

Entering a Novel Through the Eyes of a Doll: Creative Responses to an African Text by Nancy King Ph.D. nanking1224@earthlink.net



Students and their teacher sit in a three-quarter circle facing a desk covered with white cloth. Copies of Chinua Achebe's novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, are on their laps. Each student holds a homemade doll. We are about to begin our first session, examining a novel set in an imaginary African country.



The course activities I describe in this paper foster interactive student participation in a collaborative learning environment. Class assignments such as imagemaking, storymaking, drama, and creative expression are designed to augment traditional classroom writing and discussion. They help students become more aware of personal prejudices, issues, and prior experiences that affect how they read a text, as well as how they relate to characters and to classmates' ideas. Although the activities were designed for groups of about twenty, they can be used with larger groups where the sharing takes place in small groups as well as with the larger group.



The approaches I discuss can be used with any text to stimulate interest and foster active participation. To prevent students from making premature judgments on characters, I



borrow the idea of "productive choice" from theatre practitioners. Rather than right or wrong, a productive choice is one that comes from the text, is supported by the text, and opens up, rather than closes off possibilities. The use of this term encourages students to take risks rather than suss out the "one right answer" so many students have learned to look for. Speakers use "I" to keep the discussion fluid and reflective and to create space for others to express their ideas without denying, defending, or attacking previously articulated ideas.



Exploring the text: Anthills of the Savannah

Achebe's novel explores the lives of five characters at a time of political upheaval in Kangan, a fictional African country much like Nigeria. **Chris**, Minister of Information for the government and his lover, **BB**, later known as **Beatrice**, have been educated in England and work for the government. **Ikem**, born in a rural village and educated in England, is editor of the daily newspaper. **Elewa**, a market woman who speaks only Pidgin English is Ikem's lover. **His Excellency**, also known as **Sam**, is Head of State and wants to be President for Life. Sam, Chris, and Ikem have known each other since they were schoolboys.

As the novel begins, the political and social unrest is reaching crisis proportions. A delegation from a rural area arrives to demonstrate against the President's policies. The President demands that his appointees make the delegates go away without his dealing with them and without any further publicity. Although Chris, Minister of Information, initially holds himself aloof from the political fray, his friendship with Ikem, and his developing social and personal consciousness bring him into conflict with the President. Forced to choose between his need to remain uninvolved and his friendship and respect for Ikem, Chris decides to leave the government rather than fire Ikem.

In the course of the novel, through the use of old stories, the collision between truth and corruption, and the power of interpersonal connection, each of the five characters confronts important issues. His Excellency/Sam reveals his hunger for power and the lengths he will go to, not only to keep it, but also to increase it. Chris learns to respect less educated people and to express his feelings. BB sees beyond class and culture to make a genuine friendship with Elewa. Ikem writes editorials and gives speeches outlining government corruption, knowing this could cost him his life. Elewa grows in power, wisdom, and strength, refusing to accept that status based on income and education determines a person's worth.

At the end of the novel, Chris and Ikem have been murdered. BB, now calling herself Beatrice, has developed a sense of personal power. When Elewa gives birth to Ikem's daughter, Beatrice presides over Elewa's baby's naming ceremony, a ritual usually led by a male. Beatrice and Elewa name the child Amaechina: *May-the-path-never-close*. Ama for short.

Creative Activities and *Anthills of the Savannah*:

When students have little experience reading complex novels it is often difficult for them to formulate and express ideas and feelings about their reading. Iagemaking, storymaking (making a story from a story), drama, and creative writing provide stimulating strategies to approach to a novel, enabling students to use their imagination, intellect, and creativity.

Iagemaking is the process of creating a spontaneous response to an abstract task by fingerpainting or sculpting what comes to mind in less than a minute. The task is always specific but never prescriptive. Images are made quickly to avoid censorship and worry about “making art.” For example, students might be asked to paint a telling image (vivid point) in the novel or to sculpt an image of the protagonist at a crucial moment in relationship to a person, place, or thing. Students then date, note the task and text, and write words, phrases or ideas that immediately come to mind. This anchors the knowing evoked by the image and make it possible for students to revisit their images. Because iagemaking helps students access emotional material, the words they write after making their image offer clues as to what the image means to them and how it relates to their understanding of the novel. The image focuses attention on one aspect of the text, stimulating questions, ideas, and insights for discussion, an important first step toward empowering students to cherish their unique contribution to the development of the course and the quality of each class session. Most importantly, it encourages genuine interactive participation.

