DICTIONARY OF LITERARY BIOGRAPHY

AFRICAN AND CARIBBEAN VOLUME

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NGŨGĨ WA THIONG'O

BIRTH: Kamĩrĩĩthũ Village, near Limuru, Kiambu District, Kenya,

5 January 1938, ~~1938 (precise date uncertain)~~, to Thiong'o wa Ndũcũ and

Wanjiku.

EDUCATION: B.A. Hons. in English, Makerere University College,

Kampala, Uganda, 1963; University of Leeds, ~~1963-66~~ 1964-1967.

AWARDS: 1961. The Black Messiah won the East African Literature

Bureau prize for fiction; 1966 Dakar Festival of Negro

Arts award for Weep Not, Child; Lotus Award, Afro-Asian

Writers Association, Alma-Ata, 1973.

MARRIAGE: 1961 to Nyambura; children: Thiong'o, Kĩmunya, ~~Ngina~~,

Ndũũcũ, Mũkoma, Wanjikũ, Njooki.

BOOKS:

Weep Not, Child (London: Heinemann Educational Books [African Writers Series, 7], 1964; ~~New York: Collier, 1969~~; Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1967; New York: Collier Macmillan, 1969);

The River Between (London: Heinemann Educational Books [African Writers Series, 17], 1965; Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1967; New York: Humanities, 1968);

Educational Books [African Writers Series, 51],

The Black Hermit (London: Heinemann, 1968; New York: Humanities, 1969);

A Grain of Wheat (London: Heinemann, 1968; New York: Humanities, 1968); London: Heinemann Educational Books [African Writers Series, 36

This Time Tomorrow: Three Plays (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1970);

Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics (London: Heinemann, 1972; New York and Westport, ~~Conn.~~ CT: Lawrence Hill, 1973);

Secret Lives (London: Heinemann, 1975; New York: Lawrence Hill, 1975);

~~Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and~~ With Mĩcere Gĩthae Mũgo, The Trial of Dedan Kimathi (~~London~~ Nairobi: Heinemann ~~1976~~);

Educational Books [African Writers Series, 188],

Petals of Blood (London: Heinemann, 1977; New York: Dutton, 1978);

Caitaani Mũtharaba-inĩ [Devil on the Cross] (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1980);

With Ngũgĩ wa Mĩriĩ, Ngaahika Ndeenda: Ithaako ria Ngerekano (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1980);

Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary (London: Heinemann ~~1981~~; Exeter, NH: Heinemann Educational Books, 1981);

Writers in Politics (London: Heinemann, 1981);

Education for a National Culture (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1981);

Devil on the Cross (London: Heinemann ~~1982~~, Educational Books [African Writers Series, 200], 1982);

~~Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and~~ With Ngũgĩ wa Mĩriĩ, I Will Marry When I Want [Ngaahika Ndeenda] (London: Heinemann Educational Books [African Writers Series, 246], 1982);

Njamba Nene na Mbaathi i Mathagu [Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus] (Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books, 1982);

wa Thiong'o (Nairobi: Macmillan, 1973).

SELECTED PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS:

"The Tension between National and Imperialist Culture," World Literature Written in English, 24 (1984): 3-9;

"On writing in Gĩkũyũ," Research in African Literatures, 16 (1985): 151-156.

When he was incarcerated as a political detainee in Kamĩtĩ Maximum Security Prison near Nairobi in 1978 for his part in the production of the Gĩkũyũ play Ngaahika Ndeenda, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o caused consternation among the warders by refusing to submit to the ritual of being chained before being transported out of the prison for medical treatment or family visits. It was made clear

Njamba Nene na Chibu King'ang'i [Njamba Nene and the Cruel Chief] (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1986);

Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus [Njamba Nene na Mbaathi i Mathagu] (Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1986);

Njamba Nene's Pistol [Bathitoora ya Njamba Nene] (Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1986);

The First Walter Rodney Memorial Lecture (London: Friends of Bogle, 1987);

Barrel of a Pen: Resistance to Repression in Neo-colonial Kenya (London: New Beacon, 1983; Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1983);

Bathitoora ya Njamba Nene [Njamba Nene's Pistol] (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1984);

Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature (London: James Currey, 1986; Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1986);

Writing Against Neocolonialism (London: Vita Books, 1986).

Matigari [Matigari ma Njirũũngi] (London: Heinemann, 1989);

OTHER:

Okot p'Bitek, Africa's Cultural Revolution, introduction by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (Nairobi: Macmillan, 1973).

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Njamba Nene na Chibu King'ang'i [Njamba Nene and the Cruel

that refusing to be chained meant he would receive no visits f
his family and no treatment for his abscessed tooth, but for
Ngũgĩ, always alert to the symbolism of colonial and neocolon
oppression, the price of being chained was too high a price to
pay.

Ngũgĩ's refusal to submit to metal shackles in Kamĩtĩ can
seen to have been an appropriate symbolic culmination to nearl
twenty years of writing and lecturing in which he released him-
self, link by link, from the mental shackles of his colonial
education, with all the assumptions about race and class and
language that that education had sought to instil in him. Thr
ing off those shackles has brought Ngũgĩ persecution and enfor
exile, but it has also led to the production of a body of fic-
tion, drama and essays original enough, technically assured
enough, and politically committed, informative and influential
enough, for many of Ngũgĩ's admirers to regard him as the most
important of African writers.

Ngũgĩ started life as James Thiong'o Ngũgĩ, son of a peas

farmer who, having access to no land of his own, was forced to live as a "squatter" or tenant-at-will, an "ahoi" on the land "one of the very few African landlords in pre-independence Limuru." Ngũgĩ was one of about 28 children in a polygamous household in which his father had four wives: Ngũgĩ was the fifth child of the third wife. Describing his childhood, Ngũgĩ has said: "Harvests were often poor. Sweetened tea with milk at any time of day was a luxury. We had one meal a day - late in the evening. Every day the women would go to their scruffy little strips of shamba. But they had faith and they waited."

Detained, p.106.

Homecoming, p.48.

Ngũgĩ received his first schooling in 1946 at Kamaandura, a missionary-run primary school about two miles from his home. In 1948 he was taken out of the mission school and sent to Maanguu, a school "run by nationalists grouped around the Gĩkũyũ Independent and Karinga Schools Association", an independent school movement dating back to the conflict with the Church of Scotland missionaries over the issue of female circumcision in the late 1920s. The change in schools had clear political overtones.

Decolonising the Mind, p.11.

Ngũgĩ has said that, while he can't remember precisely what occasioned the change: "It was thought that in missionary schoo some things were deliberately held back from students, and tha in Gikuyu Maringa ~~[sic]~~ schools nothing would be hidden from t students to keep them ignorant."

'The making of a Rebel', Index on Censorship 3/1980, p.20.

With the declaration of the State of Emergency in Kenya i 1952 all the independent schools were either closed down or ta over by District Education Boards; English became the medium o instruction, and Ngũgĩ learnt English.

In 1955, largely on the strength of a credit in English, Ngũgĩ won a place at the prestigious Alliance High School at Kikuyu ("one of the most elitist institutions for Africans in colonial Kenya", as Ngũgĩ was later to describe it). He was " only student from virtually the whole of Limuru" to do so. Ngũgĩ's subsequent comments on the prevailing ethos of the sch have been scathing: "I think the education offered to us at Alliance was intended to produce Africans who would later becor efficient administrators of a colonial system.... we were bein trained to become obedient servants of Her Majesty the Queen o

Decolonising, p.12.

