more rational social approach to its conquest and elimination in the later books. Such a change, he argues is also reflected in the language: the "burning, tossing sentences" of The Palm-Wine Drinkard give way to the stately, more conventional sentence structure of The Brave African Huntress.

Typically, Tucker's survey ends with speculations about the unfavorable reception Tutuola received in Nigeria. Tucker suggests that his scanty education and the suspicion by many Nigerians that he was "playing the court jester to the European literary king makers" contributed to his rejection by Nigerians. Like Roscoe, he predicts Tutuola's future recognition as a talented writer whose "easeful, vital rhythmic style brought the first wave of European and American attention to West African writers."⁹⁶

Under the title "Belief and Man's Faith," Wilfred Cartey, analyzes and interprets the first four novels of Tutuola in his book Whispers from

⁹⁵Tucker, pp. 68-72.

⁹⁶Ibid., p. 72.

a Continent, (1969) ⁹⁷ His approach is both thematic and comparative in the sense that he studies the four works together, tracing and comparing motifs, as well as motivations and behavior of each protagonist. He also comments on the many oral and other stylistic devices which he applied to create his imaginative atmosphere of time and timelessness. Cartey buttresses his argument with ample textual examples from the four works. His general theory is that Tutuola's vision of the world is an optimistic vision of man mastering his environment through belief in chance, juju and "benign intervention of a never clearly defined deity." His novels, says Cartey, express a total acceptance of tradition by showing wanderers always returning home, strengthened after exposure to trials and dangers in their symbolic journeys.

One of the strengths of Cartey's comparative approach is to help substantiate generally unsupported statements of other critics like Tucker, by establishing patterns of similarities and differences between the four leading characters. For example, he shows the motif of choice between three possible routes at the outset of the adventure to be common to the four books, as are the motifs of light, trickery, chance and juju, among others. He also shows differences in the common journey motif, between The Palm-Wine Drinkard's search for continued gratification, the journey into maturation of My Life in the Bush of Ghosts, Simbi's pilgrimage in Simbi and the Satyr of the Jungle, and Adebisi's journey for the good of present and future generations in The Brave African Huntress.

⁹⁷Cartey, pp. 358-379.

Cartey is similarly intrigued by the interflow of reality and myth, of the traditional and the modern, in the "kaleidoscopic" atmosphere of these works. "All realms flow together," he says, "various manifestations of reality merge and coalesce. Yoruba myths, customs, and manners are synchronized with Western artifacts . . . all cultures are his domain and he derives his material from all of them."⁹⁸

Like most other critics Cartey comments on the episodic plots, which he shows deriving from the folkloric device of rounding off each self-contained tale and merging the end of an adventure with the precise beginning of another. Like Moore, he admits that in a long narrative this device is both "boring and tiresome." Yet Cartey stresses the interflow of these tales to provide both life and pattern to his works: "The novels are not static or immobile, but flow along. They are a richly textured, broad kenti cloth, whose fabric is woven from strands plucked from everywhere. . . . In Tutuola, all things join together, all realms intersect at the common point of experience."⁹⁹ Quite unlike Moore, Cartey would see the foreign influences in Tutuola not as a cleavage in time but as particles absorbed by the ever-flowing mass of his narrative.

Cartey was the first critic to eschew the debate about Tutuola's Nigerian reception. He concentrates instead on analyzing the nature of Tutuola's world, where everything merges through acceptance of traditional values by the heroes--and apparently by the author.

The merging of time and space in Tutuola's world is also the subject

⁹⁸Cartey, p. 358.

⁹⁹Ibid., p. 375.

of Charles Larson's study, "Time, Space and Description: The Tutuolan World" in his book, The Emergence of African Fiction. (1971)¹⁰⁰ His theory is that Tutuola's unconcern with precision in time or realism in the use of space, as well as with the utilitarian nature of his characters relates him to such symbolists and surrealists of the early twentieth century as Kafka. He shows in his writing, "an almost ideal marriage of the symbolist archetype of the dream, the subconscious, the superego."¹⁰¹

Other critics including Laurence, Tibble and Cartey have commented on the psychological and symbolic implications in Tutuola's descriptions. In similar vein, Larson parallels the writer's quests to symbolic journeys toward more understanding of man and his surroundings, the theme most commonly pursued by symbolists and surrealists. Comparing him specifically to Kafka, Larson says that Tutuola's merging of time and space lead to surrealistic passages like those in Kafka, where "physical aspects of the environment divide, alter, and coalesce into new forms."¹⁰² He observes that Tutuola's descriptions, on the other hand, are rarely related to mood or atmosphere. Most characters are designated by action rather than name, and remained essentially utilitarian lacking introspection and dialogue. He thinks Tutuola's world is "replete with humor, puns and anachronisms." He does not suggest, however, that Tutuola is directly influenced by Kafka.

¹⁰⁰ Larson, pp. 93-112.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 96.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 107.

Larson's description of Tutuola as a writer who either enraptures or disgusts readers serves as a possible explanation for the extreme reaction which his work has generated. As one of his admirers, he finds him a "pure" example of original African talent because of his close relationship to oral tradition and myth and because of the negligible influence of the West in his work. He stresses Tutuola's achievement as essentially that of a highly skilled storyteller who filters materials from Yoruba culture through his "never flagging imagination," and reshapes them in a manner unique to him. Like other comparative mythologists, Larson finds parallels between his work and medieval quests or voyage narratives like Gulliver's Travels, Pilgrim's Progress, Nathanael West's The Dream World of Balso Snell, Celine's Journey to the End of Night, or Kafka's The Castle. He does not suggest, however, as Anne Tibble does, that Tutuola has read extensively in Western mythology, but emphasizes that Tutuola draws on a common fund of imagination known by writers of different cultural backgrounds.

Compared to their English counterparts, American critics have not been pre-occupied by the issue of the Nigerian reception. While Tucker and Larson refer to it, Cartey totally ignores it. They also demonstrate a noticeable lessening of interest in discussing Tutuola's closeness to oral Yoruba traditions or his language and in giving specific critical opinions on his handling of these elements.

A Book-Length Study of Tutuola

The lone book-length study on Tutuola to date, Amos Tutuola, was written in 1969 by Harold Collins. According to the publisher, the study is intended as an introduction to "Africa's most famous modern writer."¹⁰³ Collins' approach is one of enthusiastic admiration for and vigorous defense of Tutuola against adverse criticisms, especially those from West Africa. In the preface, Collins remarks that Tutuola's work as a "literary phenomenon" poses certain problems in literary theory. Among them he notes problems of appropriate language for Nigerian English fiction, the relationship of oral traditions to modern literature, the appropriate mode of fiction for Nigerian literature, the forms of literary acculturation that should be encouraged, the problem of coming to terms with the African past, and the question of the audience for Nigerian novelists. Most importantly he proposes to seek "critical adjustments" for the evaluation of a work as special as Tutuola's.

In the first of seven chapters entitled "Amos Tutuola: The Shy Yoruba," Collins presents a relatively detailed biography of the writer. In chapter two, "The Ghost Novels as Naive Quest Romances," Collins uses Northrop Frye's definition of romance to examine the structure, characterization, point of view, and management of plot in Tutuola's first five books to determine how they should be classified. He demonstrates how closely these works parallel the western form of quest romance, hence his description of them as "naive quest romances."

¹⁰³Amos Tutuola (New York: Twayne, 1969), Dust Jacket.

In chapter three, "The Folk Basis of the Romances," he compares tales in Tutuola's works to original tales in Yoruba and other West African oral traditions. His favorable impressions echo those of Lindfors and Laurence: "We do have in Tutuola a story-teller who embellishes the fictional characters and situations as the native story-teller does, who uses a language full of wit and word play and wild humor, not unlike the traditional sort who freely combines, varies and re-arranges the tales in the manner of the traditional storyteller."¹⁰⁴ Having established that the "ghost novels" are indeed based on folk literature, he argues for their fitness as a source of inspiration for a national literature, taking to task those who fear Tutuola is headed toward a literary blind alley. Those Nigerians who object to Tutuola's use of African mythological thought as portraying them as backward and uncivilized obviously confuse myth and realism and expect European readers to do so as well. Characterizing their fears as groundless, Collins doubts their ability to judge rightly in any situation involving Tutuola.

Collins devotes chapter four, "Mythological Thinking," to examining elements from both "Pristine Africa" and Western culture in Tutuola's five works. In addition to his identification of such African elements as slave raids, magic, belief in spirits, witchcraft, and monsters he finds use of modern electrical and technical words, western figures and European-named creatures.

Chapter five, entitled "The West African's Shame," counters the charge that Tutuola's work impedes "progress" by encouraging mythological

¹⁰⁴
Collins, p. 64.

thinking. Collins' method is to enumerate such obstacles to Africa's progress as poor soil, bad communication, horrible diseases, and great social disorders of the slave trade era in order to demonstrate to Africans that they are not backward, but have made surprisingly great progress in spite of all those handicaps. Collins argues that Tutuola's emphasis on the traditional African's pre-occupation with spirits and magical transformations is "surely one reasonable way . . . of relating to the African past. . . ." Tutuola, he insists, is only confronting the facts: "Tutuola is able to admit the worst in the old ways without apology and the best in the new ways without excessive deference to the Westerners."¹⁰⁵ Such a statement, however, contradicts in part his contention that Tutuola's work is folk literature, not realism, and is inconsistent with his blaming Nigerian readers who object to Tutuola on grounds that he encourages confusion of myth and reality.

Collins devotes chapter six to analyzing Tutuola's eccentric English, with samples from the texts. He notes the oral quality of the language, quotes favorable reviewers like Moore and Murra on the grace and vigor of Tutuola's style, and provides a lengthy list of examples of his grammar, syntax, vocabulary and typography, stressing their "exotic" and bold natures. His attempts to justify such eccentric usage, however, often borders on the unconvincing. He says, for example, that "the tautologies are often rather attractive. . . . The syncopations make a kind of bold economy of language which is pleasant . . . the strange idioms . . . are hardly ever obscure, and sometimes they are rather

¹⁰⁵Collins, p. 94.

interesting."¹⁰⁶ His conclusion, nonetheless, claims great results for Tutuola's innocent 'manhandling' of English, and he sees great possibilities in such language for creative expansion, for its quality of continual freshness, and for its assimilation of alien ideas.

Answering adverse Nigerian criticism of Tutuola's language, Collins speculates that social and intellectual "snobbery" are involved in his low rating by more educated Nigerian writers. As if determined to demolish such "snobbery," in his last chapter Collins emphasizes the literary power of Tutuola's writings and his contributions to literature. His conclusion is representative of his generally favorable evaluation:

This fairly catholic reader believes Tutuola's work will endure for the vigor and interest of his language (never mind the errors and hardly ever mend them!), the force and economy and dramatic effect of his graphic descriptions, his wild humor, the compelling power of his nightmare flights, tortures, horrors, ogres, and transformation, the great humanity of his gentle Christian soul, unembarrassed by the African past, Western technology, or indeed anything else. Surely one day Amos Tutuola will be recognized as West Africa's first classic in world literature.¹⁰⁷

Collin's Amos Tutuola represents a great step forward in Tutuolan criticism, both in its serious attempt to provide detailed background and in its extended analysis of the relationship between the writer and his work. Nevertheless, by building his entire study upon the early negative reactions of such Nigerian readers as Akinjogbin and Johnson, Collins is

¹⁰⁶ Collins, p. 102.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 128.

forced into an overly sensitive reaction to all criticism. He tends to be too protective of Tutuola as he strains to explain and justify every seeming fault. His blanket condemnation of those he calls "educated West Africans," much in the manner of Murra and Tibble, fails to take into account the more positive evaluation of Tutuola by fellow African writers and other Nigerian intellectuals. His study also fails to make clear his proposed adjustment in the approach to Tutuolan criticism.

Tutuola's reception in English and American reviews, journals, surveys and book, share some similarities but have their differences as well. In general, the reception was largely favorable for the first two and sixth works, while the middle books were either mostly reviewed unfavorably or ignored. Tutuolan criticism left the impression that The Drinkard was by far the most popular of his works, and that each subsequent book marked a step downwards in a steadily declining reputation.

English reviewers showed initial excitement and enthusiasm at the discovery of Tutuola, praising the vigor and freshness of his language as well as the directness and naiveté of his style. They were also the earliest and loudest voices to complain of Tutuola's "magic leaking away," and of the decline in both his imagination and naiveté. Few English critics wrote articles about him, although nearly every English survey of African literature secured him an important place. The appearance of Achebe, Soyinka and a few others, obviously diverted English critical attention from Tutuola.

American critics, on the other hand, were generally lukewarm in their initial reviews, and by and large failed to appreciate his language,

stressing instead the primitiveness of the works' content and the lack of inhibitions in his language and style. Remarkably, American interest seemed to have grown with time as the comparatively large number of articles on him attests. A critic like Bernth Lindfors has published several articles on various aspects of Tutuola's including his critical reception, language, style and debt to oral tradition. Tutuola has also been well represented in American surveys. The sole book-length study of him is by an American. American critics have come to show more appreciation for his creative skill, to think highly of him in terms of Nigerian and world literature, and to urge critical re-assessment of his true literary merits. No doubt the growth of black awareness in the sixties is partly responsible for this.

Tutuola was discovered in England and built his early reputation there, but American critics have contributed even more to the survival and possible future growth of that reputation.

CHAPTER III
CHINUA ACHEBE

Amos Tutuola was the first Nigerian writer to win international acclaim, but Chinua Achebe has not only won world-wide recognition, he has continued to maintain and build upon the reputation from his first publication in 1958 until the present. He is widely acknowledged the most prominent novelist of modern Africa.

His first novel, Things Fall Apart, was published by William Heinemann in 1958, and Astor Honor, New York, in 1959. It won the Margaret Wrong Prize, as well as scholarships and grants for its author. Rockefeller Foundation and UNESCO funded Achebe for travel and study of literary trends in U. S. A., Brazil and Britain. Within six years, Things Fall Apart was translated into many European and other languages: German, Spanish, Italian, Slovene, Russian, French, Hebrew, Arabic and Swahili.¹ It has been adopted as a textbook in Nigerian secondary schools, teaching colleges and universities, and it is fast becoming required reading for many literature and anthropological courses in an increasing number of colleges and universities throughout the world.² Such an impressive record is the solid foundation on which Achebe's reputation has been built.

¹"Chinua Achebe--A Presentation," Modern Sprak, 57, No. 4 (1964), 435-438.

²Arthur Ravenscroft, Chinua Achebe (London: Longmans, 1969), p. 7.

The second novel, No Longer at Ease, a sequel of the first, was published in 1960 by Heinemann and Astor Honor, New York. Winner of the "Nigerian National Trophy," it has been translated into German, Czech and Hungarian, and has sold nearly as well as the first book.³ His third novel, Arrow of God, was published by Heinemann in 1964, while American editions appeared in 1967 and 1969 respectively. In England the novel was the first recipient of the "New Statesman Jack Campbell Award."

A Man of the People was published simultaneously by Heinemann and John Day in 1966, and by Doubleday in 1967. Achebe himself notes that his four novels taken together have been translated into about twenty European languages, besides translations into Hebrew, Arabic, Swahili, Luganda and Afrikaans.⁴ Other works of Achebe include two collections of short stories, The Sacrificial Egg and Other Stories (1962), and Girls at War and Other Stories (1972); two books of poems, Beware Soul Brother and Other Poems (1972), and Christmas in Biafra and Other Poems (1973); and a children's book, Chike and the River (1966). Of these, only Girls at War has received significant attention in England and America.

The Immediate Reception of Chinua Achebe in Reviews

With the publication of Things Fall Apart, the world got its first authentic inside view of a Nigerian traditional community. It describes

³"The Novelist as Teacher," New Statesman, 29 Jan. 1965, pp. 161-162.

⁴Letter to me from Chinua Achebe, 24 May 1974.

a way of life quite unfamiliar even to those British who lived there for over half a century. It is, therefore, a book of great significance to historians, sociologists and anthropologists alike, a kind of fictional documentary on African pre-colonial way of life with its proverbs, folk-tales, customs and rituals.

The English reviewer in the New Statesman, for example, applauds Things Fall Apart as "a most vivid account of tribal beliefs and culture fifty years ago . . . of great natural dignity and of a natural piety that has ossified into the tyranny of superstition."⁵ Diana Speed in Black Orpheus calls it "a piece of history" because the book creates a vivid picture of a way of life "lost irrevocably within living memory."⁶ The reviewer in the Times Literary Supplement characterizes it as a fascinating picture of tribal life and customs which are presented from "the inside" so that readers have the opportunity of sharing in "the African's experience of his masked gods, his oracles and even his weather."⁷

American reviewers have been on the whole far less enthusiastic about the background details of the book than the English. Phoebe Adams in the Atlantic Monthly describes the novel as a portrayal of primitive tribal life: "Here are all the primitive rites, the witchcraft, and superstitious savagery as well as the more acceptable facets of heathen existence."⁸

⁵New Statesman, 21 June 1958, p. 814.

⁶Black Orpheus 5 (1959), 52.

⁷"The Centre Cannot Hold," TLS, 20 June 1958, p. 341.

⁸"The Onslaught of Civilization," Atlantic Monthly 203 (Feb. 1959), 101.

Her bias and lukewarmness are echoed in Ronald Christ's lament that Achebe's first two novels are "longer on native customs and idiom, and short on narrative interest."⁹ Basing their views on assumptions of what proportion of fiction should be devoted to background, Adams and Christ maintain that Achebe has failed to maintain that balance. Their views are fairly representative. Under the title "Jungle Strongman" Davis Hussoldt in Saturday Review points out the significance of the novel: "No European ethnologist could so intimately present this medley of mores of the Ibo tribe, nor detail the intricate formalities of life in the clan."¹⁰ Hussoldt believes, however, that Ibo mores do not warrant the careful and serious treatment Achebe gives them. His summary of the book reveals his attitude:

Their greatest foray was to steal in revenge
a boy from another clan. Okonkwo adopted
him, forgot about him until the oracle in the
cave decreed his death, and then helped in that
slaughter. He planted his yams, but the rains
came to wrestle their roots from the earth,
and the sun scorched the next planting. He had
trouble with witches, who returned, re-incarnated
in each child, and had to be killed and muti-
lated as counsel to them not to come back again.¹¹

Representative of favorable British evaluation, E. M. Milne describes Things Fall Apart in his textbook for sixth form English as "a recent novel of high literary quality," a worthy model for Nigerian English students.¹² Most English reviewers think as highly of Achebe's

⁹"Among the Ibo," N. Y. Times Book Review, 2 Dec. 1967, p. 22.

¹⁰"Jungle Strongman," Saturday Review, 31 Jan. 1959, p. 18.

¹¹ibid.

¹²Sixth-Form English (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1962), p. vii.

style in Things Fall Apart, especially as a model of vividness and simplicity. Because of the novelty of his material, there seems to be among reviewers a special appreciation for clarity and simplicity of presentation. On the other hand, English critics apparently expect simplicity of language from Achebe as from any other writer for whom English is a second language. They emphasize Achebe's achievement in this regard and praise him for a job well done.

The reviewer in the Times Literary Supplement notes that Achebe's vivid imagination illuminates every page, making his style a model of clarity.¹³ Another in the New Statesman calls his style "vivid" and "careful."¹⁴ Diana Speed admires his "quiet unpretentious prose," which she concedes is "deceptively simple," and comments on the appropriateness of the style for the type of simple life being described as well as the poetic simplicity of the atmosphere created.¹⁵ American opinion of Achebe's style is mixed. The reviewer in Kirkus describes the novel as "written with quiet dignity that builds to a climax of tragic force."¹⁶ Milton Byam in Library Journal declares enthusiastically: "The style is loveliness itself."¹⁷ Davis Hussoldt, on the other hand, is totally disenchanted with Achebe's presentation of his material. His verdict is

¹³TLS, p. 341.

¹⁴New Statesman, p. 814.

¹⁵Speed, p. 52.

¹⁶Kirkus, 15 No. 1958, p. 855.

¹⁷Library Journal, 84 (March 1959), 860.

that "the flashbacks of his book are confusing, the narration undisciplined."¹⁸

The general enthusiasm of English reviews for Things Fall Apart was obviously influenced by England's closeness to Nigeria and a feeling that this book has provided an essential insight into the Ibo personality which could make for better relationships. The English laid emphasis on the "vividness," "clarity," and "authenticity" of the re-created way of life. Their commentaries revealed a seriousness of approach lacking in American reviews. To Americans with little interest in Nigeria, the details of life there were commonplace and unexciting. In evaluating Achebe's style, English critics repeatedly used adjectives like "vivid," "simple," "careful," "unpretentious." The tone of their commentaries was quite complimentary, as if they were genuinely impressed by what Achebe has accomplished. Many American reviewers assessed his style in more general terms but with no less enthusiasm. Their impressions were mixed although generally in Achebe's favor.

Achebe's second novel was naturally awaited with eagerness and curiosity by many who wondered if he could repeat the success of Things Fall Apart. Its appearance in 1960 was greeted with warmth by some and with reservations by others. Overall, there was a feeling that Achebe had created in his first novel "a classic" very hard to beat, and that No Longer At Ease was in many ways a lesser work. Robert Green in the Nation pronounces it "a book of major importance . . . that manages to be a debate without ever losing its artistic form."¹⁹ But a more representative

¹⁸Davis, p. 18.

¹⁹"The Clashing of Old and New," Nation, 11 Oct. 1965, pp. 224-5.

feeling that something on the grand scale of Okonkwo is missing in No Longer At Ease is evident in the following review by Omidiji Aragbabalu (pseudonym for Ulli Beier), editor of Black Orpheus:

Obi Okonkwo, the hero of this novel, is not an unusual type. We all know dozens like him. He is not as unforgettable a character as his grandfather the warrior Okonkwo, the hero of Things Fall Apart. But then this new novel is about the new Nigerian middle class and like most bourgeoisies in the world the Nigerian one does not produce particularly colorful and memorable characters. The strength of the novel does not lie in its characterization but in its brilliant description and analysis of situations and conflicts. . . .²⁰

It is no surprise then that most reviewers have not been excited by the novel's characters, and most comments centered instead on the style. Quietness and simplicity are the most common qualities critics attribute to this work. Green argues that the impressions of lassitude and seeming stylelessness which the book creates, are in fact a quietness of tone and a matter-of-factness of style that perfectly suits Achebe's main theme in the novel: a tragedy taking place in the corner.²¹ No Longer At Ease in his opinion, is "a psychological triumph and a narrative of extraordinary strength," in which the pace never flags and which has no irrelevancies to allow relaxation.

R. C. Healy in New York Herald Tribune echoes Green's sentiments by declaring the novel's artlessness to be its greatest asset and charm. Healy characterizes it as "disarmingly ingenuous . . . wholly declarative

²⁰Black Orpheus, No. 8 (1960-1962), pp. 51-52.

²¹Green, p. 224.

and bare of rhetorical subtlety."²² He associates its simplicity with a lack of sophistication in Achebe's style, which he describes as "primitive storytelling in the best sense." Beverly Grunwald in Saturday Review is brief and favorable: "No Longer at Ease is a delight."²³ Phoebe Adams comments on the novel's quieter mood as compared to the first novel: "It is less violent and picturesque . . . but in its quieter way it is impressive."²⁴ Such favorable impressions are not completely shared by other reviewers. The San Francisco Chronicle regrets that in a narrative "spiced with African proverbs and colorful similes," Achebe has not injected enough compassion to make it "more than another example of a growing problem."²⁵ Milton Byam in Library Journal comments on plot, background description, and language almost all in the same breath, perhaps because they are so intricately connected in his opinion. Dismissing the plot as almost juvenile in its simplicity, he emphasizes instead the details of Nigerian life and customs which, he says, make the book fascinating to read, and together with its "simplicity and musicality"²⁶ of language, make up its chief values.

English reviews were similar in their emphasis on Achebe's simple style. In a review that the critic, Charles Larson, calls "a classic example of condescension," he equates simplicity with a lack of literary

²²New York Herald Tribune, 30 April 1961, p. 28.

²³Saturday Review, 10 June 1961, p. 23.

²⁴"Potpourri," Atlantic Monthly, 207 (April 1961), 119.

²⁵The San Francisco Chronicle, 9 July 1961, p. 26.

²⁶Library Journal, 80 (June 1961), 2118.

sophistication, which he seems to expect from all African works.²⁷

It is usual, almost traditional, to pay tribute to the simplicity of style of novels such as this. We tend to harp on about it, as if short words were something new in fiction. I suppose the fact of the matter is that simplicity is all we ask for in the African novel. We want a lucid, uncluttered account of the sound, competent craftsmen to put up the framework; later, when the chronicles of change are more or less complete, some fortunate writers indeed will be able to fill the framework in, wallowing in the luxuries of characterization, motivation, depth, psychology and all the rest of it. Meanwhile, we are grateful to such as Achebe for such unadorned tales as No Longer At Ease.²⁸

Waterhouse's argument that African writing in their literary infancy cannot be expected to show marks of sophistication, seems to suggest a reason for the emphasis on Achebe's simple and clear style by both English and American reviewers. It is, nevertheless, interesting that an American reviewer finds the work "a psychological triumph" while Waterhouse implies that it is lacking in psychological depth, motivation and characterization. A reviewer in The Guardian stresses the novel's simplicity, quietness and objectivity: "What distinguishes this simple story is the straightforward unhysterical manner of the telling, a tone of voice so quietly factual that one cannot but be impressed by the desperate sincerity behind it."²⁹ Times Literary Supplement is equally

²⁷The Emergence of African Fiction (Bloomington, Indiana Univ. Press, 1971), pp 12-13.

²⁸New Statesman, 17 Sept. 1960, p. 398.

²⁹The Guardian, 16 Sept. 1960, p. 6.

favorable in commending his humor and dispassionate analysis: "Mr. Achebe's book, though set in Nigeria and concerned with Negro rather than white problems, is refreshingly free from rancour or hysteria."³⁰ There is an obvious expression of relief in the reviews above, that as a novel from a former colony, No Longer at Ease is not "hysterical" about black-white relationships.

There were no obvious differences between English and American reception of this novel. Both sides stressed Achebe's simple and objective style and the quiet simplicity of the content. The overall reception was mixed, but clearly more favorable than otherwise. No Longer At Ease might not be as exciting or as heroic as Things Fall Apart, but for the reputation of its writer, it marked another step forward.

Publication of the award-winning Arrow of God in 1964 greatly strengthened Achebe's reputation as a serious writer. Those who had come to associate his name with excellent recreation of the past were pleased that the new novel was also set in the past, his favorite milieu. John Ginger, an English reviewer, in Black Orpheus, remarks on the ambitious scope of this new work.³¹ Gerald Moore declares that it adds immensely to the achievement of the earlier books and is substantial enough to take its weaknesses in stride.³² Robert Green in the Nation attributes "many solid virtues" to it.³³ Another American critic, Bernth Lindfors calls

³⁰"Set Fair for Happiness," TLS, 15 Oct. 1960, p. 666.

³¹Black Orpheus, No. 16 (1964), p. 59.

³²"Achebe's New Novel," Transition, 14 (1964), 52.

³³Green, p. 224.

Arrow of God "Achebe's longest and richest novel . . . the work of an accomplished literary artist."³⁴ Despite the general tone of warm reception, a number of reviewers were unhappy with specific aspects of the novel as their remarks clearly indicate.

As with Things Fall Apart, the background descriptions and ample verbs provoked mixed reactions. While some approved, the novelty of it all seems to have worn so thin in Arrow of God as to become irritating to others. D. J. Enright in New Statesman complains that the copious background description tends to leave the impression that the novel is "perhaps too elaborate, too worked out, too insistent, and a little tententious."³⁵ A reviewer in Times Literary Supplement commends Achebe's evocation of African atmosphere as both fascinating and convincing, but finds the work difficult to follow because of what he characterizes as "its proliferation of untranslatable native terms and unexplained rites." He complains that his ample use of proverbs becomes repetitious and even mechanical, "a substitute for thought and feeling."³⁶

Moore is also of the opinion that Achebe overuses proverbs. He argues that they are all by no means functional, and therefore tend to lose most of their effectiveness.³⁷ On the other hand, John Ginger sees them as skillful tools in Achebe's struggle to achieve objectivity,

³⁴"Five Nigerian Novels," Books Abroad 39 (Autumn 1965), 411.

³⁵New Statesman, 3 April 1964, p. 531.

³⁶"A Restless Land," TLS, 26 March 1964, p. 249.

³⁷Moore, p. 52.

arguing that they are not decorations but integrally part of the narrative.³⁸

Nearly all other American reviewers objected in some degree to the "anthropological details" in Arrow of God. In an otherwise favorable review, Bernth Lindfors observes that the story is "sometimes embroidered with unnecessary anthropological detail."³⁹ Donald Christ in The New York Times equates such details with local color and finds them inexcusable. He complains that the slender story "is soon lost in a plethora of local color and local color alone, whether Nigerian or Californian, is no longer adequate stuff for novels, now that anthropologists are doing the job so much better."⁴⁰ Thus Donald Christ introduces the novel to the potential reader not as fiction but as anthropological and social documentation of little consequence:

Before he opens this book, the American reader will be well advised to ask himself two basic questions. Is he about to read it because it's a new novel or because it's written by a prominent Nigerian about Nigeria? Will he judge it as fiction or as ethnic reporting of ancient customs in conflict with new politics? In both cases, the second approach will prove more rewarding, though even then the rewards will be on the meager side. . . . Perhaps no Nigerian, at the present state of his culture and ours, can tell us what we need to know about that country, in a way that is available to our understanding.⁴¹

³⁸Ginger, p. 60.

