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Pages 54-56 “In this way...solid palm-oil”

Locusts: An Allegory Foreshadowing the Future Colonization of Umuofia

The legacy of imperialist forces is being felt even after the independence of the colonized countries. Therefore, it is natural to want to know the impact the colonizers had on the natives. Chinua Achebe's 1959 novel, *Things Fall Apart*, offers a riveting view of the Igbo people of Umuofia in Nigeria. Early on in the novel, Achebe writes about the locusts coming to Umuofia, for which the people are pretty excited, but underlying negativity can be spotted in Achebe's diction, syntax and other literary devices. This ambivalence in the author's writing style can be interpreted to argue the following. Achebe uses locusts as an allegory to foreshadow the impact colonizers could have on Umuofia.

The passage starts with an indication that the people of Umuofia are continuing to live their daily lives. Achebe writes the first sentence in a way that imparts a sense of fluidity in the readers. The smooth flow of time is then interrupted by an abrupt sentence: “And then the locusts came” (Achebe 54). This syntax shows that Achebe meant to describe the locusts as a disruption to daily life, which is supported by his later description of the locusts' cycle. For example, the locusts, “came once in a generation” to come annually for seven years, and then disappear “for another lifetime” (54). Therefore, the sight of locusts is naturally a strange phenomenon that attracts men, women, and children to it. To add to the people's preconceived notions that locusts are strange, Achebe writes that the locusts come from “a distant land” and a “race of stunted

men” protect them (54). However, the phenomenon is not completely unfamiliar because Achebe writes that the elders saw the locusts before, and therefore, know how to address the problem. Thus, the coming of the locusts is an exotic disruption to the people of Umuofia, who do not know how to address it without direction from their elders.

The continuing use of sudden breaks in the passage by Achebe serve to highlight the interruptions faced by the people of Umuofia. For example, after describing the locust cycle, Achebe suddenly jumps to the preparations Okonkwo and the two boys are making to strengthen their compound. One interpretation of this could be that this is not a sudden break at all but rather transitions from the topic of oncoming locusts to what is being done to prepare for them. However, one must keep in mind that “palm branches and palm leaves was set on the walls to protect them from the next rainy season,” i.e. Achebe explicitly states the purpose of strengthening the compound (55). Nevertheless, it can be argued that in allegorical terms this meant that the villagers wrongly prepared to face the colonizers, i.e. preparing for the rainy season instead of for the locusts. After preparations are completed, another sudden break comes when “...quite suddenly a shadow fell on the world” interrupting the flow Achebe started with the activities of people and animals, such as, “...a busy hen moved...in her ceaseless search for food” (55). This can be interpreted as the colonizers descending upon the people of Umuofia as if they were in a blitzkrieg; the shadow of the locusts symbolizing the future dark days for the subjugated peoples. Amidst this obviously grim outlook, Achebe includes another sudden break to note the somewhat unexpected reaction of the villagers. Instead of the alarm and panic such a strange sight is bound to incite, “...a shout of joy broke out in all directions, and Umuofia...broke into life and activity” (55). To further cast doubt on his true stance regarding the arrival of the locusts, Achebe adds another sudden break after this joyous response by the people of Umuofia

to say, “And then” a much larger swarm “drift[ed] towards Umuofia” (56). This serves to keep a mostly neutral tone regarding the villagers’ reactions to the locusts. Overall, Achebe uses sudden breaks to create a mostly balanced perspective of the people of Umuofia’s reactions to the locust invasion, leading to more confusion over Achebe’s stance on whether the colonizers’ impact would be positive or negative.

Achebe imparts this sense of ambiguity on his readers especially through the use of words that have a particular connotation, hinting at readers to make their own conclusions about the positivity of the locusts’ arrival. For example, at the beginning of the passage Achebe writes that the locusts are guarded by “...a race of stunted men” which inherently leads readers to think negatively of the whole affair (54). Additionally, Achebe mentions that the locusts are pests, eating up “all the wild grass in the fields” which adds to the negative impression readers receive thus far of the locusts (54). This no doubt seamlessly transitions to Okonkwo upgrading his compound for the rainy season but one can argue that the compound is also being readied against the incoming locusts. When the locusts do arrive, Umuofia wakes up from its slumber. Achebe likely includes this detail to show that the villagers were rather lax in their preparation for the locusts and only after they descend do the villagers become active again. However, Achebe forces readers to embrace ambiguity again as he writes that the people of Umuofia were joyous, leaving readers to wonder if the coming of the locusts is positive or not (55). Readers are further confused when Achebe switches back to the negative portrayal of the locusts. For example, Achebe writes that the first swarm of locusts were “harbingers sent to survey the land” perhaps symbolizing explorers who would later conduct reconnaissance of the village before sending that intel to the main force of the colonizers (55). This negative view is further reinforced by Achebe writing that the locusts settled everywhere they could, and “mighty tree branches broke away

under them” until they enveloped the earth (56). This clearly shows the tremendous and terrifying power the invaders possess to utilize as they please. Thus, Achebe leaves the readers to make their own conclusions about the locust invaders by using a mix of positive and negative connotation-laden words, though he does seem to mention the negative side a bit more.

Overall, Achebe’s use of syntax, diction, and connotations shows the use of locusts as an allegory to show how the people of Umuofia might react to the situation. As a result, readers can see that the arrival of a powerful, foreign force disrupts daily life but instinctual curiosity can cause a positive impact on the future. Additionally, preconceived notions about a topic guide people’s reactions and decisions regarding it. In retrospect, Achebe guides readers to draw their own conclusions from the allegorical use of locusts, ultimately leaving value judgments for the readers to make.