

Principles of Literary Study

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Office hours: Thursdays 11:45–12:45 in MU 040A or by appt.

April 30, 2026. Okri's *Prayer*.

upcoming

- ▶ course evaluation: <https://sirs.rutgers.edu/blue>
 - ▶ eat sugary snacks as you fill it out
- ▶ paper due next Monday at 10 p.m.
- ▶ exam Monday 5/11 9–11 a.m.

review

- ▶ focalization effects: Achebe's closing irony
 - ▶ the novel writes back to the (imaginary) *Pacification of the Tribes*
 - ▶ Okonkwo's futile act of violence against the *kotma* rhymes with Ikemefuna's murder
 - ▶ reclaiming history...by making up a story
 - ▶ vindicating the people of Umuofia...by exposing Okonkwo's failure
- ▶ Quayson's critical method: quoting and analyzing a lot is good
- ▶ Quayson on "realism":
 - ▶ "Reading 'culture' out of a novel is valuable but inadequate." (133)
 - ▶ "realistic description" is contradicted by "symbolic conceptualization" (133)
 - ▶ "Mother is Supreme," but mothers are expelled from the narrative

world literature (I)

He had just sent Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, who was now called Isaac, to the new training college for teachers in Umuuru. (182)

It did not occur to him [Achebe] that he was the first great African writer in the English language....Shortly afterwards he came to London on a course at the BBC. He showed it [*Things Fall Apart*] to his course officer who sent it round to Heinemann's. Heinemann's normal fiction reader read it and did a long report, but the firm was still hesitating whether to accept it. Would anyone possibly buy a novel by an African? There were no precedents.

Alan Hill, interviewed by Kristen Holst Petersen in 1990, rpt. in *Things Fall Apart*, ed. F. Abiola Irele (New York: Norton, 2009), 148–49. However, Achebe was already seeking a publisher for his novel before he came to London.

world literature (2)

Maybe someday I will, myself, translate *Things Fall Apart* into the Igbo language. Just to show what I mean, though, for me, being bilingual, the novel form seems to go with the English language. Poetry and drama seem to go with the Igbo language.

“Chinua Achebe, *The Art of Fiction* No. 139,” interviewed by Jerome Brooks, *Paris Review* 133 (Winter 1994). He never did translate it, though he did write other works in Igbo.

Those of us who have inherited the English language may not be in a position to appreciate the value of the inheritance. Or we may go on resenting it because it came as part of a package deal which included many other items of doubtful value and the positive atrocity of racial arrogance and prejudice which may yet set the world on fire. But let us not in rejecting the evil throw out the good with it....There is certainly a great advantage to writing in a world language.

The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience.

Chinua Achebe, "The African Writer and the English Language," in *Morning Yet On Creation Day* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1976), 78–79, 82.

world literature (3)

How did we [African writers] arrive at this this acceptance of “the fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English in our literature” [as Achebe wrote in 1974] in our culture and in our politics? What was the route from the Berlin of 1884 via the Makerere of 1962 to what is still the prevailing and dominant logic a hundred years later? How did we, as African writers, come to be so feeble towards the claims of our languages on us and so aggressive in our claims on other languages, particularly the languages of our colonization?

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Nairobi: James Currey, 1986), 9. The quote from Achebe is from the 1974 introduction to *Morning Yet*.

world literature (4)

The fundamental freedom is the freedom to be exactly what we're capable of being, and as a writer that's a very huge problem because every writer comes into the world with a geographical label on them....My ambition is to be a true, living, clear-seeing writer, and it's the most difficult freedom, as first you've got all your own internalised negativities, your mind, to get over. On top of that you've got the rest of the world saying you should write in the way your tradition has laid down. The challenge is constantly trying to escape straitjackets and see clearly without any labels.

Ben Okri interviewed by Anita Sethi, "Ben Okri: Novelist as Dream Weaver," *The National* (Abu Dhabi), August 31, 2011, www.thenationalnews.com.

world literature (5)

Faced with the state of the world and the depth of denial, faced with the data that keeps falling on us, faced with the sense that we are on a ship heading towards an abyss while the party on board gets louder and louder, I have found it necessary to develop an attitude and a mode of writing that I refer to as existential creativity. This is the creativity at the end of time....

If you knew you were at the last days of the human story, what would you write? How would you write? What would your aesthetics be? Would you use more words than necessary? What form would poetry truly take? And what would happen to humour? Would we be able to laugh, with the sense of the last days on us?

Ben Okri, "Artists must confront the climate crisis," *Guardian* (London), November 12, 2021, [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com).

realism, again?

- ▶ What does “Boko Haram (I)” *not* tell you that you would want to know?

realism, again?

- ▶ What does “Boko Haram (I)” *not* tell you that you would want to know?

He was only to recite under his breath the words he had been given.
(12)

Ben Okri

1959	b. Minna, Niger State (central Nigeria)
1961–66	early childhood in London
1966	family moves to Lagos, Nigeria
1967–70	Biafran War
1978	moves to Essex, England for university; homeless for a while
1980	<i>Flowers and Shadows</i> (London: Longman)
1991	<i>The Famished Road</i> (London: Cape); wins Booker Prize
1993	“Prayer from the Living,” New York Times , January 29
2002	Boko Haram Islamist movement founded in northeast Nigeria
2009	Boko Haram launches insurgency
2019	<i>Prayer for the Living</i> (London: Head of Zeus; Brooklyn: Akashic)
1981–2025	ten other novels; thirteen other poetry/story collections
2023	knighted for services to literature

Source: mainly Wikipedia s.v. [“Ben Okri”](#) and news articles and interviews cited there.

too real: “The Overtaker”

- ▶ Which parts of this story are real? How can you tell?

“Prayer”

- ▶ Where are we? and why are we where we are?

“Prayer”

- ▶ Where are we? and why are we where we are?

This is the last town in the world. (15)

who...reads?

I sang even when a white man with a television camera came into the school building. I sang while, weeping, he filmed the roomful of the dead for the world to see. I hoped he recorded my singing too. (19)

- What relation does “Prayer” establish to its audiences?

next

- ▶ papers (my work and yours)
- ▶ Okorafor, “Mother of Invention” (Canvas: print it out)
- ▶ Frow is illuminating but optional
- ▶ exam review