

"The Epistemology of the Novel: Achebe as Africa in American High Schools."
Eve Eisenberg, Indiana University

As recently as 1996, researchers found that American Social Studies teachers held the same beliefs and misconceptions about Africa that their parents and grandparents had held in decades past. To summarize, Egerton Osunde and Josiah Tlou, writing for the journal *Social Studies*, and following up on a similar survey from 1968, found that Social Studies teachers (those who bear the largest responsibility for giving young Americans information about the history of the world inside and outside of our national borders) thought of Africa as a backwards place filled with half-naked savages, people who had no history comparable to that of the West and who lived and died entirely disconnected from the wider world.

Indeed, while Americans in public schools routinely learn histories of ancient Greece and Rome, of Western Europe, and of the United States, the curriculum does little to inform them about other spaces, such as (or perhaps especially?) Africa. Despite the popular image of America's multiculturalism and heterogeneous qualities, young Americans receive little information in school about spaces not deemed directly related to the formation of Western culture, narrowly drawn.

Educational experts and administrators have turned to the English classroom to supplement the Social Studies curriculum. This turn most often expresses itself as an interdisciplinary move meant to show students the relevance and interrelatedness of the academic disciplines. A typical English-Social Studies unit (sometimes called an "integrative unit") at the middle school level might involve students learning about the American civil rights movement in one classroom while reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* in another; their homework and project assignments might ask them to relate "real" events and people from history to the fictional events and characters in Harper Lee's novel.

Clearly such a unit throws emphasis on Social Studies content, while the English class becomes supplementary and evidentiary. The move towards interdisciplinarity has re-framed English, orienting it towards basic reading and writing skills while reducing emphasis on formal and stylistic analysis of literary texts; indeed, it has begun to seem anachronistic to talk to students about aesthetic concerns when literary texts are called upon to provide context for other disciplines. As a corollary consequence, English teachers in this situation may no longer provide what we might call literary context, that is, a close engagement with the question of the role of the writer-as-artist in society, and with the role of a particular literary text in its historical moment, but instead rely on the Social Studies teacher to provide a historical context.

When, in 1996, Osunde and Tlou advised secondary school instructors to address ignorance about Africa by "[using] modern African literary works to provide reliable historical information," and to use Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in this capacity, their aim was to involve the English teacher in the dilemma of how to cram information about Africa into the American secondary curriculum.

While it is difficult to fault educators for their concern regarding Africa's absence from public school curricula, we could be forgiven for finding their corrective efforts unsatisfactory on several levels. As Chimamanda Adichie joked, during her 2009 TED Talk, exactly what view would the world have of America if the only representative national text was *American Psycho*? We can scoff at this idea because of America's tremendous cultural power, its ability to transmit multiple accounts of itself to the world. It is ridiculous to think that anyone would form a view of America based solely on one novel, yet this is what is happening in many American high schools: *Things Fall Apart* may be the only significant contact American high school students have with Africa, apart from the images of chaos and war they might see on the evening news.

Yet if Nigeria is a richly multifaceted country, profoundly heterogeneous in terms of its technological, geographical, ethnic, religious, class and social terrains, precisely how useful is it to have Americans learn about Nigeria - much less all of Africa - via a fictional text concerning one village grouping and its first contact with Christian missionaries? Even if *Things Fall Apart* performs the role its author imagined for it, that of reclaiming the dignity and beauty of the Igbo lifeworld from the racism of colonial discourses, no one text could ever flesh out a truly nuanced image of Nigeria, much less all of Africa.

Some educators believe that we should teach African literatures to American high school students not only as supplementary factual information, but also, tapping into Achebe's own stated reasons for writing *Things Fall Apart*, in order to, "break down [the] barrier to empathy" between American students and African people; Jacqueline Glasgow and Linda Rice claim that literature's "focus on the human condition,[opens] within us unique portals to understanding" (xiii). In other words, according to Glasgow and Rice, we should teach African literatures in order to humanize Africans in the eyes of our students; this mission of producing "socially responsive" readers calls for texts to provide opportunities for empathy, and asks teachers to "acquire the knowledge of the world and its people necessary for teaching global perspectives" (7). For Glasgow, Rice, and educators who ascribe to these pedagogical philosophies, African and other "world" literatures explicitly call out for contextualization, precisely because we read and teach them to produce "socially responsive" global citizens.

I would like to suggest that English teachers must shoulder some of the responsibility for helping students learn about African places and peoples, but they must also take on the task of insisting that students get a fuller picture than *Things Fall Apart* provides. To that end, as my PowerPoint presentation outlines, I would advise that English teachers consider integrating *Things Fall Apart* in a broader course of study.

One route would be to contextualize Achebe's novel by reading it alongside Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, one of the texts whose racism Achebe contested by writing *Things Fall Apart*. Reading Achebe and Conrad together would help students understand that *Things Fall Apart* doesn't represent (or intend to represent) Africa as it is today, nor all of Africa in any general sense. This approach would also invite students to think about literature's role in perpetuating racism and other problematic modes of thinking. This approach should reduce the possibility that students will perceive *Things Fall Apart* as a simple and mimetic representation of all of Africa.

Another approach I consider in the PowerPoint involves teaching *Things Fall Apart* as part of a multi-year inclusion of multiple African literary texts within an English Language Arts curriculum. In my opinion, if this is done, and if students have ample opportunity to enrich their understandings of these novels with information about authors and contexts, the result will be that English teachers will indeed help fill the gap in student knowledge of Africa, and they will do so without the risk of giving students an overly limited understanding of the continent, its cultures, and its peoples.

Works Cited

Glasgow, Jacqueline and Linda Rice, eds. *Exploring African Life and Literature: Novel Guides to Promote Socially Responsive Learning*. Newark, Delaware: International Reading Association, 2007. Print.

Osunde, Egerton O. and Josiah Tlou. "Persisting and Common Stereotypes in U.S. Students' Knowledge of Africa: A Study of Preservice Social Studies Teachers." *Social Studies* 87.3 (1996): 119-124. Print.