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Balch #4223

**6) Okonkwo's friend Obierika is described as "a man who thought about things"**

**(125). What does Obierika think about, and how does that reflection ultimately put him at odds with Okonkwo?**

In a novel where a subtle irony and a lack of foresight rules the lives of so many characters, Obierika is the exception; more so than the protagonist Okonkwo, Obierika acts as the voice of reason and sympathy in *Things Fall Apart* – the pair of sharp eyes looking clearly through a landscape of deceptively simple conflict and illusory interests.

Obierika is described as "a man who thought about things" (125). And those thoughts prove intricate; they reveal a mind willing to explore the "greater complexities" (125) of pertinent issues concerning communal identity and race relations. During a memorable exchange with Okonkwo, Obierika is asked why he did not help in the killing of Ikemefuna. He responds, "What you have done will not please the Earth [...] If the Oracle said that my son should be killed I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it" (67). Later in the book, Obierika questions why his family had to "throw away" (125) his own twin children just because the clan had called such births "an offense on the land" (125).

His reactions to these situations suggest a thoughtful approach to communal custom that divides him from some of the other citizens. True, Obierika never outright rebels against such social norms, never attempts to stop them; unlike Okonkwo, he is not

“a man of action” (69). However, his inaction does not imply conformity either. He does not try to change clan tradition, because he can respect that in other members’ minds opposition to a god’s decree would “loose [...] wrath” (125) on the entire community (“As the elders said, if one finger brought oil it soiled the others” (125)). Obierika is both aware and tolerant of another person’s beliefs – a rare combination in the novel.

And so in place of a rash showing of revolt, Obierika chooses to quietly form his own spiritual convictions and stand by them as firmly – and as sensibly – as he can. Despite hearing Okonkwo and others’ admonishment that killing Ikemefuna was the Oracle’s will, Obierika insists that “it is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families” (67). While he does not necessarily condemn other men’s roles in the incident (“Why should I?”(66) he says), he can see beyond their religious rhetoric and judge for himself that killing a boy for reasons either too easy or unclear to the participants (especially to Okonkwo, the surrogate father of the boy) is never a spiritually sound act; those men will ultimately answer to a power less obvious than just the village “messenger” (67), perhaps in the form of a discontented community splitting at the seams. More telling, though, Obierika flatly refuses to partake in the ritual even amidst group pressure and insults to his manhood – Okonkwo’s worst fear.

Indeed, Obierika’s thoughtfulness places him at odds with Okonkwo by the end of the book. A man of “solid personal achievements” (3) in the arena of physical labor and battle, Okonkwo may conveniently strike the reader as a real hero; in contrast to Obierika, he is not afraid to act on his impulses, regardless of their inherent violence or futility. But herein lies the tragic flaw of such a view: so many of Okonkwo’s actions stem from fear – fear of failure, fear of weakness, fear of irrelevance. So while Okonkwo

might appear to flare out valiantly in his refusal to adapt his values to the shifting world around him, Obierika's shrewd reading of the conflict between the Igbo and the British reveals more truth.

Perhaps the best illustration of Obierika and Okonkwo's divide is their last conversation on English colonialism. Okonkwo holds the obvious opinion: "We must fight these men and drive them from the land" (176). Obierika's response, however, strikes at the core of *Things Fall Apart* because he pinpoints *why* they fall apart. Granted, he does acknowledge that driving out the British from Umuofia would be easy at first; "There are only two of them" (176) he quips. But then he looks towards the future, a task Okonkwo hardly ever does. Obierika asks a series of questions: "But what of our own people who are following their way [...] how do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us?" (177). His queries intimate a depth of understanding, an insight into underlying tensions and pressures, that Okonkwo simply lacks. But more importantly, they expose an essential truth: Okonkwo's dream for war against the white man is obsolete. Obierika sees that this "war" is not a war at all – it is a co-option. The British do not try to eradicate the Igbo militarily but they do so ideologically by preaching on village walkways, by promising happy lives and afterlives, and by fraternizing with the untouchables of the clan. In just a few words, Obierika explains that "[the white man] came quietly and peaceably with his religion [...] now he has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart" (176). To put it bluntly, acceptance used to hold their community together (an acceptance of custom that troubled Obierika himself), and now that the missionaries and the district commissioners have manipulated the subtle but deep-rooted discontent within Umuofia,

the Igbo people must re-evaluate certain ways of living, certain facets that estrange too many members, or die out altogether. In the end, Okonkwo cannot stomach such a transition; Obierika at least sees it coming.