³⁹Lindfors, p. 411

⁴⁰Christ, p. 22.

⁴¹ibid.

A. D. Killam similarly charges that Achebe allows the background to become the subject of the book and that the functions of religion are evoked in terms of sociological textbook rather than literature. A number of other reviewers were equally critical of this aspect.⁴²

Not all reviewers, however, were as disenchanted as Donald Christ. Charles Miller in Saturday Review is positively enthusiastic about Achebe's descriptions of festivals, council meetings, family life and personal quarrels, all of which he says carry not only the ring of authenticity but lend a vital dimension to the novel.⁴³

Reactions to Achebe's manner of presenting his material conspicuously differed from reactions to his matter. Gerald Moore praises Achebe's "usual economy," strong sense of design, and the effectiveness of the "formal yet simple and muscular" language of the villagers.⁴⁴ John Ginger is pleased with the leisure and objectivity of his style, pointing approvingly to the distance the author maintains between himself and the lead characters.⁴⁵ American reviewers were equally generous. Martin Tucker comments on his compassionate rendering of a "classically tragic situation" in a style he describes as both simple and poignant.⁴⁶

⁴²Recent African Fiction," The Bulletin of the Association for African Literature in English, 2 (1966), 5. See also Phoebe Adams, Atlantic Monthly 220 (Dec. 1967), 150; and Carmen P. Collier, Best Sellers, 27, No. 18 (Dec. 1967), 366.

⁴³"Mixed Allegiances," Saturday Review, 6 Jan. 1968, p. 31.

⁴⁴Moore, p. 52.

⁴⁵Ginger, p. 60.

⁴⁶Commonweal, 1 Dec. 1967, p. 316.

Charles Miller eulogizes the book as "olympian" in its rendering, stressing that the key to such impact is in Achebe's "clean, unerringly direct manner of saying what he has to say."⁴⁷ He explains that the style is completely free of verbiage and exalted phrases and that the author maintains impeccable control of the situation, remaining totally calm and unruffled even in the most emotion-charged passages. Bernth Lindfors observes that "nearly every utterance in the novel has an African flavor."⁴⁸ Harvey K. Flad in Library Journal refers to the book as an example of Achebe's fine writing ability. He points out his masterful skill in capturing the "idiom of African speech patterns, and the obtuseness and insensitivity of colonial government."⁴⁹

A rare English commentary on plot is John Ginger's, in which he apparently commends Achebe for making the best of a bad job. In his words, "the line of the plot at times seems to disappear, just as the line of the argument in the speeches made at the village council may become obscured; yet the story is continually and surely carried forward."⁵⁰

An equally rare commentary on plot from an American is quite negative. In Douglas Killan's judgment, laxity of plot brings with it a host of other weaknesses as well, and makes for an overall ineffective rendering of the tragedy. Comparing this to the two earlier books, he

⁴⁷Miller, p. 31.

⁴⁸Lindfors, p. 411.

⁴⁹Library Journal, 93 (Jan.-March 1968), 569.

⁵⁰Ginger, p. 60.

is of the opinion that Achebe fails in the third novel "to exercise the tight control of plot and demonstrate the clarity of style which characterized his first two books." He charges that the elements of conflict are this time not subordinated to the demands of plot, resulting in a distortion of the clean line of plot "by a plethora of incidental and factual details which properly has no place in the novel."⁵¹

English reviewers barely commented on Achebe's characterization. Gerald Moore briefly remarks that Achebe's Europeans are "dull and conventional, not more than parodies albeit "perfectly fair ones."⁵² Donald Stuart in an oblique reference to the decorum exhibited by Achebe's characters, reveals his feeling that style has obscured character and setting:

I am a little troubled at the very order and perfection of presentation in this novel. It seems to me that Africa has rougher edges, crueller, droller and more grotesque things behind the scene. It may mark my own ignorance, however, that while I am ready to believe what I am told, that Achebe's Arrow of God is truthful and profound, and while knowledge of his other novels help me to guess at what he is after, my response to this novel is still somewhat bewildered.⁵³

American reviewers had much more to say about characterization in Arrow of God, most of it favorable. Killam extolls the creation of Ezeulu as a figure of intelligence, dignity, and command. The white characters are in his opinion very well realized. Achebe, he says, "had created an enlightened political officer in Winterbottom. . . ."⁵⁴ Charles Miller

⁵¹Killam, p. 5.

⁵²Moore, p. 52.

⁵³"The Modern African Writer in His Context," JCL, 4 (Dec. 1967), 118.

⁵⁴Killam, p. 6.

agrees with Killam that *Winterbottom* is very successfully realized.

He equally commends Achebe's method of characterization: "a few sure strokes that highlight whatever prominent features will bring the total personality into three-dimension life. . . ."55

With few exceptions, English reviewers were generally in agreement with their American counterparts that Achebe overused proverbs and background descriptions. Favorable reception of Achebe's style was more or less unanimous with the emphasis once again on its simplicity, directness, and economy. The rare commentators on his plot had doubts and complaints about it. Opinions remarkably differed about Achebe's handling of character, with English views tending to be negative while Americans generally thought that he was equally perceptive in depicting both whites and Nigerians.

A Man of the People was different. It was Achebe's first political novel, described by him as a "rather serious indictment on post-independence Africa." Its theme was no longer cultural conflict but a satirical treatment of politics in Nigeria. Unlike his earlier books, this was a satire, a vivid picture of an era in Nigerian politics that ended coincidentally with a real military coup like that predicted at the novel's close. Above all it was humorous; These novel aspects in Achebe's new book impressed reviewers the most. His reputation grew with this obvious extension of his literary horizon.

The English critic, Angus Wilson, is full of admiration: "He has all the marks of a potentially considerable novelist . . . swinging

⁵⁵Miller, p. 31.

easily from tragic to comic in each of his books."⁵⁶ He notes that with A Man of the People, Achebe reverts to the satirical mood of his second novel, No Longer At Ease, but this time with a "comic ambiguity and a zest for his subject that put his new novel into a different class." The reviewer in the Times Literary Supplement calls it "an eloquent, acute, and convincing anatomy" of a strange period in Nigerian politics, and predicts that it will reach the status of Things Fall Apart. Other reviewers agreed with him.⁵⁷ In his opinion, the book is a "journalistic triumph of documentation . . . intelligently observed" but not a successful political novel. His reason is his conviction that Achebe's political thinking is "misty and ambiguous," fatally dependent on what he describes as a combination of "Western abstractions and Ibo proverbial analogizing."

American reviews were also eager to point out new features in this novel. In a language that matches the ending of the book in roughness, Phoebe Adams summarizes its uniqueness: "It is all blunt roughhouse and fierce slapsticks." The wit, she says, cuts like an ax, and pidgin English is used mercilessly for satirical effect. In her view, A Man of the People might be a very funny book, but it is also "gallows comedy masking despair and disgust."⁵⁸ In general terms, Harvey Flad remarks on Achebe's astuteness as a commentator on his society and his literary

⁵⁶"Tragi-Comedy from Africa" The Observer Weekend Review, 30 Jan. 1966, p. 27.

⁵⁷"Odili's Progress," TLS, 3 Feb. 1966, p. 77. See also Monica Beckinsale, "An African Rabelais," Books and Bookmen, 11 (Feb. 1966), 33.

⁵⁸"Potpourri," Atlantic Monthly, 218 (Sept. 1966), 141.

achievement.⁵⁹ Eliot Fremont-Smith, echoing the reviewer in the Times Literary Supplement, declares the book worth a ton of documentary journalism: "Achebe had shown that a mind that observes clearly but feels deeply enough to afford laughter may be more wise than all the politicians and journalists."⁶⁰

In his essay on the writer's role in Africa, Achebe has stated: "After all, the novelist's duty is not to beat this morning's headline in topicality, it is to explore in depth the human condition. In Africa, he cannot perform this task unless he has a proper sense of history."⁶¹ Ironically, Achebe's Man of the People has generated the greatest interest and speculation among reviewers because its ending seemingly beat the morning's headline in topicality. It literally ushered in a military coup, an event that took place only days before the novel's publication. Without doubt, the momentuous ending of the book threatened to overshadow its other merits, but it earned Achebe the reputation of "prophet," and further strengthened his fame as a careful observer and an astute commentator. D. A. Jones in the New Statesman calls the book "a shrewd and prophetic condemnation" of Nanga and by extension the recently toppled government of Nigeria.⁶² Obviously unaware that Achebe was writing on an imminent chaos he saw all around him, the reviewer in the Times

⁵⁹Library Journal, 91 (Aug. 1966), 3761.

⁶⁰The New York Times, 10 Aug. 1966, p. 39, col. 3.

⁶¹"The Role of the Writer in a New Nation," Nig. M. 81 (June 1964), 157.

⁶²"Poor Innocent Victims," New Statesman, 28 Jan. 1966, p. 132.

Literary Supplement wonders at the casualness of his prediction: "Mr. Achebe's situation when he began to write it was rather as if the director of the British Council could undertake to predict the Chinese occupation of London."⁶³

The book's dramatic ending had much the same interest for some Americans too. Bernth Lindfors reads in Achebe's accuracy of vision not only a local Nigerian prophecy but also a warning parable of doom for all Africa to heed.⁶⁴ Arthur Lerner praises his prophetic insight into Nigeria's problems.⁶⁵ Robert Green in the Nation is moved to suggest that "writers of fiction are often soothsayers who have a disturbing power of foretelling the future."⁶⁶

Characters and characterization in A Man of the People have variously been praised and criticized depending on the depth of moral indignation aroused in the reviewer. Angus Wilson in The Weekend Observer, obviously disgusted with Nanga, rejects him as absurd and revolting, but praises the book "as a beautifully realized comic portrait of a fraudulent, arriviste, demagogic universal-charmer."⁶⁷ He maintains that the novel's subtlety lies in the successful realization of Odili's character. The reviewer in Times Literary Supplement is morally outraged by the characters

⁶³TLS, p. 77. For Achebe's commentary see "I Had to Write on the Chaos I Foresaw," Sunday Nation (Nairobi), 15 Jan. 1967, pp. 15-16.

⁶⁴"Achebe's African Parable," Presence Africaine, 66 (1968) 130-136.

⁶⁵Books Abroad, 41 (Winter 1967), 113.

⁶⁶"Nigeria's New Man," Nation, 18 April 1966, p. 465.

⁶⁷"Tragi-Comedy from Africa," The Weekend Observer, 30 Jan. 1966, p. 27.

and less interested in how they were realised.⁶⁸ He calls their actions "scabrous, unbuttoned, reckless." He condemns Odili as a "black fabian," who more than anyone else is "motivated by chance not free will, greed not social good, sexual pique rather than honor." Chief Nanga in his view, is a "rotund complexity, his roguery as bottomless and impenetrable as his outrageous plausibility."

In contrast, the American critic, Robert Green, finds Nanga and Odili sympathetic, and pours his scorn instead on the masses calling them black rapists of their mother country, and pointing out with obvious satisfaction the change from "they" the British to "us" the Nigerians as the invaders. His concluding moral for Nigeria and all Africa is that they should learn from "Achebe's scintillating sermon."⁶⁹ He is well pleased to find Achebe so stringently honest in exposing the odious aspects of Nigerian politics. Arthur Lerner, in Books Abroad, finds Nanga "a most seductively enchanting personality,"⁷⁰ but Vincent Colimore in Best Sellers is by no means taken in. "I did not find him enchanting or lovable," he declares, "his sexual mores are no better nor worse than any man who can buy what he wants with money or through the use of his position."⁷¹ Phoebe Adams finds them equally unappealing: "the characters are almost entirely fools, or rascals or both."⁷² But O. R. Dathorne applauds Achebe's

⁶⁸TLS, p. 77.

⁶⁹Green, p. 465.

⁷⁰Lerner, p. 41.

⁷¹Best Sellers, 15 Aug. 1966, p. 175.

⁷²Adams, p. 141.

characterization as his best thus far, and as a legitimate reason to claim critical attention: "Here there is no attempt to smother all distinction but to come to grips with the serious problems that face African writers; how to create individuals, how to stand outside the culture; how to ensure the flow of the movement of life from experience to paper. . . . It is a new kind of ritual for our ancestor-worshipper."⁷³

Humor in A Man of the People also came in for favorable criticism. Angus Wilson finds the book a "very funny satire,"⁷⁴ and Jones characterizes it as a "gay, light-footed novel," in contrast to those novels of Achebe which he describes as "intense, stiffly-wrought studies of tribal religion and alien rule."⁷⁵ The American, Thomas Sterling in Holiday Magazine attributes a considerable part of the novel's success to Achebe's "fine sardonic sense of the comic."⁷⁶ Robert Green sees humor and honesty as the book's twin virtues, but his affection for it is based on its ability to make him laugh aloud, something he admits to be rare with him.⁷⁷

A common complaint in American reviews concerns Achebe's use of pidgin English without explanations or translations. The general feeling is that passages in pidgin tend to break up the easy natural flow of the writer's narrative prose.⁷⁸ These critics fail to appreciate that Achebe

⁷³Black Orpheus, No. 21 (April 1967), p. 61.

⁷⁴Wilson, p. 27.

⁷⁵Jones, p. 132.

⁷⁶Holiday Magazine, 41 (Feb. 1967), 131.

⁷⁷Green, p. 466.

⁷⁸Choice, 4 (Feb. 1968), 1378.

writes for an African audience first and a Western audience second. His use of pidgin is only an accurate reflection of the language in Nigeria.

English and American reviews on A Man of the People reveal that Achebe's already impressive achievement was further consolidated by his fourth novel. Many reviewers welcomed its radical, thematic departure from the first three works. They found in Achebe's firmness of control of this political satire a convincing evidence of his versatility and potential as a great novelist. Most reviewers responded favorably to the overall impression of the novel.⁷⁹ There was a tendency for many, especially the English reviewers, to overemphasize the so-called "prophetic endings" of the book, to the detriment of other aspects of interest, but this is understandable in view of English interest in Nigerian politics.

In 1973 Achebe's collection of a dozen stories written over a period of twenty years was published by Doubleday as Girls at War and Other Stories. Editor-at-Large, L. L. Day launched it into the book market with the following remarks:

How to make life in an unfamiliar, perhaps frightening land engage the heart and spirit of an American reader? It is a difficult task. Yet it can be done . . . we are pleased to be publishing Achebe's latest book . . . written with grace and feeling . . . Achebe's art is never polemic but always human. That humanity shines through all his fiction. Furthermore Achebe creates an authentic sense of place and people that reaches out to a far different place and its people.⁸⁰

⁷⁹Other favorable reviews include John Povey, Books Abroad, 41 (Winter 1967), 418; K. Allsop, The Spectator, 28 Jan. 1966, p. 27; N. Shrapnel, Manchester Guardian, 3 Feb. 1966, p. 10.

⁸⁰"To Be An African." Doubleday Newsletter, March 1973.

The book became a success and received many reviews, most of them from America and nearly all favorable. Phoebe Adams praises the stories as engaging and revelatory of the many facets of changing life in modern Africa.⁸¹ To Anatole Broyard, they represent a priceless documentary of life in Nigeria as only a native eye-witness can present it.⁸² J. Yardley in the New York Times Book Review thinks them ironic, witty and complex but above all, he praises the collection as "first-rate fiction, in its own right."⁸³

In the Times Literary Supplement, a reviewer considers it along with other collections of stories on the Biafran War, laying emphasis on those stories that deal specifically with the war period.⁸⁴ He believes them to be the only worthy and lasting memorial to those who died: "When the last pamphlets of either side have fluttered and gone, when the official rhetoric is no longer even remembered, this witness will prevail." Commenting also on the war stories, D. A. N. Jones says in The Listener that Achebe has not lost his "open-mindedness nor his good humor." In his opinion the stories "are not heroic or propagandist, nor are they anti-war, they just tell you what it is like."⁸⁵ He remarks that Achebe has command of "several kinds of good English." A reviewer in the New Statesman

⁸¹Atlantic Monthly 231 (May 1973), 123.

⁸²"Of Totems and Technology," The New York Times, 14 March 1973, p. 41, col. 3.

⁸³New York Times Book Review, 13 May 1973, p. 36, col. 7.

⁸⁴"The Literature of Civil War," TLS, 3 March 1972, p. 247.

⁸⁵"African Literature," The Listener, 30 March 1972, p. 427.

declares that at their best these stories "are marked by a refreshing directness of expression."⁸⁶

Yardley considers Achebe a quiet writer whose prose is deceptively understated. He praises him for a remarkable consistency of style and point of view in stories that range over two decades and contain some works of his apprentice days.⁸⁷ Even more enthusiastic and commendatory, the Saturday Review refers to his prose as "masterfully simple, and concise without ever being mannered." Comparing the earlier stories with later ones, the reviewer declares that they are just as skillful because Achebe has been a gifted writer from the beginning: "It sometimes does not sound written at all, but rather like some perfectly normal utterance that is simply unfolding before you."⁸⁸ In an extremely short but favorable review, The Washington Post eulogizes Achebe's "fine ear for dialogue that conveys the quality of the speaking voice and a deft sense of form."⁸⁹

Unfavorable criticisms were the exceptions and even then very mild in tone. For example, the reviewer in World calls the stories "by-products of Achebe's true vocation as a novelist" which showed "all the weaknesses and strengths of the ex-colonial writer and politically committed writer." He implies perhaps a dislike for "colonial" and

⁸⁶New Statesman, 3 March 1972, p. 286.

⁸⁷The New York Times Book Review, p. 36.

⁸⁸Saturday Review, 7 April 1973, p. 95.

⁸⁹"Briefly Noted," Book World (Washington, D. C. Post), 11 March 1973, p. 14.

"committed" but these terms are not qualified enough to make his assessment explicit.⁹⁰ Most reviews were favorable. Barbara Bannon in Publishers' Weekly seemed to sum up the general tone of comments on theme, style, and literary achievement of the book:

These 12 stories . . . illustrate, through genuinely human situations, face-to-face encounters between the old Nigerian traditions and European culture. Change threatens through ideas of education, voting religion, but it threatens more subtly and perhaps more tragically through the rhythms of the young as they move away from the status quo in marriage . . . Whether Chinua Achebe writes of the life and dictates of the past, or of changing attitudes, he is perceptive, precise, evocative. These stories have the exotic quality of the foreign, but their attraction comes from the portrayal of universal aspects of men everywhere in their struggle for survival in a difficult war.⁹¹

Taken as a whole, Achebe's stories were more unanimously received with favor than any of his novels. Almost all agreed that the collection represented the best in Achebe "First-rate fiction," "masterfully simple prose," "remarkable consistency of style and point of view," "ironic, witty and complex," "priceless documentary of an eye witness"--all these favorable judgments and more come from American reviewers. Editor John Day made a point when he notes the difficulty of making life in an unfamiliar place "engage the heart and spirit of an American reader." Day claims that Achebe has done it because of a consistent humanity shining

⁹⁰World, 27 March 1973. For another mild criticism of the volume see Marvin Mudrick, Hudson Review 26 (Fall 1973), 545; for more favorable reception see Virginia Quarterly Review, 49 (Summer 1973), p. 110; New Yorker, 14 April 1973, p. 155; Kirkus, 15 Jan. 1973, p. 75; Library Journal, 98 (July 1973), 2198.

⁹¹Publishers' Weekly, 12 Feb. 1973, p. 64.

through all his fiction. Judging from the reviews of this collection, he is right. Evidently Achebe needed getting used to, and with each new work, Achebe and the land he was describing seemed to become a little more familiar and were viewed, therefore, with greater sympathy.

English critics tended to evaluate the work against the backdrop of the Nigeria-Biafra war. Nevertheless, it was Achebe's humanity that they too emphasized: "His open-mindedness," his good humor, his ability to "just tell you what it is like."

Achebe's reputation started high in England with Things Fall Apart, diminished with No Longer at Ease and Arrow of God, rose again with A Man of the People, and probably attained or even surpassed its initial height with Girls at War and Other Stories. The novelty of the life re-created in Things Fall Apart and a feeling that Achebe was repeating himself in Arrow of God, apparently accounted for their respective warm and lukewarm receptions in England. Achebe's language and style in both books were favorably received. The naturalistic nature of No Longer at Ease did not appeal to the English as much as it did to Americans, but the topicality of A Man of the People and Girls at War and Other Stories no doubt ensured their success with English reviewers, who were much closer than Americans to the events in Nigeria.

Achebe needed getting used to in America. His Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God were praised for their objective style and simple language, but were generally received without warmth because of American unfamiliarity with, and lack of interest in the background described. Achebe's American reputation rose with No Longer at Ease, reflecting American

taste for naturalistic novels, as well as their being more at ease with the mainly urban settings in both No Longer at Ease and A Man of the People. The satiric nature of the later book seemed equally to work in its favor. Americans were as pleased with Girls at War as the English were, but not so much for its topicality as for the qualities of Achebe's style and language, and his humanness which they said flows through the works. Both sides, therefore, thought Achebe a successful short storyteller, besides being a talented novelist. Almost opposite to the downward trend of Tutuola's reputation in both countries, Achebe's reputation in popular reviews has by and large continued to gather strength over the years, despite its difficult moments.

Reception of Achebe in Articles

An Ibo proverb states that "the world is like a mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place." Such is the fact with evaluating a writer of such multiple interests as Achebe. English and American critics have approached him from various angles according to their interests. Indisputably, the quantity and quality of critical studies which a writer attracts are strong indication of the esteem in which he is held in the literary world. Of all modern African writers, Achebe has been the most written about in a wide variety of scholarly journals.

Addressing themselves primarily to students of African literature, these articles in general have focused on limited aspects of the novels or on one particular novel. Among the English studies, for

example, one examines symbolism in Things Fall Apart, another traces a theme through the novels, and two make comparative studies to determine how Achebe was influenced by Yeats and T. S. Eliot respectively. Although American critics came a little later than the English to the field, their essays have been more numerous and more diversified. In the present study, two of them approach the four novels broadly, one focuses on two novels, one examines very closely a religious concept featured in the first two novels, another compares Achebe's concept of tragedy to Aristotelian tragedy, four study Achebe's language from different points of view, three examine his use of symbolism, and one analyses his method of characterization.

Gerald Moore's article "English Words, African Lives" (1965) is a critical survey of Arrow of God demonstrating why he thinks that it is Achebe's best book.⁹² Following his usual method of comparing and contrasting Achebe with other contemporary African writers, Moore points out Achebe's superior skill in character portrayal. He states that his ability "to relate the exploration and development of character to the texture of his book as a whole" marks him out as a true novelist: "Every word in this dialogue is working. Each is rooted at once in the man who speaks it, in the situation which provokes it and in the culture which contains it."⁹³ Moore expresses confidence in his character portrayals especially that of Ezeulu in Arrow of God. As far as he is concerned, Achebe has

⁹²"English Words, African Lives" Presence Africaine, 54 (1965), 90-101.

⁹³ibid. p. 93.

figuratively wrestled with the proud spirit of Ezeulu and has succeeded in producing a novel of such quality as no other African writer has produced.

A fairly common tendency among English critics of Achebe and indeed of African writers in general, is to draw parallels with well-known Western writers in order to suggest possible influences, even imitations. Names like Aristotle, Yeats, Eliot, Conrad, Greene, and Cary have been associated with Achebe's by various critics. For example, in his article, "Surface and Symbol in Things Fall Apart" (1967), Christopher Heywood attempts to fit Achebe into what he calls the "Edwardian Tradition" of the early twentieth century.⁹⁴ Assuming that Achebe works closely in the traditions of the English novel, Heywood sees him as part-descendent of the "Edwardian" group because of his pre-occupation with social and moral changes and because of his tendency to invest trivial objects with symbolic power:

In Things Fall Apart, the symbols resemble more closely the symbolic 'moments' in the more loosely organized novels by Edwardian novelists: The Marabar caves in E. M. Forster's Passage to India, the self-destruction of the printing machine in Bennett's Clayhanger, or the scene at the close of D. H. Lawrence's The Rainbow. . . . It is in scenes of this kind, giving dramatic actions in a setting of striking intensity that the art of Achebe approximates to the art of symbolism.⁹⁵

Heywood's aim is to show that Achebe uses symbolism in his writing as the Edwardians did and to suggest a close literary tie between them.

⁹⁴"Surface and Symbol in Things Fall Apart," Journal of the Nigerian Studies Association, 2 (Nov. 1967), 41-45.

⁹⁵Ibid., 43.

A different aspect of Achebe was the subject of A. G. Stock's article "Yeats and Achebe" (1968).⁹⁶ Noting Achebe's borrowing of the title, "Things Fall Apart," Stock suggests the existence of a deeper influence in Achebe's very Yeatsian manner of viewing and interpreting history. According to her theory, Achebe has successfully transferred to an African setting Yeats' prophetic concept of Europe being broken up after two thousand years by a more potent culture. She argues that Things Fall Apart is a dramatization of that concept: a traditional culture being broken up by the more potent Western culture. Stock is quite impressed with Achebe's handling of this "borrowed concept." It is her view that he does so "accurately but not in the least subserviently." She points out that Achebe has managed to endow his novel with universal significance by demonstrating through it "how a historical process works in the lives of men."⁹⁷

Roderick Wilson attempts in a similar vein to explore T. S. Eliot's influence on Achebe's No Longer at Ease, a title borrowed from "Journey of the Magi."⁹⁸ Wilson's interest is in discussing philosophical ideas which Achebe shares with Eliot from works like "The Waste Land," "The Hollow Men," and "Journey of the Magi." Without suggesting any equality of stature between the two writers or their concern for similar problems, Wilson shows their basically similar beliefs in the inevitability of

⁹⁶"Yeats and Achebe," JCL 5 (July 1968), 105-111.

⁹⁷Ibid., 111.

⁹⁸"Eliot and Achebe: An Analysis of some Formal and Philosophical Qualities of No Longer at Ease," English Studies in Africa, 14 (Feb. 1971), 215-223.

fragmentation in the modern world and a desire to create a kind of order out of this chaos. He points out that Obi of No Longer at Ease returns from abroad a stranger to his former world, confused and ill at ease, very much like Eliot's magi. The vital difference, in Wilson's opinion, is Obi's lack of religious experience and subsequently his lack of any sense of wholeness. This sense of fragmentation makes it impossible for him to survive in a complex society with contradictory standards and demands. Wilson's main objective is to show that Achebe has been considerably influenced by T. S. Eliot. Like Stock, he sees no trace of slavish imitation on Achebe's part, and he is likewise impressed with Achebe's ability to transfer essentially western philosophical ideas into an African milieu.

Although themes in Achebe's novels get partial treatment in most studies, whatever the aspects being examined, Kate Turkington in "This no be them Country" (1971), specially traces through the first three novels, the tragic theme of the man who will not or cannot adapt.⁹⁹ Combining summary with analysis and comparisons, she applies the theme to the protagonist of each novel, stressing its universal implication by equating each protagonist with "every man facing the unknown." Turkington makes several critical comments on Achebe's style and compares elements of his works to those in the Norse Saga. She praises his "wonderful true ear for Nigerian and English speech rhythms and a simple-seeming but very sophisticated use of metaphor."¹⁰⁰ She notes with much interest

⁹⁹"This no be them Country: Chinua Achebe's Novels," English Studies in Africa, 14 (Feb. 1971), 205-14.

¹⁰⁰*ibid.*, 212.

similarities in the independence of thought and action of the characters in Things Fall Apart and those in the world of the Sagas. Although mostly interested in the recurrence of the same theme in three different novels, Turkington's reception of Achebe's novels as works of fiction is both favorable and complimentary.

English critics have tended to focus predominantly on tracing Western literary influences on Achebe. Christopher Heywood sought to place him within the Edwardian traditions. A. G. Stock and Roderick Wilson each examined Achebe's philosophical debt to the literary giants from whom he borrowed his titles. Their comparative approach was determined by their thesis, which in turn determined those aspects of Achebe's novels that the critics emphasized or played down. The various studies tended to place Achebe in a literary milieu, suggesting perhaps the critical canon by which he should be evaluated. Gerald Moore and Kate Turkington show interest in other aspects. Moore's approach to Arrow of God is both comparative and impressionistic but based on familiarity with other African works and experience as a critic of Achebe. He assesses his work in an African context, comparing and commenting in relationship to other African novels. Turkington's approach is thematic, but the later part of her study tries to compare elements in Achebe's work to events far away and as old as the Norse Sagas. The general trend was, therefore, to relate Achebe in some way to some familiar form, traditions, or writers and against this background to appreciate what he achieved in his African setting.

