

Set a Purpose

Read to discover why an old man is unhappy and what he plans to do about it.



## CHARACTERS

OKORIE, an old man

AROB and OJIMA, Okorie's grandsons

BASSI, a woman

A STRANGER 1

## Act I

**SETTING.** *An imaginary village in **Nigeria**. All the scenes of this play take place in OKORIE'S mud-walled house. The time is the present.*

**Scene I.** *The hall in OKORIE'S house. There are three doors. One leads directly into OKORIE'S room. The two others are on either side of the hall. Of these, one leads to his grandsons' apartment, while the other acts as a general exit.*

*The furniture consists of a wide bamboo bed, on which is spread a mat; a wooden chair; a low table; and a few **odds and ends**. OKORIE, an old man, is sitting at the edge of the bed. He holds a stout, rough walking-stick. On the wooden chair near the bed sits a STRANGER, a man of about forty-five years of age. It is evening. The room is rather dark, and a **cloth-in-oil lantern** hangs from a hook on the wall. 2*

**OKORIE.** Believe me, Stranger, in my days things were different. It was a happy thing to become an old man, because young people were taught to respect elderly men.

**STRANGER.** Here in the village you should be happier. In the town where I come from, a boy of ten riding a hired bicycle will knock down a man of fifty years without **any feeling of pity**. You are lucky that you have your grandchildren to help you. Many people in town have no one to help them.

**1 Structure: Script**  
What information does the writer provide in the cast of characters?

**2 Structure: Script/Identify Emotional Responses**  
What do the stage directions tell you about Okorie?  
What do you feel as you visualize the writer's description?

### In Other Words

**Nigeria** a country in Africa

**odds and ends** small things

**cloth-in-oil lantern** hand-held lamp lit by oil

**any feeling of pity** caring or saying he is sorry

### Cultural Background

In Nigeria and other West African countries, *butabu*, or mud, has been used to construct some of the most elaborate buildings, from roundhouses to palaces. The tallest mud building in Nigeria, the Goborau Minaret, is 250 years old.





**OKORIE.** Look at me, Stranger, and tell me if these shabby clothes and this dirty beard show that I have good grandchildren. Believe me, Stranger, in my younger days things were different. Old men were happy. When they died, they were buried with honor. But in my case, Stranger, my old age has been unhappy. And my only fear now is that when I die, my grandsons will not **accord me the honor** due to my age. It will be a disgrace to me.

**STRANGER.** I will now go on my way, Okorie. May God help you.

**OKORIE.** I need help, Stranger, for although I have two grandsons, I am lonely and unhappy because they do not love or care for me. They tell me that I am from an older world. Farewell, Stranger. If you call again and I am alive, I will welcome you back. **3**

[Exit STRANGER. BASSI, *a beautiful woman of about thirty years*, enters.]

**BASSI.** Who was that man, Grandfather?

**OKORIE.** He was a stranger.

**BASSI.** I do not trust strangers. [*She points to OKORIE.*] What has happened, Grandfather? When I left you this afternoon, you were old, your mind was worried, and your eyes were swollen. Where now are the care, the sorrow, the tears in your eyes? You never smiled before, but now—

**OKORIE.** You know, woman, when I **worshipped at our forefathers' shrine**, I was happy. I knew what it was all about. It was my life. With my loving and helpful son, I thought that my old age would be as happy as that of my father before me. But death played me a trick. My son died and I was left to the mercy of his two sons. Unhappiness gripped my life. With all their education my grandsons lacked one thing—respect for age. But today the stranger who came here has once more brought happiness to me. Let me tell you this—

**3 Structure: Script**  
What conflict does the dialogue between Okorie and the Stranger reveal? How might that conflict structure the story that this play tells?

#### In Other Words

**accord me the honor** give me the honorable funeral I deserve

**worshipped at our forefathers' shrine** prayed at the temple we built to honor the men who started this village



**BASSI.** It is enough, Grandfather. Long talks make you tired. Come, your food is now ready.

**OKORIE.** [*happily*] Woman, I cannot eat. When happiness fills your heart, you cannot eat.

[*Two voices are heard outside, laughing and swearing.*]

**BASSI.** Your grandchildren are coming back.

**OKORIE.** Don't call them my grandchildren. I am alone in this world. **4**

[*Door flings open. Two young men, about eighteen and twenty, enter the room. They are in shirts and trousers.*]

**AROB.** By our forefathers, Grandfather, you are still awake!

**BASSI.** Why should he not keep awake if he likes?

**AROB.** But Grandfather usually goes to bed **before the earliest chicken thinks of it**.

**OJIMA.** Our good Grandfather might be thinking of his youthful days, when all young men were fond of farming and all young women loved the kitchen. **5**

**BASSI.** Shame on both of you for talking to an old man like that. When you grow old, your own children will laugh and **jeer at you**. Come, Grandfather, and take your food.

