

Step by step Analysing characters

PRE-READING

1

Nigeria has the highest population in Africa and its economy is largely based on oil. Yet in 2018 the human development index (HDI), which is used by the United Nations to measure progress, placed Nigeria on rank 148 among 189 countries worldwide. With an estimated 87 million people, i.e. about half the population, living on less than 1.90\$ a day, Nigeria now has the largest number of people worldwide living in extreme poverty.

- Locate Nigeria on the map.
- Describe the photos. Assess what impression they give of Nigeria.
- Pair work:** Discuss to what extent the photos reflect the economic situation of Nigeria.



COMPREHENSION

2

In her novel *Americanah*, published in 2013, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie tells the story of Ifemelu and Obinze. They have known each other since their high school days and, having started a relationship at university, decide to live together. But as the political situation in military-ruled Nigeria becomes increasingly difficult, Ifemelu emigrates to the US, where Obinze hopes to be reunited with her. Yet due to a stricter US immigration policy following 9/11, their plan fails. Obinze cannot join Ifemelu in the US and goes to Great Britain instead. When his visa expires, he is forced to return to Nigeria, where he becomes rich and successful.

- Read extract 1 from the novel and outline Obinze's relationship to Ifemelu.
- Describe the setting and explain what impression of Nigeria is created.
- Discuss how the description relates to your previous impression of Nigeria.

Americanah

by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Extract 1

When Obinze first saw her e-mail, he was sitting in the back of his Range Rover in still Lagos traffic, his jacket slung over the front seat, a rusty-haired child beggar glued outside his window, a hawkker pressing colourful CDs against the other window, the radio turned on low to the Pidgin English news on Wazobia FM, he skimmed the e-mail, instinctively wishing it were longer. *Ceiling, kedu? Hope all is well with work and family. Ranyinudo said she ran into you some time ago and that you now have a child! Proud Papa. Congratulations. I recently decided to move back to Nigeria. Should be in Lagos in a week. Would love to keep in touch. Take care, Ifemelu.*

He read it again slowly and felt the urge to smooth something, his trousers, his shaved-bald head. She had called him Ceiling. In the last e-mail from her, sent just before he got married, she had called him Obinze, apologized for her silence over the years, wished him happiness in sunny sentences and mentioned the black American she was living with. A gracious e-mail. He had hated it. He had hated it so much that he Googled the black American – and why should she give him the man's full name if not because she wanted him Googled? – a lecturer at Yale, and found it infuriating that she lived with a man who referred on his blog to friends as "cats", but it was the photo of the black American, oozing intellectual cool in distressed jeans and black-rimmed

glasses, that had tipped Obinze over, made him send her a cold reply. *Thank you for the good wishes, I have never been happier in my life, he'd written. He hoped she would write something mocking back – it was so unlike her, not to have been even vaguely tart in that first e-mail – but she did not write at all and when he e-mailed her again, after his honeymoon in Morocco, to say he wanted to keep in touch and wanted to talk sometime, she did not reply.*

The traffic was moving. A light rain was falling. The child beggar ran along, his doe-eyed expression more theatrical, his motions frantic: bringing his hand to his mouth, again and again, fingertips pursed together. Obinze rolled down the window and held out a hundred-naira note. From the rear-view mirror, his driver, Gabriel, watched with grave disapproval.

"God bless you, oga!" the child beggar said. "Don't be giving money to these beggars, sir," Gabriel said. "They are all rich. They are using begging to make big money. I heard about one that built a block of six flats in Ikeja!"

"So why are you working as a driver instead of a beggar, Gabriel?" Obinze asked, and laughed, a little too heartily. He wanted to tell Gabriel that his girlfriend from university had just e-mailed him [...] His phone rang and for a confused moment he thought it was Ifemelu calling from America.

Preview

In this workshop, you will focus on analysing characters in fictional texts. To do so, you will start by collecting information on the different aspects of a character's personality. Then you will write a characterization.

3

The characters in a novel are presented in a way that makes the reader understand their role, sympathize with them in difficult situations or even identify with them. There are minor characters who play a less important role and are consequently sketched rather than presented in detail – and there are main characters, the protagonists who the author focuses on. These characters are often round characters who are complex and develop throughout the novel, whereas minor characters are often flat characters who are one-dimensional. Obinze is evidently one of the protagonists in the novel. Read extract 2 and sum up what you find out about his life.