In America, Austin Shelton's article "The Offended Chi of Achebe's Novels" (1963) represents an early anthropological approach to Achebe's

novels and it is the only study of its kind.¹⁰¹ Based on his personal knowledge of Ibo traditions gathered during his residence in Eastern Nigeria, Shelton's aim is to prove that Achebe's interpretation of "Chi" as "personal god" is a blasphemous misrepresentation, "reflecting possibly a jaundiced attitude towards his own people's religion," and causing him to blame the wrong people for the failure of Okonkwo and his descendants.¹⁰² Shelton claims that "Chi" means "God within" and according to his theory, Okonkwo's killing of Ikemefuna was an offense against his "God within," the consequences of which are to be felt by Okonkwo and his descendents. Shelton lends weight to his argument by explaining other complicated Ibo traditions and rituals and providing Ibo translations of these as well. The unfavorable tone of his careful documentation is apparently due to his resentment of what he calls "Achebe's sensitivity about non-Igbo speaking critics." His conclusion clearly reflects this resentment:

Achebe makes a vainglorious attempt in these two books . . . and I suspect he will continue so in The Arrow of God . . . to ascribe all the evils which occurred in Ibo society to the coming of the white men. But he stacks the cards in the novels, hinting here and there at the truth, yet not explaining fully the substratum of divine forces working to influence the characters. His own motives perhaps are linked with his patent desire to indicate that outsiders can never understand the works of Igbo-speaking writers.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹"The Offended Chi in Achebe's Novels," Transition, 13, No. 8 (1963), 36-37.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁰³*Ibid.*, 37.

Although unfavorable to Achebe, Shelton's article is a rare example of criticism given depth by the critic's familiarity with the milieu of the novels. It is, on the other hand, an example of a kind of dogmatism that could develop in an over-confident critic, and which could set off an emotional battle of words on both sides.¹⁰⁴

Judith Gleason's "Out of the Irony of Words" (1965) is one of the earliest treatments of Achebe in an American periodical.¹⁰⁵ Much of the article is taken up by general remarks on the present state of African literature and its criticism: the gain in confidence of African writers in general and their increased experimentation that recalls Yeats, Beckett, Durrenmatt and Greek plays. In her review of Arrow of God, however, she provides a fairly detailed summation of the plot and few remarks on Achebe's artistic ability. She is delighted with his skill and objectivity in recreating "myriad of intricate domestic details, shafts of sunlight . . . scenes of squalor and hardship too. . . in true Homeric fashion."¹⁰⁶ But her broad approach to this work gives her study the tone of a review rather than a critical or analytical examination.

In his article "The Novels of Chinua Achebe" (1967) John Povey

¹⁰⁴See a reply to Shelton in support of Achebe in Donatus Nwoga, "The Chi Offended," Transition, No. 5 (1965), 5. Shelton later challenges Achebe's choice of protagonists in another article, "Failures and Individualism in Achebe's Stories," Studies in Black Literature, 2, No. 1 (Spring 1971), 5-9.

¹⁰⁵"Out of the Irony of Words," Transition, 18 (1965), 34-38.

¹⁰⁶ibid., 37.

attempts to situate Achebe securely within the English tradition.¹⁰⁷ He suggests that Achebe's successful appearance in school texts is due to his being readily evaluated by Western critical canons: "When one can so readily make cross-comparisons with the work of Achebe and say, Thomas Hardy or Joseph Conrad, one has the satisfying sense that the African writer can be conveniently set within the context of the much wider field of English language writing; the whole 'Great Tradition' of which F. R. Leavis so persuasively writes."¹⁰⁸ Claiming that Achebe writes for a foreign audience, Povey praises his good judgment in avoiding the African writers' temptation of becoming an anthropologist instead of an artist. Of his background descriptions, for example, he notes that Achebe makes them an integral part of the structure of his story, thus informing us almost, as it were, without our recognizing it and without our attention being directed away from the essential elements.

Povey is also favorably impressed by Achebe's variety of style and languages, which he says perfectly match his characters, and range from the extremely formal to the dislocated English of the less educated and to pidgin English with its African flavor. In his opinion, "To read Achebe is to feel a deliberate and effective selection at work, moulding verbal patterns to achieve specific artistic aims."¹⁰⁹ Comparing him to other African novelists, he praises his general professional competence

¹⁰⁷"The Novels of Chinua Achebe," Introduction to Nigerian Literature, ed. Bruce King (Lagos: Evans Brothers, 1971), pp. 97-112.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

and remarks that his work has a structural strength and an architectural coherence unmatched by other African novelists.

Povey discusses and summarizes the four novels at length and finds them "the most important prose achievement yet in African Literature in English." Povey's study is in itself a brief summation of what English critics have been trying to do. It is a combination of Moore, Heywood, Yeats and Wilson in its attempt to place Achebe within an African context by comparing him with other African writers, as well as place him firmly within the Western literary tradition.

The earliest article dealing at length with Achebe's language is Bernth Lindfors' "The Palm-Oil With Which Achebe's Words are Eaten" (1968).¹¹⁰ He demonstrates what he regards as Achebe's virtuosity in devising "an African vernacular style": simulating Ibo idiom and using proverbs to provide appropriate language for each novel, add local color, re-inforce themes, distinguish characters, and focus on social values. He maintains that Achebe is a "careful and fastidious artist in full control of his art," exhibiting that proportion and decorum which he thinks most contemporary writers lack. Lindfors points out the several prose styles which Achebe employs to individualize his characters. In conclusion, he states: "One can observe his mastery of English language, his skill in choosing the right words to convey his ideas, his keen sense of what is in 'character' and what is not, his instinct for appropriate metaphor and symbol, and his ability to present a thoroughly African world

¹¹⁰"The Palm-Oil With Which Achebe's Words are Eaten," African Literature Today, No. 1 (1968), pp. 3-18.

in thoroughly African terms."¹¹¹

Lindfors' study is important because it broke fresh grounds in the criticism of Achebe. His example was followed by other American critics who focused on language and other stylistic aspects of Achebe's works. Austin Shelton's article "The Palm-Oil of Language: Proverbs in Chinua Achebe's Novels" is devoted to discussion of the nature and function of proverbs in the four novels and selected short stories.¹¹² As an anthropologist, he is interested in the diverse functions of proverbs in a traditional community. He defends Achebe's wisdom in making use of so many proverbs on the grounds that they are all functional. He argues that Achebe effectively uses them to enhance plot and delineate characters and never as ends in themselves. In his evaluation, they "lend realism to the dialogue . . . function as metaphors, to concretize description . . . stress the plot and problems of the stories."¹¹³ In addition, he argues that proverbs grace the speech of Achebe's older characters, and in a very significant way Africanize his writings. As with his first article of 1963, Shelton translates and interprets every proverb he quotes. In every case his reception of Achebe's proverbs is favorable and he brings to his study the advantage of his familiarity with these proverbs in their original Ibo language and context of usage.

¹¹¹Lindfors, 18.

¹¹²"The Palm-Oil of Language: Proverbs in Chinua Achebe's Novels," Modern Language Quarterly, 30 (1969), 860-111.

¹¹³Ibid., 109-110. For a negative view on Achebe's proverbs see Michael Crowder, "Tradition and Change in Nigerian Literature," Tri-Quarterly, No. 5 (1966), p. 120.

Many critics have noted in passing the similarities between Achebe's works and Greek tragedy, but Roger Landrum was the first to make a study of such parallels in his article, "Chinua Achebe and the Aristotelian Concept of Tragedy."¹¹⁴ He analyses among other things similarities in the movement of plot, the stature of the protagonist, and the significance of the tragic flaw, concluding with the observation that Things Fall Apart is a great novel, "a marvelously detached contemplation of African history forged into a classic literary design."¹¹⁵ Landrum also attempts an allegorical interpretation of the work and its chief character, claiming that even the minor figures have specific allegorical significance. In his opinion, "all the pieces form the whole, a kinesthetic fictional mimesis which symbolizes the African tragedy."¹¹⁶ Like the English critics who compared Achebe to Yeats and T. S. Eliot, Landrum finds that Achebe exhibits no slavish imitation but rather an assimilation and transplanted of a classical concept into an African novel.

A year after the English critic, Heywood, explored symbolism in Achebe, the first American article on a similar topic appeared. In cooperation with Cathy Ramadan, Donald Weinstock published "Symbolic Structure in Things Fall Apart" (1969), a study of Achebe's use of descriptive passages and tales to unify, both symbolically and structurally, a seemingly episodic novel.¹¹⁷ Both critics are impressed by Achebe's technique of

¹¹⁴"Chinua Achebe and the Aristotelian Concept of Tragedy," Black Academy Review, 1, No. 1 (Spring 1970), 22-30.

¹¹⁵*Ibid.*, 22.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, 30.

¹¹⁷"Symbolic Structure in Things Fall Apart," Critique, 11, No. 1 (1969) 34-41.

blending realistic and symbolic modes. Comparing him in this regard to Conrad, Joyce and Lawrence, they remark that the blending is "unobstrusively almost subliminally" done, perfectly integrated with the structure, and helping to create a tightly-knit novel.

In another article entitled "Achebe's Christ Figure" (1970) Donald Weinstock continues his examination of Achebe's use of symbolism in Things Fall Apart.¹¹⁸ He interprets the sacrificed boy, Ikemefuna, as a Christ figure and Achebe's symbol foreshadowing the impact of Christianity in Iboland. He asserts that through this symbolic death, as well as other "useless" deaths in the novel, Achebe emphasizes his people's distrust of youth, their rigidity of thought and action which would have to give way to the love and creativity represented in Ikemefuna, and by extension in Christianity. In both articles, Weinstock makes it clear that it does not matter what Achebe says because it is legitimate for the critic to bring out meanings which even the artist might be unaware of. He is convinced from his studies, that Achebe is by no means as simple as most critics claim him to be, but is rather deep and complex in his style and philosophy.

In a third article, "The Two Swarms of Locusts: Judgement by Indirection in Things Fall Apart" (1971), Weinstock once again emphasizes Achebe's subtlety and complexities, his ability to give his views on issues through a skillful manipulation of words and symbols.¹¹⁹ His

¹¹⁸"Achebe's Christ Figure," JNALA, 5 and 6 (Spring/Fall 1968), 20-26.

¹¹⁹"The Two Swarms of Locusts: Judgement by Indirection in Things Fall Apart," Studies in Black Literature, 2, No. 1 (Spring 1971), 14-19.

argument this time is that Achebe uses the locust symbolically to represent Christianity, revealing in this deeper conscious or unconscious sympathy towards Christianity than a surface reading his novels would suggest. Weinstock draws ingenious parallels between the locust and the missionaries, in the timing of their arrivals, in their potentials for good and destructiveness, in their ability to awaken an enervated community, and in their being viewed by the people as "creatures of legend." The interpretation which he claims Achebe's symbols imply is that the acceptance of Christianity would greatly benefit his people.

Weinstock's moral bias inevitably influences his interpretation of Achebe's symbols as he narrows them to fit his line of argument. Comparing, for example, the views of Achebe's characters to the narrowness of the Old Testament, he claims that Achebe is symbolically warning against the narrowness of traditional ways, which will inevitably succumb to the "New Testament breath and gentleness of Christianity with its presumably less serious defects."¹²⁰

An important article on Achebe's symbolic use of language, Gareth Griffith's "Language and Action in the Novels of Chinua Achebe" (1971), explores the ironies involved in the author's celebration of Ibo culture with a language gained in the destruction of that culture.¹²¹ Griffith's theory is that Achebe's poise between two worlds and his heritage of both African and Western civilizations can explain his refusal to identify

¹²⁰Weinstock, 18.

¹²¹"Language and Action in the Novels of Chinua Achebe," African Literature Today, No. 5 (1971), pp. 88-105. For another commentary on themes see John Povey, "Changing Themes in the Nigerian Novel," JNALA, 1 (1966), 3-11.

totally with either world or point of view, hence his ability to narrate with objectivity and detachment. His approach, like that of the English critic, Kate Turkington, is thematic. In his discussion of each novel, Griffith attempts to demonstrate the recurrent theme of man bound within the limitations of his viewpoint, and struggling to come to terms with the ambivalence of his situation. In Things Fall Apart he sees how Nwoye's failure ironically insures his survival, while Okonkwo's "success" leads to disaster. He points out Achebe's use of language in No Longer at Ease to reveal the gap between idealism and reality, to analyze "with clarity and compassion" the dilemma of being caught between two worlds.

Like most other critics, both English and American, Griffith finds Arrow of God a more complex and ambitious work, revealing "greater confidence and control." He also finds his theme very much at work in this novel: ". . . in Ezeulu's madness Achebe finds his most powerful symbol of the limitations of men." Similarly in A Man of the People, he emphasizes the several distinctions between language and action, between what Idili says and what he does. He particularly praises the distance which Achebe puts between the reader and Odili, thus permitting the reader to objectively discern subtle distinctions in characters, which are further clarified, through Achebe's skillful manipulation of Ibo, Pidgin and English.

As general in his approach as Povey or Gleason, Robert McDowell comments on Achebe's style, themes and the overall success of the novels in his article "Of What is Past, or Passing, or to Come" (1971).¹²²

¹²²"Of What is Past, or Passing, or to Come," Studies in Black Literature, 2, No. 1 (Spring 1971), 9-13.

Summarizing the plot of each novel, he emphasizes the combination of skills that makes them successful works of art. In Things Fall Apart, he notes the "rich imagination" that informs the entire recreational process; his "fine prose style;" and the strict objectivity of his narrative that registers both the ugliness and the "iron brutality of habitual modes of life." McDowell's favorites are the first and third novels in which he discerns a "remarkable unity of the word with the deed, the character, the time and the place . . . which is rare anywhere in modern English fiction."¹²³ Like most critics, he judges No Longer at Ease of lesser significance than the first or third novel. He points to the weakness of Obi's character as the reason rather than to any stylistic inadequacies. In A Man of the People, he remarks that the prophetic nature of the close is a good commentary on Achebe's sensitivity in scrutinizing the ills of Nigeria. He evaluates Achebe as an artist of considerable note and the most imaginatively gifted of Nigerian writers.

Lloyd Brown takes a different approach in discussing Achebe's language in his article, "Cultural Norms and Modes of Perception in Achebe's Fiction" (1972).¹²⁴ Noting Achebe's pre-occupation with language as a "total cultural experience," and the ambivalence of ex-colonial writers towards the European language, he comments: "Achebe seizes upon the perceptual values represented by an alien European culture and its language, then exploits these criteria to portray external conflicts between the

¹²³ McDowell, 12.

¹²⁴ "Cultural Norms and Modes of Perception in Achebe's Fiction." Research in African Literatures, 3, No. 1 (Spring 1972), 21-35.

African and the white colonialist, or to project the internal crises of African society."¹²⁵ Brown demonstrates his theory with episodes and passages drawn from Things Fall Apart, No Longer at Ease, and A Man of the People. As one example of Achebe's ironic and ambivalent use of English language, Brown points to a scene in Things Fall Apart when the District Commissioner plans his book of memoirs: The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger. He notes that "The white colonist lacks the capacity to perceive the human dimensions of Okonkwo's tragedy. . . . But Achebe's historical novel has used this same machinery to present the 'primitive' as a complex human being who reflects, and is part of African history."¹²⁶ Brown argues that it is through scenes like that of Okonkwo's suicide that Achebe, especially through his manipulation of differences in language, religious themes and irony, heightens the reader's awareness of cultural conflicts: "The European's ignorance of African languages (and culture) therefore complements the ethnocentric bias of his Christianity."

On another aspect, Brown compares Achebe's sense of history to those of T. S. Eliot and Yeats as A. G. Stock and Roderick Wilson had done, observing that Achebe borrows "European historiography" in order to explode the myth that Africa lacks history:

Achebe accepts the historiographic principle which allows Eliot to telescope multiple cycles of history into one moment, to compress repetitive conflicts between Christendom and paganism,

¹²⁵Brown, 23.

¹²⁶*Ibid.*, 28.

or between hostile cultures, into a single event or personal experience. But Achebe also exploits this material in order to assert the validity of pagan values which the Christian feels impelled to minimize or deny. And on an ethnological level, the operation of the historical sense in No Longer at Ease is invested with the same irony that influences the handling of Yeats' "Second Coming" in Things Fall Apart.¹²⁷

In A Man of the People, Brown shows that Achebe turns inwards to underscore "the limitations of traditional values" when set against the challenges of modernity and its Western criteria. He demonstrates once again, Achebe's successful use of irony and differences in languages in exposing the internal conflicts of an independent hybrid country.

The first systematic study of characterization in Achebe's novels since Larson's partial treatment of it in his Emergence of African Literature, is made by James Olney in his article, "The African Novel in Transition" (1941).¹²⁸ His method is to evaluate the characters against the Western ideal of "character-growth," finding them successful in proportion to their approximation to this ideal. His view is that Achebe's characters progress towards the ideal as their approach to love and sex becomes more westernized. According to his criteria, character portrayal in Things Fall Apart is a failure. He complains that Okonkwo is more an abstract and symbolic representation of Ibo manhood than a person, a force that reduces all other characters to mere shadows. He notes an improvement in No Longer at Ease in the greater differentiation and

¹²⁷Brown, 26.

¹²⁸"The African Novel in Transition," South Atlantic Quarterly, 70 (1971), 299-316.

and individualization of Obi and Clara. He argues that Achebe achieves this clarification by creating between the characters a relationship that agrees with every notion of "romantic, sentimental, Western love."

The crowning success in character portrayal is, in Olney's opinion, Achebe's creation of Odili in A Man of the People, an individual capable of growth, of various desires and loyalties. For this reason, he considers this novel to be pre-eminently a novel in the Western tradition with remarkable resemblances to the novels of E. M. Forster. He praises its "technical refinement" of characterization, its "subtlety and delicate assurance of tone." In a concluding statement that seems designed to uphold the great merits of individualism, Olney commends Achebe for letting his hero discover that "it is only after all, in the private realm that there is anything meaningful at all."¹²⁹ It is interesting to note that Olney and Charles Larson both judge Achebe against Western norms and yet arrive at different conclusions about his character portrayal in A Man of the People.¹³⁰

The number and diversity of American articles on Achebe are evidence of a growing interest in his works.¹³¹ Areas of dominant interest

¹²⁹Olney, 316.

¹³⁰See Larson, p. 148.

¹³¹Other American articles include: Harold Scheub, "When a Man Fails Alone," Presence Africaine 74, No. 2 (1970), 61-89. He argues perceptively against the interpretation of Things Fall Apart as a total falling-apart of an African way of life by portraying Okonkwo, not as a symbol of his tribe, but as a stranger to it, a menace to its traditions; Jeffrey Meyers, "Culture and History in Things Fall Apart," Critique 11, No. 1 (1969), 25-31, a favorable article on Achebe's recreation of African background; Richard B. McDaniel, "Stylistic Devices in the Narrative and Dialogue of Chinua Achebe's Prose," M.A. Thesis, Univ. of New Brunswick 1970; Robert E. McDowell, "The African-English Novel," Ph.D. Diss., Univ. of Denver 1966.

were language, symbolism, and proverbs. Fresh grounds were broken and some bold interpretations attempted by critics with literary approaches far more diverse than those of the English. Lindfors was both sociological and concretely impressionistic in his interest and commentaries. McDowell emphasized stylistic analysis without reference to sociological or literary contexts. Landrum, Povey and Olney, each in his own way, tried to place Achebe in a literary milieu as English critics did by comparing aspects of his works against Western norms, Brown demonstrated his skillful manipulation of languages, Weinstock, a symbolist and a moralist, explored a special Christian point of view not evident from the surface reading of Achebe. Shelton, on the other hand, was obviously an anthropologist in his love for careful documentation of background details and of proverbs and their meanings in context. The favorable tone pervading these articles reflects a serious, critical interest, beyond the lukewarm reception of Achebe in American reviews. By the diversity of their interests and approaches, American critics have shown their desire to assess Achebe objectively, by viewing him from different angles like the proverbial dancing mask.

Reception of Achebe in Critical Surveys

"When a man washes his hands, he can eat with Kings," so says an Ibo proverb. It is indeed significant that of the six English and four American critical surveys of African literature discussed in chapter II, every one seriously considered Chinua Achebe, all this in addition to reviews, articles, a pamphlet and two book-length studies on him alone.

Achebe has figuratively washed his hands and can, therefore, eat with the kings of the literary world.

Gerald Moore made a critical study of Achebe's Things Fall Apart and No Longer at Ease in his book Seven African Writers (1962).¹³² Holistic and comparative in his approach, he attempts to provide for the interested reader solid and factual background information on the two novels, as well as serious observations on the style and overall literary merits of Achebe as an African writer. On the dust cover of his second book, The Chosen Tongue, Moore says, "My hope is that future generations of English readers will rejoice in the richness and extent of the literature available to them in that language . . . instead of keeping their sights narrowly set on the classical canon of 'English Literature.'"¹³³ His evaluation of Achebe reflects the sentiment behind those words. He constantly sets Achebe within the African context, comparing him to other contemporary African writers and evaluating his writings on their own merits.

Declaring Things Fall Apart "the first West African novel in English which could be applauded without reserve," Moore upholds it among other Nigerian works as a model of creative skill, "extremely well constructed" and exhibiting confidence and precision of style. He praises Achebe's characters as people of flesh and blood, and especially commends his overall objectivity, his refusal to "justify, explain or condemn."

Moore furthermore emphasizes Achebe's ability to select and

¹³²Seven African Writers, pp. 58-72.

¹³³The Chosen Tongue.

organize only the most relevant materials out of the "boiling hotch potch" of cultural influences of modern Nigeria. In his opinion "Achebe has, as it were, gone back to that bleak little paragraph of despised and garbled history. With love, with understanding and with justice he has drawn from it a story of people just as real and individual as ourselves, whose world had its own completeness and whose life its own dignity."¹³⁴ But after summarizing No Longer at Ease, Moore finds it a lesser work than Things Fall Apart, mostly because of the difference in milieu and the unheroic stature of its leading character. He complains that the book creates "a certain sense of diffuseness and slackness after the austere tragic dignity of Things Fall Apart."¹³⁵

Ann Tibble, in her book African/English Literature (1965) believes Achebe to be "next to Tutuola in importance as a prose writer" but there is little doubt that she thinks highly of Achebe.¹³⁶ Although her approach is that of a comparative anthropologist, she tends to be impressionistic and fragmentary in her attempt to touch upon several aspects of the works. Her method of evaluating Achebe's merits is to compare him to the best in Western literature. In a short passage characteristic of her approach, she touches on four different aspects in Things Fall Apart all within a few lines. A verse in a song recalls Euripides for her, while mentioning in the next breath that humor is to be found in the account of the rainmaker. Leaving the statement at that,

¹³⁴ Seven African Writers, p. 65.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 68.

¹³⁶ African/English Literature: A Short Survey and Anthology of Prose and Poetry up to 1965 (London, Peter Owens, 1965), pp. 101-111.

she touches on masquerades and their audiences and ends with the following commentary on the characters that people Achebe's world: "His African characters in their Ibo village life follow a ceremonious ritual by no means simple. Their code of virtue is not unbecoming to human beings of the continent from which some of our earliest ancestors may have set forth."¹³⁷

Contrary to Moore's view, Tibble finds No Longer at Ease to be "of similar profundity" to the first novel. She bases her judgment on the fact that writing about the "shifting morass of social change" in that novel was immensely difficult and underscored Achebe's substantial achievement. Arrow of God is also her favorite. In her opinion it is the richest and best-constructed of the three novels she discusses, one that would not "come altogether badly out of a comparison with novels like Anna Karenina, Madame Bovary and Middlemarch."¹³⁸ Tibble's discussion of Achebe leaves an overall favorable impression. There are no negative remarks and she indicates in conclusion that Achebe's fourth novel is "most eagerly" awaited.

In Long Drums and Cannons (1969) Margaret Laurence's aim is to demonstrate that Nigerian prose writing in English has come of age and should be recognized as a significant part of world literature.¹³⁹ A novelist herself, she takes a sympathetic approach to Achebe. Her main

¹³⁷Tibble, p. 102.

¹³⁸ibid., p. 108.

¹³⁹Long Drums and Cannons: Nigerian Dramatists and Novelists (London: Macmillan, 1968), pp. 97-125.

interest is in Achebe's creation of characters, but her glowing praises are largely impressionistic and unsupported by any sustained analysis. Rather, she is chiefly concerned with 'placing' Achebe. Thus, she sums up the high respect in which she holds him: "Chinua Achebe's careful and confident craftsmanship, his firm grasp of his material and his ability to create memorable and living characters, place him among the best novelists now writing in any country in the English language."¹⁴⁰ Regarding Things Fall Apart, she observes that his style is plain and spare, with a pervading sense of irony. She claims blanket success for Achebe's handling of characters in general, and says that each has a life of his own and none is stereotyped. Like Ann Tibble, she feels that No Longer at Ease represents a much more complicated, if less tragic work. Nonetheless, she is very impressed by the skill and subtlety with which the reader is led to identify with the dilemmas of its protagonist, Obi. Referring to Arrow of God as "unquestionably his best," and probably one of the best novels of the decade in the world, she eulogizes Achebe's control of his material, his successfully realized characters, and the plainness and vividness of his style. Similarly, she is full of praise for Achebe's character portrayals in A Man of the People. It is her judgment that the author's ability to create living characters is his greatest talent as a novelist.

In The Chosen Tongue: English Writing in the Tropical World (1969), Gerald Moore discusses Achebe's Arrow of God and A Man of the People under the chapter titles "The Claims of the Past" and "The Claims

¹⁴⁰Laurence, p. 97.

of the Present" respectively.¹⁴¹ Moore believes Arrow of God to be Achebe's finest achievement, and characterizes it as a work of "great imagination," of surprising control in its language and vision, consistent in its style, and objective in its observations. He attributes much of the novel's success to Achebe's fidelity to the living language of his childhood: "a judicious mixture of translation and authentic invention" producing a conversational style. Moore is generally pleased with A Man of the People. He calls Achebe's technique of presenting Nanga through Odili's eyes both measured and effective. He upholds his use of pidgin English as a master stroke, because of its capacity for humor as well as irreverence and deflation. Taken as a whole, Moore's assessment of Achebe is both warm and positive.

In his book, A Manifold Voice (1970), William Walsh, (like Moore a professor at Leeds University) chooses Achebe as the representative of what is best in African Literature.¹⁴² He approaches Achebe's first three works as variants of tragedy caused by the failure of their protagonists to achieve a workable relationship with time. According to his theory, Achebe presents in Things Fall Apart a masculine, coherent, and curiously classical society existing in a "kind of trance," perfect in the present. He argues that the protagonist typifies this situation by his rejection of the immediate past (his father), for the values of remote heroic times. It is the critic's opinion that the society crumbles because by its nature, it lacks resources for assuming new intellectual postures. He notes after

¹⁴¹The Chosen Tongue, pp. 194-196.

¹⁴²A Manifold Voice: Studies in Commonwealth Literature (London: Chatto and Windus, 1969), pp. 48-61.

summarizing the novel at length, that it gives a "remarkably massive impression," and he commends the equilibrium of its structure as well as its effective style, which he describes as "plain, calm, confident and vigorous."

Much in the vein of Moore, Walsh finds No Longer At Ease a lesser work in overall impact. He calls it "febrile and edgy," though admitting that its unsettled and uneasy atmosphere is appropriate for its story. He misses in it much of the "positive, poetic murmurations," which enriched Things Fall Apart. Walsh interprets the protagonist as not so much a victim as a moral by-product of a confused system, "one which has not succeeded in keeping its connection with the past straight or its route forward open."¹⁴³

Like other English critics before him, Walsh assesses Arrow of God as the writer's most mature work. He is impressed by the authenticity of the African world created, as well as with Achebe's sympathy and humanity in portraying the essential sensibilities and values of that world. His concluding remarks assemble all the positive values he has stressed in Achebe throughout his article: "Achebe's emotional maturity, his masculine force of narration, his calm objective outlook, his fastidious sense of genuine tradition, the deeply particularizing, palpable, quality of his imagination, make his talent of a rare and significant sort."¹⁴⁴

Adrian Roscoe's Mother is Gold (1971), under the heading "Chinua Achebe: The Novelist As Teacher," discusses Achebe's use of proverbs as

¹⁴³Walsh, p. 55.

¹⁴⁴Ibid., p. 61.

teaching device in the first three novels.¹⁴⁵ He examines the fourth novel in the section entitled "Achebe As Satirist." In both sections, Roscoe applies his critical viewpoint that African writings in English must be judged by English critical standards.

The first English critic to pay close attention to Achebe's copious use of proverbs as a major artistic device, Roscoe analyses their didactic functions and central significance, demonstrating how proverbs act as "guides to conduct, aids to instruction, rallying cries to tribal unity, and . . . the weapons of debate and the buttress of oratory."¹⁴⁶ Comparing Achebe to English writers, Roscoe notes that he is something of a curiosity in the twentieth century because proverbs have virtually disappeared from English writings since the Elizabethan era. He notes, however, that proverbs in Achebe and other African writers add richness and variety of imagery and represent a successful carry-over of artistic adornments from a vast oral literature.

Roscoe's evaluation of Achebe as satirist in A Man of the People against the standards set by English fathers of satire like Swift and Pope is most unfavorable. He asserts that Achebe's loss of artistic detachment which he has so amply exhibited in other novels, makes for an alarming decline in style, and reduces the book to "journalistic propaganda." Roscoe strongly believes that African writers do well with forms which have long roots in Africa but tend to do poorly with imported forms like the

¹⁴⁵ Mother is Gold: A Study in West African Literature (Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 121-131.

