



***Half of a Yellow Sun* – Argument Exchange Issues**

These debatable issues were framed during a seminar on the novel at Jones College Prep (Chicago) in March, 2018. They will be used in an Argument Exchange to be conducted as a final assessment in the unit.

Olanna's Adultery with Richard

After Olanna discovers that Odenigbo had a brief sexual relationship with Amala, their relationship undergoes severe strain. Olanna undertakes an extensive re-thinking, and she ends up having sex with her sister's fiancé, Richard. This is certainly one of the most surprising, important plot points in the book, suggestive of its thematic importance. Why does Olanna sleep with Richard? Is it primarily to get revenge on Odenigbo, allowing her to return to her relationship with him with much less resentment and bitterness? Or does she commit adultery with Richard as a more fundamental act of personal liberation, expressing a deep misgiving about her relationship with Odenigbo as controlling her in a way that she no longer wished to be controlled?

Principles vs. Pragmatics

Important characters in the novel make cautious, guarded decisions, and moderate their own speech, based on a pragmatic view of the world, weighing their political and social principles against their own material survival (in the case of Ugwu and Kainene) or respect for their parents and family (in the case of Olanna). But some characters express a commitment to principle, at least at times, above pragmatics (Odenigbo has strong political convictions; Kainene takes great personal risk to support her refugee camp at the novel's end). What is the novel's view of the principles vs. pragmatics decisions that we are all faced with, especially at pivotal moments in our lives? Which side does it lean toward: living and speaking out of principle, or making pragmatic compromises to preserve values other than personal principle?

European Appreciation of Africa

Richard seems genuinely committed to writing two books about Africa, one about Igbo art and one about Biafra and the Biafran War, entitled *The World Was Silent When We Died*. He is also asked by Col. Madu to produce journalism on the war that would reach European and American media, so as to inform the world of the plight of the Biafran people. But he doesn't finish these books, and Madu acknowledges that he asks Richard to do this journalism primarily because he is white and would have more credibility with European media. Does Richard have a genuine appreciation for Biafra and the Biafran people? Or is he essentially a



poseur, and trying to compensate for some deficiency or loss by attaching himself artificially to Biafra and its people? By extension, is the novel opposed to Europeans' telling the stories of Africa, finding Europeans to be the wrong voices to fully appreciate African history and culture? Or does the depiction of Richard suggest that actually there can be exceptional Europeans equipped to fully appreciate Africa and to do this work?

Love Story Set During War or Anti-War Novel Shown Interfering with Love

Most people who read *Half of a Yellow Sun* are struck by the extent to which this historical fiction is devoted to telling what can be described as love stories – most centrally, Olanna and Odenigbo's love story, and Kainene and Richard's love story. But of course it is also a novel not only set in the Biafran War, but very much about war and its horrible consequences. The question for literary critics and critical readers is: is this novel essentially a literary story of the human heart, that is set in war and includes war's effect on love, or is it more essentially a political novel with a strongly anti-war theme, whose love stories (as compelling as they are) serve the novel's political theme?

The Thematic Meaning of Odenigbo's Fall

Odenigbo undergoes a surprising fall in the novel. He starts as an esteemed university professor, highly principled, proud, dedicated to leftist politics, and admired and loved by Olanna; he ends as a broken man, spiritually defeated, ethically shady, physically diminished and alcoholic, and often loathed by Olanna. "This drinking here [in Umuahia] silenced him. It made him retreat into himself and look out at the work with bleary weary eyes. And it made her furious" (477). What accounts for Odenigbo's fall? Is it the demoralizing effect of the Biafran War? Are his ideas (socialism, tribalist anti-colonialism) and intellectualism being symbolically exposed as weaknesses? Or does he more simply suffer from deep and latent character flaws?