'The making of a Rebel', p.20.

'The making of a Rebel', p.20.

England, to serve her and the British Empire, and never to question the legitimacy or correctness of that Empire."

What Alliance High School did do for Ngũgĩ was sustain an interest in reading and arouse a speculative desire to write, though one gets the impression that this was achieved more through random novel-reading in the comparatively well-stocked library than through the formal curriculum. Ngũgĩ read widely: Dickens, Scott, Haggard, Buchan, Paton and W.E. Johns all having their somewhat catholic place. But it was, in fact, of R.L. Stevenson that Ngũgĩ was later to say: "He is the one who really set my imagination flying and I thought that one day I would like to write stories like those which he himself had written." When asked, at the end of his stay at Leeds, what had moved him to start writing, Ngũgĩ replied: "I wrote, I suppose, because I had been moved by the bloodshed and violence during the Mau Mau uprising."

African Writers Talking, p.122.

Alan Marcuson et al. "Leeds Interview", p.1.

Although Ngũgĩ's formal education was not interrupted by the State of Emergency, he no more than anybody else could be left unaffected by the turmoil in Central Kenya resulting from the

1952-56 armed revolt of the Land and Freedom Army (called "Mau Mau" by the settlers) against the inequities, particularly the unequal distribution of land, of the colonial system. Ngũgĩ's elder brother, Wallace Mwangi, joined the guerillas in the fore between 1954-56, as a consequence of which Ngũgĩ's mother was detained for three months and tortured at the home-guard post Kamĩrĩĩthũ. In an interview published in 1973 Ngũgĩ addresse the question of the precise extent of his awareness of what wa happening during the Emergency: "As a child growing up during this period, it would be silly and not true to say one was awa of all implications of even the struggle itself. But one did g the impressions. You are so young. You see your uncles being killed.... You see some of your friends being taken from their homes. These things stay with you. You see an old man you respected being emasculated as a condition of war. These thing leave you with an impression...."

'Tolstoy in Africa', in G.D. Killam, Critical Perspectives on Ngugi. p.52.

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On his return to Kamĩrĩĩthũ after his first term at Allian Ngũgĩ found that, as part of the colonial forces' anti-insurgen

"protected" village strategy (designed, in fact, to cut the forest fighters off from their food supplies) his home had simpl disappeared: "My home was now only a pile of dry mud-stones, bit of grass, charcoal and ashes.... Not only my home, but the old village with its culture, its memories and its warmth had been razed to the ground." The trauma of this experience has led to "the return" being a recurrent motif in Ngũgĩ's fiction, and his writing is often at its most powerful when recreating the anguis and heroism of the "Mau Mau" revolt.

Detained, p.73.

From Alliance High School, Ngũgĩ followed the well-beaten path to Makerere University College, Kampala, where in 1959 he embarked on a four-year Honors degree in English, "...from Chaucer to T.S. Eliot with a touch of Graham Greene." In retrospect Ngũgĩ regards the real importance of his time at Makerere as lying in his exposure to African and West Indian writers for the first time, though they had no place on the syllabus and "were never mentioned as part of the course work." Ngũgĩ single out three works as having impressed and influenced him in part-

Decolonising, p.12

'The Making of a Rebel', p.21.

icular: Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart; George Lamming's In the Castle of My Skin; and Peter Abrahams's Tell Freedom.

At Makerere Ngũgĩ joined the University Drama Club and Play Reading circle and then, in 1960, found himself having to write short story, "The Fig Tree", as a result of telling a member of the editorial committee of Penpoint that he had already written one, when it was, in his words, "only in my mind." This was th start of an intensely creative three year period during which Ngũgĩ wrote six other short stories later collected in Secret Lives, three one-act plays, a full-length play (The Black Hermit), and two novels: The Black Messiah and Weep Not, Child.

Preface to Secret Lives.

In 1962 Ngũgĩ participated in the historic "Conference of African Writers of English Expression" at Makerere which was attended by most of the better-known "Anglophone" African writers, including Achebe, Soyinka, Okigbo and Mphahlele. Writing from prison in 1978, Ngũgĩ commented: "What I remember most abou the conference was the energy and the hope and the dreams and th confidence: after all, we were part of a continent emerging from a colonial era into...what? We never answered the question, but

Detained, p.142.

the hopes and the dreams and the confidence remained. Now we have no doubt, two decades later, about the answer.»

In addition to his burst of creative writing, Ngũgĩ was also, by the end of his four year degree, editing *Penpoint*, the Makerere English Department literary journal (but also a major vehicle for writers from all over East and Central Africa), and writing a regular column for the *Sunday Nation* in Nairobi. And he still found time to obtain a good upper-second class Honours degree — writing his special essay on Conrad in the process.

Ngũgĩ's first novel, published as *The River Between* in 1965, started life as *The Black Messiah* and was embarked on in March 1961 in response to the challenge posed by an East African Literature Bureau novel-writing competition whose deadline was in December that year. Ngũgĩ won the competition.

The action of the novel takes place among the ridges in the heartland of Gĩkũyũ territory in the late 1920s, at the time of the conflict between the missions and Gĩkũyũ traditionalists over female circumcision (described by Ngũgĩ in a 1962 *Sunday Nation*

Lindfors, p.28.

article as a "brutal" custom). Ngũgĩ makes use of a symbolic topographical setting, whereby two long-standing rival ridges, Kameno and Makuyu, now the homes of Gĩkũyũ traditionalists and Christian converts respectively, confront each other across the river of the title. This provides him with a simple, but effective, schematic base from which to explore the relationships between Christianity and Gĩkũyũ tradition (including the similarities between the mythologies underlying each), between private and public responsibilities, and between education and political activism.

Waiyaki, the 'Black Messiah' of the original title is last in a line of descent from the Gĩkũyũ seer Mugo wa Kibiro, and is looked to by his father Chege, an elder from Kameno, to fulfil Mugo's prophecy: "Salvation shall come from the hills. From the blood that flows in me ... a son shall rise. And his duty shall be to lead and save the people." To this end Waiyaki is sent by his father to the mission to learn the wisdom and secrets of the white man - but enjoined to be true to the Gĩkũyũ people and

their ancient rites. The inherent contradiction in this injunction proves insurmountable.

When circumcised Gĩkũyũ are excluded from Siriana, the mission school, Waiyaki returns to the ridges and establishes the first Gĩkũyũ independent schools. He fires the ridges with his enthusiasm for education, seen by him as the solution to the encroaching domination of the colonial power, and comes to be seen as a saviour. But Waiyaki is so single-mindedly intent on his schools that he fails to give due recognition to the political significance of the Kiama, a Kameno-based proto-"Mau Mau" organization led by Kabonyi, a lapsed Christian who is intensel jealous of Waiyaki. The Kiama is dedicated to the "purity of th tribe", and prepared to use more direct forms of political activism than Western education to oust Christianity and colonialism.

In Romeo and Juliet fashion, Waiyaki falls in love with Nyambura, the daughter of the fanatical leader of the Christian converts of Makuyu, Joshua, who is the arch-enemy of the Kiama. Kabonyi manages to engineer a public trial of Waiyaki for betray

ing the tribe by associating with the Christians, Waiyaki refuse to renounce his love for Nyambura, and the pair are handed over to the Kiama for judgement and, presumably, execution.