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 124.

novel.¹⁴⁷ He argues that the teaching role suits Achebe better because of its long roots in African tradition, but he suspects that Achebe's failure as a satirist is due to the fact that satire has not enjoyed a long history in Africa. He warns Achebe and others to keep off the genre he assumes they are unprepared for: "But those who would venture into a field honored by the genius of Pope, Swift and Sterne had better display more qualities than noise and iconoclasm if they are to make their mark."¹⁴⁸

The nature of the critical surveys, as well as the personal dispositions of the critics, contributed immensely to the fund of insights supporting Achebe's critical reception. The enthusiasm for Achebe's works evident in Moore, Laurence and Walsh, pointed to critics who enjoyed reading Achebe and were disposed to emphasize his positive achievements, based mostly on personal impressions rather than any on concrete analysis of the works or parts of them. The tendency, especially in Laurence, was to let claims of excellence, particularly on Achebe's ability to create memorable characters, stand for analysis of facts and evidence. Ann Tibble's handling of Achebe was, in view of the nature of her book, more of a brief survey than criticism. Her remarks on style were too generalized and fragmentary to provide clear impressions. Like all theoretical arguments, Walsh's appears circumscribed by his theory. The description

¹⁴⁷Roscoe, p. 75. There are three variants of the same view on this page alone.

¹⁴⁸Ibid., p. 131.

of Achebe's society as "perfect in the present," for example, seemingly contradicted textual evidence as well as Walsh's characterization of Achebe's portrayal of that society as effective and realistic. Similarly, Roscoe's dictum on which genre was native and which foreign to Africa apparently biased his appreciation of Achebe the teacher, as opposed to Achebe the satirist. His assumption that time was the critical element in literary development and maturation, failed to recognize that African writers could build like other Western writers, on the experiences of the masters of satire. Besides, he provided little basis for his assertion that "satire has not enjoyed a long history in Africa."

The excessive span of most of these survey books is a matter for concern. Mother is Gold, for example, spanned eighteenth through the twentieth century Nigerian literature, from Equiano to contemporary writers. Besides creative works of literature it covered some political speeches and biographies of politicians and pamphlets, as well as children's books. While this might be an extreme case, each book suffers to some extent from overstretching of interest and resultant lessening of critical analysis of works represented.

In her book This Africa (1965) which Lionel Trilling judges "learned, sympathetic and often brilliant," Judith Gleason proposes to study the trend of social change in Africa through African novels, which she discusses mainly as they fit her interpretation of "Village Life," "City Life," "The Inner Life" and so on.¹⁴⁹ Sociological in her approach, this American critic's major interest in Things Fall Apart and Arrow of

¹⁴⁹This Africa: Novels by West Africans in English and French (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), pp. 81-93.

God is in seeing how they present authentic studies of African village life. Her method, much like that of Margaret Laurence, is to summarize the plots while emphasizing customs, rituals, proverbs and communal scenes most representative of pre-colonial village living. Her discussion of these works is dominated by her line of argument, making her observations however perceptive, a little confining in supporting her thesis. She makes only scant critical evaluation of the works as literature.

Things Fall Apart is, in Gleason's opinion, "the purest and most precise village novel so far in English."¹⁵⁰ She finds Arrow of God an equally excellent example of village life and she praises Achebe's style as "poised and stately," elegant in its simplicity, noble in its restraint and perfect for its theme. Thrilled in general with what to her is an artistic recreation of a whole way of life, she is particularly impressed, again like Laurence, by the portrait of Okonkwo and the village elders. Gleason's sympathetic and even enthusiastic reception of these two novels primarily establishes Achebe's validity for sociological study and his reputation as a careful and imaginative social observer and writer.

In his Africa in Modern Literature (1967) Martin Tucker differs significantly from other critics although he applies the common method of interspersing brief synopses of the novels with critical observations. The theme of blame or what he bluntly terms Achebe's obsessive concern "with blaming the white man for the corruption of the African garden of

¹⁵⁰Gleason, p. 81.

Eden," dominates his discussions through the first three novels.¹⁵¹

Margaret Laurence later takes him to task in her book over what to her is clearly Tucker's wrong interpretation of Achebe's intentions.¹⁵²

In discussing Things Fall Apart, Tucker observes that Achebe shows "remarkable insight" in the recreation of Ibo traditional life, and like Laurence and Gleason, commends him strongly on what he characterizes as a superbly realistic portrayal of Okonkwo. The point about blaming the white man is strongly made and carries over into his discussions of No Longer at Ease and Arrow of God. Tucker says, for example, of Arrow of God, that it is "Achebe's remarkable classical simplicity of style--the almost heroic calmness of his accusatory statement--that provides the richest kind of tension for his profoundly ambivalent portrayals."¹⁵³ To him the book is one long accusation of the white man.

In discussing A Man of the People, therefore, Tucker feels special gratification at the shift from external to internal criticism: "Having had his say about the cause of the Nigerian corruption (the white man's decadence and the African's fall into temptation and submission to white power), evidently now he feels free to deal with corruption from the uncluttered viewpoint of a sardonic raconteur."¹⁵⁴ In view of the topic of this novel, Tucker praises Achebe for avoiding propaganda and

¹⁵¹Africa in Modern Literature (New York: Ungar, 1967), p. 111.

¹⁵²Laurence, p. 105.

¹⁵³Tucker, p. 87.

¹⁵⁴*Ibid.*, p. 91.

sensationalism by emphasizing "the comic aspects of human foibles in a threatening situation." Unlike English critic, Adrian Roscoe, he finds no evidence of journalistic propaganda in the work.

In Whispers From A Continent (1969) Wilfred Cartey's overall aim is to put into perspective through creative works, the disruptions of colonialism, the African's revolt, search for self, exile and return.¹⁵⁵ He analyses Achebe's Arrow of God as part of the disillusionment and breakup of traditional life. Cartey observes that Ezeulu's downfall, for example, is due "as much to his stubborn intransigence, uncommunicating aloofness, and destructive pride, as to the progress of colonial administration."¹⁵⁶

Cartey's discussion of No Longer at Ease takes the form of analysing the events leading up to the point at which the protagonist joins the "lost generation" of Africa, emphasizing that neither the old colonial administration nor the traditional communal group can comprehend the strength of the forces at work against Africa's "young professional elite." Once again he underlines the dual nature of the evil forces at work, as opposed to Tucker's interpretation that Achebe blames only the white side.

As a black man, Cartey tends to be influenced by his sentimental attachment to Africa in analysing A Man of the People. He laments the fate of the "Poor Black Mother" whose hopes of freedom and independence had become the ugly reality of fraud and corruption, of greed and

¹⁵⁵Whispers from a Continent (New York: Vintage books, 1969) pp. 80-84, 173-177, 189-193.

¹⁵⁶ibid., p. 176.

incompetence, and seeming hopelessness for newly independent countries.¹⁵⁷ He constantly points out with obvious pain, the apathy, cynicism, and pessimism that pervade the entire novel. Cartey finds many faults with the book as a work of art. He charges that Achebe's treatment of many incidents is superficial, his characters are too sketchy, and despite the great variety of political motifs explored, Achebe fails to penetrate "the dynamic political convolutions at work."¹⁵⁸ Cartey's commentary on characterization is the very opposite of Laurence's blanket praise. He evaluates Achebe as an artist of promise for successfully exploring the social implications of colonialism. Sociological in interest and approach, he treats Achebe's novels, except for the last, more as sociological studies than works of art.

Charles Larson's The Emergence of African Fiction (1971) analyses Achebe's Things Fall Apart as the archetypal African novel.¹⁵⁹ He argues that the novel is representative of Africa not only in these but also in Achebe's departures from European tradition to create something distinctly African. His theory represents a change of view from English critics like John Povey and Christopher Heywood, who feel that Achebe is "orthodox" in creating within the mainstream of English literary traditions of the novel.¹⁶⁰ Larson, on the other hand, points out how it differs from the

¹⁵⁷Cartey, p. 189. Cartey is originally from the West Indies.

¹⁵⁸Ibid., p. 193.

¹⁵⁹The Emergence of African Fiction (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), p. 27-65, 147-155.

¹⁶⁰See John Povey, "The Novels of Chinua Achebe" and Christopher Heywood, "Surface and Symbol in Things Fall Apart."

Western novel by its scanty dialogue, few pictorial descriptions, creation of distinct African flavor through the use of African similes, proverbs, leitmotifs and devices of oral literature, emphasis on community rather than individual, a virtual absence of plot in the Western sense, and emphasis on cultural descriptions.

Commenting that some critics object to Achebe's cultural descriptions as "anthropological documentation," Larson defends their use as functional and essential for the theme, in the absence of "a novel of character." He compares them, in a sense, to the evocation of atmosphere and mood in Hardy's works. Larson observes with admiration: "Achebe had widened our perspective of the novel and illustrated how a typically Western genre may be given a healthy injection of new blood once it is reshaped and formed by the artist whose vision of life and art is different from our own."¹⁶¹

In discussing specific modes of characterization, however, Larson is disappointed that Achebe does not strive to achieve the Western ideal of "character growth." He admits his bias willingly: "I, for example, find it easy to identify with the situations Chinua Achebe's characters are involved in, but rarely do I identify with the characters themselves . . . because of the absence of what I have been trained to see in Western fiction: character development."¹⁶²

In marked departure from Margaret Laurence's praise of Achebe's character portrayals, Larson concludes that characterization in Things

¹⁶¹Larson, p. 65.

¹⁶²ibid., p. 148.

Fall Apart is mostly accomplished through action and authorial commentary with little dialogue or introspection. He finds Arrow of God more sophisticated and showing a marked increase in dialogue as well as introspection in the form of dreams, soliloquies, and proverbs. Charging that Achebe's white characters become more stereotype with each successive novel, Larson believes A Man of the People to be Achebe's weakest novel in terms of character portrayal although conceding that stereotype is a common feature in satires. He judges Achebe's characterization wanting in comparison to Western norms.

A previous comment about the vastness of scope equally applies to the four books of critical survey published in America. Commentaries were general in nature, especially in Gleason and Tucker, who relied mainly on summaries to support their remarks and impressions. Cartey avoided summaries by using a comparative and collective approach to the books. Only Larson's seemed limited to two areas of interest: Things Fall Apart as novel, and character development in Achebe's works. American critics were generally attracted to similar aspects of the novels as their English counterparts. Judging from their remarks on background, one could say, for example, that Moore was as much an influence on Gleason as he was on Laurence. It is fair to say that each writer's interpretation and evaluation of the works was conditioned to a large degree by the nature of his study, or the overall theory guiding the entire book. Gleason for example was limited to discussing Achebe's works strictly in terms of "Village Life," just as Cartey interpreted them as break-up of traditional life and its resultant disillusionment.

Unlike Tucker, however, he avoided the pitfall of giving a one-sided interpretation of Achebe's view which has no textual support. The otherwise favorable reception in Tucker's essay was dampened by his assumption or suspicion that Achebe was obsessed with blaming only whites for African failures. Larson, on the other hand, evidently worked with double standards of evaluation. He praised Things Fall Apart, as an example of an archetypal African novel, for all its distinguishing qualities, as well as its widening the perspective of the novel as genre. He was, nonetheless, dismayed that Achebe failed to measure up to his ideal of character-growth in the Western novel. Where Roscoe found A Man of the People wanting as satire, Larson found it wanting in character development. Except for specifically unfavorable remarks about A Man of the People from Cartey and Larson, Achebe was generally well received as a serious artist of great merit and promise.

Achebe's Reputation in Critical Studies

A decade after the publication of Achebe's first novel, the British Council and National Book League felt the public need for a full study of Achebe's work to help the general reader appreciate his overall achievement. The Council commissioned Arthur Ravenscroft to make the study, and the result was the publication of a thirty-seven page pamphlet, Chinua Achebe (1969).¹⁶³ Ravenscroft's method is guided by his objectives.

¹⁶³Chinua Achebe (London: Longmans 1969).

The study opens with background information on the growth of modern African literature and a profile on Achebe. He then discusses each novel in a separate chapter and closes with personal remarks on Achebe's involvement with the war efforts of Biafra, and its effects on his literary career.

Ravenscroft approaches each novel with sympathy, summarizing the plot, highlighting major facts and events, explaining customs and rituals, and commenting generally on the style and universal implications of some themes. He also attempts, through his interpretations, to correct what he feels are false impressions. Throughout the study he emphasizes that Achebe is no mere recorder of anthropological details in the first three books, nor a propagandist in the fourth, as some have charged. In his opinion, Achebe proves himself a serious artist by refusing to simplify the complex issues of religion, politics, morality and history. Ravenscroft claims that Achebe is a subtle and complex writer, contrary to the impression of simplicity which many reviews give. He is equally impressed with the close interaction between language and theme and the great variety of language habits in Achebe's novels.

He characterizes Things Fall Apart as "an extraordinarily close-knit novel," in which every part remains integral and in proportion, including the proverbs and background description against which some critics have reacted. His evaluation of No Longer at Ease as a lesser work than the first novel is similar to that made by critics like Moore, Laurence, and Tibble, although he gives a different reason for it. He

argues that Achebe's social satire in the novel is too obvious to carry off convincingly the tragic effect which Achebe seems to be striving for. He complains that "What one misses is the artistically cohesive tension between chief character and setting that occurs in Things Fall Apart."¹⁶⁴

Like many other English and American critics before and after him, Ravenscroft judges Arrow of God to be Achebe's most ambitious work: fuller in scale and richer in linguistic texture and elaborate descriptions of customs. He accepts fully the numerous proverbs and descriptions as functional and integral. Ravenscroft describes A Man of the People as "a sparkling piece of satirical virtuosity," although aware that anger, bitterness and disillusion are not far beneath the surface. His study is very sympathetic to Achebe and rates him as a conscious and gifted artist, although his high admiration is almost pre-determined by the Council's decision to commission the book. It represents, however, the first lengthy and perceptive survey of Achebe's work ever undertaken.

The Novels of Chinua Achebe (1969) by G. D. Killam was the first book-length study of its kind anywhere.¹⁶⁵ It promises a serious literary criticism of Achebe's four novels. Killam offers it as a "commentary" for those who feel the need for straightforward and enlightened guidance, and as a book which "will answer the needs of universities and schools." Besides a lengthy introduction on the state of criticism of African literature, Killam devotes a chapter to each novel and concludes with a discussion of a few selected short stories by Achebe. His strategy is to

¹⁶⁴ Ravenscroft, p. 20.

¹⁶⁵ The Novels of Chinua Achebe (New York: Africana Publishing Co., 1969).

study the four novels as a tetralogy revealing "the extent to which traditional values have been turned upside down," although he clearly states that he means to eschew the predominantly anthropological commentaries which he claims have passed for literary criticism in Achebe's works.

The major part of Killam's lengthy introduction is devoted to quotations of Achebe's statements on the African writer's duties to his society. He emphasizes Achebe's educative role of reconciling the individual with his cultural heritage by concretely showing through the life recreated, that the African past is not "one long night of savagery." He observes that Achebe asserts the rights and points out the obligations of modern African society while exploring in his novels, "the depth of the human condition." His method, which does not quite live up to his promise of critically analyzing the novels as works of art, is to give detailed summary of plot for each novel, as well as a few commentaries on style, plot, characterization and the overall excellence of the works. He emphasizes Achebe's style, which he commends in several instances for its "characteristic economy," its "seeming simplicity" and its casualness of tone that belies real depth and complexity. Most commentaries are impressionistic with very limited analysis.

Killam's discussion of Things Fall Apart is the fullest and representative of his general approach to the others. He gives a brief, favorable evaluation of the work before proceeding to summarize the plot with commentaries and some explications. He says in his opening evaluation, for example:

Things Fall Apart is a small book which for all its apparent casualness and sobriety of

style and complexity of the human relationships it presents, is a very well-constructed book, in which technical problems of presentation have been most carefully worked out. Further, Achebe's method of working affects complete verisimilitude in its presentation: he never imposes himself between us and the scene he presents. Achebe is the most objective of writers in this sense.¹⁶⁶

He demonstrates from the text that Achebe's choice of imagery, proverbs and language are appropriate in reflecting the African background of the story.

Killam makes similar points about language and stylistic subtleties in discussing each of the novels. He points out that in No Longer At Ease Achebe's protagonist is fully realized, capable of change, and yet always acting in character. His commentary on intricacies of the plot and style in Arrow of God is representative of the general character of the entire study: a failure to come to grips with specifics. He states, for example, that the "complexities of the finely wrought plot supported by an intricately patterned series of ambiguities and ironies, set against a background equally intricately patterned and the whole couched in a language everywhere appropriate to the theme, only yields its full meaning through careful and deliberate readings."¹⁶⁷ His discussion of A Man of the People stresses once again Achebe's success with characters, plot and style. Matching Margaret Laurence in enthusiasm he praises the major characters as three dimensional, exhibiting complex motivation and loyalties. His overall impression of the novel is

¹⁶⁶ Killam, p. 15.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 83.

one of "a carefully plotted and unified piece of writing" in which balance and proportion are attained.

Killam's book is indeed a lengthy introduction to Achebe for the general reader and for the student interested in good summaries and helpful commentaries. As a critical study of Achebe, it may appear to the serious student to be "too rich on plot" and too scanty on critical evaluation of the novels as works of art.

David Carroll's Chinua Achebe (1970) is the third full-length study of Achebe.¹⁶⁸ Similar in structure to the other two studies, Carroll's devotes a chapter to each novel and includes an introduction and a conclusion. His approach is once again mostly to summarize the plots, make few critical commentaries and evaluate the works briefly in his conclusions. His declared objective is to study Achebe's works as a record of a people's social evolution and through the study to help the reader move beyond false assumptions about Africa. To emphasize his intentions, Carroll examines in his introduction the major stereotype images of Africa, which he feels are systematically proved false as one sees Africa through the eyes of a creative and serious African artist. In this regard, Carroll's study does not differ significantly in matter and manner from those before it. The detailed background information, the emphasis on plot summary and the general nature of the commentaries clearly points to a general readership.

Like Killam, Carroll relies on extensive textual quotations to

¹⁶⁸ Chinua Achebe (New York: Twayne Publishing Co., 1970).

support his exposition of major events, his observations on Achebe's achievement in adding to the tradition of the novel. In the chapter on Things Fall Apart, Carroll gives an example of that achievement:

To the reader accustomed to European fiction, the modulation from the communal life of the village to individual consciousness and back again is unexpectedly powerful. No longer is the individual introspection the fictional norm as in the European novels of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It now appears foreign and unnatural . . . This is the dimension of the novel to which previous fiction has not accustomed us--the direct translation of proverbs, moral, political, religious, into public debate and action.¹⁶⁹

It is clear that Carroll treats the first and third novels as basically similar: "a clash between a flexible, tolerant society . . . and a simple-minded authoritarian character." The second and fourth novels are interpreted as the result of what happens in the other two: a lack of stable synthesis of values from two worlds, with the characters caught inbetween. Summing up the essence of the tetralogy, he says, "We began with the gentle rhythm of the communal life of Umuofia, we end with the individual's desperate search for values in a disintegrating society."¹⁷⁰ Commenting that the two worlds fail to meet socially, Carroll contends that they, nonetheless, merge successfully at the level of language: "English has taken on African contours without losing its flexibility; it ranges freely from the oracular utterances of the egwugwu to the irreverent asides of the villagers."¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ Carroll, p. 39.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 146-147.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

Achebe was first published in England and had built himself a strong reputation as one of Africa's foremost writers before becoming well-known in America; hence, it is no surprise that the first long critical survey of Achebe's works came from an Englishman. It is interesting, however, that the two book-length studies both came from university professors in Toronto and were published in New York. They are both treated as "American works" in this study. Broadly speaking, each of these three works in its own way fulfilled a need for an overview of Achebe's novels, as well as providing basic commentaries on language and style. Each of them was heavy on plot and light in critical analysis of the novels. Each demonstrates the tendency to be repetitive and to dwell too long on details of plot. The lack of analytical depth rendered many observations too general and sometimes vague.

Ravenscroft was not trying to prove a thesis; his objective was simply to make Achebe more accessible because he was an African writer of considerable note. His approach was that of a straightforward survey without trying to argue a thesis and without responding emotionally to the facts of colonial rule. Killam and Carroll, on the other hand, both seem to have a mission to help Achebe prove to the readership that Africa had cultural values which were destroyed or thrown into confusion by the coming of the white man. Killam, for example, in diametrically opposed sentiment to Martin Tucker, insisted everywhere on the negative and disruptive roles of the colonial forces. In the chapter on No Longer at Ease he said: "Obi's experiences testify . . . to the oppressive weight of doubt, guilt, shame and regret that the colonial experience has

imposed on modern Nigeria. . . ."¹⁷² Carroll, on his own part, hoped to explode age-old myths about Africa by studying the creative works of a writer not only able to re-create the past but also willing to castigate the ills of present society. Americans, because of their distance from the colonial experience in Africa, usually reacted to it in two basic ways: irritation and impatience with the African's "over-emphasis" on the experience or strong condemnation of all it stood for. Killam and Carroll were obviously in the second category.

Achebe is evidently the best received African novelist to date. Despite objections of some critics and reviewers to his background descriptions, frequent use of proverbs, "superficial treatment of incidents," "sketchy" characterization or lack of conventional plot, his reception has been largely favorable in both English and American reviews, articles, surveys, and books. Most English reviewers were very interested in the picture of traditional life which Achebe re-created especially in Things Fall Apart and also in the topical military coup and Nigerian War which feature in two of his novels. They were equally impressed by his concise and simple style, his variety of languages and the authentic African flavor of his novels. In contrast, American reviewers concentrated their admiration on stylistic qualities such as simplicity and clarity of expressions, as well as on his success with characterization.

English academic critics were evidently interested in claiming

¹⁷²Killam, p. 58.

Achebe as one of their own. Most of them suggested Achebe's close links with certain English writers or his assimilation of specific historical and philosophical views of Yeats and T. S. Eliot. Only Gerald Moore assessed him within the context of African literature, comparing him with other African writers and evaluating the novels on their own terms. In marked contrast to this comparative approach, American articles varied in interest and method, concentrating mostly on language, symbolism, and use of proverbs. There were varied approaches including sociological, anthropological, impressionistic, symbolic and general. The greater number of American articles compared to English articles represents a significant growth in American interest, considering the less enthusiastic tone of their reviews.

Both English and American books of survey tended to treat groups of writers or to survey the total works of writers and as a consequence sacrificed close analysis for coverage. Among English critics, Gerald Moore seemed to have set the trend of criticism with his early and favorable reception of Achebe. Margaret Laurence and William Walsh echoed Moore's warm remarks about Achebe's confidence, his precision of style his creative skill and realistic characterization. Ann Tibble was also favorably impressed, although her comments appeared fragmentary and disorganized. Only Adrian Roscoe doubted Achebe's ability as a satirist in A Man of the People, although he admitted that Achebe was an effective and successful teacher of culture in his earlier works. It is also noteworthy that contrary to the lukewarmness of English popular reviewers towards Arrow of God, English academic critics generally agreed that it was Achebe's most imaginative and ambitious novel.

The more specific interests of American critics gave their surveys relatively more depth, and the language of their criticism more edge. Three out of four were sociological in their approach, studying the works as representations of either village life, break-up of traditional way of life, or white-black cultural conflict. Only Charles Larson treated Things Fall Apart as the archetypal African novel and examined his modes of characterization in three novels. The lack of a stable critical standard for criticism of African literature was demonstrated, however, by Larson's double standards: praising Things Fall Apart for being different from European novels, while condemning A Man of the People for failing to measure up to the norms of characterization in Western novels. Despite Wilfred Cartey's criticism of Achebe's handling of politics, and Tucker's objections to his portrayal of white characters, American critics generally agreed that Achebe was both a skillful and important artist.

Arthur Ravenscroft's study of Achebe did not differ markedly in content from the studies by the two Canadian professors, A. D. Killam and David Carroll. The detailed summary of each novel and the scarcity of critical analysis in each study, especially Ravenscroft's, made them more like introductions than critical studies. Killam was formerly a lecturer in Nigeria, and his familiarity with the works' backgrounds is reflected in his perceptive explications of customs.

When viewed together, the English and American reception of Achebe was favorable and occasionally enthusiastic. The differences in interests, approaches, and attitudes between the two groups reflected the extent of their familiarity with the works and their different literary backgrounds. They were, nonetheless, in agreement that Achebe was a writer of great potential and promise.

CHAPTER IV
WOLE SOYINKA

Wole Soyinka was once described by one of his publishers, Rex Collings, as "something of a universal man like his Renaissance progenitors."¹ Like Achebe, Soyinka is a poet, novelist, critic, teacher, lecturer, and commentator keenly interested in the Nigerian political situation. But he is primarily a playwright, as well as an actor and a producer in his own right. His image is one of restless energy being channeled productively into many areas, and of a wealth of artistic imagination constantly developing and maturing. Between 1960-67 he published and directed seven plays, wrote and directed two revues, founded two theater companies, and published a novel and a volume of poems, as well as numerous critical articles. He is also a "tireless controversialist," once getting himself "detained" and later imprisoned from 1967-69. Since his release, he has published two collections of poems, two plays, a book of memoirs, and a novel. A brief review of his career will put his diversified activities into better perspective.²

Soyinka entered Leeds University in 1954 and in the following year produced his first (but unpublished) play, The Invention, at a Sunday performance. Between 1956-57 he wrote The Lion and the Jewel. While

¹"Wole Soyinka, A Personal View," New Statesman, 20 Dec., 1968, p. 879.

²I am indebted to James Gibbs for a detailed date-line on Soyinka 1935-1972, published in New Theater Magazine, 12, No. 2 (1972), 12-14.

working as a reader attached to the Royal Court Theatre, he presented an "Evening Without Decor," which included reading several of his poems and presenting The Invention. As part of the Nigerian independence celebration, October 1, 1960, Soyinka produced A Dance of the Forests with a company he formed, called the 1960 Masks. He himself acted the major part of the Forest Head. In 1963, he published A Dance of the Forests and The Lion and the Jewel in London and The Swamp Dwellers, The Trials of Brother Jero, and The Strong Breed, in Ibadan, Nigeria, and founded the Orisun Theatre in Lagos. The Interpreters, Soyinka's first novel, was published in 1965. In September of that year, his new play, The Road, was produced at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, to make the opening of the Commonwealth Arts festival. In April 1966, Soyinka directed the production of Kongi's Harvest at the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar and was awarded the first prize for drama. In July 1966, The Trials of Brother Jero was presented at the Hampstead Theatre Club, shortly followed by the presentation of The Lion and the Jewel at the Royal Court. He received, with Tom Stoppard, a John Whiting Award in 1967 for his work in the theatre. The same year, his first collection of poems, Idanre and Other Poems was published and The Strong Breed and the Trials of Brother Jero opened off Broadway. He received the Jock Campbell New Statesman Award in 1968.

Soyinka's imprisonment from 1967 to 1969 marked a definite break in his literary development but it was by no means a halt. Despite the profound fear by many that the fertility of his imagination might be affected by his prolonged imprisonment, Soyinka has confounded all such fears with the quality and quantity of his post-war writings. Poems from

Prison was published in 1969. In 1970 he played the part of Kongi in the Calpenny Film production of Kongi's Harvest. The same year he completed and directed the production of Madmen and Specialists at the Eugene O'Neill Memorial Centre, Connecticut. The play was published in 1971. Another volume of poems on his prison experiences, A Shuttle in the Crypt, appeared in 1972 quickly followed by his prison memoirs, The Man Died. His 1973 publications included a novel, Season of Anomy, a play, Jero's Metamorphosis, and an adaptation of The Bacchae of Euripides. The unpublished radio play, Camwood on the Leaves (1960) has recently appeared in print. Other unpublished plays include The Invention and The Detainee.

Besides the impressive list of his works, Soyinka has also published over twenty articles in scholarly journals and translations into English of two works by the famous Yoruba writer, D. O. Fagunwa. Soyinka has also made enormous and invigorating contributions to building up the School of Drama at Ibadan University and to the growth of modern Nigerian theater in general. Outside Nigeria, Soyinka, like Achebe and Tutuola, has attracted considerable international attention, and in a special way not available to the other two writers, he has communicated directly with English and American audiences through the stage production of many of his plays. Reviews of productions, as well as of published texts are represented here largely in the order in which they came to the reviewers' attention.

During the Festival of World Negro Arts at Dakar 1966, Soyinka was quoted accusing white drama critics of double standards, charging

that they tended to overpraise plays from Africa which they would laugh out of court were they from a European pen.³ At an earlier Drama Conference in Edinburgh in 1964, he also denounced what he described as "exotica" in the theatre, declaring that it provided European and American audiences with excuse for condescending approval.⁴ Soyinka asserts that African drama has been "persistently patronized, belittled and retarded" by those mostly concerned with "anthropological data," and maintains that any drama from Africa should be judged on its merits based on its adequacy in representing universal human experiences.

