

CATASTROPHE, AFTERMATH, AMNESIA:  
CHINUA ACHEBE'S "CIVIL PEACE"

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Chinua Achebe's short story "Civil Peace" depicts a family and community's response to the devastation wrought by war. Although the tale by no means abandons hope for either the family or the community, it wryly suggests that civil peace is the mirror image of civil war insofar as the human tendencies that push people to war are not completely resolved in its wake, regardless of political settlements. In a post-war civil society, civility is in short supply: people continue to bully, deceive, and overreach in the struggle for a foothold in the peace. The author challenges us to understand this peace, to locate certain enduring lessons of war, perhaps even to circumvent its repetition, by having us look at humanity in war's aftermath, and by having us contemplate our responses to conflict and aggression when the military is silent.

Along with "Civil Peace," the tales "Sugar Baby" and "Girls at War" form Achebe's masterful trilogy of short stories that is set during and immediately after the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70), and brings to a close the Nigerian author's 1972 volume of short fiction, *Girls at War and Other Stories*.<sup>1</sup> While "Civil Peace" is the focus of the present study, it is considered partly in relation to Achebe's two other war-related tales. All three probe the experience, roots, and legacy of war, rather than the question of who was at fault. Achebe, who is of Igbo descent, might well have done the latter, given the catastrophic impact of the war on his own life and on the Biafran cause, for which he was a spokesman. Yet, as he does in each of his novels, including his first and most famous, *Things Fall Apart* (1958),<sup>2</sup> which dramatizes the advent of British colonialism in West Africa, Achebe rejects a partisan vision in the stories in favour of understanding the psychic and social effects of war and the varied human traits that play a role during and after the fighting.

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