[*OKORIE stands up with difficulty and limps with the aid of his stick through the exit, followed by BASSI, who casts a reproachful look on the two men before she leaves.*]

**4 Identify Emotional Responses**

Visualize this conversation between Okorie and Bassi. What does Okorie tell Bassi about himself? How does this make you feel about him?

**5 Structure: Script**

What information about Arob and Ojima does the writer suggest in this dialogue?

**In Other Words**

**before the earliest chicken thinks of it** when it is not yet dark outside  
**jeer at you** say mean things to you  
**casts a reproachful look on** looks angrily at



**AROB.** I wonder what Grandfather and the woman were talking about.

**OJIMA.** It must be the usual thing. We are bad boys. We have no regard for the memory of our father, and so on.

**AROB.** Our father left his responsibility to us. **Nature had arranged that he should bury Grandfather before thinking of himself.**

**OJIMA.** But would Grandfather listen to Nature when it comes to the matter of death? Everybody in his generation has died. But Grandfather has **made a bet with death.** And it seems that he will win. **6**

**OKORIE.** [*calling from offstage*] Bassi! Bassi! Where is that woman?

**OJIMA.** The old man is coming. Let us hide ourselves. [*Both rush under the bed.*]

**OKORIE.** [*comes in, limping on his stick as usual*] Bassi, where are you?  
Haven't I told that girl never—

**BASSI.** [*entering*] Don't shout so. It's not good for you.

**OKORIE.** Where are the two people?

**BASSI.** You mean your grandsons? They are not here. They must have gone into their room.

**OKORIE.** Bassi, I have a secret for you. [*He narrows his eyes.*] A big secret.  
[*His hands tremble.*] Can you keep a secret?

**BASSI.** Of course I can.

**OKORIE.** Listen, woman. My dear son died and left me to the mercy of his two sons. They are the worst grandsons in the land. They have sold all



Beadwork from  
Kenya

**6 Identify Emotional Responses**

Imagine listening to this conversation between Arob and Ojima. What does the writer reveal about their relationship with Okorie? How do you feel about this relationship?

**In Other Words**

**Nature had arranged that he should bury Grandfather before thinking of himself.** Grandfather should have died before our father.  
**made a bet with death** planned to live forever



that their father left. They do not care for me. Now when I die, what will they do to me? Don't you think that they will abandon me in disgrace? An old man has a right to be properly cared for. And when he dies, he has a right to a good burial. But my grandchildren do not think of these things. **7**

**BASSI.** See how you tremble, Grandfather! I have told you not to think of such things.

**OKORIE.** Now, listen. You saw the stranger that came here. He gave me hope. But wait, look around, Bassi. Make sure that no one is listening to us.

**BASSI.** No one, Grandfather.

**OKORIE.** The stranger told me something. Have you ever heard of the Jewels of the Shrine?

**BASSI.** Real jewels?

**OKORIE.** Yes. Among the beads which my father got from the early white men were real jewels. When war broke out and **a great fever invaded all our lands**, my father **made a sacrifice in the village shrine**. He promised that if this village were spared, he would offer his costly jewels to the shrine. Death roamed through all the other villages, but not one person in this village died of the fever. My father kept his promise. In a big ceremony the jewels were placed on our shrine. But it was not for long. Some said they were stolen. But the stranger who came here knew where they were. He said that they were buried somewhere near the big oak tree on our farm. I must go out and dig for them. They can be sold for **fifty pounds** these days.

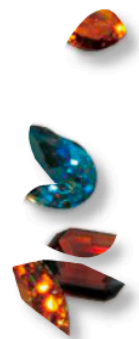
**BASSI.** But, Grandfather, it will kill you to go out in this cold and darkness. You must get someone to do it for you. You cannot lift a shovel. **8**

## **7 Identify Emotional Responses**

Visualize this scene. What do you see and hear Okorie doing? How does this make you feel? Write your notes in your chart.

## **8 Structure: Script**

What does the writer do in this dialogue between Okorie and Bassi to advance the plot?