Extract 2

“Darling, *kedu ebe I no?*” His wife, Kosi, always began her calls to him with those words. Where are you? He never asked where she was when he called her, but she would tell him, anyway: I’m just getting to the salon. I’m on Third Mainland Bridge. [...] On Lekki Expressway, the traffic moved swiftly in the waning rain and soon Gabriel was pressing the horn in front of the high black gates of his home. [...] Inside was the furniture imported from Italy, his wife, his two-year-old daughter, Buchi, the nanny Christiana, his wife’s sister Chioma, who was on a forced holiday because university lecturers were on strike yet again, and the new housegirl, Marie, who had been brought from Benin Republic after his wife decided that Nigerian housegirls were unsuitable. The rooms would all be cool, air-conditioner vents swaying quietly, and the kitchen would be fragrant with curry and thyme, and CNN would be on downstairs, while the television upstairs would be turned to Cartoon Network, and pervading it all would be the undisturbed air of well-being. He climbed out of the car. His gait was stiff, his legs difficult to lift. He had begun, in the past months, to feel bloated from all he had acquired – the family, the houses, the cars, the bank accounts – and would, from time to time, be overcome by the urge to prick everything with a pin, to deflate it all, to be free. He was no longer sure, he had in fact never been sure, whether he liked his life because he really did or whether he liked it because he was supposed to. “Darling,” Kosi said, opening the door before he got to it. She was all made-up, her complexion glowing, and he thought, as he often did, what a beautiful woman she was, [...] She laughed. The same way she laughed, with an open, accepting enjoyment of her own looks, when people asked her “Is

your mother white? Are you a half-caste?” because she was so fair-skinned. It had always discomfited him, the pleasure she took in being mistaken for mixed-race. “Daddy-daddy!” Buchi said, running to him in the slightly off-balance manner of toddlers. She was fresh from her evening bath, wearing her flowered pyjamas and smelling sweetly of baby lotion. “Buch-buch! Daddy’s Buch!” He swung her up, kissed her, nuzzled her neck and, because it always made her laugh, pretended to throw her down on the floor. “Will you bathe or just change?” Kosi asked, following him upstairs, where she had laid out a blue caftan on his bed. He would have preferred a dress shirt or a simpler caftan instead of this, with its overly decorative embroidery, which Kosi had bought for an outrageous sum from one of those new pretentious fashion designers on The Island. But he would wear it to please her. “I’ll just change,” he said. “How was work?” she asked, in the vague, pleasant way that she always asked. He told her he was thinking about the new block of flats he had just completed in Parkview. He hoped Shell would rent it because the oil companies were always the best renters, never complaining about abrupt hikes, paying easily in American dollars so that nobody had to deal with the fluctuating naira. “Don’t worry,” she said, and touched his shoulder. “God will bring Shell. We will be okay, darling.” The flats were in fact already rented by an oil company but he sometimes told her senseless lies such as this, because a part of him hoped she would ask a question or challenge him, though he knew she would not, because all she wanted was to make sure the conditions of their life remained the same, and how he made that happen she left entirely to him.

ANALYSIS: CHARACTERIZATION

4

- a) Copy the grid below. Use a complete A4 page.
- b) Read both extracts from the novel again. Add quotes from the two extracts that match the different aspects of Obinze’s personality to the second column of the grid.
- c) Explain what the quotes reveal about Obinze (third column).

| aspect | quote | interpretation |
|---|---|--|
| 1. Outward appearance physical features/clothes/body language | “He [...] felt the urge to smooth something, his trousers, his shaved- bald head.” (extract 1, ll. 17-19) | well-groomed person; gesture suggests need to reassure himself; agitation upon receiving message |
| 2. Character traits e.g. modesty, courage, uncertainty | | |
| 3. Behaviour How a character acts gives an impression of his/her motives, abilities or moral standing. | | |
| 4. Mood the emotional state of a character | | |
| 5. Language e.g. correct or incorrect use of grammar, simple or sophisticated vocabulary, colloquial language; reflects a character’s social background, education, attitudes, etc. | | |
| 6. Family/social background | | |
| 7. Relationship with others how a character interacts with others and is perceived by them | | |

5

Use your grid and the information from the info box below to write a characterization of Obinze.

Types of character and characterization

Info

A character in a fictional text may be presented in different ways:

| Telling technique: direct characterization | Showing technique: indirect (dramatic) characterization |
|--|---|
| The reader is told directly and explicitly about the character’s looks, traits and attitudes. This can be done by the narrator, the character himself/herself or other characters. | The reader may be able to infer character traits from a character’s actions, clothing, body language, interactions with others and the language he or she uses. |
| EXAMPLE: When described as feeling “the urge to smooth something, his trousers, his shaved- bald head” (extract 1, ll. 17-19), Obinze is presented as a well-groomed man who cares about his appearance. | EXAMPLE: The description of Obinze as feeling “the urge to smooth something, his trousers, his shaved- bald head” (extract 1, ll. 17-19) suggests a need to reassure himself, which reveals his agitation upon reading Ifemelu’s message. |

WRITING: DISCUSSION

6

It is not untypical for Nigerian novels to deal with the experience of former exiles on their return from the US or Great Britain. Discuss to what extent the question of identity is dealt with in the two extracts from the novel.