Initially, I asked students to make images when I discovered many not only had trouble visualizing, but also had poor access to their imaginations. Their puzzled looks in response to questions such as, “What do you imagine she was wearing?” or, “In what condition was the house when he entered unexpectedly?” made me realize that students did not necessarily see what they were reading in their mind’s eye.

Recent research in the architecture of the brain describes two memory systems of the brain, one in the neocortex for facts, and one in the amygdala for emotionally charged events and information (Goleman 1995, 21). When we use pen or pencil we write what we can verbalize but it is sometimes difficult to find words that express our feelings and intuitions. Making spontaneous images in response to an abstract idea from the text enables students to become more aware of their emotionally charged reactions. When images and words are used together, readers have a greater variety of expression than if either is used exclusively.

In addition to pen and paper, my students buy and bring to every class meeting, fingerpaints (six colors including black and brown), nonhardening clay, and paper towels to wipe fingers. After making their image and writing

what come to mind, students discuss the importance of their images and offer ideas and questions about the topic for classmates to consider. Using what they have learned from sharing their imagemaking, students are able to go deeper into the text, exploring connections to it and each other. Even when students select the same moment in a novel, their images are always different, as is their take on what is going on. For example, two students painted an image of BB riding in a car, being driven to the President's house. One student's image was a huge black car with BB represented by a tiny blob of red, sitting in the back between two blobs of brown which the student said symbolized the President's men. BB looked small and powerless, exactly the student's point of view. The second student painted an image of BB in many colors, radiating energy. This student described her as a powerful woman who would not allow herself to be taken advantage of by the President if there was any way for her to prevent it from happening.

One way to begin exploring a novel is to create a symbolic object. In this case, students were asked to make their dolls before class discussion of *Anthills of the Savannah* as a way to help them focus on the characters and events in the novel. Previous students complained they had trouble identifying with characters from other cultures, even when these characters were the same age as students, dealing, at least in part, with similar issues such as growing up or choosing a mate. They grumbled about having to read novels set in foreign cultures. Making the dolls changed students' perception about the difficulty of the novel as they focused on deciding which character would make the doll, its symbolic function, and the blessing, wisdom, or hope the dollmakers would bestow in their presentations.

Initial assignment: making the doll

Focus: Amaechina: May-the-path-never-close

Student activity:

Choose a character in the novel at a specific moment in the text. As this character, make a doll for Elewa's baby, born at the end of the novel. The doll cannot cost more than fifty cents to create. Design the doll according to what your character thinks is important--a legacy, a blessing, a source of hope or wisdom, a warning, perhaps a connection between a person who dies in the course of the novel and the child he or she will never know. The doll reflects symbolically your character's ideals, ideas, and way of being in the world.

Each doll will be presented by the dollmaker, in role at a

particular moment in the novel. Your character can only know what has happened to her or him up to this point. You present your doll, as your character, giving the child a blessing, a bit of wisdom, a story, hope for the future, and/or a lesson learned from personal experience. The words will be formally spoken before, during, or after the doll is carefully placed on the desk, transformed into a ritual space by the class who decide ahead of time how they wish to do this.

Class activity:

Class members respond in role, as their chosen characters, to affirm, support, and bear witness to the presentation. When the last person has bestowed her or his doll there will be a moment of silence before Uncle, rises. As a class, we select the student to play Uncle before we begin the ceremony. In the novel, Uncle, Elewa's mother's husband, would normally have conducted the naming ceremony as the closest male relative, instead he acknowledges Beatrice's leadership and ends the baby naming ceremony by leading the class, in role, in the blessings that begin on page 210.

"What brings us here is the child you sent us. May her path be straight..."

"Ise!" (Spoken by the class each time.)

After the last blessing and "Ise!" we will reflect on what has been said. Then, as in Quaker meeting, we remain silent until we feel moved to speak, in role, always identifying who we are and our most recent experience. The Chris who initially made fun of Ikem's worries about the President's activities speaks differently after he (Chris) is forced to hide from the President's forces and run for his life,

If a student speaks to a character playing the same person as the questioner, each talks to the other with the amount of knowing each has at the moment, alter egos with differing experience. Class members, in role, are free to join in, asking and answering questions, or coming to the aid of a besieged character. Questioning and responding have a unique rhythm and dynamic; when the energy is gone we respect the silence that follows.

A Selection of Student Doll Presentations:

Each class decides how to prepare for the presentations. One class covered the teacher's desk with a white cloth. In another, a student brought in a hand-embroidered cloth made by her grandmother. In a third class, students decorated the desk with fresh flowers while in another they encircled the desk with "sacred" objects. Students, using formal language, move smoothly from one presentation to the next having determined ahead of time the order in which they will go. After students place their doll on the table they speak their blessing and describe the symbolic meaning of the doll.