Immediate Reception of Soyinka in Popular Reviews

The English critic, Alan Brien, in a review of Soyinka's The Invention entitled "Where Spades Are Trumps" (1959) agrees with Soyinka: "I think it is simply inverted race prejudice to believe that Spades are always trumps . . . the presence of a Negro in a play is becoming very near to being a guarantee of a masterpiece . . . Left-wing intellectuals overpraise anything written by a Negro."⁵ Brien was determined to call a Spade a Spade in evaluating the first play of this young Negro writer, which was produced at London's Royal Court Theatre in 1959. He describes Soyinka as fluent, funny and angry, but states pointedly that Soyinka has

³See Christian Science Monitor, 6 Jan., 1967, p. 4.

⁴See Black Orpheus 15 (August 1964), 46.

⁵"Where Spades Are Trumps," The Spectator, 6 Nov. 1959, p. 629.

not yet "begun to understand how to work out a verse or to organize a play." He criticizes the content of the play as "clumsy pamphleteering," the images as imprecise and sometimes strange, his humor as raw and tough, and the entire play as revealing the writer's limitations in dealing with an originally sharp and provocative idea.

An American critic, Charles Larson, more accommodating, stresses the fact that the play is "a vociferous attack" on South Africa's policy of apartheid and on racism everywhere.⁶ Far from calling it propaganda, Larson commends it for showing Soyinka's concern with Pan-African problems and with contemporary African life. He does not hesitate, however, to admit in retrospect that the play is a lesser drama and technically inferior to Soyinka's later works.

The production of The Swamp Dwellers at the Arts Theatre of Ibadan University in 1959 prompted the review entitled "Three Views" by two English critics, Una Maclean and M. M. Mahood, and one Nigerian critic, Mrs. Phebean Ogundipe. Under the telling title of "Words, Words, Words," Una Maclean's generally unfavorable review stresses three main points of objection: the play's occasional longeurs; the weakness and ineffectuality of the hero; and the writer's "obsession" with an atmosphere of gloom and hopelessness.⁷ She equally criticises Soyinka's "copious and flowery language," the obscurity of certain actions in the play and improper lighting. Maclean has initially promised not to be carried away

⁶"Soyinka's First Play: The Invention," Africa Today, 18, No. 4 (Oct. 1971), 80-83.

⁷"Three Views of The Swamp Dwellers," Ibadan, No. 6 (June 1959), pp. 27-28.

by the novelty of a Nigerian playwright of Soyinka's calibre, and keeps her promise by having scarcely a good word for the play. She strongly suggests that the play needs pruning. Mahood's review tries to dismiss some of Maclean's objections on the grounds that Soyinka is working within the tradition of poetic drama of men like Yeats, Synge, and Eliot and that the play should be approached more on the symbolic than on the realistic plane.⁸ He insists, for example, that the play's main objective is not portraying life in the Niger Delta but rather in showing Soyinka's way of exploring the universal but localized theme of disappointment and frustration. In spite of his seeming defense of Soyinka, Mahood agrees with Maclean that the play needs pruning.

The longest and most complex of Soyinka's plays, A Dance of the Forests, has proved a challenge to reviewers and critics because of the complexity of its symbolism, mythology, allegory and its layers of possible interpretations. It was directed and produced by Soyinka, who was also main actor in it, and to date nobody has attempted to produce it again. An English critic, Una Cockshott, refers to A Dance of the Forests (1960) as "a lengthy creation of multiple facets, 'formless' to some, 'tedious' to others, 'frankly incomprehensible' to those who fail to make sufficient intellectual effort to see what the author is about."⁹ Reviewing A Dance of the Forests in Ibadan, she marvels at its complexity of pattern, the abundance of its themes and characters, and the over-abundance of distracting noise and agitation during its production. She characterizes

⁸"The Right Lines," Ibadan, No. 6 (June 1959), pp. 28-29.

⁹Ibadan, No. 10 (Nov. 1960), pp. 30-32.

it as a mixture of drama, ballet, poetry, and mythology, swinging from tragedy to farce, from silences to blasts of rhythm and frenzied dancing, a mixture of moving poetry with pedestrian prose and "farcical slap-stick" with "perceptive comment." Despite her reservations, she believes that it represents a central achievement for Soyinka, a daring amalgamation of previous visions in his earlier works.

Judith Gleason, an American who has not seen the production, is moved to comment on what seems to her "an incredible temerity" on Soyinka's part in using the solemn occasion of Nigerian Independence Celebration to strip illusions from the past and reveal the failings of the present. She sees the play as a demonstration of "Soyinka's high-strung preciousness," and describes it in terms of a "comic mask, . . . an anxious image of self."¹⁰

Reviewing Soyinka's five earliest published plays in Books Abroad (1965), Martin Banham, an English critic, comments on Soyinka's "delightful ease with the language, and the richness and wit of his dialogue."¹¹ He is favorably impressed by Soyinka's penetrating satire and by his seeming concern for fostering better understanding in human relations through exploiting universal themes. Treating four of the plays collectively, Banham briefly notes that the writer is as successful with the humorous plays The Lion and the Jewel and The Trials of Brother Jero as with the more "sensitive" ones, The Swamp Dwellers and The Strong Breed. In his judgment,

¹⁰"Out of the Irony of Words," Transition 18 (1965), 34-38.

¹¹Books Abroad 38, No. 1 (Winter 1964), 92.

they are "skillfully constructed, convincingly characterized, and written with fluency." He has some reservations about the organization of A Dance of the Forests but concedes that it is a work of great imagination and of considerable stature. He speaks favorably of Soyinka as "confident in the use of his medium" and as a playwright of talent.

Under the title, "Range Considerable," in East Africa Journal (1965), Edgar Wright of University College, Nairobi, enthusiastically describes Five Plays as the sum of "the best dramatic writing that has come out of English-speaking Africa, even the whole of Africa."¹² He calls Soyinka a craftsman of the theater, and a "genuinely creative African playwright" of wide ranging themes and international appeal. In discussing The Trials of Brother Jero and The Lion and the Jewel which he thinks thoroughly successful, he not only stresses Soyinka's gift of dialogue and comic invention, but also the vitality and energy which seem to flow from him into his dialogues and characters. "All is very much alive," declares Wright. He observes that the shorter plays show the serious, symbolic and humorous aspects of Soyinka's talent, but he finds A Dance of the Forests too complex a combination of experimental techniques, which risks overloading the work. He complains that the play is difficult to follow and its language is occasionally turgid and heavy with symbolism. Wright remains convinced, despite his criticisms, that the volume of plays is a work of quality. He believes Soyinka's greatest talent lies in comedy and observes that he has all the potential of a great

¹²East Africa Journal, 2, No. 7 (Nov. 1965), 35-38.

comic dramatist of serious intent in the manner of Bernard Shaw.

Writing in the Times Literary Supplement (1965), another reviewer also expresses creative imagination as well as the great variety of his dramatic idiom.¹³ He praises A Dance of the Forests as "a dramatic poem of great beauty and profundity" with many brilliant theatrical possibilities, and describes its language as "a mixture of charged rather austere prose, a short-footed verse of great energy and passion, and a few beautifully modelled songs." He, nonetheless, admits that the complexity of the play would make it unsuccessful on stage. He finds The Strong Breed impressive as tragedy but he obviously prefers the "richly ribald comedy" of The Lion and the Jewel. Its language, in his opinion, has a marvellous lightness of touch," and he believes that the excellence of some of the scenes qualifies them to represent "pinnacles" in Soyinka's achievement. He is particularly attracted by the clarity of structure in The Swamp Dwellers and by Soyinka's experiment with pidgin English in The Trials of Brother Jero. In his judgment the plays offer "new idioms of speech, of acting, of presentation and of poetic allusion." He refers to the book as not only a "splendid fanfare" for future theatre in Africa, but also a "treasure mine," of themes that can inspire other African writers.

An American reviewer in Choice (1966), characterizes the plays as "excellent," and declares Soyinka a playwright of talent: "He has sensitivity, style, insight, and a fine dramatic sense. . . . Wole Soyinka is

¹³"Third World Stage," TLS, 1 April 1965, p. 252.

a writer of promise, of achievement, and one of today's best young playwrights."¹⁴ He does not treat the plays as individual works, but in rather generalized terms, he claims blanket success for them and professes great admiration for Soyinka.

In evaluating different aspects of these plays, English reviewers were generally favorable in their reception of Soyinka. They all agreed that he handled the four shorter plays much better than the longer and more complex Dance of the Forests at least for stage purposes. They expressed a special fondness for The Lion and the Jewel above all others, because of its light-hearted love theme and unexpected twist of events. The shorter tragedies failed to elicit much response and tended to be lumped together and described as quite successful. The critics agree that A Dance of the Forests was a work of great ambition and considerable power but found it rather unwieldy. On the whole, these reviews represent a warm reception of the collection of plays, as a volume of great significance in the growing reputation of a developing and talented artist.

In September 1965, The Road opened the Commonwealth Arts Festival at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East and won subsequently the prize for drama. It received many complimentary, as well as mixed and confused commentaries. Eric Shorter in The Daily Telegraph (1965), describes it as "maddeningly mysterious, compellingly exotic and crammed with African superstition."¹⁵ Shorter finds too many loose ends in the play and

¹⁴Choice, 2 (Feb. 1966), 870.

¹⁵Eric Shorter, "Nigerian Author of Talent," The Daily Telegraph, 15 Sept. 1965.

complains that one has to be a Nigerian, and "even then extra patient" to enjoy the play fully. He calls Soyinka "an author of remarkable talent with a good command of English," but doubts his gifts in the theatre or his ability to keep a grip on the imagination of the audience.

Penelope Gilliat in the London Observer (1965) is much more vivid and forceful than other reviewers in describing what she sees as the true significance of The Road in terms of language. According to her, it does for "napping" English language what "brigand dramatists from Ireland have done for two centuries, booted it awake, rifled its pockets and scattered the loot into the middle of next week."¹⁶

Caren Meyer in The Evening News and Star (1965) describes two typical reactions to The Road as either a nod of approval from "the wise," or a cry of despair from "the unwise."¹⁷ Meyer probably belongs with "the unwise," for she confesses that she only understood the play in snatches, while its language left her quite confused. In her words, "assumingly significant phrases, uttered but immediately punctured again by acid satirical wit, follow each other until we are dizzily unsure what to accept and what to reject." Yet she finds the presence of tribal masks and dances and the "pregnant drum beats" in the play theatrically impressive.

Ronald Bryden in the New Statesman (1965), is impressed by the realistic picture presented in The Road: "the real modern Nigeria . . . being

¹⁶London Observer, 19 Sept. 1965. Quoted in New Society, 28 April 1966, pp. 21-22.

¹⁷"Humor And Melancholy," The Evening News and Star, 15 Sept. 1965, p. 40.

supplanted by the new patterns of technology--above all by the system of rough, weather-pitted roads along which thousands of ramshackled, picturesquely named lorries speed goods and passengers hundreds of miles to market."¹⁸ He suggests the influence of O'Neill's The Iceman Cometh, describing the play as one of "poetry and atmosphere" rather than action. In Bryden's opinion, what the average Englishman loses in obscure idiom and imagery is well compensated by the visual, "some striking masks to contemplate" when communication fails. Despite uneven production of the play, the critic expresses satisfaction with its power and sophistication.

The Guardian was patriotically favorable. Brian Lapping upholds Soyinka among other commonwealth dramatists as the one who writes plays displaying a total master of European theatrical techniques.¹⁹ He believes his form is "thoroughly British," although the content is Nigerian. Gerald Fay, also writing in The Guardian (1965) is far less impressed. He describes The Road as "an early bird" at the festival which he believes will not catch the worm."²⁰ Soyinka's language, he claims, is not even at the borderline between "articulateness and mere verbosity" and is still groping its way. He comments rather condescendingly that "when he knows, or perhaps more accurately, when he can make others know what he is trying to say, he will be going places." He complains that the chief

¹⁸"The Asphalt God," New Statesman, 24 Sept. 1965.

¹⁹"The Road to Somewhere," The Guardian, 3 Sept. 1965, p. 7.

²⁰The Guardian, 15 Sept. 1965.

character is not strong enough for his part. The actors' rich voices, the vigor of movement and vivid costumes appealed to Fay, but on the whole he is disappointed that The Road does not "add up to a satisfying or exciting play in Stratford East 15, whatever impact it may have in Lagos."

The Road was not staged in the United States. Bernice Duncan bases her review on the published edition.²¹ Almost in echo of Lapping's words she observes that Soyinka seems "in full command of his dramatic technique" and credits him with effective characterization through dialogue and action, as well as with skill in his sly indulgent satirical wit. She finds the complex mixture of language, superstition and reality fascinating, and expresses faith that the play can be effectively staged.

Production of The Road was clearly a new experience for both audience and reviewers. Most expressed a general feeling that Soyinka was a writer of considerable talent, or at least on his way to being one. Their overwhelming impression, however, was that Soyinka's language was not equal to the demands made on it. Meyer, Shorter, Fay and Hobson all thought his language was inexplicit and confusing, not because he lacked command of English, but because he complicated it with ill-defined symbols and images.

On the other hand, many reviewers were fascinated by the entertainment of the play's visual aids, like drumming, singing, dancing and costumes. None, however, was carried away on this account. The dominant view, despite spotty favorable remarks, was that reviewers found The Road confusing; as Martin Banham aptly suggests, "they could not follow the

²¹Books Abroad, 40, No. 3 (Summer 1966), 360-361.

allusions, supply the rest of the comment [or] complement the statement that the playwright makes."²²

The Trials of Brother Jero was presented by the Ijinle Company at the Hampstead Theatre Club 28 June, 1966. Comparing the effect of this play on the audience with that of The Road, Sean Day-Lewis remarks in The Daily Telegraph that the new play is "entertaining and undemanding in a manner easily accessible to European ears."²³ Day-Lewis singles out actors for their excellent performances, and comments that Atholl Fugard's production of the play is "full of vitality and explosive crowd effects." His reception of the play is quite warm, but he was much more enthusiastic about the actors.

D. A. N. Jones in the New Statesman (1966) ranks The Trials of Brother Jero low among Soyinka's works, and describes it as "a bit trivial" when compared with The Road.²⁴ He comments on what appears to be the writer's obsession with shady, prophet-like characters as best exemplified in Jero. Jones does not spell out his impressions about the play, but his review definitely lacks warmth.

American audiences saw The Trials of Brother Jero and The Strong

²²"Nigerian Dramatists," JCL, 3 (July 1967), 100.

²³"'Brother Jero' full of Vitality," The Daily Telegraph, 29 June, 1966, p. 19.

²⁴"Soyinka," New Statesman, 8 July 1966, p. 63. Other reviews of the play include "Harsh Comedy on Lagos Beach," The Times, 29 June 1966, p. 79. "The Voice of Africa," London Observer, 3 June 1966; "Sardonic Diversion into New Africa," The Daily Express, 26 July 1966. "Slight but Funny Satire," The Daily Mail, 29 June 1966.

Breed produced Off-Broadway in November 1967. The reviewer in the Time lightly refers to the first as "a broad spoof of a religious humbug."²⁵ Particularly impressed by the excellent acting, he characterizes The Strong Breed as not only serious and dark, but also obscure. He strongly objects to the flashbacks which he regards as confusing: "Exorcism and witchcraft flicker along the edge of the action, but the convoluted flashbacks of a meandering plot never indicate exactly how and why."²⁶ He feels that Soyinka's gift as a satirist and a "mytho poet" is his skill in "blending humor with flare-lit passion."

Gerald Weales in the Reporter (1969) reviews the double-bill under the catchy title, "Tribal Patterns," pointing to Soyinka as an artist creating with indigenous materials rather than as an interpreter of Africa to the outside world.²⁷ He observes that American unfamiliarity with the background of Soyinka's works accounts for his being so belatedly known on the American stage, and admits that for the typical American audience African culture is still "trapped in white hunter exotica" resulting from years of "drumbeat movies." In expressing his thorough enjoyment of the lighthearted Trials of Brother Jero, Weales states that it is much more accessible on stage than the "highly sophisticated" Strong Breed. He criticizes the use of foreshadowing elements in the later play as ineffective and confusing, but, nonetheless, finds it the "more interesting" of the two plays considering its subject matter.

²⁵"Infections Humanity," Time, 17 Nov. 1967, pp. 50-52.

²⁶Ibid., 52.

²⁷Gerald Weales, "Tribal Patterns," Reporter, 8 Feb. 1969, pp. 39-40.

In the Newsweek, Jack Kroll describes the plays as small but effective works which "reflect the tensions between old tribal African and new Africa struggling to find form."²⁸ While discussing another play by Soyinka, a reviewer in America intimates that he enjoyed The Strong Breed and The Trials of Brother Jero very much.²⁹

English reviewers regretted the cancelling of The Strong Breed at the last minute. They agreed that The Trials of Brother Jero was very successful as light entertainment and that it drew positive crowd reactions. There was a general feeling like that of the reviewer in The Daily Express, that the play was "a slight but funny satire." The emphasis, though, was on its trivial subject matter, as well as on its low-rating among Soyinka's works. American critics similarly commented on the play's lightness and the excellent performance by the company. There were no significant differences in opinion. Reactions to The Strong Breed were mixed. Time thought it exotic and a bit confusing in its use of flashbacks, but enjoyed the occasional humor, and the Reporter was impressed by the play but criticized the direction. Without specifically stating it, the reviews suggested that The Strong Breed ranked as one of the less successful Soyinka plays.

The publication of Soyinka's first novel, The Interpreters in 1965 was greeted as a sign of yet more versatility of his creative energy. According to the review in the Times Literary Supplement entitled "Chameleon Clues" (1965), the novel's characters merge with their surroundings like chameleons thus making the novel difficult to understand.³⁰ The critic

²⁸Newsweek, 29 April 1968, p. 93.

²⁹See review of Kongi's Harvest, America, 11 May 1968, p. 651.

³⁰"Chameleon Clues," TLS, 1 April 1965, p. 260.

explains that each character represents something larger than himself like intellectualism, tribal past, or corruption, while remaining secondary as individuals. He feels that the characters are still searching for their identity and, therefore, give the work an impression of instability: "The surfaces of characters and physical objects are not firm; things are not in their correct places; the shorthand dialogue which passes between the characters is often opaque and private. The interpreters do not always interpret." The reviewer blames Soyinka for applying too European a sophistication to an African scene.

F. W. J. Hemmings in the New Statesman (1965) characterizes The Interpreters as "a great steaming marsh of a novel, rather like Nigeria itself, with a lot of things obviously wrong but undeniably impressive, brimful of promise and life."³¹ He is very specific in enumerating these faults: "too many marginal characters, more ends left loose than tied fast, a tendency for incident to substitute for action and for the writing to rise dangerously above blood-heat."

An American reviewer in Book's Abroad (1965) has nothing but admiration for the author and for the novel as a literary work of universal significance:

Here an urbane and sophisticated skill has been brought to bear on the usual Lagos theme, raising it to a dimension of comprehensiveness and universal subtlety. This book may stand as a goal for other novelists. Since there is so much vitality and variety in both language and subject, the future of the African novel seems certain to be both prolific and significant.³²

³¹New Statesman, 7 May 1965, p. 733.

³²Books Abroad 39, No. 4 (1965), 413.

Writing in Black Orpheus in 1966, Bruce King describes the characters in The Interpreters as people feeling their way towards "individualized personalities," constantly questioning themselves collectively and individually.³³ King thinks that the different perspectives give the novel a positive quality: "The shifts in focus are quick and almost violent. Flashbacks into the past, close-ups into the feelings of someone . . . the compression of events all contribute to the dense richness of the book. The Interpreters offers a feeling of life being lived."³⁴ He, nonetheless, criticizes some of the imagery as self-conscious and absurd, some sentences as being strange, and certain themes as insufficiently developed. He urges revision and pruning. He is seriously disturbed by what he considers shallow portrayal of characters in such a novel of sophisticated technique and "highly polished" satire. While conceding that such shallow characterization is possibly intentional on Soyinka's part, he claims that it causes a drop in tension.

The reviewer in Time (1967) compares Soyinka to James Joyce in his reliance on stream-of-consciousness techniques and other Joycean devices.³⁵ He points out, however, that the symbolism and spirit of the book are unwaveringly African. A later reviewer in Choice (1973) is pleased and relieved that the novel differs from many other African works which are "overlaid with anthropological explication of village life and tradition."³⁶ He attributes the novel's structural difficulty to its

³³Black Orpheus, No. 9 (March 1966), p. 55.

³⁴ibid.

³⁵Time, 17 No. 1967, p. 52.

³⁶Choice, 9 (Jan. 1973), 1454.

complexity and sophisticated manipulation of time and place, but admits that the parts eventually fit together, and that the often hilarious and vulgar content which Soyinka treats with "profound seriousness" adds to the flavor of the work. He describes Soyinka's vision as "scathing, lucid and honest," and thinks that his talent needs no patronizing approval from anybody.

Both English and American reviewers are in no doubt that Soyinka's first novel is a considerable achievement when compared to many other novels from Africa. The near consensus is that despite the positive qualities of his language and techniques, the work remains essentially difficult to read, and is at times quite confusing, especially for the Non-Nigerian reader because of its allusions and its lack of a well-defined plot. The Interpreters, no doubt, adds to Soyinka's reputation as a talented, versatile, and sophisticated writer, but a difficult one too.

Soyinka's The Lion and the Jewel, presented at Royal Court Theatre in December 1966, got a very enthusiastic review from the drama critic of The Times.³⁷ Under the title "Sheer Ingenuity of Soyinka's Plot," he says of the play: "this work alone is enough to establish Nigeria as the most fertile new source of English speaking drama since Synge's discovery of the Western Isles." He feels that even a comparison with Synge does Soyinka less than justice because, in his opinion, he has many more problems to surmount than Synge had, as well as a more complex situation to explore: "To find any parallel for his work, you have to go

³⁷"Sheer Ingenuity of Soyinka's Plot," The Times, 13 Dec. 1966, p. 6.

back to the Elizabethans."

He describes the play as "superb comedy" with memorable points that include "sheer ingenuity of plot," a wide variety of speech idioms, as well as vitality and abundance of rhythmic tribal life. He is particularly impressed by the visual aids in Soyinka's drama. "Nowhere does Soyinka's technique show more brilliantly," he declares, "than in his ability to include extensive group mimes and dances . . . without in any way digressing from the main action." He praises individual actors for excellent performances and acknowledges Soyinka as "a highly sophisticated craftsman." W. A. Darlington in The Daily Telegraph (1966) describes the evening at Royal Court as "interesting . . . in a noisy yet unexciting way."³⁸ He finds the visual techniques of dancing the singing interesting but of only momentary fascination: "It is all novel enough to hold one's attention completely." Although conceding an attractive comic sense to the playwright, Darlington complains that performers are a little stilted in their dialogue, a criticism that is equally aimed at Soyinka's handling of language. He notes individual exceptions and good performances among the actors, but the overall impression of his remarks about the play leans towards the unfavorable side.

Ronald Bryden in The Observer Weekend Review (1966) is one of the most favorably impressed reviewers of The Lion and the Jewel.³⁹ Under the

³⁸"Simple parable of African Life," The Daily Telegraph, 13 Dec. 1966, p. 15.

³⁹"African Sophistication," The Observer Weekend Review, 18 Dec. 1966, p. 20.

title "African Sophistication," he blasts those reviewers who have dwelt on the simplicity and naiveté of the play, claiming to have counted six uses of the adjective "simple," four uses of "naive" and two "folksies" in his survey of the play's reviews. "To hang any of them on The Lion and the Jewel is like speaking of the guidelessness of Brecht," Bryden declares, while describing the play as "the most sophisticated spectacle in town." He praises Soyinka's direction and effective use of visual aids like mimes, dances, and costumes, to compensate for what he considers a lack of "fully professional performances on the part of the African cast." He observes that it is one of the best plays the Court theatre has offered in a long time.

Representative of rare negative reception of The Lion and the Jewel, an American critic, Harold Hobson, in the Christian Science Monitor (1967) charges that the play has been received 'with critical adulation of a most embarrassing kind.'⁴⁰ He is persuaded that it is by no means in the class of The Road, characterizing its plot as entirely English and its philosophy as entirely "reactionary." In his opinion, the play is "a transcription in the plainest possible manner, of the story of William Wycherley's The Country Wife."

Judging from the above reviews, the English reception of the play was mixed and far from being unanimously favorable. The reviewer in The Times was extremely complimentary. Donald Bryden was favorable too, but Darlington, on the other hand, was lukewarm, although he blamed the performers as much as he did the writer. These observations represent a

⁴⁰Hobson Harold, "The Lion and the Jewel from Africa," Christian Science Monitor 6 Jan. 1967, p. 4.

rather wide range of reactions across the board, remarkable in a play which by consensus was one of the most straightforward and successful of all Soyinka's plays. The reviews do not support Harold Hobson's accusation of "critical adulation," and the additional criticisms of a good play suggest that critics by this time had learned to expect more from Soyinka.

Kongi's Harvest was presented at the First World Negro Festival of Arts, Dakar (1966) by a combined company of Soyinka's Orisun players and University of Ibadan School of Drama players. It won the first prize for drama and got some good reviews from Africans and non-Africans alike. Dennis Duerden's report from the festival states that Kongi's Harvest is no doubt "the most international product of the festival. It alone did what the festival aimed to do--"l'Universalité de l'Art Nègre."⁴¹ An American critic, John Povey is equally convinced that it is at least the best among the plays presented at Dakar.⁴²

One of the most supportive remarks came from the English Martin Banham.⁴³ He calls Kongi's Harvest "a powerful satirical statement," expressed not only in "eloquent English dialogue" but also in the spectacle of music and dance. He stresses the significance of the play as the first major example of Soyinka fusing traditional elements into the new theatre in Nigeria thereby evolving a more broadly appealing theatrical style.

⁴¹"A Triumph for Soyinka" New Society, 28 April 1966, pp. 21-22.

⁴²"Dakar: An African Rendez-vous," Africa Today, 13, No. 5 (May 1966), 4-6.

⁴³JCL, 3 (July 1967) pp. 97-102.

Not all reviews were favorable. Berry Boyd in Ibadan observes that although Kongi's Harvest's presentation at the Festival "created a sensation," he has a number of reservations and disappointments.⁴⁴ He feels that the last scene is considerably confused, and as an outsider he finds the play rather incoherent, and subject to many possible interpretations. Much of the confusion he attributes to Soyinka's failure to help the spectator differentiate between the essential and non-essential in characters and action: "It is a great disappointment, to realize finally that, in the interests of coherence and clarity, many fascinating dramatic touches in Kongi's Harvest should be more fully developed, carefully subordinated, or lopped off."

In April 1968, Kongi's Harvest was presented at St. Mark's Playhouse, New York, by the Negro Ensemble Company. The play itself got mixed reviews, but the players were unanimously praised for an excellent performance. Harold Clurman in the Nation is fascinated by what he describes as alternation of mood from "savage horror to grim irony."⁴⁵ He finds it poetically rich but "stiffly or over-elaborately eloquent," such that the words sometimes do not fit the mouths of actors, who in his view are very good. He commends the dancing, drumming, and colorful costumes as sources of great entertainment. In the words of his vivid descriptions: "Women whose skins glisten with a satin glow, move with a power that is more than muscular, while the men stomp and shudder with demonic discipline which is not machine made."

⁴⁴ Ibadan, No. 23 (Oct. 1966), pp. 53-55.

⁴⁵ Nation, 206 (April 1968), 581.

Jack Kroll in the Newsweek (1968) characterizes the play as rather strange because it lacks a certain "revolutionary vision" which Westerners expect in African plays but is instead coated with an irony that disappoints this expectation and "makes that Western eye shift uncomfortably in its socket."⁴⁶ He describes Kongi's council, for example, as "a council of idiotic functionaries who wear Western suits and bicker like a parliament of chimpanzees," and laments that the "plague-on-both-your-thatched houses black comedy," is not in Frantz Fanon's militant mood, but is instead funny and highly ironic. He misses in it those elements of tragedy which he says the play badly needs "to complete itself." Above all, he seems most upset by the comedy's lack of "ideological dimension." Like other critics, Kroll is impressed by the "brilliant" choreography of the company and good performances of individual actors and actresses.

The reviewer in the Time (1968) declares the acting in Kongi's Harvest considerably better than the play itself.⁴⁷ He complains about long conversations and the "rambling and repetitive" nature of certain actions, and criticizes his language as "clotted and obscure" for the most part, although poetic in spots. He lavishes his praise instead on the choreography and excellent acting of the company.

The play did not fare better with Edith Oliver, who reviewed it in the New Yorker.⁴⁸ She follows the trend in lauding the extraordinary

⁴⁶"Caesar in Africa," Newsweek, 29 April 1968, p. 93.

⁴⁷"Kongi's Harvest," Time, 26 April 1968, p. 97.

⁴⁸"Kongi's Harvest at St. Marks," New Yorker, 27 April 1968, pp. 86, 91.

acting and dancing of the Negro Ensemble Company, especially their "superb job" in conveying the needed atmosphere of the jungle and of life under tyranny. Her reservations concern the playwright. She complains that sharpness and clarity of satire are lost because of indigenous allusions and obscure passages: "I had no idea what was going on."