Leeds Interview, p.11.

Asked about his writing by an interviewer at Leeds, Ngũgĩ's comment on The River Between was: "I had come from a missionary school and I was deeply Christian.... In school I was concerned with trying to remove the central Christian doctrine from the dress of Western culture, and seeing how this might be grafted onto the central beliefs of our people. The River Between was concerned with this process."

River Between (1975 ed.), p.141.

That the novel is, to some extent, a project in contextualizing theology is borne out by its extensive use of Biblical language and imagery, by the way it sets the Gĩkũyũ creation myt beside the Christian one, and by such recognitions as that arrived at by Waiyaki towards the end: "Even his [the white man's] religion was not essentially bad.... But the religion, the faith, needed washing, cleaning away all the dirt, leaving only the eternal. And that eternal that was the truth had to be

reconciled to the traditions of the people.'

But this project, which would suggest that Ngũgĩ's sympathies lay on the Makuyu side of the river, does not come across as the dominant concern of the novel to most readers. Christianity in the novel is represented by the somewhat caricatured figure of Joshua ("he would never refrain from punishing a sin, even if this meant beating his wife") and, while much of the novel is concerned with the foundation of the Gĩkũyũ independent schools movement, there is no mention of the historically parallel independent church movement. The focus on Christianity here is very similar to that in Achebe's Things Fall Apart: it is a divisive influence which produces a violent reaction on the part of traditionalists and provides the obvious focus for an exploration of the impact of colonial penetration on traditional ways of life. Not that the Kiama finds much favour either; it is characterized by "extravagant enthusiasm", led by a jealous fanatic, and its members are symbolically depicted as "figures lurking in the edges of darkness."

River Between, p.31.

River Between, p.112.

River Between, p.124.

The two themes which critics have seen as dominant in the novel are, firstly, the relationship between education and political activism and, secondly, the relationship between private commitment and public responsibility.

Waiyaki's preoccupation with education leads him to lose contact with the people he wants to serve, or perhaps more accurately, considering his messianic sense of his own destiny, to lead and save. Only at the end of the novel does he come to recognize that "The Kiama was right. People wanted action now", and decide that if he were to have the opportunity he would preach "education for unity. Unity for political freedom." He is repeatedly described as "confused" and is often unaware of the implications, and sometimes even the origins, of his actions.

River Between, p.143 both quotations.

Ngũgĩ is clearly inviting his readers to be critical of Waiyaki's simplistic positing of Western education as the cure-all for political ills, and his divorcing of education from political action. Waiyaki has no reply to Kabonyi's crucial question: "do you think the education of our tribe, the education and wisdom which you all received, is in any way below that of

River Between, p.95.

the white man?" Where Waiyaki does not appear to come in for authorial criticism is in his quest for the reconciliation of th ultimately irreconcilable opposites represented by Kameno and Makuyu.

The focus on Waiyaki's public role as founder of the inde- pendent schools is to some extent eclipsed in the second half of the novel by the attention given to his love for Nyambura. It i this shift in emphasis which has led some critics to regard the theme of private conscience and commitment set against public responsiblity as carrying the main weight of the novel's message

Killam, Introduction to the writings of Ngugi, p.29.

G.D. Killam, for example, sees the theme which most interests Ngũgĩ in this novel as "the place of love as a means of achievir personal redemption and by extension as an agent for redemption in the community."

The novel is characterized by a simplicity of language, anc a schematic opposition of contending values and their champions, which have much in common with the myths on which it draws so heavily. The complexity of its themes could well have borne the

fuller and more complex treatment given in the later novels, but the critical tendency to sum up the novel in the manner of Kil- lam's "it is a modest beginning in a small novel..." does perhap not do justice to what was a remarkable achievement for a univer sity student producing the first novel in English by a Kenyan writer.

Killam, Introduction..., p. 20.

If, as Cook and Okenimkpe claim, Ngũgĩ now finds the novel embarrassing to turn back to, that will doubtless be because he has travelled a long way, ideologically, from the reconciling River Between in the interim. He would no longer endorse either the Christianity, however contextualized, underpinning the novel or the subordination of the education/political-activism debate to the slightly clichéd love-story at the end. But Ngũgĩ would have no need to feel that The River Between was an embarrassingl weak first novel.

Cook and Okenimkpe, p. 31.

The Black Messiah was barely complete when, in January 1962 Ngũgĩ started on his second novel, Weep Not, Child. Set twenty years later, at the time of the 1950s State of Emergency in

Kenya, when many of the latent tensions and antagonisms explored in the earlier novel boiled over in armed conflict, Weep Not, Child is generally held to be the most autobiographical of Ngũgĩ's fictional works.

The main protagonist is a young boy, Njoroge, through whose often very naive perceptions most of the action of the novel is filtered. The youngest son in a polygamous family renowned for its domestic harmony, Njoroge, like Ngũgĩ himself, plays no active role in the armed rebellion which his family becomes caught up in, but rather carries on with his schooling, placing his faith, like Waiyaki, in education: "He always thought that schooling was the very best that a boy could have. It was the end of all living."

Weep Not, Child, (1976 ed.), p. 38.

The novel traces Njoroge's career as a scholar, which takes him to Siriana (a fictional version of Alliance High School) as "the only boy in all that area" to get there — again like Ngũgĩ himself. At the same time, it charts the progressive disintegration of the ideally harmonious home and family. When the novel opens, Ngotho, Njoroge's father, is a landless peasant

living as an ahoi on the land of Jacobo, a rich African farmer, and tending the tea plantation being grown on his ancestral lanc now "alienated" and given to a Mr Howlands under the post-World War I soldier-settler scheme. Ngotho loses his job as a result of taking part in a strike and leading an attack on Jacobo, who, true to his collaborationist role, is trying to persuade the strikers to return to work. This wholly uncharacteristic action on the part of Ngotho is embarked on in an attempt, in part, to appease his son Boro, who is an embittered ex-serviceman who despises his father and his father's generation for their passiv submission to colonial rule.

These four characters exemplify, emblematically and with great economy, the diagram of forces unleashed in central Kenya with the declaration of the State of Emergency in October 1952. Howlands becomes a fanatical District Officer who plays a brutal role in the repression of the revolt; Jacobo becomes a "loyalist home-guard leader who viciously exploits his position to settle the score with Ngotho; Boro takes to the forest as a guerilla leader and is responsible, in the end, for killing both Jacobo

and Howlands, being captured in the process; and Ngotho is the hapless victim, the peasant caught in the cross-fire, who confesses falsely to the killing of Jacobo and is tortured and castrated by Howlands before dying. Njoroge's part is to be a passive spectator until arrested from school on suspicion of complicity in Jacobo's killing, whereupon he too is tortured — both physically and, more particularly, by the denial of further schooling.

Ngũgĩ's attitude towards his main protagonist is difficult to place. Njoroge's response to the gathering conflict around him, depicted sparingly but with considerable historical authenticity, is to retire behind fantasies of his historical destiny:

Weep Not, Child, p.94.