The dolls vary enormously. One doll's head was an apple so the baby would never go hungry. Another doll's body was a book so she would never lack information. In each case, students created their dolls out of materials on hand. Stuffed socks often served as the body, dressed by using napkins, ties, and scarves. Others used sticks as arms and legs and made the heads and bodies out of clay. Given that fifty cents was the absolute spending limit, they had to use imagination and knowledge of their character in order to create unique and meaningful dolls.

Ikem offers his doll at a time when he is increasingly worried by the deteriorating political situation. His fear that the police have come for him gives way to exhilaration when he is greeted by two taxicab drivers who have come to salute him for his work as editor of *National Gazette*. The passage he used was:

The elation came perhaps from this rare human contact across station and class with these two who had every cause to feel hatred but came instead with friendship, acting out spontaneously and without self-righteousness what their betters preach but so often but so seldom practice. (125)

He presents his doll to the daughter he will never hold.

"I am the father you will never know. I am a man who died knowing he had much to learn. Yet I know one thing absolutely--I love you my daughter. Although I will not see you grow to be a woman, take comfort from this doll I bestow on you. May it give you courage to acknowledge your truth, strength to never turn your back on what you know to be right and true and good, wisdom to learn from **all** of your people, and the ability to tell the stories that nourish, sustain, educate, and strengthen our hearts, our minds, our spirits, and our souls. Walk with grace, my daughter. Your father watches over you."

Beatrice presents her doll, made after she decides to perform the naming ceremony of Elewa's baby. The passage she used was:

"There was an Old Testament prophet who named his son *The Remnant-Shall-Mourn*. They must have lived in times like this. We have a different metaphor, though; we have our own version of hope that springs eternal. We shall call this child AMAECHINA: *May-the-path-never-close*. Ama for short." 206)

She presents her doll to the child whose mother she initially scorned.

"Had I given you a doll when I was a child in my father's house, I would have said, 'Here is a doll in which you can hide your feelings, shadow your thoughts, muffle your words, and bury your truth.' But now, as a woman living in her own house, I say to you, 'Here is a doll to give you courage to know your feelings, strength to reveal your thoughts, wisdom to speak your words, and love to guide you on your true path.' This doll is given to you by a woman who loves you, who tells you, 'As I was a friend to your father, so will I be your friend. As I have become a friend to your mother, so will I be your friend. Always.'"

Chris is on a bus, escaping to the countryside. When a police sergeant drags a young girl into the bushes to rape her Chris follows, grabs the man's hands, and orders him to release the girl. They argue. Chris stands his ground, looking straight into the policeman's eyes, daring him to shoot. The passage he used was:

"And he did, point-blank into the chest presented to him." (199)

He presents his doll to the daughter of his closest friend.

"I give you this doll made of love and laughter. Only in the last few days of my life have I so clearly understood their importance. May your life be filled with people who help you grow into a woman as fine as your mother Elewa and her wise and loving friend Beatrice."

The taxi-driver who drives Ikem home complains it is a disgrace for Ikem, an important man, to drive an old car. He is also angry that Elewa didn't tell him that the man (Ikem) whom he (the taxi-driver) refused to let pass while

driving, was the editor of *National Gazette*. The passage he used was:

“Wonderful! You no see say because you no tell me, I come make another big mistake. If I for know na such big oga de for my front for that go-slow how I go come make such wahala for am? I de craze? But the thing wey confuse me properly well be that kind old car wey he come de drive. I never see such! Number one, the car too old; number two, you come again de drive am yourself. Wonderful! So how I fit know na such big man de for my front? I just think this I-go-drive-myself na some jagajaga person wey no fit bring out money to pay driver, and come block road for everybody. To God, na so I think.” (126-7)

He has an important reason to give the baby his doll.

"I do not speak in my language but what I say is true. I knew your father. I told him he should have a new car. He should not drive around in an old heap but he laugh at me. He ask me, 'Why should I drive new car just because people expect the editor of the paper to have fancy car? My old car works. It takes me where I want to go.' I knew your father. In his name, I give you this doll made of old clothes and old buttons and old stories, to remind you that knowing how to use what you have may keep you out of someone's pocket."

Emmanuel Obete, President of the Student Union, first meets Ikem after hearing him speak at the University of Bassa to an audience of more than two thousand people. When Emmanuel learns that Chris is in political trouble, he packs his bag and goes to help Chris. By this time, Ikem is dead and the political situation is deteriorating into chaos. The passage he used was:

Emmanuel was also a fugitive wanted by the police. But being of only middling importance in police estimation he was not given the VIP treatment of having his wait-and-take picture on television. A troublesome Students Union official was nothing new to the Kangan Police, and they were not about to make a song and dance about him. (174)

He gives this message to the baby.