Those English and American reviewers who saw the Dakar production of Kongi's Harvest received it favorably as the best there was at the Festival, and as a play of considerable power, though by no means Soyinka's best. Berry Boyd, however, found it confusing and in need of pruning. American reviewers who witnessed the performance of the play in New York were unanimous in praising the company's excellent acting and choreography. They all had serious reservations about the play itself, complaining of its uneven language, obscure allusions, verbosity and occasional longeur. Although willing to concede considerable achievement to Soyinka, especially in his use of language, the consensus seemed to be that Kongi's Harvest, one of his longer plays, was less successful with American audiences than African. The topicality of its subject and allusions which were very unfamiliar to average Americans were probably at the roots of the play's unfavorable reception. Another possible reason could be, as Kroll suggests, that a Westerner was disappointed at the absence of an expected revolutionary vision in the play.

Madmen and Specialists written and directed by Soyinka, was first presented by the Connecticut Commission of the Arts in association with the Eugene O'Neill Memorial Theatre Centre in August 1970. It also played at Hartford, New Haven, Bridgeport, Waterbury, and New York. The cast was from University of Ibadan Arts Theatre. The reviews discussed here are

representative of reactions to this play which Soyinka started in a Nigerian prison and finished at the O'Neill Theatre. The reviewer in the New York Times (1970) appears overwhelmed by the complexity of this "archetypal psychological play," which he believes could be read on a ritualistic level, as well as on allegorical, symbolic, and religious levels.⁴⁹ He even suggests that it could be a play about civilization, establishment and revolution, "there is considerable confusion as to what Soyinka is saying at any one time, and to whom he feels the greatest allegiance." He is, nevertheless, impressed by Soyinka's language, which he says, has almost a Shakespearean soar to it, although he regrets that Soyinka sometimes gets carried away "into flights of linguistic and literary fancy which further obscure already buried meanings." He warmly commends Soyinka's direction of the play and the excellent performance of his troupe.

Alan Bunce in The Christian Science Monitor (1970) remarks that the audience probably does not hear all the words clearly, but still responds fully to the play's basic vitality: "lively outbursts of tribal chanting, acidic humor, ritual form, and forcefully worded flights of bitter speculation."⁵⁰ Without going into details, he states that the good points in the play far outweigh the lapses and weaker points, and therefore, in his opinion, the play is quite a success. He too calls Soyinka a good director.

Writing in the New York Times Book Review (1972) Charles Larson describes Madmen and Specialists as Soyinka's most brutal piece of social

⁴⁹New York Times, 3 August 1970.

⁵⁰The Christian Science Monitor, 15 August 1970, p. 12.

criticism . . . a deeply troubling drama, an allegory of life in postwar Nigeria."⁵¹ Like other reviewers, Larson also finds much of its dialogue confusing, but he defends Soyinka on the grounds that the obscurity of the play is his way of avoiding censure.

A reviewer of the published play in Choice (1974) appears more generous and positive in his assessment, referring to Madmen and Specialists as both "difficult and rewarding," and as a major work in Soyinka's canon.⁵² He believes that mature readers will find the play interesting for its original English, as well as its "clipped rhythmic sureness, color and outlook."

An English review in the New Statesman (1972) by Angus Calder is mixed. Calder complains about the cynicism and "lust for doom" that pervades the work, but admits certain merits: "it demands that its audience must think, and it makes them laugh at the foul absurdity of state-organized viciousness. It is full of a broad chuckling, Mephistophelean satire which is very personally Soyinka's."⁵³

Those reviewers who saw the play's performance seemed impressed by the acting of the play, its visual aids, and Soyinka's skill in directing it, but also found the play confusing and obscure in many parts. Those reviewers who did not see the performance also found the dialogue difficult and obscure. Larson and the reviewer in Choice were, nonetheless, convinced that despite its shortcomings, Madmen and Specialists was the work of a serious writer.

⁵¹N. Y. Times Book Review, 24 Dec. 1972, p. 6.

⁵²Choice, 9 (Jan. 1973), 1454.

⁵³New Statesman, 28 April 1972, p. 564.

Conor Cruise O'Brien, the Irish author and diplomat, reviews Soyinka's The Man Died in World (1973).⁵⁴ He refers to it as bad in an interesting way, bad because of uncontrolled indignation and tendency to grandiloquence, and interesting because his material is crucial as autobiography and history. O'Brien is fully convinced that Soyinka and his book have potential for greatness and world importance, if only he exercises more control over his emotions (like an Achebe or a Swift), and writes in a more down-to-earth manner.

The Times Literary Supplement shares O'Brien's sentiments about the effect of Soyinka's indignation on the overall significance of the book.⁵⁵ Referring to it as the work of an angry young man, the reviewer stresses the fact that Soyinka's views are but those of one man about Nigeria: "brittle, brilliant, brutish, but still the view . . . of one man." He also criticizes sections of the work as incomprehensible: "Much of it is pure Soyinka, the prose and imagery taking off into lunar labyrinths beyond the immediate understanding of the mortal reader." The significance of the book, in his view, lies in its being a book on the conflict in Nigeria written by a Nigerian with international reputation.

Angus Calder in the New Statesman is clearly unfavorable. He sees the book as a major event only because of its historical significance.⁵⁶ Like other reviewers, he is appalled by the anger and scorn exhibited in certain portions of it, and charges that much of the content is exaggerated

⁵⁴"Literature and Indignation," World, 13 Feb., 1973, pp. 46-47.

⁵⁵TLS, 2 March 1973, p. 244.

⁵⁶"Pilgrim Turn Alone," New Statesman, 8 Dec. 1972, p. 866.

partly by the visions and hallucinations resulting from Soyinka's self-imposed fast. His vivid descriptions of how the work strikes him is worth quoting: "The artist marshals from monotony a brilliantly varied book, ranging from densely argued self-examination through laugh-aloud revue-sketch send ups of authority, to fabulously real descriptions of the mini-world of solitary confinement where a one-eyed cat stalking beetles becomes a hero of gargantuan mock-epic, and a lizard on a wall struck with broken glass rears like a dinosaur before the glaciers."

The American in Publishers' Weekly (1973) is mixed in his evaluation of the book.⁵⁷ The reviewer indicates that the quality of Soyinka's message varies "from sincere soul-searching to hackneyed revolutionary jargon." Norman Lederer in Best Sellers (1973) favorably characterizes The Man Died as "an extraordinary and moving book."⁵⁸

The American reviewer in Choice (1974) is evidently more favorably disposed toward The Man Died both as historical and personal document: "Its real life will endure for its intense poetry, for its anger, for its recording of Soyinka's successful attempt to maintain the self through fasting and other means."⁵⁹ He admits to finding the book incomprehensible and dull in some parts, but "extraordinarily interesting" in others. His main reservation is over its localized context. He fears that the American reader will make little of the many Nigerian names mentioned without much needed explanatory notes, and for this reason, recommends

⁵⁷Publishers' Weekly, 7 May 1973, p. 64.

⁵⁸Best Sellers, 1 Jan. 1973, p. 307.

⁵⁹Choice, 11, No. 2 (April 1974), 268.

it for academic libraries only.

H. James Cargas in America (1974) commends The Man Died as a book exposing tyranny and appeals to the world for action.⁶⁰ In his view, Soyinka writes "movingly" without being sentimental: "He does not whine . . . No homily here, yet a tremendous lesson." Cargas is struck by the courage and integrity of the man as revealed in his book and admiringly declares that his actions advance the spirit of man a step further. But he fails to assess the work as literature.

Critics recognized the extraordinary circumstances that surrounded the writing of The Man Died--angry notes which a special prisoner scribbled between lines of smuggled-in books and on toilet paper. The general opinion, however, was that as a work of literature, the book lacked proper control because of the excessive anger of its language. Reviewers agreed that it was a remarkably interesting book for its historical insights into political events in Nigeria, although confusing to the uninitiated. While critics expressed themselves differently, they, nevertheless, generally agreed with Cruise O'Brien that The Man Died was not great, but had strong potential to be a great book. The Man Died represented a new period in Soyinka's literary life. In view of his established pre-war reputation and the strange conditions that produced the work, Soyinka's reputation was probably not hurt by it, although men like O'Brien urged him more than ever to exercise better control of his emotion if he hoped to become a truly great writer.

Season of Anomy (1973), Soyinka's second novel and the first in

⁶⁰"The Man Died: Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka," America, 2 March 1974, p. 160.

his post-war phase, was warmly received in the Times Literary Supplement and The Spectator. The former describes it as narrower than his pre-war writings in "its margin of hope, its determination to face and master the dragon of terror, its more direct use of allegory and representative character."⁶¹ Its reviewer finds Soyinka's prose relatively cooler, and the entire work "handled with a controlled and lyrical grace." He commends the clarity of his descriptions in his unrelenting determination "to rub his countrymen's faces in the deeds now officially forgotten or denied."

Peter Ackroyd in The Spectator (1973) admits that he has been expecting prosaic rage and self-pity from Soyinka's post-war novel but is delightfully surprised instead: "I was wrong, Season of Anomy is a substantial book."⁶² He marvels at Soyinka's "fluency and subtlety," in his "elaborate and careful book." He finds the book's all-inclusiveness of genre both odd and exciting: "romance, intrigue, high comedy, political statement and bloody description." His only complaint is that Soyinka's writing occasionally becomes too lyrical and grandiose for his themes.

The American critic, Charles Larson, in Books Abroad (1974) briefly notes the work's allegorical nature, but emphasizes its complexity and obscurity: "Season of Anomy is Soyinka's second novel and his most difficult. I am certain that it will be pondered over for years to come."⁶³

⁶¹TLS, 14 Dec. 1973, p. 1529.

⁶²"The Heart of the Matter," The Spectator, 15 Dec. 1973, p. 787.

⁶³Books Abroad, 48, No. 3 (Summer 1974), 522.

Judging from the tone of these representative reviews, Soyinka had retained important characteristics of his former writings while adding new features. The content of the latest work for example, like most of his earlier works, has been described as complex, sometimes obscure, a mixture of many genres to create an elaborate plot. Typical of nearly all earlier reviewers, Ackroyd observed that Soyinka's language was still occasionally too lyrical and grandiloquent for his themes. Nonetheless, Season of Anomy was judged a definite improvement, a sign of greater maturity, exhibiting a "control" and carefulness which The Man Died lacked.

Soyinka has received a great deal of English and American attention, an attention that appears on the increase judging from listings in Book Review Indexes. Reviews for certain plays have been either mostly English or American depending on place of production, but nevertheless, it is easy to follow a clear trend in their assessments of both the writer and his works. The overwhelming complaint from both sides has been against Soyinka's tendency towards complexity and metaphysical subtleties in the content and grandiloquence in the language of his works. English reviewers on the whole were more receptive of the tribal elements and background to these works, whereas Americans more frequently expressed confusion and impatience. Broadly speaking, there were no striking differences in the complaints and criticism of English and American reviewers. There was a general feeling that Soyinka had still much room for improvement, although he was definitely on his way to being a competent and great writer of international significance.

Reception of Soyinka in Articles

Wole Soyinka has been written about by many English and American academic critics. A number of them, especially among the English, have had close associations with Nigeria, a point that is potentially helpful as regards the insight they bring to their commentaries and their general attitude. These articles differ from popular reviews not only in their greater scope and depth, but also in reflecting the different expectations of critics and the criteria they used in evaluating the works.

In her article entitled "Soyinka's International Drama" (1964) Una Maclean introduces her survey of Five Plays (1964) with remarks made by Soyinka at the Drama Conference of Edinburgh, about African drama needing to be judged on the basis of its effective presentation of universal human experiences.⁶³ It is her desire to judge his works by the stringent standards he called for. Her primary interest is the manner of Soyinka's integration and transformation of the very local content of his works into universal concerns. Her method is to examine each play for local and universal elements, while summarizing it and commenting on points of interest.

She points out that the plays are specifically Nigerian in setting in the use of names, and of well-known character types of Nigerian people. Besides, there are also the visual aids incorporated from oral traditional theatre like music, dance, poetry, proverbs, and mime. She sees a real test for Soyinka's skill in the effective integration of

⁶³"Soyinka's International Drama," Black Orpheus, 15 (August 1964), 46-57.

these local materials, but admits that he is quite successful. On the music and dance she says: "They are employed judiciously to intensify and express emotions already implicit in the action." She commends the pointed nature of his proverbs, which though often sardonic, in her opinion, are never used as ends in themselves. Upholding him as exemplary among other African writers, she asserts that his poetry is of great originality.

A Dance of the Forests represents for her a most successful synthesis of the local and the international, and she calls it "a mythological dramatic poem on a grand scale" dealing with the universal theme of the relationship between past and present. She notes that Soyinka creates the artist Demoke as the most sensitive and living character to symbolize his conception of the artist as one who will "not only interpret the past to the present, but also protect the potentialities of the future."⁶⁴

The pervading sense of fear and impending doom which dominates The Strong Breed is in Maclean's view both effectively and economically captured in its local spirit as none but an African can do: "The African playwright sets two people in a hut at night . . . as they talk quietly together, the fears and compulsions of a continent are revealed."⁶⁵

In her discussion of The Swamp Dwellers, she complains about the querulous and ineffective nature of the protagonist who she believes cannot bear well his tragic role. She concedes, however, that Soyinka successfully presents African villagers at the mercy of elements and the characters'

⁶⁴ Maclean, p. 49.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, 50.

reactions to that basic situation as a universal experience, and in a language that borders on poetry. She finds The Trials of Brother Jero excellent entertainment and its caricature of the protagonist brilliantly drawn. She characterizes The Lion and the Jewel as "pure comedy," a kind of African Beauty and the Beast fable. She concludes that Soyinka has been successful with both serious and light drama in not only re-interpreting the past to the present, but above all in giving universal significance to local images. She commends his skill in integrating legend, traditional religion, and history into the body of his works: "He alone among African dramatists has managed brilliantly to mold mythology into a new image, by inviting the participation of pagan symbols in a dramatic ritual of universal import."⁶⁶

Martin Esslin, a professional producer and reviewer of drama, was asked to review Soyinka's Five Plays and J. P. Clark's Three Plays. The result was his article, "Two Nigerian Playwrights" (1966).⁶⁷ He states that with no knowledge of the plays' background, he is evaluating them as plays, pure and simple. His method is to point out the various handicaps under which these playwrights are creating in order to measure their true achievements. The first in his list of handicaps is the total unfamiliarity of a foreign audience with the background of the plays, especially

⁶⁶ Maclean, p. 51.

⁶⁷ "Two Nigerian Playwrights," Introduction to African Literature, ed. Ulli Beier (London: Longmans, 1967), pp. 255-262; first appeared in Black Orpheus, No. 19 (March 1966), pp. 33-39. Also appearing in 1966 was Ian Watson's "Dance of the Forest," Transition, 27 (1966). It was a detailed summary of the play in the light of the universal implications of its symbols and themes.

since drama deals with human emotions and predicaments in a social context. Although, ironically, the very "exoticism" of background affords the plays a fair chance of success, Esslin warns that "delight in exoticism almost invariably fastens on superficial external factors."

Secondly, he points out the formidable handicap of all translated drama, the problem of how to translate for example, the language of peasants and fishermen into English, even for a writer who has mastered English nuances as Soyinka has. He sees an only way out in the use of highly stylized poetic drama. Soyinka is obviously aware of this problem, because his prose is both formal and stylized. But the use of verse evidently poses a new problem, for Esslin points out that content must be raised up to the level of an "eternal poetic symbol," or face the danger of being crushed "under the load of its poetic objective." Esslin further suggests that Soyinka must evolve "a new truly African brand of English which will eventually be able to embody the emotions, customs and daily life of the people concerned."⁶⁸ Soyinka like Achebe and other African writers is also fully aware of this problem, and has experimented extensively with different levels of English as well as Pidgin.

Expressing surprise that a hardened producer like himself can be moved and uplifted by Soyinka's works as he is, Esslin marvels at Soyinka's varied talent which moves easily from farce to tragedy, to romantic mythology, changing from prose to verse within one play and employing "the full panoply of the great African tradition of dance and mime." Like Una Maclean, he points out the very recognizable Nigerian settings of his

⁶⁸Esslin, 258.

plays as evidence of his deep concern for the present. Contrary to the generally unfavorable reviews, Esslin states that A Dance of the Forests is a most ambitious endeavor, multi-layered in its poetic texture, and in his view, handled with "consummate skill." The basic philosophy of the play given in the words of Forest Head, appeals specially to him: "to pierce the encrustations of soul-deadening habit, and bare the mirror of original nakedness . . ."⁶⁹

Esslin obviously enjoyed the light-hearted Lion and the Jewel. Like all other critics who have discussed the play, he is intrigued by what appears to be a clear reversal of the usual trend, in that the village belle, Sidi, prefers an old upholder of tradition to a young, supposedly forward-looking teacher. Attempting an allegorical interpretation, Esslin asks: "Is Sidi the Nigerian people who might believe in the impotence of the past but will nevertheless experience its powers?"

His one objection to Soyinka's technique concerns what he characterizes as somewhat overfree, and sometimes confusing use of flashback scenes which cannot be effectively used on stage except with great caution. In conclusion, he calls Soyinka a highly accomplished playwright, and expresses full confidence in him as "a master-craftsman of the theatre and a major dramatic poet." Esslin's reception is very favorable and significant because it comes from a professional who is ostensibly using the only criteria Soyinka has demanded: that the works be judged on their own terms and merits.

Martin Banham, once a deputy director at the School of Drama in

⁶⁹Esslin, 261.

Ibadan University published "African Literature II, Nigerian Dramatists" in 1967, which is mostly a discussion of Soyinka.⁷⁰ Banham's emphasis is on what he regards as Soyinka's great success in fusing English with local traditional art forms of popular Yoruba theatre, specifically music, dance, mimes, and constant allusions to Yoruba folklore and customs. In this regard, Banham sees evidence of Soyinka's clean break from the restrictions of European form into more flexible and far richer possibilities offered by traditional forms. He finds the best example of such fusion in Kongi's Harvest, where Soyinka amply uses music and dance for the first time. Contrary to the evaluations of popular reviewers, Banham considers the play to be Soyinka's finest work: "The language is enlivened and enriched by the clarity of movement and the comment of the music," which provides Soyinka with new powers and options in theatre. He considers Kongi's Harvest to be particularly imaginative, universal in its theme and a "satirical comedy of the highest order." His favorable impressions are not dampened by his suspicion that the work is "somewhat experimental in its style of presentation."

The following year, another former lecturer at Ibadan, John Ferguson, published an article on Soyinka entitled "Nigerian Drama in English" (1968), which includes synopses and commentaries on a number of his plays and general remarks about his place and significance in Nigerian theatre.⁷¹ Ferguson's approach shows the confidence of one familiar

⁷⁰"African Literature II: Nigerian Dramatists," JCL, 3 (July 1967), 97-102.

⁷¹"Nigerian Drama in English," Modern Drama, 11, No. 1 (May 1968), 10-26.

with both production and background of the plays, as well as with the writer himself. He describes Soyinka as a "young, suave and confident" playwright, an exacting producer, and a competent actor who knows and understands theatre. In his view Soyinka is the leading hope in Nigerian drama because of his ability to speak to the world through his plays.

After summarizing The Lion and the Jewel, Ferguson calls it a good play with "both spice and point in its comedy of words, situation, and character." He stresses the "excellent spectacle" of its mumming and miming. He judges The Swamp Dwellers "an altogether meatier play," although he compares its tragic atmosphere to that in Riders to the Sea. In spite of favorable remarks about scenes which he considers dramatically excellent, Ferguson complains as Maclean has done, that the play's weakness not only lies in its failure to convincingly integrate a major character, but also in its unsuccessful attempt to make satisfactory drama with an ineffective protagonist. At the close of a brief summary of The Strong Breed Ferguson characterizes it as "a powerful play," and emphasizes the obvious symbolic overtones in its fusion of village customs and Christian elements, explaining that Eman is indeed "Emmanuel the redeemer."

A Dance of the Forests likewise impresses him as Soyinka's greatest achievement, and he compares its atmosphere to A Midsummer Night's Dream and The Tempest, suggesting a direct influence by calling it "the most Shakespearian of Soyinka's plays." His reception of the play is very mixed indeed. He notes as an eyewitness that it pleased neither Nigerians nor the whites in the audience and that the Independence Committee rejected it on the grounds that its themes of corruption, violence,

and lust did not befit the occasion, although Soyinka produced it anyway. He explains that the play's sophisticated symbolism did not appeal to the Africans, while Europeans failed to appreciate the many elements of Nigerian mythology in it. His personal verdict is that the play needs "pruning shears" to reduce its "sprawling and massive" nature because he believes that it is hurriedly written.

On the positive side, he concedes that A Dance of the Forests offers a thrilling experience by the "sense of its haunting tradition, the music of its poetry, and the dynamics of its visible action." He sees it as a welcome departure from "European-type plays in an African setting" characteristic of Soyinka's earlier works, into something more capable of bearing the interpretative and authentic voice of Africa to the world beyond.

In assessing The Road's production, Ferguson has to rely on other reviews of the play. He complains that reviewers are more pre-occupied with the captivating drumming and dancing than with the artistry of the work but approves their general appreciation of the language and character portrayal as well as their criticism of its "loose structure." Ferguson's evaluation of Kongi's Harvest is a far cry from Martin Banham's great enthusiasm. He judges it as basically an evening's entertainment because of its music and dancing. He is disappointed that despite its theme of dictatorship, the work fails to study power and the real sense "of what it is for a democrat to live under a dictatorship." Even the language leaves him cold: "there is little that is remarkable or even striking." It is significant that the play which Banham believes to be Soyinka's best, is his worst according to Ferguson's assessment: "A

play worth writing, but in Soyinka's ultimate achievement, marking time."⁷² Having pointed out that Soyinka needs to work more on characterization and structure, Ferguson is ready to praise his gifts of language and dramatic conception. He is convinced that Soyinka is creatively and technically equipped "to take his place among the very few dramatists who overstride the boundaries of continents and centuries."⁷³

Arthur Ravenscroft examined Soyinka's The Interpreters as one example in his essay, "Novels of Disillusion from Africa" (1969).⁷⁴ Obviously the critic considers the novel a more serious work than ordinary satire, or the indictment of a "sick society." His positive remarks about the novel are, however, counterbalanced by what he sees as a lack of balance and objective restraint, and an absence of definite moral orientation. He apparently expects Soyinka to be a "teacher" to his audience in the manner of Achebe. Among the strengths of the play, he counts its intensity and denseness of language: "It is clearly a poet's novel, again and again one catches whole passages and cadences of Soyinka's own poetry breaking through the prose." Ravenscroft stresses its tremendous energy and linguistic vitality, its excellent comedy, especially in capturing and flaying "the absurd posturings of various groups among his countrymen." He is impressed by the pieces of fantasy in the wit, and the "sheer inventiveness of the comedy," but it is also on these

⁷²Ferguson, 26.

⁷³Ibid., 27.

⁷⁴"African Literature: Novels of Disillusion," JCL, 6 (Jan. 1969), 120-137.

very points that he expresses his reservations.

Ravenscroft laments that the evidence of great energy and creative genius in The Interpreters only makes one wonder what the novel adds up to, because he suspects that Soyinka delights in dwelling on the ugly aspects of his society: "It strikes me as a therapeutic novel for one feels uncomfortably all the way through that Soyinka has to write it in order to get a bleak, self-destructive gloating over the evils of the Sarduana's Nigeria out of his system."⁷⁵ The critic feels also that Soyinka is too personally involved as he flashes his angry eye over almost every aspect of society: "Each is treated with scorn, contempt or anger, not dispassionately but with a furious emotional involvement and a pitch of intensity that makes the reader long for more artistic control."⁷⁶ He equally criticizes the novel for a seeming lack of integration of some episodes, especially that of the albino, which in itself he considers a "brilliantly conceived story." Ravenscroft considers The Interpreters a rich enough novel to "provide a superb feast for any reader," but his reservations and disappointment over it are captured in this lament: "And yet what a pity that a novel with such strengths and potential as it does have should leave one so unhappy about its artistic hollowness."⁷⁷

Another article by Martin Banham entitled "Wole Soyinka in the Nigerian Theatre" (1972), attempts to put into proper perspective

⁷⁵Ravenscroft, 124.

⁷⁶ibid., 126.

⁷⁷ibid., 124.

Soyinka's place in Nigerian theatre vis-à-vis other contributors, his closeness to Yoruba theatrical traditions, and its effect on his audiences both Nigerian and foreign.⁷⁸ Banham prefaces his notes with comments on the major contributions of many others to the growth of theatre in Nigeria. He observes that by elevating Soyinka so high above all others, critics have embarrassed him and isolated him from those colleagues and his cultural context "severed from which his work has little significance." Banham seeks to establish three aspects of Soyinka: as a dramatist who is never isolated from his audience, as a writer preoccupied with the present and the real in his society, and as one whose works appeal internationally.

On the first point, he emphasizes that Soyinka is firmly rooted in Western, as well as indigenous theatrical traditions, and as playwright, producer, actor and academician, he has learned to communicate: "It is Soyinka's ear and eye, his sensitivity to the subtleties and humours of people's activities, that have made him the forceful playwright that he is."⁷⁹ He notes that Soyinka's successful fusion of the local and the foreign, the sophisticated stagecraft and techniques from his British experience, and visual aids like mime, music, and dance, coupled with wit, from the well-established traditional Yoruba drama, help make him a very audience-oriented playwright.

On the second point, Banham demonstrates that every Soyinka play

⁷⁸"Wole Soyinka in the Nigerian Theatre," New Theatre Magazine, 12, No. 2 (1972), 10-11.

⁷⁹*ibid.*, 10.

is concerned with an aspect of the present, like politics, the family, human emotions or society in cultural turmoil: "The superstitions and fears of The Swamp Dwellers or the satire of Brother Jero are as apparent and real to Nigerian audiences as the irony and bitterness of Kongi's Harvest or Madmen and Specialists."

Banham's final point focuses on Soyinka's success in maintaining an open line of communication with his audience, despite his experimentations, and the complexity and high intellectual level of his works. He attributes Soyinka's success to his keeping in close contact with his background: "The language may be English but the voice and the song are Nigerian."

In 1972, Martin Esslin published a follow-up article entitled "Wole Soyinka: A Major Poetic Dramatist."⁸⁰ Apparently Esslin has become much more familiar with the playwright and is able this time to analyze his achievements in language, plot, and symbolism with both conviction and confidence. Reiterating the already discussed handicaps under which Soyinka and others labor, he adds to them the difficulty of getting adequate performances of these plays in England and America because few actors are willing to tackle such characters and problems. Esslin asserts that Soyinka's powerful poetic prose should be recognized and that he should be praised as one of the finest poetic playwrights that ever published in English.

In discussing The Road, Kongi's Harvest, and Madmen and Specialists, Esslin admits initial difficulties of comprehension in these plays

⁸⁰"Wole Soyinka: A Major Poetic Dramatist," New Theatre Magazine, 12, No. 2 (1972), 9-10.

but emphasizes that such problems are more than compensated for by their hidden beauties. Like other critics before him, he notes that in their use of ritual, dance and music the plays resemble traditional Yoruba theatre.

Esslin approaches The Road on one level as a realistic play, and on another as a symbolic death ritual, "a dream-like initiation rite into the other world of the shades." He admits that at first The Road appears strange and difficult to grasp, but that in time, it literally grips the reader with its beauty and magical power. He describes Kongi's Harvest as a complex play with an intricate but "crystal-clear" plot, containing much satire and wise political comments." Referring to the protagonist, as nearly all other critics have, as a "somewhat Nkrumah-like dictator," Esslin points out that too few foreigners know enough of the background to appreciate the play's subtleties and depth of insight. He is favorably impressed by the unpredictable turn of events both dramatically and politically by which Soyinka avoids obvious plot clichés about African politics. Over and above that, Esslin is deeply touched by the play's overall impact and significance, asserting that there is "a mellowness, a maturity and a sadness in this play which gives it the stamp of real greatness."

Madmen and Specialists is, in Esslin's opinion, Soyinka's most mature work, possibly because it bears traces of traumatic war experiences. Without claiming to penetrate all its meaning, Esslin comments on its extreme richness and the various interpretative layers it contains, among them realistic, satirical, and symbolic interpretations. He calls attention to the verbal power and wit of its language and to the

extraordinary portrayals of the four major characters, whose part in the play he compares to that of a Greek classic in their commenting and participating as well as providing the play's central poetic image. In conclusion Esslin states: "Madmen and Specialists presents us with an image, a poetic metaphor of the agonies and doubts of a continent in the throes of violence and tragic change. Its ten characters, a group of richly-drawn grotesques, stand for millions. Only a poet of major stature could achieve such an astonishing dramatic and linguistic 'tour de force'."⁸¹

The overriding interests of English critics included Soyinka's closeness to Nigerian traditional drama, in the use of dance, drums, mime and the interpretation of traditional religion, beliefs, and customs of his people; the success of his prose, verse and variety of languages; and the universality of his themes in their local settings. One got the impression that most of them knew about and were interested in the existence of traditional materials which could be incorporated into conventional forms to create something new and exciting and, therefore, encouraged Soyinka and other African writers to continue in that direction.