### **In Other Words**

**a great fever invaded all our lands** many people got very sick and died  
**made a sacrifice in the village shrine** prayed to the village's gods and made a promise to them  
**fifty pounds** a lot of money





**OKORIE.** [**infuriated**] So, you believe I am too old to lift a shovel. You, you, oh, I . . .

**BASSI.** [**coaxing him**] There now, young man, no temper. If you wish, I myself will dig up the whole farm for you. **9**

**OKORIE.** Every bit of it?

**BASSI.** Yes.

**OKORIE.** And hand over to me all that you will find?

**BASSI.** Yes.

**OKORIE.** And you will not tell my grandsons?

**BASSI.** No, Grandfather, I will not.

**OKORIE.** Swear, woman, swear by our fathers' shrine.

**BASSI.** I swear.

**OKORIE.** [**relaxing**] Now life is becoming worthwhile. Tell no one about it, woman. Begin digging tomorrow morning. Dig inch by inch until you bring out the jewels of our forefathers' shrine.

**BASSI.** I am tired, Grandfather. I must sleep now. Good night.

**OKORIE.** [**with feeling**] Good night. God and our fathers' spirits keep you. When dangerous bats alight on the roofs of wicked men, let them not trouble you in your sleep. When far-seeing owls hoot the menace of future days, let their evil **prophecies** keep off your path. **10** [**BASSI leaves.** OKORIE, *standing up and trembling, moves to a corner and brings out a small shovel. Struggling with his **senile joints**, he tries to imitate a young man*

#### **9 Structure: Script**

In creating this dialogue, what does the writer reveal about Okorie and Bassi's personalities and their relationship?

#### **10 Identify Emotional Responses**

As you read Okorie's blessing, visualize what he says. How do Okorie's words make you feel? What words led to your feelings?

#### **Key Vocabulary**

**infuriate** v., to make extremely angry, to enrage

**prophecy** n., statement of what someone believes will happen in the future, prediction

#### **In Other Words**

**coaxing him** trying to make him happy

**senile joints** arms and legs that are old, weak, and sore



digging.] Oh, who said I was old? After all, I am only eighty years. And I feel younger than most young men. Let me see how I can dig. [He tries to dig again.] Ah! I feel aches all over my hip. Maybe the soil here is too hard. I must rest now.

*[Carrying the shovel with him, he goes into his room. AROB and OJIMA crawl out from under the bed.]*

AROB. *[stretching his hip]* My hip, oh my hip!

OJIMA. My legs!

AROB. So there is a treasure in our farm! We must waste no time, we must begin digging soon.

OJIMA. Soon? We must begin tonight—now. The old man has taken one shovel. *[pointing to the corner]* There are two over there. *[They fetch two shovels from among the heap of things in a corner of the room.]* If we can only get the jewels, we can go and live in town and let the old man **manage as he can**. Let's move on.

*[As they are about to go out, each holding a shovel, OKORIE comes out with his own shovel. For a moment the three stare at each other in silence and surprise.]* <sup>11</sup>

AROB. Now, Grandfather, where are you going with a shovel at this time of night?

OJIMA. **[impudently]** Yes, Grandfather, what is the idea?

OKORIE. I should ask you; this is my house. Why are you creeping about like thieves?

AROB. All right, Grandfather, we are going back to bed. <sup>12</sup>

**11 Structure: Script**  
Think about the dialogue and stage directions. What has the writer done with these elements to deepen the play's conflict?