"Your father gave a speech and changed my life. He said that storytellers threaten those in control and frighten those who would usurp the right-to-freedom of the human spirit. I give you this doll, a bear whose body is

a book--a story about people who bear witness to the truth. Read it and remember that your father was murdered because he told stories. Yet the stories he told live on in those of us who heard them. When you are of age, we will tell them to you. Your father's spirit lives in all of us."

Processing the Presentations:

Most students choose characters emotionally supportive of Elewa and her fatherless baby. When one student, in role as His Excellency, Mr. President, gave the baby a doll dressed in feathers with the blessing, "May you learn to make men happy," a second student in role as Emmanuel spontaneously countered, "I can't change your blessing but I amend it." He stood up, glared at the student in role as His Excellency and slowly turned toward the dolls on the table. "Amaechina, may you always know the difference between love given from the heart and love given for the pocketbook.

Afterward, we reflected on the "thirteenth fairy syndrome" where the uninvited fairy suddenly appears at the party for the newborn and curses the baby. Although the invited fairies cannot take away the curse they can modify it, making it possible for the child to survive. For example, the uninvited fairy curses Sleeping Beauty, saying she will die after piercing her finger with a spindle. The fairies modify it to a sleep that will last until a prince, brave enough to enter the enchanted castle, kisses her. Many students were surprised at how strongly they felt about modifying "May you learn to make men happy" into something more empowering. As one student said, "It's only a doll, and it's all our imagination, yet it feels so real." I believe this vicarious identification with invented characters and events helps students to examine their assumptions and beliefs, the first step in making new choices--real changes in the real world.

As part of the discussion, class members talked about political and personal pressures on various characters and how they dealt with them. For example, Chris is initially bemused by Ikem's worries about their friend Sam wanting to be President For Life and ignores evident signs of political unrest. Yet when forced to choose between Sam and Ikem, he chooses Ikem. Although he loves BB, he remains emotionally distant from her despite BB's attempts to draw him closer. Only after Ikem is murdered and Chris has to flee, does he learn an empowering truth about people he had previously discounted such as taxicab drivers, rural farmers, and people without a British education. They not only risk their lives to save his, they also make it possible for BB to evade police so she can spend a night with Chris in one of his hiding places where he is finally able to give of himself, utterly and

completely.

Another important change happens between BB and Elewa. Although BB and Chris spend time with Ikem and Elewa, BB disrespects Elewa because they are not of equal social standing. Elewa thinks BB is snooty. Yet after Ikem is murdered, Chris flees for his life, and BB learns that Elewa is expecting Ikem's child, BB learns to see Elewa as a fully dimensional human being. In turn, Elewa discovers that BB, now Beatrice, is powerful, caring, strong, and articulate. The two women, despite differing strengths and experiences, befriend and give healing support to each other as they deal with the murders of Ikem and Chris.

Through the presentation of the dolls, students track how characters' responses change over the course of the novel, discussing motivation, choice, and consequence. Many noted that Ikem, who was born in Abazon but educated in England, never loses his ideals despite his success as newspaper editor. When Ikem learns that the white-bearded leader has walked from rural Abazon to the capitol and will protest the treatment of his people, Ikem attends the rally. He knows he needs to hear the talk for personal enlightenment, not as a newspaperman. As Ikem listens to the old leader's stories Ikem feels even more connected to his people and to the power that old stories still have on him and those willing to listen.

The old man says, "The sounding of the battle-drum is important; the fierce waging of the war itself is important; and the telling of the story afterwards--each is important in its own way. I tell you there is not one of them we could do without. But if you ask me which of them makes the eagle-feather I will say boldly; the story... Why? Because it is only the story can continue beyond the war and the warrior. It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story, not the others, that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it we are blind. (114)

Ikem takes special note of the story about Leopard who has tried to trap Tortoise for a long time. When Leopard finally catches him, Tortoise asks for time to get ready. Although Leopard expects Tortoise to quietly prepare himself to die, Tortoise scratches the sand with his hands and feet, throwing it in all directions. Puzzled, Leopard asks why Tortoise is making such a mess. Tortoise responds, "Because even after I am dead I would want anyone passing by this spot to say, yes, a fellow and his match struggled here." (117-18)

Ikem listens to the old man tell the crowd that they too are struggling, and perhaps the purpose of their struggle is so that those who come after

them will be able to say: "*True, our fathers were defeated but they tried.*" Ikem hears these words as if the man is speaking directly to him.