"...he was lost in speculations about his vital role in the country. He remembered David rescuing a whole country from the curse of Goliath." In comparison with Waiyaki, Njoroge has no basis for his fantasies either in achieved action or in heredity and prophecy, and it is clear that the reader is not intended to take them very seriously. But Ngũgĩ's characterization of Njoroge seems almost wholly without irony, and the reader is not

invited to take up the same position of detachment in relation '

Njoroge's other main line of escape - another Romeo and Juliet love relationship, this time with Mwihaki, the daughter of Jacobo.

Even the ending of the novel is somewhat ambivalent. With his father dead, his brothers all in prison or detention, and Boro bound to be hanged, Njoroge tries to commit suicide when Mwihaki refuses to elope to Uganda with him. His courage fails him, however, when his two mothers, Nyokabi and Njeri, true to the life-giving and -supporting role they play throughout the novel, come to find him in the darkness. The act of attempting suicide is presented as a cowardly escape, yet the actor, Njoroge, appears to escape censure. He is allowed to run ahead as the three return home in the last sentence of the novel and symbolically "open the door" of the future for his two mothers.

Ngũgĩ's apparent ambivalence towards Njoroge extends to hi attitude towards the "Mau Mau" movement itself, whose effects o the Gĩkũyũ villagers form the central concern of the novel. A Ngũgĩ put it in a 1964 interview: "Actually in the novel I hav

African writers Talking, p.121.

tried to show the effect of the Mau Mau war on the ordinary man and woman who were left in the villages. I think the terrible thing about the Mau Mau war was the destruction of family life, the destruction of personal relationships." Many critics inco rectly interpret this novel, presumably on the basis of their readings of later ones, as sympathetic towards the forest fighters: e.g. "The sympathies of the novel lie inevitably with the freedom fighters."

Cook and Okenimkpe, p.56.

The novel is very successful in its depiction of the bitte disillusionment of ex-servicemen who returned from fighting for "Freedom" to discover that the freedom they had been fighting fo was not about to be extended to them, which was one of the main catalysts of the revolt, and in its depiction of the plight of the landless Gĩkũyũ peasantry, the main spur to the revolt. Indeed, Ngũgĩ's description of Ngotho lovingly watching over his land by working on it as a "shamba-boy" for the colonial-settle usurper, Howlands, is likely to bring home to the reader the anguish of the dispossessed with a far more memorable poignancy than any number of statistics about the number of square miles c

land "alienated". Ngũgĩ is also unflinching in his portrayal of the ruthlessness and brutality of the colonial response to "Mau Mau". But the movement itself, as represented in the person of Boro, is kept at a firm distance from the reader's sympathies and is depicted as motivated by revenge and as fighting for nothing more principled than: "To kill. Unless you kill, you'll be killed. So you go on killing and destroying. It's a law of nature."

Weep Not, Child, p.102.

Three major themes can be identified in the novel: the themes of education and messianism, which are carried over from The River Between, and the declared focus on the suffering occasioned to the ordinary villagers by the revolt. This last was intended by Ngũgĩ to have a representative dimension: "...in my approach to the novel you use even a small village as a symbol of a larger concern.... I use a small village as a guide for the whole African struggle for identity."

'Tolstoy in Africa', p.52.

In comparison with the treatment of education in the earlier novel, Njoroge's notion of education is abstract and theoretical and the novel does not explore the tension between education and

political activism at all, although in many ways better placed t

do so. Although it could be argued that Ngũgĩ's rendering of Ngotho's recounting of the Gĩkũyũ creation myth is designed to show that education is not, in fact, the exclusive preserve of schools, the novel as a whole seems to endorse a generally uncritical acceptance of Western education, along the lines of Ngũgĩ's comment in an interview at Leeds: "The gospel of the peasant has always been: 'Get ye first education, and all other things will be added unto you.'"

Leeds Interviews, p. II.

Even if we are not expected to take Njoroge's messianic urgings seriously, as suggested earlier, no scepticism is being invited over the novel's identification of Jomo Kenyatta variously with Moses and with Christ. As a student at Makerere in the years leading to Uhuru, Ngũgĩ clearly shared the popular conception of the still-detained Kenyatta as a saviour; as Ngoth sees it: "To him Jomo stood for custom and tradition purified by grace of learning and much travel." Kenyatta's condemnation of "Mau Mau" and the resort to political violence, both before and during his detention, must have had considerable influence on th

Weep Not, Child, p. 74.

distance the novel puts between itself and the movement.

Where the sufferings of the ordinary villagers under the State of Emergency are concerned, Ngũgĩ uses Njoroge's family as a microcosm of the Gĩkũyũ peasantry, ninety percent of whom, though one would certainly not guess it from the novel, are estimated to have taken the movement's oath of loyalty. The break-up of the home is intended to exemplify the break-up of the larger Gĩkũyũ society, and the tragic dimension of this break-up is personified in Ngotho and dramatized in his decline in public esteem and self-respect as a result of his conflict with Boro. One of the problematic aspects of Ngũgĩ's fictionalization of the State of Emergency in this novel is that it appears to invite its readers to see "Mau Mau", rather than the repressive colonial dispensation against which the movement was revolting, as being responsible for the disintegration of Ngotho's family and the wider society it represents.

Generally evaluated by critics as a work of apprenticeship, paving the way for A Grain of Wheat, Weep Not, Child manages, nonetheless, to evoke the conditions of the State of Emergency in

Kenya with considerable power and poignancy. Ngũgĩ's style he

is sparser and less Biblical than in his earlier novel, in kee

ing with a project in fictional realism which is more firmly

based in history and has less of the air of myth-making about

Where the novel has weaknesses, for example in the imprecision

its treatment of the central question of education, and the

partial nature of its analysis of the revolt, they can be attr

buted not simply to the technical consequences of the choice o

Njoroge's consciousness as a vehicle, but also to the closenes

of the subject matter to Ngũgĩ's own experience and the interp

tations a privileged university student, product of the coloni

educational system, would inevitably place upon that experienc

<u>The Black Hermit</u>, the only full-length play of which Ngũg

is sole author, was written as the Makerere Students Dramatic

Society contribution to Uganda's Uhuru celebrations and was fi

produced in the Uganda National Theatre in November 1962.

Remi, the only son of his "tribe" to have achieved a univ

sity education, is confronted with the choice of remaining as

"black hermit" in the city, or of returning home to provide political leadership to his people, which would bring material benefits all round but would take him back to Thoni, his brother's widow, whom custom decreed that he should marry. He returns, but the failure of each to communicate his or her lov for the other leads Thoni to commit suicide. The first act, characterized by stylized and generally formal language, focus on the traditional world of the village; the second act, in wh the language is colloquial and informal, deals with the city; third act deals with the fatal intersection of the two.

Writing a preface for the 1968 publication of the play, Ngũgĩ distances himself from its main concern: "I thought then that tribalism was the biggest problem besetting the new East African countries.... [that] all we had to do was to expose an root out the cantankerous effects of tribalism, racialism and religious factions."

The Black Hermit, like Ngũgĩ's other early plays, has ten to receive short shrift from literary critics, who have lambas

Cook and Okenimkpe, p.153.

Mbughuni, p.96.

Robson, p.114.

it for "clumsy didacticism", cumbersome themes, and for charac ters which "lack depth and development" and are used as mere "mouthpieces for views on politics or education". It is by no means certain, however, that those who watched the plays in performance shared these views.

