

## 7. Dead Men's Path

Chinua Achebe

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### About the writer :

Chinua Achebe was a famous Nigerian novelist, poet, professor and critic. He was born and educated in Nigeria (Africa). His most famous novel is *Things Fall Apart*. His other novels include *No Longer at Ease*, *Arrow of God*, *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of Savannah*. Achebe's writings express the Nigerian culture; especially the traditions of Igbo society, the effects of Christian influences and the clash of Western and African values during and after the colonial era.

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Michael Obi's hopes were fulfilled much earlier than he had expected. He was appointed headmaster of Ndume Central School in January 1949. It had always been an unprogressive school, so the Mission authorities decided to send a young and energetic man to run it. Obi accepted this responsibility with enthusiasm. He had many wonderful ideas and this was an opportunity to put them into practice. He had had sound secondary school education which designated him a "pivotal teacher" in the official records and set him apart from the other headmasters in the mission field. He was outspoken in his condemnation of the narrow views of these older and often less-educated ones.

"We shall make a good job of it, shan't we?" he asked his young wife when they first heard the joyful news of his promotion.

"We shall do our best," she replied. "We shall have such beautiful gardens and everything will be just modern and delightful . . ." In their two years of married life she had become completely infected by his passion for "modern methods" and his denigration of "these old and superannuated people in the teaching field who would be better employed as traders in the Onitsha market." She began to see herself already as the admired wife of the young headmaster, the queen of the school.

The wives of the other teachers would envy her position. She would set the fashion in everything. Then, suddenly, it occurred to her that there might not be other wives. Wavering between hope and fear, she asked her husband, looking anxiously at him.

“All our colleagues are young and unmarried,” he said with enthusiasm which for once she did not share. “Which is a good thing,” he continued.

“Why?”

“Why? They will give all their time and energy to the school.”

Nancy was sad. For a few minutes she became doubtful about the new school~ but it was only for a few minutes. Her little personal misfortune could not blind her to her husband’s happy prospects. She looked at him as he sat folded up in a chair. He was stoop-shouldered and looked frail. But he sometimes surprised people with sudden bursts of physical energy. In his present posture, however, all his bodily strength seemed to have retired behind his deep- set eyes, giving them an extraordinary power of penetration. He was only twenty -six, but looked thirty or more. On the whole, he was not unhandsome.

“What are you thinking, Mike,” said Nancy after a while.

“I was thinking what a grand opportunity we’ve got at last to show these people how a school should be run.” Ndume School was backward in every sense of the word. Mr. Obi put his whole life into the work, and his wife hers too. He had two aims. A high standard of teaching was insisted upon, and the school compound was to be turned into a place of beauty. Nancy’s dream- gardens came to life with the coming of the rains, and blossomed. Beautiful hibiscus and allamanda hedges in brilliant red and yellow marked out the carefully tended school compound from the rank neighborhood bushes.

One evening as Obi was admiring his work he was scandalized to see an old woman from the village hobble right across the compound, through a marigold flower-bed and the hedges. On going up there he found faint signs of an almost disused path from the village across the school compound to the bush on the other side.

“It amazes me,” said Obi to one of his teachers who had been three years in the school, “that you people allowed the villagers to make use of this foot- path. It is simply incredible.” He shook his head.

“The path,” said the teacher apologetically, “appears to be very important to them. Although it is hardly used, it connects the village shrine with their place of burial.”

“And what has that got to do with the school?” asked the headmaster.

“Well, I don’t know,” replied the other with a shrug of the shoulders. “But I remember there was a big row some time ago when we attempted to close it.”

“That was some time ago. But it will not be used now,” said Obi as he walked away. “What will the Government Education Officer think of this when he comes to inspect the

school next week? The villagers might, for all I know, decide to use the schoolroom for a pagan ritual during the inspection.”

Heavy sticks were planted closely across the path at the two places where it entered and left the school premises. These were further strengthened with barbed wire.

Three days later the village priest of Ani called on the headmaster. He was an old man and walked with a slight stoop. He carried a stout walking stick which he usually tapped on the floor, by way of emphasis, each time he made a new point in his argument.

“I have heard,” he said after the usual exchange of cordialities, “that our ancestral footpath has recently been closed. . . .”

“Yes,” replied Mr. Obi. “We cannot allow people to make a highway of our school compound.”

“Look here, my son,” said the priest bringing down his walking stick, “this path was here before you were born and before your father was born. The whole life of this village depends on it. Our dead relatives depart by it and our ancestors visit us by it. But most important, it is the path of children coming in to be born . . .”