Most students choose a character toward the end of the text. They want the baby to have the full benefit of what the doll maker has learned about life. Many make references to what their character might have said at an earlier point. For example, one student, making the doll as BB, was going to choose BB just after police tear her apartment apart hoping to find Chris or evidence of his whereabouts (162). The student intended to design a doll that would be a gift of protection from men, but her choice kept gnawing at her until she finally decided all of BB's experiences helped her transform into Beatrice and the baby would be short-changed if her gift did not include the wisdom gained from them. She made the doll as Beatrice, just before the baby naming ceremony, with the blessing, "Life is complex, changing more quickly than we sometimes realize. Therefore I wish for you the ability to see the whole and the parts, knowing each for what it truly is."

Students sometimes use their doll presentation to raise questions about the text, as did the BB who made her doll after she returned from her command visit to His Excellency. (74) "I give you this doll filled with wisdom I do not presently possess. Why was I invited? Why did Chris encourage me to go? Why did I behave as I did? May the people who love you help you grow in wisdom while keeping you safe from harm."

In response, several students in role as Chris protested. One irate Chris retorted, "You keep saying you're an independent woman! Why should I insult you by thinking you need my protection? Don't blame me for the choices you make. You can't have it both ways."

Another Chris snapped, "You're a well-educated woman with a mind of your own. Don't use me to avoid taking responsibility for your mistakes."

The student playing BB angrily countered, "You say you love me yet when I speak, you hear what you want to hear, not what I say I mean. You're in the government. You know His Excellency's reputation. Yet when I tell you I'm worried or afraid, you laugh. Is that supposed to make me feel good?"

Another student in role as BB chimed in, "You call sex love. You keep your heart and mind and body separate. You think feelings are just for women. What do you really know about love? When was the last time you cried?"

Several students in roles as His Excellency, Ikem, and Chris joined in an increasingly heated discussion of motivation, responsibility, and character relationships that rose to such intensity, a student in role as Elewa put her up hand to stop the arguments. "We are here to bless Amaechina whose name

means May-the-path-never-close. Do not fill her path with brambles and boulders. Do not block her path before she walks it." Many students looked embarrassed, yet the issues they were raising were important, so after the naming ceremony ended we listed some of the questions and issues raised during the discussion. These included:

Why does His Excellency invite BB to his estate knowing she's Chris's girlfriend? What does he want from her? What are the consequences for His Excellency and BB?

Why does BB behave at the party as she does? What effect does her action have on her? On Chris? On His Excellency? What does the episode say about the way His Excellency treats women? What is the purpose of this scene in the novel?

Why does the novel seem to start in the middle?

How much of Kangan politics reflects Nigerian politics?

Why does Achebe use two different language systems throughout the novel?

How do the shared boyhood experiences of Ikem, Chris, and Sam affect their relationship as adults? What effect does it have in social and political terms?

How do the changes in relationships between the two couples affect their friendship with each other and as couples?

How does the changing relationship between BB and Elewa and Agatha, BB's maid mirror BB's changing social consciousness?

What is the role of story in the novel and in the lives of the characters? How does this use of story reflect the teachings of the culture?

How does Ikem's death affect Chris, his understanding of himself and his world, his relationships with the "small men," and his rescue of the young woman?

During the reflection that ended this class period, many students said they needed to reread the novel before the next class because so much had been brought up that they hadn't noticed or remembered. One woman said the novel brought up important issues regarding ways men and women relate to each other in our culture. A male student said, rather sheepishly, "I think I have more of Chris in me than I'm willing to admit." We agreed to talk

about these issues in subsequent sessions.

Second assignment: creating a one-minute internal monologue

Focus: Moments of crisis/times to make choices

Students select from the list, one question or issue they will address in a one-minute internal monologue (what a character says to her or himself), written from the perspective of a character of their choice, at a particular moment in the novel. They must choose a character making an important decision or who is actively responding to a difficult situation. All monologues have to be in the present tense and the character cannot know anything beyond the event in question. For example, if Ikem's monologue takes place as he is being arrested, he cannot know he will soon be murdered.

Although monologues are written at home, students present them orally in class, without reference to written material. What they remember is what they speak. Even when the written material is self-conscious and without emotional power, when the student enters into role and presents his or her monologue orally, the spoken words often have an immediacy and passion lacking in the written monologue. Not only does this give students an opportunity to look at differences between oral and written language, it also offers them a powerful vicarious experience. Presenting the monologues and reflecting on differences and similarities between characters and themselves helps students recognize personal prejudices and tendencies to be judgmental rather than observant. When readers pass judgment on characters before examining them, it is as if they kill the characters. As students learn to separate what is "mine" from what is "the character's," their interest in the novel deepens. What may have seemed initially opaque and complex and off-putting becomes a "good read."