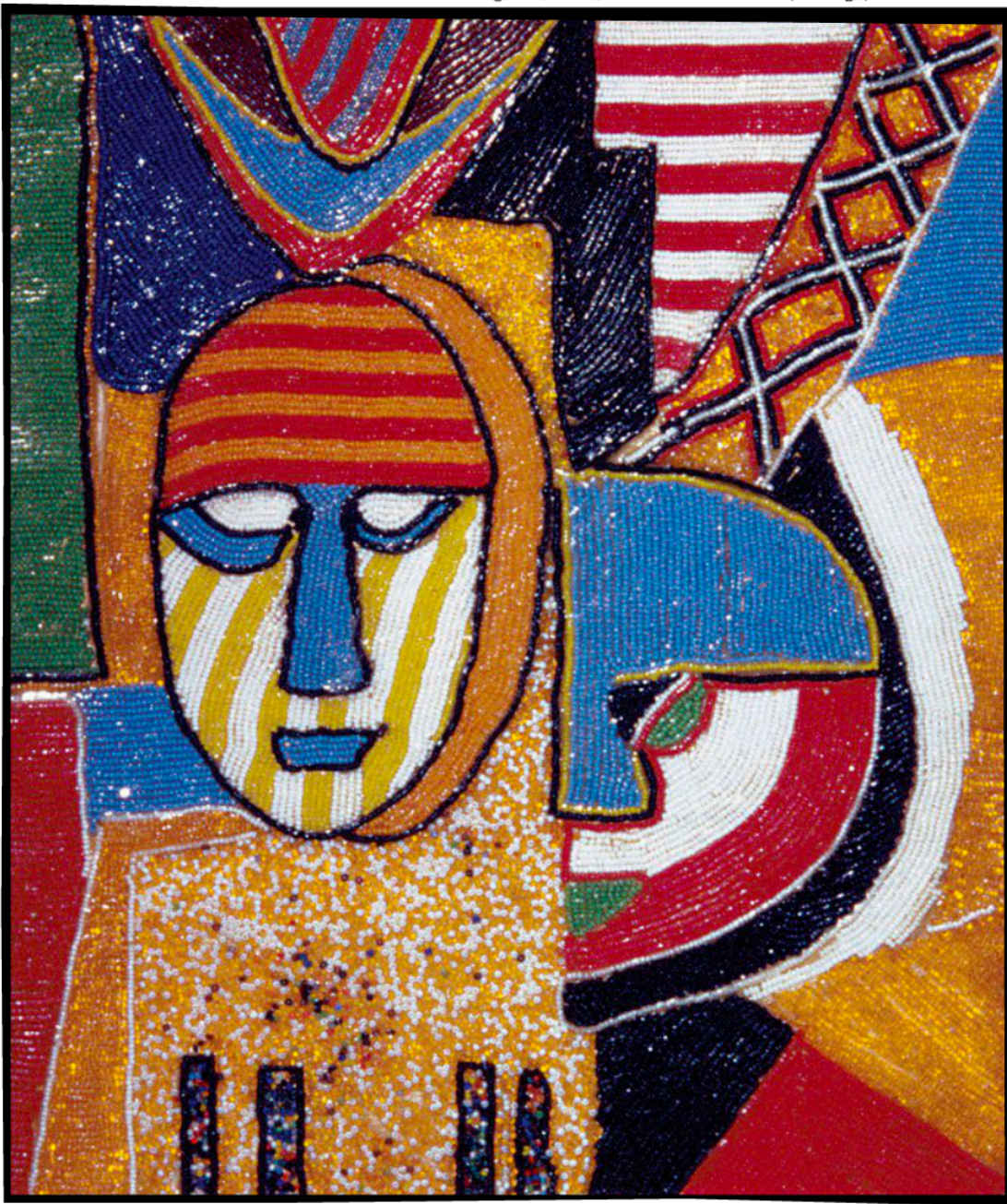
**12 Identify Emotional Responses**  
How do you react to Ojima and Arob's words and actions? Use your chart to track what you visualize and how you feel.

### Key Vocabulary

**impudently** *adv.*, in a disrespectful or bold way

### In Other Words

**manage as he can** take care of himself



◀ **Critical Viewing:  
Effect**  
Describe your emotional response to the painting. What details make you feel as you do?

🔊 **OKORIE.** What are you doing with shovels? You were never fond of farming.

**OJIMA.** We intend to go to the farm early in the morning.





**OKORIE.** But the harvest is over. When everybody in the village was digging out the crops, you were going around the town **with your hands in your pockets**. Now you say you are going to the farm.

**OJIMA.** Digging is good for the health, Grandfather.

**OKORIE.** [*re-entering his room*] Good night.

**AROB and OJIMA.** Good night, Grandfather.

*[They return to their room. After a short time AROB and OJIMA come out, each holding a shovel, and tiptoe out through the exit. Then, gently, OKORIE too comes out on his toes, and placing the shovel on his shoulder, **warily** leaves the hall.]* 13

## End of Scene I

### 13 Identify Emotional Responses

How do you visualize the end of this scene? What is your emotional response to each of these three characters at this point, and why?



### Monitor Comprehension

#### Explain

Why doesn't Okorie tell his grandsons about the jewels?

#### In Other Words

**with your hands in your pockets** doing nothing instead of working  
**warily** carefully and secretly