Ngũgĩ filled the interval between graduating from Makerer and going to Leeds in September 1964 with work as a junior rep ter on the Daily Nation in Nairobi. His regular column during this period, called "As I see it", ranged widely, from Shakes- peare to African Socialism, and provides useful insights into Ngũgĩ's liberal ideological position at this time.

Leeds provided something altogether different, though onc again it was on the fringe of the formal curriculum that the development of Ngũgĩ's thinking and writing received its major boost. Formally, Ngũgĩ spent most of his time at Leeds engage in research for a two year MA on Caribbean literature. Inform ally, Ngũgĩ's political thinking was revolutionized by his fir exposure to Marx and Fanon and by his interaction with other students like Grant Kamenju, Peter Nazareth, Ime Ikiddeh and A

Hunt, and, perhaps more particularly, with socialist academics like Arnold Kettle. Apart from the West Indian writers on whom his research focused, the specifically literary influences to which Ngũgĩ was first exposed at Leeds were Brecht, and Robert Tressell's The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists, described by Ikiddeh as a "major influence" on Ngũgĩ.

Homecoming, Foreward, p.xiii.

Ngũgĩ took the opportunity while at Leeds to travel exten sively. He not only toured England and Scotland and visited t continent but also attended the 1966 Afro-Asian Writers' conference in Beirut, from where he went on to visit Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon and to travel to Damascus with a group from the conference. He a visited the United States as a guest of honour at the inte national P.E.N. conference. His first impressions of the Unit States are significant when one comes to consider his more recer condemnation of what he sees as United States economic imperialism: "I was impressed by the actual material progress. Bu in the streets of New York, one of the richest cities in the world, I found beggars crawling in the streets and people who ha nowhere to sleep. I couldn't believe it."

Leeds Interview, p.111.

Ngũgĩ's main preoccupation while he was at Leeds was, however, the writing of A Grain of Wheat which was completed in

November 1966 and published in 1967.

The action of the novel covers a time-span of four days leading up to Independence Day, 12th December 1963, and involves four main characters, who are all villagers from the Gĩkũyũ village of Thabai: Mugo, Gikonyo, Mumbi and Karanja. Within the time-scale of the four-day fictional present Ngũgĩ manages, prin cipally by means of a series of interlocking flash-backs, to convey not only the personal histories of the important charac- ters, focusing in particular on their experiences under the Stat of Emergency, but also an outline of the history of Kenyan resis tance to colonial rule.

The most significant structural break with the pattern of the earlier novels lies in the abandonment of the single central protagonist and his replacement with a group of protagonists. The intention, deriving from Ngũgĩ's exposure to socialist think ing at Leeds, and to Fanon in particular, is clearly to employ a fictional form better suited to the rendering of collective consciousness. This does, however, run into problems from two main sources. Firstly, as is apparent from the title, whose

meaning is made explicit in the epigraph to the last section - "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit" - the novel makes extensive use of Biblical imagery and also takes as its meta-discourse the Christian model of individual guilt, expiatic and redemption.

A Grain of Wheat, (1967 ed.), p. 229.

Secondly, the novel's plot parallels that of Conrad's Under Western Eyes very closely; Conrad's influence is clearly discern-ible elsewhere in the novel; and Conrad can be seen to have provided Ngũgĩ with a model of a secular, but otherwise very similar, pattern of betrayal, remorse and redemption. The re-sult is an internal tension between a fictional structure designed as a vehicle for a historical project which will ex-plore Kenya's past and present from the collective vantage-point of the Kenyan peasantry, and a fictional rendering, at times almost obsessive in its minuteness, of the states of mind and th spiritual redemption of a series of essentially isolated indiv-iduals. Gikonyo's perception, "To live and die alone was the

A Grain of Wheat, p.135.

ultimate truth seems definitive.

The novel's opening focuses on Mugo, whose solitariness and air of self-sufficiency, combined with his reputation as a hero of the struggle, have led the villagers to see him as their choice as the main speaker at the Uhuru celebrations. One of th purposes of the celebrations is to honour those who died in the struggle, most notably Kihika, a Mau Mau leader from the village who was betrayed and hanged during the Emergency.

Mumbi, Kihika's sister, fulfils a key role as the catalyst in the development away from the pervasive atmosphere of guilt self-doubt and betrayal which characterizes the villagers' preparations for the Uhuru for which they endured so much. Gikonyo and Karanja are long-standing rivals for Mumbi's affections. Gikonyo is the village carpenter who marries Mumbi is sent to a detention camp, and betrays the movement by confessing the oath in order to be allowed to return to Mumbi. On his return he finds Mumbi suckling a child she has had by Karanja who, in spit of having lost her to Gikonyo, has betrayed his people by confes

sing the oath and joining the "loyalist" home-guard in order to avoid detention and remain near Mumbi. Having held out against his advances for six years - during which Karanja becomes a sadistic and much-hated home-guard chief - Mumbi yields to him in her ecstasy at hearing of Gikonyo's impending release. The existence of the child acts as a total block on communication between Mumbi and Gikonyo.

As the action unfolds it becomes apparent that it was the apolitical Mugo who, resentful like Conrad's Razumov at having the even tenor of his solitary existence intruded upon, had betrayed Kihika when the latter came to him for shelter after assassinating a notoriously brutal District Officer. Mugo initially refuses to speak at the Uhuru celebrations which are to be used by Kihika's former comrades as an opportunity to denounce and execute Karanja as Kihika's betrayer. But, as a direct result of Mumbi's confiding her marital problems to him and his own private confession of the betrayal of Kihika to her, Mugo makes a public confession at the meeting in order to save Karanja, and is duly executed.

Mugo's courage in publicly confessing and expiating his act of betrayal provides the inspiration for Gikonyo to reconsider his harsh rejection of Mumbi and her child. Their reconciliation, which, through the closeness of their names to those of Gĩkũyũ and Mumbi, the mythical founders of the Gĩkũyũ nation, implicitly extends to the regeneration of the Gĩkũyũ people and post-independence Kenya as a whole, is symbolized at the end of the novel in Gikonyo's plans for the carving of a traditional stool as a gift for Mumbi. The stool will not only incorporate figure of a woman big with a child as a symbol of hope for the future, but Gikonyo contemplates working an image of "a field needing clearance and cultivation" in beads on the seat. The struggle is not over with the celebration of Independence: much clearing still needs to be done if the ground for genuine freedo and independence is to be successfully cultivated.

A Grain of Wheat, p. 279.

The novel's focus is predominantly on the past. Its criticism of the post-Independence political dispensation in Kenya is low-key and almost incidental, in spite of Ngũgĩ's 1966 author's note: "But the situation and the problems are real —

A Grain of Wheat, p. vi.

sometimes too painfully real for the peasants who fought the British yet who now see all that they fought for being put on or side." The closest Ngũgĩ gets to a critique of the direction Kenya's independence had begun to take is in the pillorying of the M.P. for Thabai. Gikonyo, anxious to buy a farm for a co-operative farming venture, goes to the M.P. to ask him to organize a loan. The latter, who is clearly intended as a representative of post-independence corruption, buys the farm ir question for himself.