Achebe uses dialect to illuminate differences in characters' social and economic status. Students who chose to write monologues from characters who speak pidgin English could not duplicate their language but felt a strong need to attempt to differentiate their language from that of Ikem, BB, and Chris. Both in their written and oral monologues, students introduced their character by saying their choice of sentence structure and vocabulary was an attempt to give the flavor of her speech. In no case did they use it to patronize or to demean.

After the internal monologues are presented to the class, classmates, in role, respond with lively, pointed comments and questions. Sometimes

students who have chosen the same character argue among themselves, as if they are alter egos with conflicting points of view. The discussion and reflection that follow the presentation of the monologues allows students to articulate what, why, and how they come to think and feel as they do. For example, let us look at Elewa's monologue, coming after she loses patience with Ikem because he won't allow her to spend all night with him (34).

Written monologue:

"That Ikem, he think he can have a poke and leave when he feel like it. When we go his place he never let me stay. He call taxi and send me home in middle of night. Even though he have fancy education and I sell at market, I just as good as he, maybe better. I know how treat people. I no send a girl like me home in taxi when everyone know robbers everywhere in Bassa just waiting for chance to steal and kill. When I tell Ikem he say no one kill me. How he know? When it happen he be sorry but what good sorry do me? And his friends, that BB and Chris. I see look at Ikem when I talk. They think I have no feeling? My momma say I one foolish girl. A man like Ikem never marry me. She say I looking heartbreak in face. Maybe she right. But I love Ikem. I want be with him forever. I want him be father of my children. So what choice I have? Love is love."

The oral monologue tape-recorded:

"Ooh, I so mad at that man. Mr. So-Fine-Editor. That man have no manners. None! Any decent man know he take his woman home after they make love but does he? No! He give me a poke and call taxi man to take me home. In middle of night! For all he know I be robbed and murdered. Do he think taxi man protect me? No! When Mr. So-Fine-Editor look at my bloody body be too late for sorry. Momma tell me I be one foolish girl. She say, 'He never marry poor girl like you, he marry fancy lady. Who talk good, like him.' Hah, what she know? I laugh. But inside, I be crying. I love Ikem. I want he be father of my children. So what my choice? Love is love. No?"

Questions and comments after the monologue:

As Elewa after the naming ceremony (215): "If you could change the nature of your relationship with Ikem, what would you do?"

Elewa of the monologue: "I love Ikem and he know it. He should let me spend the night instead of sending me off like some package. But,

he's a growing man. Maybe he will come to his senses and learn to enjoy the pleasures of sleeping all night with the woman who loves him."

As Elewa after Ikem dies: "What is a growing man?"

Elewa of the monologue: A man who comes to understand the wisdom of his people as well as the knowledge he gains from attending university.

As Chris to Elewa after he makes love to BB in hiding (183): "I had a good university education but there was much I didn't learn. I didn't understand that to succeed as a small man is no easy thing. I'm sorry I treated you badly. You deserved better."

Elewa of the monologue: "I forgive you. In a way, it is not your fault. As a young person you went far away, to a school that taught you to hate your people and yourself. This is not good. Use what you have learned to help those of us who have not had your opportunities. Join with us in our struggle for equality. We have much to teach you."

Processing the Monologues:

During the reflection, students commented that they were taken aback by the emotionality of the monologues, and surprised at how deeply they felt the passion of their characters. One student said, "I didn't know I could act... Actually, I wasn't really acting, I was thinking about how BB was feeling, you know, like what was happening to her, and the words just came out the way they wanted to."

Those who chose to explore Elewa and the Taxi Man said that even though they could only begin to approximate pidgin English, they felt a sense of connection with them after their monologues. One student discussed how trying to speak pidgin had raised her awareness of the role language plays in our perception of people. She said, "I was surprised at how hard it was to make myself speak what I consider to be poor English, yet it was the only way I could try to understand Elewa." Students discussed how Achebe's use of pidgin English distanced them from characters who spoke it, just as BB initially looked down on Elewa and Agatha, BB's maid.

Students brought in articles about political repression in Nigeria (activists had just been killed by the regime in power) and wondered if Achebe had left Nigeria for political reasons. Many said that since reading the book they found themselves paying attention to news about Nigeria, and were surprised to notice the extent to which their reading had sensitized them to events in a part of the world that had previously been

inconsequential.