Mr. Obi listened with a satisfied smile on his face.

“The whole purpose of our school,” he said finally, “is to eradicate just such beliefs as that. Dead men do not require footpaths. The whole idea is just fantastic. Our duty is to teach your children to laugh at such ideas.”

“What you say may be true,” replied the priest, “but we follow the practices of our fathers. If you reopen the path we shall have nothing to quarrel about. What I always say is: let the hawk perch and let the eagle perch.” He rose to go.

“I am sorry,” said the young headmaster. “But the school compound cannot be a thoroughfare. It is against our regulations. I would suggest you construct another path, going around our premises. We can even get our boys to help in building it. I don’t suppose the ancestors will find the little detour too burdensome.”

“I have no more words to say,” said the old priest, already outside.

Two days later a young woman in the village died in childbirth. A diviner was immediately consulted and he prescribed heavy sacrifices to pacify ancestors insulted by the fence.

Obi woke up next morning among the ruins of his work. The beautiful hedges were torn up not just near the path but right round the school, the flowers trampled to death and one of the school buildings pulled down. That day, the white Supervisor came to inspect the school and wrote a nasty report on the state of the premises but more

seriously about the “tribal-war situation developing between the school and the village, arising in part from the misguided zeal of the new headmaster.”

### About the story :

‘Dead Men’s Path’ is one of his most famous short stories. In this story the conflict takes place between the priest representing the traditions of the village fore-fathers and the new headmaster of Ndume Central School representing modern ideas and education. As a result a tribal-war situation develops between the school and the village.

### GLOSSARY

put into practice (v)	:	to execute
sound (adj)	:	good
designated (v)	:	ranked, titled
pivotal (adj)	:	important
condemnation (n)	:	criticism
denigration (n)	:	defame
superannuated (adj)	:	old-fashioned, out of date
colleagues (n)	:	co-workers
stoop shouldered (adj)	:	with bent shoulders
frail (adj)	:	weak
hibiscus (n)	:	a plant or shrub with brightly coloured flowers
allamanda (n)	:	a plant or shrub with brightly coloured flowers
tended (adj)	:	cared
rank (adj)	:	coarse, indecent
scandalized (v)	:	offended, shocked
hobble (v)	:	to walk in a limping manner
incredible (adj)	:	unbelievable
shrine (n)	:	building or place associated with something deeply respected
shrug (v)	:	to lift shoulders high to show difference

row (n)	:	noisy quarrel
ritual (n)	:	religious act, ceremony
premises (n)	:	campus
stoop (v)	:	to bend
cordialities (n)	:	exchange of wishes
eradicate (v)	:	to remove
thoroughfare (n)	:	way for all
detour (n)	:	a roundabout way
trampled (v)	:	crushed, trodden

### COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS :

#### A. Choose the correct alternative:

- Obi and his wife were married for \_\_\_\_\_ years  
 (a) five (b) four  
 (c) two (d) one
- \_\_\_\_\_ was the name of Obi's wife.  
 (a) Michael (b) Nancy  
 (c) Odanta (d) Marry
- \_\_\_\_\_ was the name of the school.  
 (a) Missionary School (b) Ndume Central School  
 (c) Secondary School (d) Onitsha School
- \_\_\_\_\_ died in the village.  
 (a) A little boy (b) An old man  
 (c) A young woman (d) A priest

#### B. Answer the following questions in 30 to 40 words each :

- Why was Obi given the responsibility of the Ndume Central school?
- What were the two aims set by Obi for the betterment of the school?

3. What did the priest of Ani tell Obi about the path?
4. Why was the path very important for the villagers?
5. What did the diviner suggest at the death of a young woman?
6. Describe the report prepared by the white supervisor.

**C. Answer the following questions in 125 words each :**

1. Describe the condition of the Ndume Central School before and after Michael Obi.
2. Draw a character sketch of Obi.
3. Why were the school building and the hedges ruined?

**D. State True or False:**

1. Michael Obi was 30 years of age. (True/False)
2. Nancy was the name of Obi's wife. (True/False)
3. A young woman died in a road accident in the village. (True/False)
4. Michael Obi and the priest of Ani had a heated discussion between them. (True/False)
5. The White Supervisor wrote a good report of Obi's work in the school. (True/False)

**E. Creative Writing :**

Extend the story and imaginatively create a new end of the story.