On individual works, most attention was devoted to A Dance of the Forests, which all agreed was the most substantial and intricate of his plays and also the most fascinating in the richness of its traditional materials. The shorter plays were generally given scantier attention,

⁸¹Esslin, 10.

although The Lion and the Jewel was singled out as the favorite and most successful comedy. The only significant difference of opinion was between Banham's glowing praise for Kongi's Harvest and Ferguson's criticism of its language and its failure to come to grips with its theme. Objections and reservations were numerous, particularly about Soyinka's tendency to overload his language and plays in general, but they all agreed that he was a sophisticated and talented artist capable of producing even better works.

American academic critics, like American reviewers, became familiar with Soyinka later than did the English. The two articles that appeared in 1966 were both concerned with how Soyinka's writings differed in content from those of Chinua Achebe and other African writers. In an article entitled "Tradition and Change in Nigerian Literature" (1966), Michael Crowder discusses the crucial problem faced by Nigerian writers in establishing a direct line of communication with their audience.⁸² He argues that there is no continuity between modern Nigerian writing and traditional literature except perhaps in poetry. Other critics, however, question the narrowness of such an assumption.⁸³ Since poetry and drama present, in his opinion, the best escape from isolation and since Soyinka uses blank verse in his drama, Crowder holds him up as an excellent example of a writer successfully solving the dual dilemma of translating

⁸²"Tradition and Change in Nigerian Literature," Tri-Quarterly, 5 (Spring 1966), 117-127. First read at Northwestern University, August 1964.

⁸³See Martin Banham, Margaret Lawrence and Gerald Moore and others for comments on the rich and direct influence of traditional theatre on modern Nigerian drama.

ideas from one language to another and establishing a clear line of communication with both local and foreign audiences. He calls him the most interesting and experimental of Nigerian writers.

Crowder openly expresses relief at finding in Soyinka's plays a different concept of cultural conflict from that expressed in Achebe and others, conflict within the African society rather than between black and white. He points out that The Strong Breed and The Swamp Dwellers are entirely African in setting and content. A Dance of the Forests poses a problem for Crowder. He has previously believed it to be a great work with "superb" poetry, but he admits that under the influence of an unidentified critic's commentary, he has come to view it as a less successful work, mainly because Soyinka has used visual techniques which to him represent elements of African "exotica." Crowder is interested in Soyinka mostly as an example of successfully bridging the writer-audience gap through the use of traditional themes. Ironically, the African "exotica" which he objects to are, in the opinion of critics like Banham and Maclean, crucial elements in bridging such a writer-audience gap, particularly in Nigeria.

Martin Tucker's series, "West African literature: The Second Decade," Parts I and II (1966), was one of the earliest and longest American examinations of Soyinka's plays.⁸⁴ As one who has criticized Achebe for his obsessive concern with culture conflict and with blaming the white man, Tucker, like Crowder, is more favorably disposed towards

⁸⁴"West African Literature: The Second Decade," Africa Today, 13, No. 5 (May 1966), 7-9; Part II, No. 6 (June 1966), 7-8.

Soyinka because he believes that Soyinka is not interested in a "contemporary historical situation of the white man's sojourn in Africa." He points to his all black characters as positive evidence of his greater interest in the human rather than the historic aspects of his plays, and sees this fact as partly responsible for the universal elements in his characters despite their very African folk beliefs and conflicts. "His people could be Asians, or Americans or Europeans; their hunger and needs require no local habitation."⁸⁵

Tucker's approach is thematic and interpretative. Through his summaries and commentaries on each play, he tries to establish relationships between the various themes of the different plays, and attempt to interpret seemingly allegorical and symbolic elements in order to clarify Soyinka's often ambivalent postures towards the past and the present. He is intrigued by the repeated failure of those characters who appear strong intellectually and by the survival of the weak, the idiots, the maimed and the rogues.

Tucker explains the ambiguity of Soyinka's ambiguous stance towards the ancient custom of having a human scapegoat in The Strong Breed as, in fact, part of Soyinka's attempt to retain the best elements in tribal life while condemning its cruelties and superstitions. Tucker reaches a similar conclusion about the ambiguity in The Swamp Dwellers, although the struggle this time is between life in the swamps and the lures of the modern city. Tucker sees a similar lack of choice between the "tawdry" past and the often ugly present in both A Dance of the Forests and The

⁸⁵Tucker, 8.

Lion and the Jewel, resulting in both plays ending in vexing states of irresolution. In Tucker's judgment, Soyinka follows a wise course by his deliberate refusal to side with the past or the present, because he, thereby, avoids the common African writer's pitfall of becoming either "a primitivist or a propagandist of modernism." He observes that the successful roguery of Jero in The Trials of Brother Jero and the violent death of the intellectual leader of the group in The Road, similarly point to the gloomy conclusions and tragic state of irresolution which Tucker feels have imbued Soyinka's works with certain "lyric and plaintive beauty."

Tucker's tone, throughout his article, is one of respect for a writer of talent and various accomplishments, and especially for an African writer daring to break ranks with many, by showing little pretense to social instruction. He finds him the best example of what he envisions continuing maturation of African literature in English to be, and asserts that the quality of his plays is comparable to that of the best works of contemporary British or American playwrights.

In his article "African Drama West and South" (1968), Robert McDowell discusses three of Soyinka's plays in terms of the writer's ambivalence towards issues, the universal nature of his themes despite their Nigerian background and his use of techniques borrowed from traditional drama.⁸⁶ McDowell goes over much the same grounds as Tucker has earlier covered. His general impression of Soyinka is that of a satiric and rather pessimistic playwright not given to facile answers in

⁸⁶"African Drama, West and South," Africa Today, 15, No. 4 (August 1968), 25-28.

view of the infinite possibilities of the mind, hence his studied ambivalence.

Like Tucker, McDowell also comments on the complexity of choice and Soyinka's ambivalence in The Strong Breed towards the chief characters. The Lion and the Jewel fascinates him not only by its "rich comedy," but even more by Soyinka's upset of tradition in letting the "more primitive" chief triumph over the "over-cerebral mind" of the modern teacher. As he puts it, Soyinka is "anti-conservative, anti-Negritude, anti-romantic, anti-soul-deadening habits." He comes to the inevitable conclusion, as Tucker does before, that the sum of Soyinka's mythology, is "a deliberate ambivalence, a highly-designed paradigm of possibilities."⁸⁷

John Povey's article in 1966 entitled "Wole Soyinka and Nigerian Drama," is strictly a survey to introduce he says, "a relatively unknown writer to the American reader."⁸⁸ In 1969, he published "Wole Soyinka, Two Nigerian Comedies," which was supposed to be a critical study of The Trials of Brother Jero and The Lion and the Jewel, comedies which have proved particularly popular on American campuses.⁸⁹ Povey provides detailed summaries of the plays and few comparative commentaries, drawing parallels between them and such other well-known English plays as The Alchemist, Volpone, and Richard III. He points to the success of Soyinka's

⁸⁷McDowell, 28.

⁸⁸"Wole Soyinka and the Nigerian Drama," Tri-Quarterly, 5 (Spring 1966), 129-135.

⁸⁹"Wole Soyinka, Two Nigerian Comedies," Comparative Drama, 3, No. 2 (Summer 1969), 120-132.

productions abroad as evidence of the high quality of his plays. He attributes Soyinka's ready appeal to his international and cosmopolitan outlook, his readiness to learn from the drama of all nations and especially his dual heritage of African and Western experiences. He stresses Soyinka's unique position as a playwright who must first be recognized on stage to be successful. He believes that Soyinka's reputation is based more on successfully produced plays than on his books

Povey discusses The Trials of Brother Jero along thematic lines of high roguery and international comedy of marital spats, suggesting analogies with "the witty roguery of Antolycus of the Winter's Tale: and particularly with the ending of two Johnsonian comedies, Volpone and The Alchemist." Although conceding the play funny, Povey insists that the unqualified success of the rogue prophet makes it a pessimistic play and thwarts the reader's expectations.

He finds, nevertheless, that a similar thwarting of expectations in The Lion and the Jewel adds greatly to its success. He characterizes the play as a brilliant attempt to force readers to reconsider the simplistic premises upon which many conventional notions are built while praising its novelty of vision and its lively entertainment. Like Tucker, he argues that Soyinka's does not reject progress for tradition, but in effect protects the valuable and positive aspects of tradition against the false assumption that Western values are the only source of change possible for Africa. Povey concludes that Soyinka's comedies have been deservedly successful with American audiences and show him to be "among the most able contemporary dramatists in English."

Bruce King, formerly of Ibadan and Lagos Universities, gives his impressions about several of Soyinka's plays in his article "Two Nigerian

Writers: Tutuola and Soyinka" (1970).⁹⁰ It is a criticism of Kongi's Harvest and Idanre and Other Poems. His reception is mixed, and as his introductory remarks show: "Only The Lion and the Jewel is totally satisfying. The remainder are full of promise, brilliant in spots, but never fully achieved. . . . Each work appears like a new start which has been abandoned before problems of structure and theme have been aesthetically resolved."⁹¹

Concerning Kongi's Harvest, King praises Soyinka's ability to use comic dialogue for serious purposes in creating certain characters which he thinks are marvelously realized. On the other hand, he charges that the plot is not fully explicit and the action sometimes vague, and fails to yield the full cosmic interpretation that the writer obviously intends. King describes the faults in the play as an example of "what happens when a talented writer does not need to face exacting criticism," implying that Soyinka has been over-praised to his own detriment.

"Idanre" Soyinka's long title poem of the collection of poems does not find much favor with Bruce King. He refers to it as "a typical Soyinka Mixture of genuine talent, literary sophistication, and lack of self-criticism." In his opinion, it is a poem of great intensity and superhuman scope, but one whose language needs revision: "It is told in anapocalyptic diction, often bombastic, occasionally silly and sometimes magnificent." His concluding remarks emphasize once again Soyinka's

⁹⁰"Two Nigerian Writers: Tutuola and Soyinka," Southern Review, 6 (1970), 843-848.

⁹¹ibid., 843.

success with dialogue, which he says adequately reflects the African language of the characters. He feels that Soyinka's infatuation with the sound of words makes his dialogue worthy of comparison to Pinter and even Beckett.

On the whole, American writers were pleased that Soyinka did not dwell on those colonial themes which had proved uncomfortable for many American critics of Achebe. They were generally impressed by three related aspects of his works: the universal implications of his themes despite the very local background; his ambivalent posture toward the traditional and the new, his willingness to castigate tradition in the way Achebe would not, and his consuming concern with problems of the present for all classes of people, including artists.

In dealing with individual plays, American critics showed a remarkable tendency to avoid A Dance of the Forests; only Martin Tucker discusses it in his essay, but very briefly when compared to English critics. As with Achebe's criticism, Americans felt ill-at-ease with traditional beliefs and legends, and they preferred to discuss the shorter plays. Even with these, they made only few perceptive observations, dwelling instead on Soyinka's ambivalent stance towards tradition and modernity.

Most of these articles, both English and American were predominantly surveys or general reviews rather than critical analyses of special aspects of Soyinka's works. Some were content to summarize the works and add a few personal observations on what they believed were his strong points or weaknesses. Whatever the nature of these articles,

Soyinka was generally well received as a writer of talent, difficult and obscure at times, but also eloquent and skillful. They see in his works various indications of a fertile mind, comparable, many admit, with some of the best in Western literature.

Reception of Soyinka in Critical Surveys

Compared to Achebe's representation in all six English books of critical survey and Tutuola's representation in four of these, Soyinka's writings have been discussed in four books of survey by Anne Tibble, Margaret Laurence, Gerald Moore and Adrian Roscoe. Soyinka's plays were not yet published when Gerald Moore wrote his Seven African Writers in 1962, and William Walsh's A Manifold Voice (1970) was of such scope that he had to limit his choice to one writer from Nigeria, and he was obviously more interested in the novel than in drama. Of the four American books of survey examined, only three of them discussed Soyinka, as Judith Gleason's This Africa is concerned only with novels. Obviously, Soyinka was as well represented as Tutuola, and nearly as well as Achebe was. Gerald Moore's The Chosen Tongue, which briefly examined A Dance of the Forests, is not discussed because he examined the play at greater length in his book, Wole Soyinka.

Anne Tibble surveyed Soyinka's works in two pages as compared to those of Achebe's in ten.⁹² A possible explanation could be a lack of interest in drama. Her approach as usual is impressionistic, as she makes

⁹² Anne Tibble, English/African Literature: A Short-Survey and Anthology of Prose and Poetry (London: Peter Owens, 1965), pp. 87-89.

very brief examination of four plays, registering her views on their overall impact and viability on stage. Tibble has obviously enjoyed reading The Trials of Brother Jero. She describes it as "a glorious satire and a hilariously funny farce at nobody's expense," and predicts a long and successful theatrical life for it. With no supportive evidence, Tibble observes that the writer's handling of The Strong Breed is "superb." The play represents for her "Soyinka's searching analysis of humaneness," his continued deeper probe into the cultural beliefs and customs of his people.

A Dance of the Forests, however, sorely tests Tibble's patience. She finds it baffling and charges that "three or four careful readings can leave only glimmers of what it is about." She points out that Soyinka has so deliberately hidden his meanings among so many obscure symbolic figures that the dialogue is "rendered almost superfluous." She observes that although the play may have a future on the African stage and in discussion, she cannot envisage its theatrical success anywhere outside Nigeria. Judging from the play's one performance since 1960, she might well be right.

The Lion and The Jewel appeals to Tibble as does the first comedy, not only by being "clever, funny and dramatic," but more especially by centering around what she terms the universal theme of potency. She admires his capacity for handling such a potentially serious theme with "the finest, lightest fun," and she finds the characters convincingly real, both as local and as universal people: "modern Everyman, symbols from the canon of Samuel Beckett or Brecht."

In Anne Tibble's judgment, Soyinka acquits himself very well in

the shorter plays, while showing a special talent for comedy. Although confused and unhappy with the longer play, she suggests that she has found Soyinka to be as she had introduced him, "the most outstanding among Nigerian dramatists."

Margaret Laurence, the novelist critic, is obviously as much interested in Soyinka the dramatist as she is in Achebe, because she devotes a very long chapter to him entitled, "Voices of Life, Dance and Death."⁹³ She also obviously addresses the general reader because her method is essentially to summarize the works, explain customs, rituals and imagery for non-Yoruba readers, provide biographical data on Soyinka, render her impressions on his handling of style, language and characters. Laurence is as sympathetic and generous in her remarks here as she is with Achebe. She tries above all to impress her reader with the amazing diversity and variety of Soyinka's talent. Her introductory paragraph, as usual, sums up her views about the man and his works:

Wole Soyinka's writing often seems like a juggling act. . . . He is able to handle many themes simultaneously without ever endangering the reality of his characters. His people are never ciphers or symbols, always persons speaking in their own voices. He is a volatile writer, and he achieves in his work an almost unbelievable amount of vitality.⁹⁴

Laurence equally focuses attention on the writer's skill in enriching his modern themes by incorporating elements of traditional religion, customs, mythology and poetry as well as the more visible use of drums,

⁹³Margaret Laurence, Long Drums and Cannons: Nigerian Dramatists and Novelists (London: Macmillan, 1968), pp. 11-76.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 11.

dance and mask borrowed from traditional Yoruba drama. She describes the effect of such combination as sometimes "electrifying," and emphasizes that Soyinka is as much indebted to European as to African sources in the form and content of his works. In a statement with which most reviewers certainly seem to disagree, she claims that Soyinka's works pose no problems to foreign readers: "Generally speaking Soyinka's plays contain everything necessary to understand his references to Yoruba gods and cults." Nearly all reviewers find the references not explicit enough and sometimes confusing. Before discussing individual plays, Laurence provides an exposition on Traditional Yoruba drama and folk opera in order to clarify Soyinka's debts and true relationships to them.

The Lion and the Jewel is no doubt one of Laurence's favorites, as with most other critics and reviewers. Her emphasis is on the lightness of its satire, the delicacy of touch in the irony, and the affectionate or at least sympathetic drawing of all characters. She commends his skill in softening the rather serious themes of impotency and woman's sexual malice by his ridiculing both traditionalists and progressives alike. In her judgment, the play is balanced and delightful mainly because of the "airy and subtle" tone, the atmosphere of tolerance pervading all, and the moderate but effective use of dance and masquerade.

The Trials of Brother Jero left the same light impression on her as on other critics. She thinks the structure extremely simple, depending on "the well-worn device of concealed identity." The rest of the discussion is summary and explanations. She barely makes critical comments on The Swamp Dwellers beyond a thorough summation of plot and

registering complaint against the semi-heroic stance of the protagonist, who in her view lacks the strength to bear the part well. The Strong Breed surprises and pleases her by its scope and skillful integration of elements from traditional religion: elders, priest, sacred grove, ritual, and a parallel Christian passion story of a father's demand for self-sacrifice, a son's attempted evasion, role of redeemer, and death on a sacred tree. Laurence admires the compactness of the play, observing that "in a relatively short space Soyinka has managed to convey and contrast concepts relating to figures found in many societies and many religions."⁹⁵

Understandably Laurence spends relatively more time in discussing A Dance of the Forests, by general consensus the most intricate and substantial of Soyinka plays, and one demonstrating the writer's temerity by presenting such a damaging portrait of political corruption at the celebration of Nigerian independence. Moving away from her former statement on the self-sufficiency of the play, Margaret Laurence admits like everyone else that the play is difficult in parts because of obscure references and possible multiple interpretations. According to her, "the action is rapid--sometimes too rapid; the themes are never dealt with simply but always more than one at a time; the idiom is frequently unfamiliar; the poetic imagery is sometimes bewildering."⁹⁶ As an example, Laurence seems to struggle with the meaning of the play's ending and the character Demoke's true significance. She insists,

⁹⁵ Laurence, p. 28.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

nonetheless, that what weaknesses there are in the play represent only minor flaws in a great work, and that the chief meaning comes across very well even at first reading. In echo of her favorable remarks on Achebe's characters, Laurence asserts that all the characters in this play come alive, the humans as well as the gods. Equally commendable in her opinion is Soyinka's use of mask and dance to reinforce "the splendid vividness" of the play and to heighten the necessary sense of mystery.

As he does with Achebe, Adrian Roscoe examines Wole Soyinka's role as a satirist in his critical survey, Mother Is Gold (1971).⁹⁷ His emphasis is on the boldness and sophistication with which Soyinka deals heavy blows to the people and government of Nigeria. He notes that A Dance of the Forests and The Road, establish Soyinka as an angry young man: "He moves about the West African scene like some marvelously gifted malcontent, fiercely thrusting at the corruption, intrigue and vaulting ambition which he witnesses on every side. And his blows strike home, for on two occasions he has been sent to prison."⁹⁸

Discussing A Dance of the Forests as satire, Roscoe is surprised by its complexity, its bold imagination and its scope of vision. He marvels like Margaret Laurence and other critics at Soyinka's audacity in making the nation the victim of his satire, on the "euphoric occasion" of its independence, talking of death, corruption, and betrayal when the mood called for rebirth and reconciliation. In his view, Soyinka flouts

⁹⁷ Adrian Roscoe, Mother Is Gold (Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 219-233.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 219.

all the cherished teachings of 'negritude' and de-romanticizes his people and their history 'with a boldness scarcely paralleled since the days of Synge and O'Casey.' Roscoe points out universal elements in the satire which are not only appropriately about Africa but indeed about mankind at large. He holds up Soyinka as a man of vision, who forcefully expresses the need for national self-criticism six years before Achebe's A Man of the People. In his usual comparative reference to Western satirists, Roscoe describes Soyinka's satiric vision as a curious mixture of 'partly Swift's savage indignation, partly the Conradian 'horror' and partly the Wordsworthian lament over what man has made of man.'⁹⁹

He finds in The Road an equally difficult and powerful satire, a play that is subject to many levels of interpretations: representative of any Nigerian road, the proverbial road of life along which individuals, groups, and nations must travel; a satire on the road of progress; and above all the hazy road between life and death which has always fascinated Soyinka. According to Roscoe's interpretation, Soyinka is here satirizing the hideous mingling of cultures in Africa as Achebe has done, but with "a complexity, a subtlety, and a revulsion" unparalleled by any other African writer. He notes that such cultural confusion is best illustrated in the person of the professor:

With his Victorian outfit of top hat and tails,
all threadbare, with his academic title, earned
through prowess in forgery, with his past con-
nection with the Christian church, and his clear
leanings towards Ifa, he is a sort of amphibious
creature, neither right African nor right European;

⁹⁹Roscoe, p. 227.

neither wholly spiritually oriented nor wholly materialistic.¹⁰⁰

Roscoe shows that everything in the play, names, actions and languages of the characters, is a curious "potpourri," an ugly fusion of elements from both cultures.

Roscoe believes The Road to be a wormier and more scathing criticism on Nigerian society than A Dance of the Forests. He points to Soyinka's deliberate choice of the "Ageo" motif (dissolution into rot and death) and the fact that every character representing a facet of society is morally or physically diseased in some way, as his way of emphasizing the rotten conditions in Nigerian society. Roscoe characterizes The Road as Soyinka's writing on the nation's wall, a point which Martin Tucker seems to overlook in 1966, when he praised Soyinka for his minimal interest in social criticism.

In other plays of Soyinka, Roscoe also points out strong satirical elements, but which are mostly against those who abuse their power through dishonesty and selfishness, rather than against a whole nation. Accordingly, he attacks greed in the Kadiye of The Swamp Dwellers who symbolically entwines the land and chokes it in the name of his serpent god, and in the eloquent fraud of prophets like Jeroboam in The Trials of Brother Jero. He notes that although The Lion and the Jewel is relatively mild as satire, it is, nonetheless, satire against preposterous arrogance of superficial westernization in Lakunle the schoolteacher. Kongi's Harvest represents, in Roscoe's opinion, 'a fierce onslaught in

¹⁰⁰Roscoe, p. 229.

West Africa's modern breed of politicians," and warns particularly against dictatorship in Africa and the world at large.

The tone of his analysis leaves little doubt that Roscoe considers Soyinka not only West Africa's "finest dramatist," a writer of creative energy and refined sensibility, but also and above all, a satirist of considerable stature, bold and fearless, and of great imaginative vision. Whereas he considers Achebe a woeful failure as a satirist, he believes that Soyinka is by temperament and artistic learnings a successful one, not only in exposing the ills of his people, but also in touching simultaneously upon similar conditions of men the world over.

English reception of Soyinka in critical surveys has been mixed but has tended to be mostly favorable. Ann Tibble and Margaret Laurence approached him generally as a dramatist and Adrian Roscoe more specifically as a satirist. Naturally, the first two critics were much more general in their discussions and remarks. Tibble raced through the plays, barely tolerated the shorter tragedies, seemed very pleased with The Lion and the Jewel and frankly confused by A Dance of the Forests. Laurence was thorough in her leisurely summaries and spotty explanations and analysis, and was very generous and general with her qualifications and assessment. Interest centered, as in English articles, on Soyinka's successful integration of local dramatic techniques and elements, the universality of his themes and characters, and the wide range of his writings, both women agreed that The Lion and the Jewel was his most delightful and successful play, while the complex and sometimes confusing A Dance of the Forests was his greatest achievement.

Roscoe's study was a more specific search for evidence of pointed social criticism in Soyinka's plays. He analyzed his three substantial works, A Dance in the Forests, The Road, and Kongi's Harvest, in terms of withering social criticisms, so contrary to the views of such American critics as Martin Tucker and Michael Crowder on Soyinka's role as a writer. Roscoe found him to be a true satirist of much more than local reputation. Objections about complexity apart, the critics generally upheld Soyinka as the best dramatist in Africa, and by English standards, very successful.

Since Martin Tucker's article on Soyinka, which is reprinted in his book Africa in Modern Literature, has already been discussed, only the two remaining American volumes are examined in this section. Soyinka, like Tutuola was discussed under the chapter title "Beliefs in Man's Faith" in Wilfred Cartey's Whispers from a Continent.¹⁰¹ His rationale is that the realm of nature and that of man are hardly distinguishable in both writers and that their works are strangely influenced by Yoruba traditional beliefs and customs. Cartey approaches Soyinka's tragedies thematically and philosophically exploring different aspects of the interaction between the various realms of man, nature, spirits of living beings, and inanimate objects. He traces the major recurrent themes, especially that of sacrifice, as a link between the realms and also as the only escape out of the pessimistic and somber situations of life.

He explains A Dance of the Forests in terms of cyclical history demonstrated in the use of cyclical imagery, recurrent poetic motifs "in

¹⁰¹ Wilfred Cartey, Whispers from a Continent (New York: Vantage Books, 1969), pp. 316-341.

which the past and the present, the dead and the living cohere, their axes and revolutions are coincidental." On another level he sees the play as a ritualistic atonement for the dead characters and a trial for the living. He also examines the interplay of choice, accident, and history and complains that Soyinka does not always indicate the demarcations between them. Cartey gives many examples of Soyinka's rather pessimistic view of history, of individual freedom, and efficacy of thought. He, nevertheless, notes and stresses the faint but ever present signs of rebirth at the end of even the gloomiest of his plays. In A Dance of the Forests, for example, he points out that the carver's one act of self sacrifice at the end mysteriously causes all other characters to be strengthened by cosmic forces. Cartey's concluding remarks very aptly sum up his interpretation of the play:

And so The Dance of the Forests plays itself out, structurally united through ritualistic sequences, through a mask play linking the dead to the living who ordered the dance and who, with spirits of creatures, pronounce the future. Nothing is left as background; all phenomena, a multilayered piling up, are externalized, linked together through concomitant images of space and time to produce a stratified, if at times unclear, vision of history and man's destiny. Time and space are historically defined, thoughts and feelings are given an historical dimension. Characters, although they are immersed in actions of the present, nonetheless, seem to be aware of their past, for Soyinka builds through the consonance of images a multi-tiered and many-sided dance.¹⁰²

His method of discussing The Road is a thorough analysis of the phenomenal merge between the realm of nature and man, which he has

¹⁰² Cartey, pp. 327-328.

already observed in Tutuola's books. Cartey demonstrates analytically that the central symbol of the play, or the imagery of The Road, becomes the nature of death, and man's journey through life. He interprets The Road as essentially Soyinka's fusion of thought and imagery to form a pessimistic philosophical statement about life, and the manner of dying either an ennobling or a degrading death. As opposed to the overlapping cycles of A Dance of the Forests, he characterizes the different realms in The Road as "marching along in parallel lines, [and] meeting at certain climactic and decisive point." Although pessimism dominates the play, Cartey, nevertheless, interprets the last act of saving a baby as a sign of hope and return to normalcy. In Soyinka's words, "The link is complete and the natural flow of time can now continue."¹⁰³

Discussing The Swamp Dwellers, Cartey explains the dominance and oppressive potency of "The Swamp" by its multi-dimensional nature and variety of images: "It is despair and disaster, an evil malignant force, an all-powerful controlling influence, the hope of fertile land . . . it is a living thing . . . demanding an unquestioning allegiance."¹⁰⁴ Once again, despite all the cycle of disaster and misery" and the pervading gloom, Cartey reads optimism in the blind beggar's assurance: "I shall be here to give account."

Wilfred Cartey explores The Strong Breed in terms of the theme of sacrifice, which plays such an important part in The Road and The Swamp Dwellers. In discussing the central image of the carrier, or the

¹⁰³Cartey, p. 332.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., p. 334.

atonement for collective guilt, he notes that "Time and Space are linked by the blood of the strong breed, which too demands its own sacrifice, which has its own compulsion." Cartey secondly analyzes the theme of blood and its pull, which he uses to explain the various actions of the protagonist, the atmosphere of evil and inevitability pervading the play, the constant flashbacks and the final evil denouement. Cartey emphasizes once again the ray of hope which the hero's death sheds on the night of cruelty and superstition by suggesting that Eman's death and Sunma's consequent madness may bring an end to the cruel custom of the carrier.

Cartey is not interested in assessing Soyinka's artistry of the success of his plays. He accepts them as they are and attempts to bring more meaning to them through analysis, and by carefully tracing patterns and recurrent motifs in the plays, he tries to establish a pattern for Soyinka's view of history. Cartey demonstrates that Soyinka not only castigates those executors of customs who pervert the customs' meaning and violate their taboos, but also those customs which are in themselves cruel and stultifying. Above all, he emphasizes that Soyinka's constant vision always opens to a somehow optimistic future, despite the deep pessimism in which much of his writing is rooted.

In chapter nine of The Emergence of African Fiction entitled, "The Novel of the Future," Charles Larson discusses Wole Soyinka's The Interpreters and two novels of Ayi Kwei Armah as examples of second generation African writing.¹⁰⁵ He notes that these writers differ from

¹⁰⁵ Charles R. Larson, "The Novel of the Future: Wole Soyinka and Ayi Kwei Armah," The Emergence of African Fiction. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), pp. 242-277.

the first generation writers by their much greater interest in the immediate and present rather than the past and also by their concern for the place of the artist in the new African nations. He observes that "Bitterness, disgust, and a lack of hesitancy to criticize the status quo strongly identify the works of the most recent African novelists; the second generation."¹⁰⁶ He points out that the isolated individual in Soyinka is often the would-be artist who is frustrated and ignored by a society that has made no real commitment to art.