Few students chose a character of the opposite sex. A man playing BB focused on Chris's unwillingness to commit himself emotionally to her. When one of his classmates asked why he chose BB, he hesitated before answering. The classmate saw his discomfort and said that he didn't have to answer her question. "I want to," he said. "I need to think how to answer. I believe I'm a lot like Chris only I didn't know it until reading this book. I thought if I played BB I might have a better idea about why it's so hard for lots of guys to tell women they love what's really going on for them. Maybe even more important, why guys spend so much time denying." The classmate grinned and asked, "So, do you know now?" He smiled. "No, but at least I know it's a problem."

Third assignment: exchanging letters

Focus: The relationship between crisis and growth, internal and external events, pressures, and issues

The monologue activity focuses on one's self as character. To explore how characters connect with each other, and to help students become more aware of self as character in relationship to other characters, students write a letter in class during the third session.

In role as a character, write a letter to another character telling him or her about a critical experience that raises a question or need for advice. Reflect the particular relationship and state of mind of the writer to the receiver in your choice of how you begin and end your letter.

The letters are collected and redistributed. Students respond to the letter as the character to whom the letter is addressed. Letters, read by the respondent and then returned to the original writer, provide the basis for subsequent discussion and reflection.

Two sample letters:

Dear Ikem,

You and I have known each other for a long time. Although we argue every time we meet, I had an experience

that has shaken me to my core. Sam told me to fire you. I refused. Suddenly, in that moment, I could see that all that you have been talking and railing and ranting about was true. My denial, my refusal to see the issues astounds me. How could you continue to call me friend? I suspect Sam will act quickly. I do not think you will be fired because you are too popular, instead you will "merely" be suspended or you will have a serious "accident." One way or another, you will be silenced.

I need to talk with you. I need to tell you how right you are and how wrong I have been. How shall we communicate when all the phones are tapped and the mail is censored? We need to make plans.

A friend who came to see the truth--perhaps too late, Chris

Dear Chris,

Not to worry. As our friend from Abazon told us, those who know how to look will always see the signs left by Tortoise. Listen to the stories Elewa tells about struggle and overcoming. In these stories it is always the small animal that survives through cunning and wisdom. You can be Spider Ananse, who cleverly manages to get all the stories of the world from Great One, and I will be Tortoise, the one who knows he may not survive but is determined to go down leaving signs of struggle for all those who are willing to look. If we are lucky, we will leave behind the story of our struggle. That is no small achievement.

Your friend, Tortoise

Reflection on the Letter Writing Process:

Although students respond to the letters in role, they can change role at any time by prefacing their question or comment saying, "As Chris," or "As Emmanuel," etc. In response to the Chris/Ikem letters one student asked about stories and the role they play both in the book and in the life of Nigerians. A student studying anthropology offered information about the oral tradition she had learned in a previous course. She talked about how tribal wisdom in traditional cultures is passed down from elders to children as the old man from Abazon did, using stories and proverbs to make his points. She felt this was why Ikem had gone to hear him not as a reporter, but as one

seeking personal advice and enlightenment.

Another student told a story he had read in a book of African folktales about Python, a greatly feared animal. When a group of chimpanzees unexpectedly came upon a giant python, they got into single file and marched on his body. By the time Python realized what was happening, the chimpanzees were on top of him and killed him. The student saw the story as a metaphor for Chris and Ikem, small, essentially powerless people trying to defeat the corruption of Sam and his cronies.

Students examined issues raised by the letters, not only through discussion, but also by reading relevant passages from the novel aloud, in ways that reflected the point of view of the character or narrator. One student read a passage with such strong emotion another wondered how the reading affected the meaning of the passage since he had read it quite differently. This brought up subtext, (what lies under the text), and how tone, emphasis, and a character's situation can affect not only what is said, but also what is heard. For example on page 86 Ikem is talking to BB and says:

"August used to be a dry month. August Break we called it. The geography textbooks explained it, the farmer in the village expected it. The August Break never failed in those days."

BB responds, "Really?" The student spoke the word sarcastically, which made the student reading as Ikem feel bad because he had been talking about a meaningful time in his life. He found it difficult to share his real feelings as he responds, "What happened to the days of my youth, BB?"

Another student, with an entirely different reading, spoke the word with amazement, as if she was learning something new and interesting. The Ikem who spoke after this reading felt encouraged to share more of his life. Both readings can and were justified by the text. "So which one is right?" asked a student? This question allowed us to explore productive choice, examining which reading furthered our understanding of the characters and events more fruitfully.