Where A Grain of Wheat breaks most significantly with the earlier novels is in its abandonment of education as containing the key to Kenya's problems, and its acceptance, at least in the abstract, of the necessity for armed struggle. Kariuki, Mumbi's younger brother, who, like Njoroge and Ngũgĩ himself, "was the only boy in these ridges to get a place in Siriana secondary school" is a wholly insignificant character who plays no part ir the action. His acceptance, as brother of a "Mau Mau" leader, t Siriana is not, as with Njoroge, treated as an area of potential

A Grain of Wheat, p. 169.

political reconciliation deriving from universal aspirations for education, but is now, much more realistically, and in keeping with Ngũgĩ's own experience, made politically very contentious: "why ... should a boy whose brother was in the Forest, be allowed to go to a government school, while the sons of loyalists could not?" The main characters are not singled out by their education; they are all uneducated peasants, and Kihika is shown to have run away from the brutality and blinkered vision of formal education.

A Grain of Wheat, p. 169.

The novel's endorsement of "Mau Mau" remains at an abstract level. Kihika is the only major character in the novel who is not guilty of betraying some person or ideal, and is explicitly likened to Christ at certain points, but he is characterized as totally insensitive to the needs of his girlfriend Wambuku, as being similar to Boro in his contempt for what he too sees as the weakness of his father's generation, and, essentially, as the Conradian man "haunted by a fixed idea". The living "Mau Mau" representatives in the novel are portrayed as obsessed by guilt over their past acts of individual violence, a pervasive guilt

which implicitly expunges any political legitimacy the novel might elsewhere be seeming to try to establish for the movement's resort to violence. Despite Ngũgĩ's reading of Fanon in the interim, this novel is clearly not informed by the surprisingly Fanonist view expressed in Ngũgĩ's 1963 review of Majdalany's A State of Emergency: "Violence in order to change an intolerable, unjust social order is not savagery: it purifies man."

Homecoming, p.28.

Although A Grain of Wheat does provide some evidence of an ideological shift, Ngũgĩ's exposure to socialism at Leeds was too recent to have been fully assimilated, and this novel, like the previous ones, can be seen to be predominantly informed by liberalism. Aesthetically this is perhaps most evident in the impulse towards "balance" in structure and characterization. So Ngũgĩ is at pains to explore the consciousness of, and invite sympathy for, politically antipathetic characters like Karanja and John Thompson, a once idealistic colonial administrator who had ended up being responsible for the novel's fictional version of the Hola detention camp massacre.

The major development demonstrated by this novel is in the

area of fictional technique. Apart from his very assured hand-ling of the fractured time-scheme, Ngũgĩ makes effective use of some intricate patterns of symbolism and develops a flexible prose style far better adapted to the complexity of many of the issues raised by the novel than the brevity and simplicity of t prose of the two earlier novels. Songs become part of the tex-ture of the narrative, the narrative voice assumes an identity one of the Thabai villagers in the second half of the novel and in general, Ngũgĩ can be seen to be making a concerted attempt adapt the novel's form to make it an appropriate vehicle for th consciousness of a group of Gĩyũkũ peasants with little formal Western education.

The attempt is undermined by Ngũgĩ's residual liberalism, leading to the contradictory focus on individual consciousness, usually of guilt, but this does not prevent A Grain of Wheat fr being one of the major accomplishments of African literature; n has it hindered most critics from recognizing it as such.

In formal terms A Grain of Wheat was the major outcome of

Ngũgĩ's stay at Leeds. He did not complete his MA thesis, clear-
ly regarding the production of his novel as more important and

Cook and Okenimkpe, p.5.

possibly, as Cook and Okenimkpe suggest, becoming sceptical about
the value of postgraduate awards. His decision not to complete
the MA may also have been connected to a more radical and far-
reaching questioning which first found expression in the inter-
view he gave to fellow students at Leeds before returning to
Kenya. When asked whether he had plans for any other books,

Leeds Interview, p.V.

Ngũgĩ replied: "No plans at present. You see I have reached a
point of crisis. I don't know whether it is worth any longer
writing in English.... I am very suspicious about writing about
universal values. If there are universal values, they are always
contained in the framework of social realities. And one impor-
tant social reality in Africa is that 90 per cent of the people
cannot read or speak English... The problem is this - I know who
I write about, but whom do I write for?"

In less formal terms, what Leeds did for Ngũgĩ is perhaps
best summed up in a comment he made in an interview with Mĩcere

Micere Mugo, Visions of Africa, p.25.

Gĩthae-Mũgo in August 1971: "I think I was confused at Makerere. I had more questions than answers and by the time I left I was disillusioned about many things. Leeds systematized my thinking."

In 1967 Ngũgĩ returned to Kenya as a Special Lecturer in English at University College, Nairobi, having earlier in the year attended the African Scandinavian Writers' Conference. He had apparently overcome his doubts about writing in English sufficiently to sign a contract with Heinemann to write a ~~novel~~ book, to be titled A Colonial Affair, about the social life of European settlers in Kenya. Significantly, however, although he embarked on serious research towards the project, he found himself unable to write the book. As he puts it in Detained: "An account of their social life would have to include a section on culture, an I was by then convinced that a Draculan idle class could never produce a culture."

Detained, p.29.

Ngũgĩ's stay at University College was brief but productive During this time he edited Zuka, the department's literary journal, and he was one of the driving forces behind the move to

abolish the English Department and replace it with a Department of African Literature and Languages. The key document here, reproduced in Homecoming, argues that "The primary duty of any literature department is to illuminate the spirit animating a people, to show how it meets new challenges, and to investigate possible areas of development and involvement", and is predicate on the central question: "If there is need for a 'study of the historic continuity of a single culture', why can't this be African?" The outcome of the debate was the establishment of two departments: Languages and Literature.

Homecoming, p.146.

Homecoming, p.146.

Early in 1969 Oginga Odinga was invited to speak on campus but prevented from doing so by the government; the students boycotted lectures in protest; the police intervened with considerable violence; and the College suspended five students. Ngũgĩ resigned his post in protest "against the mishandling of the crisis by the College administration, and ... the failure o a large body of members of staff to come out clearly and public with their views or attitude towards issues underlying the

Peter Darling interview, Sunday Nation, 16/3/69, p.15.

crisis."

Ngũgĩ was immediately offered a year's Fellowship in Creative Writing in the Department of Literature at Makerere Univer sity, during the course of which his collection of short plays <u>This Time Tomorrow</u> was published. This was the last work to be published under the name "James Ngugi". In 1970, in response to challenge from the floor (pointing to a contradiction between h statement "I am not even a Christian" and his use of the Christ ian name "James") after he had addressed the General Assembly o the Presbyterian Church of East Africa in March, Ngũgĩ decided that in future he would use the name Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o rather than James Ngugi.

<u>This Time Tomorrow</u> consists of three one-act plays: "The Rebels" and "The Wound in the Heart" which were written at Makerere; and the title play which was written as a radio-play for the B.B.C. Africa Service and first broadcast in 1967.

"The Rebels" deals with the return of the university-educated favourite son of the village, unexpectedly accompanied b

his foreign (but African) girl-friend, to be confronted by the parental demand that he marry a less than enthusiastic village girl chosen for him by his father. "The Wound in the Heart", rejected for the 1962 Uganda Drama Festival by the censors, reac like a preliminary sketch for Gikonyo's return from detention in A Grain of Wheat; the major difference being that the patiently waiting wife has eventually remarried as a result of having been misled into believing that her husband has been killed. In both plays the solution to the dilemma is found in the somewhat improbable death or suicide of the woman. "This Time Tomorrow" is an account of the destruction of a Nairobi shanty-town which, in highlighting the poverty of the majority of Nairobi's inhabitants and their disillusionment with independence, presages Ngũgĩ's later works.