Larson, therefore, evaluates The Interpreters on the basis of how well it fulfills its role as a novel of the future, not only in content and form, but also as a demonstration of the true position of "artists" in Africa. He considers it one of the most impressive but difficult novels from Africa in the past few years. Like Gerald Moore, among others, he finds the beginning of the novel quite confusing:

The use of multiple flashbacks, and the juxtaposition and overlapping of several different time levels is apparent in almost every chapter of Soyinka's novel, though at the beginning this is much more confusing because the reader does not have enough information to piece together many of the incidents.¹⁰⁷

Larson attributes some of the alleged obscurity of the novel to critics' being confronted with something original and without precedent in African writing: absence of conventional plot, figural rather than temporal movement of the narrative, absence of conflict, and images in the place of the orderly progression of events. Larson says, for

¹⁰⁶Larson, p. 242.

¹⁰⁷ibid., p. 458.

example, that "the pattern within the novel itself is based on a montage-like repetition of images, piled up on top of one another, overlapping upon one another."¹⁰⁸ He regards both the unconventional pattern and the dialogue of the novel as reflecting Soyinka's experience as poet and playwright: "Many of the scenes read as if they were originally conceived as short plays and later incorporated into the novel."

A characteristic of a novel of the future, Larson stresses, is satiric and critical social commentary against the ills of society, although he concedes that Soyinka is much less bitter than Ghanaian Ayi Kwei Armah. He argues that Soyinka appears much less personally involved because the themes are mostly "religion, ritual, the quest for finer sensitivity which is missing from contemporary African society, and above all the artistic side of it."¹⁰⁹

Finally, Larson deduces from The Interpreters what he believes to be Soyinka's view of the artist's place in society. He paints a gloomy picture of a totally frustrated, neglected, and misunderstood artist facing insurmountable odds, without hope of any rewards from Africa in the nature of grants, awards, and university chairs, and without even serious publishing houses or quarterlies. In view of such a catalogue of problems facing an African artist, Larson echoes John Povey and Martin Tucker in his amazement that Soyinka and a few other Africans have "attained a level of distinction comparable to that of the most talented writers now living in the West." Larson has his reservations about parts

¹⁰⁸ Larson, p. 246.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*, p. 257.

of The Interpreters, but on the whole he finds it a sharp departure from earlier African writings in its bold, unconventional experimentation with plot and language, its social criticism, and its special interest in the place of an African artist. He evaluates the novel on these bases, and concludes that Soyinka deserves to be ranked among the best writers anywhere. This is the type of conclusion which critics like Conor O'Brien and Bruce King regard as overflattering and, therefore, a disservice to Soyinka.

Quite unlike the very general approach that has been the hallmark of most articles already discussed, those of Wilfred Cartey and Charles Larson are delimited, and they were able to bring some depth to their discussions. Cartey's search for the intricate and unifying interaction between the different realms of animates and inanimates through a perceptive analysis of all the works helped him discover Soyinka's basic philosophies, his constant vision, and the reasons for his seemingly ambivalent positions towards the traditional and the modern.

Larson, on the other hand, had a theory to prove in The Interpreters and tailored his arguments and statements to fit the theory, even at the risk of characterizing all the main characters in the novel as artists, or exaggerating the problems artists face in African societies. Whereas Cartey, like English critics, emphasized the writer's closeness to oral and traditional sources, Larson stressed his break with conventions and his affinities with contemporary experimental writers, particularly of African origin.

Despite their reservations, and they had a few, their studies were

genial and receptive of Soyinka's achievement. Both American critics certainly thought Soyinka to be both a serious and promising playwright.

A Book-Length Study of Soyinka

Gerald Moore's Wole Soyinka (1971) remains the only book-length study on the playwright.¹¹⁰ It is appropriate that it comes from an English critic because Soyinka has written and produced more plays in England than anywhere else and had been nurtured as much by the English dramatic and theatrical forms and techniques as by the African ones. Moore's stated aim is to discuss the works "critically, chronologically and consistently," in order to enable the reader to appreciate them as a developing whole, and to learn something about their criticism. He devotes a chapter each to the following titles: "Early Works in the Theatre;" A Dance of the Forests; "The Tragedies;" The Interpreters; and "Later Poetry and Idanre." His method is to trace Soyinka's development chronologically, beginning with a fairly detailed biography, surveying his early works in the theatre, discussing individual works in their order of publication, and ending with the two poems from prison, which mark a turning point in Soyinka's literary career.

Moore is very conscious of Soyinka's unique position as dramatist, because of the advantages drama has over all other literary means of communication in Africa. He stresses the fact that Soyinka's borrowing

¹¹⁰ Gerald Moore, Wole Soyinka (New York: African Publishing Corporation, 1971).

of elements already familiar in traditional drama makes his works even more familiar to Nigerian audiences, whose attention and participation are unmatched in Western Theatre. He also portrays him as a playwright whose African heritage has enabled him to produce works of not only African but universal significance. He studies him in the African literary context, pointing out parallels and links between Soyinka's works and the social and political events in Nigeria. Basically impressionistic in his evaluations, Moore aims in essence to introduce Soyinka, to the general reader. He summarizes each play and explicates themes, customs, and rituals which he considers unfamiliar to such an audience.

The early works Moore discusses include a tragedy, The Swamp Dwellers and the two comedies, The Trials of Brother Jero and The Lion and the Jewel. It is the simple "Hauptmann-like realism" of The Swamp Dwellers which arrests Moore's attention, as he notes its surface of prose realism, the virtual absence of those external devices like dance, drums and mime, so effectively used in other plays, and its seemingly simple but heavily symbolic theme of rural decay. He points out weaknesses of character and language, especially Soyinka's failure to realize the figure of the Kadiye, and thus accounts for the weakness of his lines. In his opinion, Soyinka is influenced by Synge, though to what extent and with what success he does not make clear.

Referring to The Trials of Brother Jero as a genial satire on religious rogueries, Moore compares Jero to such classical rogues as the Jew of Malta or Scapin, in both his abundant energy and obvious enjoyment of his ingenuity. Soyinka's first attempt to use pidgin in this work is not completely successful in Moore's judgment, but on the whole

he thinks it an excellent portrayal of a memorable rogue.

The Lion and the Jewel is apparently a delight to Moore, especially in its extensive use of dance and mime, and the provocative moral of its ending, which repudiates a cliché of literature concerning progress and tradition. He commends the more conventional plot of this comedy, which unlike most of his other plays moves along a single plane of reality. He notes Soyinka's attempt to obey the classical unities of time and place, and the theatrical freedom he exercises in the use of mime to recreate earlier events and extend the scope of the play.

Moore expresses doubts about Soyinka's mastery of the special problems posed by verse in this his first attempt to use verse in theatre. With the performances of Shakespeare and Molière in mind, he argues that Soyinka's dependence on "the felicity of his ideas" to maintain the play's poetic content does not always succeed and that he produces, therefore, occasional strained lines that would have been much more effective as prose. He commends the comic plot as "well-balanced and adroitly handled with constant shifts of sympathy from one character to another."¹¹¹ Comparing this play to The Swamp Dwellers, he finds Soyinka's touch in The Lion and the Jewel both lighter and surer, and he points to its popularity with audiences around the world, as far away as New Guinea, as indisputable evidence of its merits and success as a stage comedy.

Gerald Moore underlines the importance of A Dance of the Forests by discussing it in a separate chapter. In his opinion, the play marks

¹¹¹ Moore, p. 27.

a clear beginning of Soyinka's tragic imagination, but represents above all a work of great scale and ambition, profound, symbolic and with various levels of interactions, and marking a substantial growth from his earlier plays. Emphasizing the play's closeness to traditional beliefs and rituals, Moore specifically points out the underlying motifs of forest and dance, which Soyinka respectively employs in the concept of an abode of secret forces that interact with man, and as a visible expression of the interplay between the various realms.

In summarizing and explicating the plot, Moore notes lapses in structure, obscure references, complex stagings, and other general difficulties that render the play rather impractical for theatre, despite its many effectively dramatic passages. He finds Part Two relatively weaker than Part One, as well as lacking in self-sufficiency:

In his laudable desire to develop a 'total theatre' for West Africa, a theatre which will make the fullest use of music, masquerade, dance and mime, Soyinka has fallen into the error of offering us, in these final scenes, a text which is too thin and unexplicit to guide us through a complex maze of stage action performed to music alone. The relative crudity of the play-within-the-play as a device for presenting the interaction of past and present is at least clear and effective, but the devices he adopts for showing the complementary interaction of present and future are likely to fail dramatically through sheer obscurity.¹¹²

Despite his numerous reservations, Moore insists that A Dance of the Forests is remarkable for its character of an "over-stored treasure

¹¹² Moore, p. 40.

house, full of themes, concepts and images" which Soyinka makes effective use of in later works.

Discussing the "Tragedies," Moore observes that Soyinka has lent a proper weight of meaning to the word "tragic" by centering his plots on death and its meaning to life, although he admits that only the death of the professor in The Road fulfills the Aristotelian function of catharsis. The Strong Breed points out one or two passages he considers dramatic failures or superfluous, but praises the richness of Soyinka's metaphors and dramatic symbols which he has borrowed from traditional religion and mythology. Contrary to critics who view Soyinka's rejection of certain traditional characters as tantamount to rejecting traditions, Moore stresses the fact that Soyinka always makes exceptions for aspects of tradition worthy of respect and dignity. On the whole, he thinks the play a serious attempt at tragedy, but by no means the writer's best.

The Road is in his judgment Soyinka's finest play, one in which he more fully develops the system of dramatic ideas already tried in earlier works. He characterizes it as a play of great originality in its handling of time and space within a single scene and with a single group of actors. He calls attention to other new levels of achievement, like better dramatic means of achieving economy and concentration, and above all development in language, in variety, range, and effectiveness. He finds Soyinka profitably influenced by Nigeria's popular theater troops, declaring The Road with its Yoruba choruses and completely integrated action to be a significant beginning of creative cooperation between the popular and more formal theater in Nigeria.

Moore is not as pleased with Kongi's Harvest, the closest direct comment on Africa's political scene and a strong satire on dictatorship. Its very topicality is, in his opinion, a serious flaw and a threat to its theatrical longevity. Once again, however, he finds the play's mixture of "fairly racy colloquial prose" and passages of verse quite remarkable for the arrangements of traditional metaphors in them.

In his discussion of The Interpreters Moore notes that the novel deals with the continuing theme of gods manifesting their will through human acts and personalities and that it further demonstrates Soyinka's strong attraction to Yoruba gods, especially Ogun. He emphasizes Soyinka's originality in creating a symbolic mystical novel of multiple heroes and levels of interpretations, united by the characters' common concern with discovering their true identities in the total scheme of the Pantheon of gods.

Although he calls it "a rich and fascinating work," Moore concedes that it is a very hard novel to comprehend for the casual reader who is confronted, as it were, with several characters whose history only very slowly unfolds:

The mind is congested with partial hints and obscure clues as to what is going forward, but has almost nothing tangible to work upon, either in the form of a discernible plot situated in time or in that of identifiable central characters. It is only the persevering reader who gradually discerns the pattern of self-discovery which discriminates and yet unites the little group of friends as their affairs begin to move towards crisis in the later pages of the novel.¹¹³

¹¹³Moore, p. 79.

He attributes this difficulty to Soyinka's relative inexperience in the art of fiction, suggesting, nonetheless, that part of the confusion derives from Soyinka's deliberate method of presenting a group of men and women who are confused about their identities. Obviously, the novel does not strike Moore as the scathing satire that Arthur Ravenscroft found it to be.

In evaluating the group of poems published under the title Idanre and Other Poems, Moore in effect shows the close relationship between the themes of death, road, loneliness, and birth, as explored here, and similar themes which form the central motifs of his plays. Among others he discusses the poems of 1966 whose impressiveness, he indicates, is occasionally marred by "excessive violence of expression." The violent events in contemporary Nigeria form the backdrop of the poems, in keeping with Soyinka's continued concern for the present. Moore singles out individual poems for commentaries on their moods, imagery, intimacy, energy or pre-occupation with the creative force of art, as in the longest poem, "Idanre."

The collection is a great linguistic success in the critic's estimation, exhibiting a vocal rather than visual poetic style, and giving the works the formal discipline of poetry. He complains that Soyinka's persistent weakness remains his tendency to overload and strain his lines. On the other hand, he marvels at his assurance, his profound seriousness of tone, and above all the continued growth in the mastery of his distinctive language shown in this collection: "a great deepening as well as darkening of his art. The progress from 'Requiem' to 'Post Mortem' or from 'Telephone Conversation' to 'Civilian and Soldier,' is

that from a brilliant colonial student to a mature poet measuring the tragic weight of the present hour."¹¹⁴

Moore's Wole Soyinka manages to tie together the loose ends in Soyinka's literary development, integrating each work with proper background events in Nigeria and elsewhere, while demonstrating the intimate knowledge of one who has seen most of the plays on stage. It shows a definite pattern and logic in Soyinka's development of certain themes, his incorporation of new elements like dance, music and mime, the growth in complexity of plot, boldness in language experimentation and use of new techniques, a deepening in his pessimistic view of history and life, and an overall tendency towards improving his stature as a writer of note. Without doubt, Moore judges Soyinka by what he would like to regard as general and universal standards of excellence. He finds lacunas and excesses, as well as passages and lines of great power and beauty. On the whole he finds in Soyinka an artist of diverse and continuously growing talents.

The critical reception of Soyinka was in some ways remarkably different from those of either Tutuola or Achebe. Because most reviews were based on stage productions of Soyinka's plays, there was obviously more pressure on him for clarity and simplicity, especially in his allusions to gods, customs and rituals and the use of African background. He was also under pressure to find ways to grip and maintain the attention

¹¹⁴Moore, p. 99.

of his audiences or lose their interest. English and American reviewers alike commended his use of dances, drums, mimes and attractive costumes to entertain the audience. Most were impressed by his imaginative ability, the scope of his undertakings, but especially the performance of his troops. On the other hand, reviewers on both sides persistently complained about Soyinka's over-sophistication, the complexity of his plots, his frequent use of high-flown and bombastic expressions, and his general wordiness.

In critical articles on Soyinka, English and American interests differed considerably. The English heavily emphasized Soyinka's closeness and debts to Nigerian dramatic traditions, but also dwelt on the variety of his language and the universal elements in his themes. All seemingly enjoyed his comedies better than his tragedies. Most English critics thought highly of A Dance of the Forests whose richness they discussed at length with much admiration. American critics once again showed relief at the absence of colonial themes in Soyinka's works. They stressed instead his language, his ambivalent posture, and the universality of his themes. There was a marked shying away from A Dance of the Forests reflecting once again American discomfort when confronted with unfamiliar Nigerian background. One noticed fewer complaints about the complexity or confusion of plots, possibly because critics worked mostly with written texts. They generally agreed that Soyinka was a promising playwright of great talent but with much room for improvement.

Soyinka was warmly received in the surveys. Margaret Laurence's long and favorable discussion of his writings was a pace setter and a

great boost for his reputation. Ann Tibble preferred his comedies, largely ignored the tragedies, and expressed impatience and bafflement with A Dance of the Forests. Roscoe narrowed his study to discussing Soyinka as a satirist. The critics by and large agreed that he was Africa's most promising playwright and satirist, one who favorably compares with any writers in English at present. American surveys showed narrower but differentiated interests. Wilfred Cartey was obviously influenced by English critics in his emphasis of Soyinka's closeness to his traditional past, especially in his manner of interweaving the human, spiritual and inanimate realms in his plays. Charles Larson shared instead the typical American belief about Soyinka's non-colonial themes, arguing that The Interpreters was a bold departure from other African writings in its criticism of Nigerians, and its interest in the plight of the artist. Despite their different emphasis, however, both critics thought Soyinka effective and successful in handling the aspects they examined. Gerald Moore's Wole Soyinka was in itself a crowning of Soyinka criticism, a perceptively well-written book that provided both casual and serious readers with an informative history on Soyinka's growth and steady maturation, his achievements, his vast interests and involvements, and the promise of greater things to come. It also pointed out, without qualms, those weaknesses in plot and language which Soyinka needed to work hard to eliminate.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, and Wole Soyinka are not only among the first West Africans to create literary works in English, but are acknowledged among Africa's best writers at home and abroad. The study of their foreign reputation is therefore a crucial gauge of their merit as writers of more than local significance, of their importance, and by extension, the importance of modern African literature in the order of the world literature. As T. S. Eliot so aptly states in "Tradition and the Individual Talent,"

The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the super-vention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are adjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new . . . the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.¹

The appearance of works by Tutuola, Achebe and Soyinka was like "the supervision of novelty" on the existing order of Western literature. As literary spokesmen of their countries, English and American critics showed by their remarks and criticisms the nature of this alteration

¹"Tradition and the Individual Talent," Selected Essays, 1917-1932 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co. 1932), p. 5.

to accommodate the new, the extent of Western willingness to receive this new literature on its own terms without prejudice, or Western determination to patronize and fit it into existing molds.

As might be expected, English and American critics reveal many similarities as well as differences in their tone, attitude and approaches to Tutuola, Achebe and Soyinka. There was evidence to suggest that a few European and American critics are patronizing, but little to support the view that African writers are over praised by virtue of their color and nationality.

English reviewers and critics were by and large more understanding and receptive of background elements in the works than were Americans. The long and close relationship between Nigeria and England, as well as the wide-ranging contact of the English with all corners of the world were important factors which helped foster a more cosmopolitan attitude of tolerance and sympathy for the "super-vention of novelty." A large percentage of these critics, for example, have lived and taught in Nigeria or other parts of Africa. Most American reviewers and some of their critics, on the other hand, showed a lack of familiarity with the African background of the works and often reacted with frustrated impatience to anthropological information or to allusions to traditional cultures and rituals. While only few American critics were interested in elements of African background, an occasional critic like Austin Shelton made it a point to demonstrate his familiarity with the language and customs of the Ibo.

The reception of Tutuola was an interesting case study in the sudden rise in fame and fall from grace of a writer. The surprise publication of The Palm-Wine Drinkard in 1952, at a time when English critics of literature and language were seemingly bored with themselves, aroused so great an enthusiasm that Tutuola soon became a celebrity. Many, including Dylan Thomas, were fascinated by the strange exotic tales of adventures which Tutuola told in an ungrammatical and naive language. Critics like V. S. Pritchett hailed him as a real discovery, and as a potential founder of a new Afro-English literature. Most English reviewers praised him less extravagantly, commending his graphic descriptions and uninhibited style. Everyone agreed that a writer of great imagination had appeared.

With the publication of The Brave African Huntress in 1958, however, a definite downward trend in Tutuola's British reputation set in and never again changed its direction effectively. The sudden and growing disenchantment was captured in Gerald Moore's often referred to comment on the work: "the magic has leaked away." Most reviewers and critics complained that Tutuola lost much of his spontaneity and naivety because of his misguided and self-conscious attempt to improve his grammar and broaden his readings. The honeymoon was over. Tutuola, who was formerly praised for childlike lack of inhibition was soon denounced as deliberately childish. His two books that followed were quickly dismissed in a sentence or two by a number of reviewers. The merits of The Palm-Wine Drinkard meanwhile seemed to shine brighter and overshadow all his other works.

American reviewers were more consistently lukewarm in their reception of all Tutuola's books. They largely ignored his language, which had so intrigued the English. They concentrated instead on the primitive and primordial element in the works. Anthony West's description of The Palm-Wine Drinkard as "barbaric" reflection of "an analphabetic culture," was fairly representative, although some were pleased by this primitivism. Americans seemed to reflect a feeling that English reviewers were taking Tutuola far too seriously. Some accurately predicted that the enthusiasm would be short lived. Tutuola's other works were no better received than the first.

Tutuola must be one of the most controversial and abused of writers. He was accused by many readers in Nigeria of exploiting European thirst for the exotic, of giving a false image of Nigeria, and of exposing the nation to European ridicule. Such an example of image-consciousness was nothing new in literary history, but still indicative of the way literary works are evaluated on non-literary grounds. On the other hand, the reasons advanced especially by some English reviewers and critics for their treatment of Tutuola's later works, were unconvincing since they seemingly expected him to remain intellectually frozen in order to retain his naive qualities. Ironically, others like V. S. Naipaul denounced him for not improving his communicative techniques over the years.

The level of Achebe's reputation has remained high and stable from the publication of Things Fall Apart in 1958 until the present. He was then, and is still now, acknowledged one of the best novelists from Africa, and possibly the most skillful. English reviewers were moved by topical

events like the military coup and Nigeria-Biafra war to praise the authenticity of his recreation of traditional village life, the conciseness and clarity of his language, and the objectivity of his approach. Yet they showed disenchantment with background elements in his third novel, Arrow of God, largely because they felt they were essentially similar to those in the first.

American reviewers, with very few exceptions, seemed unimpressed by the rich tradition he depicted. Most of their commentaries were limited to praising his objectivity, the classic simplicity of his language and imagery, and his skill in character portrayal. Despite the differences in emphasis and interests, reviewers of both countries agree that Achebe was a serious writer whose self-control and mature vision have made him one of the best novelists writing in English today. The fact that the recently published Girls at War and Other Stories was received with more nearly unanimous favor than his novels strongly indicates that Achebe's reputation, unlike Tutuola's, is still growing stronger.

Soyinka's reputation has been partly built on the texts of his works but mainly on their stage productions in Nigeria, England, and America. The English critics were more familiar with and hence a little more accommodating towards, the cultural and traditional elements in his plays, but English and American opinions came closest to being unanimous in their view of Soyinka. Praise centered around his skillful integration of European forms and techniques with elements borrowed from traditional Yoruba theatre like dancing, drumming, miming and mumming, his eclecticism and versatility, his sophistication, the universal implication of

his themes, and the enormous potential for literary experimentations evident in his plays. Most reviewers complained about the complexity of interpretative levels in his works, the confusing symbols and flash-back techniques, obscurity of allusions to Yoruba cultural beliefs and practices, and the over-elaborate eloquence of his poetry and prose. Some serious critics like Martin Esslin acclaimed him a fully mature dramatist, comparable to the best in Western literature. A clear majority of critics, on the other hand, evaluated him as a talented artist of great potential, but one who must strive harder at self-criticism, clarity, and more down-to-earth language.

Most English and American critics who wrote scholarly articles were favorable to the three writers. It was very interesting to note a definite shift from the lukewarmness towards these writers in American reviews to much greater interest and warmth which critics revealed in their academic essays. English critics may have discovered these three writers first, but the quantity and variety of American articles are strong evidence of a growth in greater awareness of African literature that probably came with Black demands in the sixties. The quality of the articles has been mixed, including perceptive articles like Bernth Lindfor's "Tutuola: Debts and Assets," Gerald Moore's "Amos Tutuola: A Nigerian Visionary," research articles like Austin Shelton's "Palm-Wine of Language: Proverbs in Chinua Achebe," and Robert P. Armstrong's scholarly but very complex essay, "The Narrative and Intensive Continuity: The Palm-Wine Drinkard," as well as pedestrian articles of mostly summaries and few impressionistic remarks, like many of the essays on Soyinka and a few on the others as well. It was

evident that the most meaningful criticisms resulted from research efforts and familiarity with the cultural milieu of works. Those who were content to go over cultivated grounds ended up substituting elaborate summaries for analytical criticism.

Each of the book-length or independent studies was a broad introduction addressed to the general readership. Gerald Moore's Wole Soyinka was a perceptive combination of introduction and criticism judiciously organized to integrate the man and his works. Harold Collin's Amos Tutuola was in a way rendered tedious and less effective by his over-zealous and apologetic defense of Tutuola from criticism. His book is nonetheless an excellent collection of information on Tutuola and his works. Studies of Achebe by A. D. Killam and David Carroll suffered to some extent from their strain to castigate colonial forces, but each represents a commendable effort to introduce Achebe and his works both clearly and forcefully. Arthur Ravenscroft's non-committed generally relaxed approach proved to be more germane for an introductory study.

One of the most difficult questions implied in this study concerns the critical standards by which African writings have been assessed by English and American critics, and beyond that, the question whether it is possible to have a common standard of criticism among critics of different nationalities. African writers by and large have asked that their works be judged on their own merit as works of art trying to explore human concerns. They resent, and with good reasons, the strong tendency on the part of many critics, particularly Americans, to fit their works into the molds of "Western Literature" and to brand them failures if they fail to fit, as

exemplified in the criticism of Achebe's characterization by Charles Larson or James Olney.

Some English and American critics have argued for the application of Western canons of criticism because these writings are in English. Others have advocated "universal standards," and yet others have believed that African literature must be approached differently, though precisely how none seemed to know or demonstrate. Adding this problem to personal interests, biases and prejudices, the result has been a confused variety of approaches and standards for evaluation throughout the study. T. S. Eliot said of the new poet,

In a peculiar sense he will be aware also that he must inevitably be judged by standards of the past. I say judged, not amputated by them; not judged to be as good as, or worse or better than, the dead; and certainly not judged by the canons of dead critics. It is a judgment, a comparison, in which two things are measured by each other.²

The relevance of such a statement to criticism of African literature is echoed in Gerald Moore's plea that "future generations of English readers will rejoice in the richness and extent of the literature available to them in that language . . . instead of keeping their sights narrowly set on the classical canon of 'English literature.'"³ It is indeed only natural that Achebe should be compared to writers like Yeats, T. S. Eliot, Conrad and Green; Soyinka to Ben Jonson or O'Neill;

²Eliot, p. 5.

³The Chosen Tongue (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1969), Dust Jacket.

and Tutuola's folk-tales to tales the world over. It is, however, a futile exercise to assess a work set in an African milieu and using African characters strictly on the basis of what normally obtains in Western literature. Thus Adrian Roscoe, for example, pronounces Achebe a total failure as a satirist in A Man of the People because he does not imitate adequately Pope or Swift. His argument that African writers are less effective in genres that are foreign to Africa like the novel, and in his opinion, satire as well, is evidently shattered by Achebe's success as a novelist and Soyinka's reputation as a social and political satirist. On the other hand, critics have demonstrated the positive interdependence between the new literature and the old. Gerald Moore has emphasized the vigor and spice which Tutuola's unconventional language and grammar brought to the English language, Charles Larson noted Achebe's added dimensions to the genre of the novel, and many critics commended Soyinka's successful and effective mixture of traditional elements of Yoruba theatre with Western theatrical techniques. The three writers themselves have not only used English to communicate, but do not deny being nourished on Western as well as African cultures.

In other ways also, "the two things are measured by each other." The generally favorable reception of these works in England and America, despite their deep roots in Nigerian culture, renews one's faith in the knowledge that writers immersed in different local cultures can appeal universally. On the other hand, the specific criticisms against Tutuola for repeating similar backgrounds in book after book, against Achebe's

excessive use of proverbs and background decor, and against Soyinka's obscure allusions, complex plots, and grandiloquent language forcefully point out the dilemma of the African writer, who must strive to satisfy both his African and Western readers. He must strike a felicitous balance in order, for example, not to confuse Westerners by insufficient explanations or obscure allusions, or bore his African readership by too many footnotes. Experiments with languages, styles and various combinations of forms and techniques in the works of Tutuola, but especially in those of Achebe and Soyinka show that they are constantly striving to strike such a balance.

Finally, the study of these three writers' reception in England and America has pointed out in a way how much modern African writing has grown, and what needs to be done to further encourage that growth. Judging from the favorable as well as unfavorable criticisms, African literature is fast finding its place and is increasingly being recognized as a separate and viable entity with immense potential for growth and improvement. The impatience of most American and some English reviewers with background elements, the lack of familiarity with the works' context on the part of some critics, and the resultant shallowness and unfavorable criticisms, point to a critic's responsibility towards the work he is evaluating. Familiarity brings understanding and sympathy and gives greater weight to criticism. The African writer, on the other hand, cannot afford to dismiss Western criticism by assuming that it is patronizing, biased, or based on misinformation. Because of the interdependence of

cultures and literatures, both sides must be willing to see each other's point of view: the African to recognize legitimate and helpful criticisms even if based on Western aesthetic precepts; and English and American critics to familiarize themselves as much as possible with African backgrounds and to recognize the right of African literature to be itself and reflect different values. There is also the need for more diversified research by African and Western critics alike, hopefully in cooperation, to bring more meaning and greater appreciation of the works by Tutuola, Achebe and Soyinka, and beyond them, the works of a large number of African writers which deserve recognition and more encouragement. According to an Ibo proverb, "As a man dances, so do the drums beat for him." One hopes that the foreign drummers for African writers would beat their drums not only to reflect individual performances of the dancers, but also to encourage even greater competence and self-confidence among them.

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Arrangement of this bibliography is made to facilitate the location of appropriate entries as they occur within the text. The first section, an index of reviews, is arranged chronologically according to the author reviewed, first Tutuola, then Achebe, then Soyinka. All subsequent sections except the last are arranged alphabetically by the author of the book or article: general surveys on African writing; general articles; critical books on all three Nigerian writers; critical articles on Tutuola, and on Achebe, and on Soyinka. The last section, containing a list of primary works by the three authors, is arranged chronologically.

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