Fourth assignment: writing a book

Focus: Developing access to the self the character perceives as being the "real" self

A character in the novel decides to write a book. After you chose your character/author, you have thirty minutes to respond to the following

questions:

What kind of book do you write (novel, collection of essays, memoir, etc)?

When do you write it? During the course of the novel? Ten years after?

Why are you writing this book, now, at this moment?

Who publishes your book? A mainstream publisher? An alternative publisher? A press in another country?

What is the title of your book?

To whom is it dedicated?

What is written on the first and last pages?

What does the cover look like?

A critic reviews your book. Who is the critic? What publication does he or she write for? Write the critic's review of the piece.

What affect does writing and having the book published have on you?

Reflection on the Book Writing Process:

By this fourth session, students were used to working quickly, without preplanning, and immediately started writing. Even so, we could easily have used more time. In a subsequent class I assigned the book as homework, processing their work in class, but these books were not as creative or powerful. Although it could have been the particular students, the next time, students completed the task in class and the material was as trenchant as it had been originally. Perhaps unlimited time is as bad as too little time when it comes to tapping one's creativity and imagination.

As the class processed the books, there was laughter at the wry humor of a memoir describing life as Tortoise. Students listened sympathetically as Amaechina shared a passage from her painful biography of the father she never knew. Students nodded knowingly as government cronies trashed books by the not-so-loyal opposition and reacted

compassionately as Beatrice described government outrages in a book published out of the country and reviewed by a banned person who praised her essay.

Since this was the final session devoted to *Anthills of the Savannah*, students not only talked about the novel, but also how their ideas, attitudes, feelings, and understanding had changed over the course of class activity and discussion. One student summed up the reaction of many when she said, "I don't think I'll be afraid to read a novel from a culture that's not mine any more. I have lots of ways to go into the book and think about it from the inside out."

The theory behind the process:

A surprising number of students initially admitted they hated to read and write papers. They spoke about the misery of having to read and write with "the teacher on my shoulder," that is, reading to decide what will be on a test or writing an essay to prove they've read the book. "Busy work," said one student contemptuously. Yet after experiencing imagemaking, storymaking, drama, and creative expression, these same students talked about the books we read with vitality and intensity, putting forth their ideas and feelings with passion, clarity, and insight. Many revised papers beyond the required number of revisions as they discovered new ideas and issues to explore. As students learned to shift their focus from only wanting to know what the teacher said was important, to noticing what they found important, developing their own questions and ideas, students moved from passivity to interactivity, to vibrant discussions and meaningful engagement with the text and each other.

The approach described in this paper explores how symbolic function can help students explore a novel. For example, when asked to sculpt an image that symbolized their response to the novel, one student sculpted a large door with a small mound nearby. He offered this explanation: "In the novel it's as if Chris, Ikem, and BB start life closed off from a part of themselves, so that's what the door symbolizes. But, each of them finds a key to open the door, so the mound symbolizes the hidden key."

"Does it matter if you're forced to find the key like Chris, or you're looking for it like Ikem?" asked a classmate.

"No, because in both cases the door is closed. The key is available only if we're willing to look for it, if we want to get in or out of where we are. I keep thinking about how Chris had everything he needed in order to have a good relationship with BB and Ikem but he blindsided himself by refusing to

connect to them emotionally. Eventually, he found the key but this was only after he had to run for his life and depend on people he didn't know, who put their lives in jeopardy, who had everything to lose if the police found they had harbored Chris. Even though the key was always there, waiting to be used, Chris didn't even know to look for it until he refused to fire Ikem."

Although symbolic meaning is both taught and learned through experience, even shared symbols have unique personal meaning. The flag of one's birth country can be a source of pride if you live a life of privilege or pain if you are a political prisoner. The creative activities described in this paper help students uncover and discover symbolic meaning. They are based on the premise that the extent to which we know ourselves is the extent to which we are able to differentiate what we think and feel from our thoughts and feelings about characters living in different cultures and circumstances. It is easy to judge Chris for disconnected and cold. But, but when we look at what he has been forced to give up of his birth culture in order to study in England, to succeed in ways he feels is necessary for his self-esteem, we are more compassionate. We can cheer him on as life experiences enable him to transform into a more caring person.

The use of creative activities stimulates, intrigues, and challenges students to develop a variety of ways to express their thoughts and feelings about a text. As a community, students become skilled articulating their ideas imaginatively and effectively. If it takes a village to raise a child, I believe it takes classroom collaborative learning experiences to cultivate wise, responsive, and caring human beings.

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