On completing his fellowship at Makerere, Ngũgĩ accepted a year's visiting professorship in African Literature at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, where the long process of writing Petals of Blood was begun, before returning to Nairobi in August 1971 to take up a lectureship in the Department of Literature.

He was rapidly promoted to Senior Lecturer and before long was Acting Chairman and then Chairman of the department.

1972 saw the publication of Ngũgĩ's first collection of essays, Homecoming, which brings together essays, speeches and reviews written from 1962 to 1970, and thereby provides documentation, invaluable to the interpretation of the fiction, on the shift in Ngũgĩ's thinking over this crucial period in both Kenya's and his own political development. Ngũgĩ himself argues in his Author's Note that Homecoming "is an integral part of the fictional world" of the early novels: "Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction ar even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society."

Homecoming, p. xv, both quotations.

The collection is divided into three sections. The essays in the first, "On Culture", lead from an early critique of racis and tribalism, through a scathing indictment of the role of Christianity in serving colonial expansion, most obviously through the destruction of traditional culture, to the advocacy

of a national culture which will depend on "a completely social-ized economy, collectively owned and controlled by the people", and on the prior "complete and total liberation of the people through the elimination of all exploitative forces".

Homecoming, p.13.

The second section, "Writers in Africa", includes essays o Achebe, Soyinka and Aluko, and Okot p'Bitek and East African writing. The literary criticism is always related to the overa polemical thrust of Ngũgĩ's lucid and impassioned attack on monopoly capitalism, and comes to the conclusion that: "It is n enough for the African artist, standing aloof, to view society and highlight its weaknesses. He must try to go beyond this, t seek out the sources, the causes and the trends of a revolution ary struggle which has already destroyed the traditional power-map drawn up by the colonialist nations."

Homecoming, p.65/6.

The third section, "Writers from the Caribbean", the fruit of Ngũgĩ's research at Leeds, consists of two essays on George Lamming and two broad surveys of Caribbean fiction. The volume concludes with an appendix containing the memorandum "On the

Abolition of the English Department, prepared as part of the Nairobi debate, which has been the single most influential document in the revision of University English Department curricula in "Anglophone" Africa.

In 1974 a joint project between Ngũgĩ and Mĩcere Gĩthae Mũgo, which had been conceived in 1971, finally found fruition i the play The Trial of Dedan Kimathi. The final spur to the completion of the play was the 1974 publication of Kenneth Watene's play Dedan Kimathi which, following the pattern of colonial writings about 'Mau Mau', depicted Kĩmathi as a crazed and brutal paranoiac. Ngũgĩ and Mũgo, by contrast, in "an imaginative recreation and interpretation of the collective will of the Kenyan peasants and workers in their refusal to break under sixty years of colonial torture and ruthless oppression by the British ruling classes", were determined to recreate Kĩmathi as the "great man of courage, of commitment to the people" of popular memory.

The content of the play derives from the historical trial of Kĩmathi after his betrayal and capture in 1956, but its polemica

thrust is aimed at highlighting another, contemporary, kind of trial: "We believe that Kenyan Literature - indeed all African Literature, and its writers is on trial. We cannot stand on the fence. We are either on the side of the people or on the side of imperialism."

The play makes no attempt at a naturalistic recreation of the trial and makes extensive use of mime, dance, and song, with the songs frequently being in Gĩkũyũ. It is episodic, with the action in the court-room being interrupted by scenes depicting other, related, action. There is a scene early in the play in which the actors enact the Black Man's History - from the time of the slave traders to the continuing struggle against imperialism - as an overarching historical context for the action of the play. There is a series of scenes in which a symbolically un-named Kenyan Woman, representative of the Kenyan people, recruits a Boy and a Girl as her helpers in an attempt to assist Kĩmathi to escape.

Towards the end of the play there is a long flash-back to

his time in the forests in which Kĩmathi is seen putting on tria[l]

a group of forest-fighters, including his brother, who have

betrayed him. It is in their depiction of Kĩmathi's ultimate

Trial of Dedan Kimathi, p.62.

betrayal as resulting from his having "so hated the sight of

Africans killing one another that he sometimes became a little

soft with our enemies" that Ngũgĩ and Mũgo repudiate Watene's

interpretation most directly.

There is also a series of scenes in the middle of the play

in which Kĩmathi is subjected to a series of private trials in

his cell. These depict the colonial magistrate's promises to

spare his life by way of a bribe for acknowledging the jurisdic-

tion of the court; the blandishments of black businessmen and th[e]

exhortations of the clergy; and, finally, torture. While thes[e]

trial cum temptation scenes are reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's

Murder in the Cathedral, the play as a whole is far closer in

genre to Brecht's epic theatre - if one is looking for Western

antecedents to set beside its obvious debt to the Gĩkũyũ oral

tradition.

Preface.

"We Believe," say the authors in their Preface, "that good theatre is that which is on the side of the people, that which, without masking mistakes and weaknesses, gives people courage ar urges them to higher resolves in their struggle for total liberation." That this idea of what constitutes "good" theatre was shared by many among the enthusiastic audiences which attended its first run in Nairobi would seem to be attested to by a first night review which describes: "a degree of audience participati and appreciation which one seldom sees in Nairobi - culminating in many of the audience joining in the final triumphant dance down the central aisle and spilling out into the street." It would have been this kind of audience response, rather than official approval of the content of the play, which led to its being sent to Lagos as one of Kenya's official entries for the 1977 Festival of Arts and Culture.

Sunday Nation review quoted on back cover of paperback edition.

In 1975 Ngũgĩ published Secret Lives, a collection of thirteen short stories which he describes in the Preface as his "creative autobiography over the last twelve years." Many of t stories were published (usually in Penpoint) while Ngũgĩ was at

Preface.

Makerere, and many of them feature characters, themes or situations which recur in the novels. Thus, for example, "The Return" is another variation on a theme that has its fullest exploration in Gikonyo's return from detention in A Grain of Wheat; "Goodbye Africa" deals with a situation and relationship very similar to that of John and Margery Thompson in the same novel; and the ghoulish political competition to see who can provide the most extravagant coffin for Wahinya in "A Mercedes Funeral" presages the competition of thieves and robbers in Devil on the Cross.

The collection is divided into three sections. The first, titled "Of Mothers and Children," contains three of the earliest stories and conveys a profound concern for the hardships endured by women in traditional Gĩkũyũ society, particularly the plight of barren women, thereby presaging the dominant role played by women in much of Ngũgĩ's fiction. The stories in the second section, "Fighters and Martyrs," either explore the confusion an indecision which result from the conflict between Gĩkũyũ trad-

ition and Christianity, perceived in terms very similar to those of The River Between, or deal with the Emergency and its aftermath.

The last section is notable for three much longer stories written after Ngũgĩ's return to Kenya from Evanston in 1971. These three, "Minutes of Glory", "A Mercedes Funeral" and "Wedding at the Cross", focus on the victims of post-independence Kenya's much-bruited economic "success": those left behind or trampled underfoot in the scramble for wealth and status. These are highly accomplished stories, scathingly satirical and very similar in mood to much of Petals of Blood, which conclusively give the lie to Ngũgĩ's comment: "I don't think I'm particularly good at them [short stories] myself."

'Tolstoy in Africa', p.54.

Ngũgĩ spent September 1975 as a guest of the Soviet Writers Union at Yalta, where he completed Petals of Blood, conceived in the United States six years earlier. "It was not", said Ngũgĩ in a 1978 interview, "a very easy novel to write. It kept changing all the time. I grew with it all the time. And that is why it

Weekly Review Interview, 9/1/78, p.9.

Anita Shreve interview, *Viva*, 3 (1977), p.36.

Killam, *Introduction*, p.74.

Weekly Review interview, p.10.

took so long to write." "Change" is a word that recurs repeatedly in Ngũgĩ's answers to questions about how Petals of Blood relates to his other works: "I feel that I have changed, in terms of outlook."

The fiction Ngũgĩ produced in the 1970s does not simply embody more explicit statements of positions already held when writing the earlier works, as one might infer from many of Ngũgĩ's critics. G.D. Killam, for example, in discussing Secret Lives, says: "Ngũgĩ's position in the stories as in A Grain of Wheat and Petals of Blood is that of a humane socialist...." In fact, Petals of Blood reveals a marked break from the liberal humanism of the early works, mediated aesthetically through Christian and Gĩkũyũ mythology and the Great Tradition, and a shift to a militant socialism informed by Marx, Fanon, and Cabral.

Ngũgĩ has been quite explicit about the ideological thrust of this novel compared to the previous ones. Referring to the novel's characters he has said : "I am more interested in their development from the stage of black cultural nationalism to the

stage of class consciousness. From a stage when (a character) sees oppression in terms of culture alone, to the stage when he can see oppression and exploitation as being total, that is, as being economic, political and cultural." Ngũgĩ sees this novel as representing "a shift ... from a concentration on the vacillating psychology of the petit bourgeoisie to the position of th[e] worker and the peasant." It must, however, be added that none o[f] the four main characters is, strictly speaking, a representative worker or peasant.

Jurgen Martini et al., interview, Kunapipi, 3 (1981), p.137.

The central focus of the novel is on the fictional village of Ilmorog which "progresses" in the twelve years the action of the novel takes, from drought-stricken dereliction in the middle of nowhere to commercial boom-town astride the Transafrica Highway. Ilmorog's "progress", representative of that of post-independence Kenya as a whole, is the vehicle for the most comprehensive critique in African literature of the corruption and indifference of the neo-colonial elite, and the practical consequences of its economic and cultural dependency, seen most

starkly in the poverty and dispossession of the peasantry. Ilmorog's condition at the beginning of the novel is described as being that of "an island of underdevelopment which after being sucked thin and dry was itself left standing, static, a grotesque distorted image of what peasant life was and could be."

Petals of Blood, p.184.

In order to place Ilmorog's fate in its proper historical context Ngũgĩ reconstructs Kenya's history from pre-colonial times. As Karega puts it: "To understand the present ... you must understand the past. To know where you are, you must know where you came from...." Knowing where you come from in this novel involves, in particular, and in marked contrast to the early novels, understanding the relationship between education and the ideology it serves.

Petals of Blood, p. 127/8.

The structure of the novel is borrowed from the detective story. Three prominent company directors in New Ilmorog have been murdered by arson; the four main characters in the novel, Munira, Wanja, Karega and Abdulla, have been arrested as suspects; and the time-present of the novel is taken up with Inspec

tor Godfrey's investigation of the murder. This is conducted mainly by the extraction of a lengthy written statement from Munira, the headmaster of the village school, in which he recounts events in Ilmorog since he arrived there twelve years earlier. Much of the narrative thus takes the form of extended flashbacks which, in turn, allow scope for the reminiscences of the other three main characters. The four individual histories are gradually laid bare, as are the many coincidental points at which those histories intersect with each other and with those c the three murdered men. The history of the community in the day before Munira's first arrival is reconstructed through the remir iscences of Nyakinyua, Wanja's grandmother, an archetypal villag elder who is the guardian of Gĩkũyũ myth, legend and lore.

Of the four central chracters Wanja is the dominant personality. Her promising school career terminated by her seduction, impregnation and abandonment by Kimeria, one of the murdered mer she earns a precarious and sordid living as a barmaid before arriving in Ilmorog. Once there, her dynamism leads to her becoming a successful businesswoman, initially via the brewing c

Theng'eta, a traditional herbal spirit made from flowers with th "petals of blood" of the title. She becomes involved in relationships with Munira, Karega and Abdulla in turn but, bitterly disillusioned by both the loss of her brewing business as a result of the greed of capitalist investors in New Ilmorog, and her abandonment by Karega, she uses her remaining money to set herself up as the Madame of the up-market brothel in which the three company directors are incinerated. The philosophy by which Wanja now regulates her life is: "This world ... this Kenya ... this Africa knows only one law. You eat somebody or you are eaten. You sit on somebody or somebody sits on you."

Petals of Blood, p.291.

Munira is a portrait of inadequacy - the epitome, in fact, of the "vacillating psychology of the petit bourgeoisie". Expelled from Siriana for his part in a pupils' strike, he becomes a schoolteacher and accepts the post in Ilmorog as a refuge both from his rigidly "Christian" wife and father and from his sense of failure in the face of the worldly success of his siblings. Munira's father, Waweru, is a wealthy landowner who acquired his

wealth through collaboration with the colonial government and carries much of the weight of Ngũgĩ's criticism of institutionalized Christianity. Inadequate as a teacher, anxious to avoid having to make choices and become involved in other people's lives, and unable to have a fulfilling relationship with Wanja in consequence, he consigns himself towards the end of the novel to a fanatical revivalist Christianity.

Karega, as part of a pattern of repetition to be found throughout the novel, was also expelled from Siriana for his involvement in a pupils' strike in protest against an inflexibly Eurocentric education. Karega becomes Munira's assistant and it is he who conceives of the villagers' epic journey to Nairobi, consciously reminiscent of the march of the women in Sembene Ousmane's God's Bits of Wood, to seek drought-aid from Ilmorog's absentee Member of Parliament. The journey rekindles the collective spirit in the community but its end result, the development of New Ilmorog, brings, by a bitter irony, the final destruction of that community. Dismissed as a result of Munira's

jealousy, Karega leaves Ilmorog but returns to become the trade union organizer at the Ilmorog brewery. Of all the characters, i is Karega who learns most during the course of the action and it is through his perceptions that much of the novel's criticism of the neo-colonial dispensation in Kenya is voiced.

Abdulla is the novel's representative ex-"Mau Mau" guerilla whose unqualified heroism, depicted in Fanonist terms, is a marked change from the equivocation surrounding the treatment of "Mau Mau" in the earlier novels. Maimed in the forest and unrewarded for his sacrifice after independence, he returns as a petty trader and storekeeper to Ilmorog. Infused with the spiri of the warrior heroes of Kenya's primary resistance to colonialism, he comes into his own as the community's chief storyteller and inspiration on the journey to Nairobi.

It is left to Abdulla, dispossessed and impoverished in Ne Ilmorog, to father the child Wanja conceives, after so many yea of waiting, at the end of the novel. This unborn child serves the same symbolic function as the woman "big with child" Gikony plans to incorporate in his carved stool. It signifies, as Ngũ