

# Comparative essay, things fall apart vs. the persimmon tree essay sample

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A comparison of the use of similes, metaphors and narrative perspective between Things Fall Apart, by Chinua Achebe and The Persimmon Tree, by Marjorie Barnard

Things Fall Apart and The Persimmon Tree could hardly be more different, the former being set in Africa, reflecting an entire society facing substantial change, and taken from a third-person point-of-view, whereas the latter is set in Australia, reflecting the main character's experience of convalescing, and taken from a first-person point-of-view. However, despite their differences, both texts exhibit a similarity in that both Achebe and Barnard have made extensive use of similes and metaphors in their writing styles, in order to enhance the mood

A significant contrast can be found between the two different narrative techniques, particularly with respect to the levels of attention to detail found in each text. Achebe allows the attention to detail in Things Fall Apart to vary across the text, as the novel has far more space for the writing style to vary in its attention to detail as opposed to The Persimmon Tree, a short story, which by and large maintains a distinctly high level of attention to detail to almost all objects and scenes described in the story.

Things Fall Apart is written in the third person, and this narrative perspective often, though not always, offers a more matter-of-fact, even detached view of the setting described in the text. The narrative style is largely to-the-point, for example the beginning of Chapter Ten, where the narrator briefly and directly describes the setting for the settlement of a dispute, giving the narrative a rather blunt tone. In front of the elders were a " row of stools on

which nobody sat”, and “ there were nine of them.” The narrator does not provide us with any elaboration as to the stools, for example their design, colour etc. are not described. What is most striking about Achebe’s writing style, however, is that there are also instances in which detailed accounts of the setting do appear, the most telling example being the beginning of Chapter Fourteen.

Here the “ grass had been scorched brown” and the sands felt “ like live coals to the feet”. This vivid visual and tactile imagery, additionally supported by the use of simile, has been used by Achebe to enrich the description of the setting, and to contrast that setting with a scene of what it became after the rains had fallen. It is more significant however, in its being absent from the previous example of the stools, and thus we can see how the narrative style employed by Achebe stays constant in the sense that it always remains in the third-person point-of-view, and yet within this point-of-view there are variances in the depth of perception; some scenes are described in greater detail than others.

In contrast, *The Persimmon Tree*, which is written in the first-person, offers a consistently detailed account of the setting, exhibiting greater perception than can be found in the most of the scenes described in *Things Fall Apart*. For example, in the narrator’s description of her residence, we find several mentions of colour and design, as well as the use of visual imagery and simile to enhance readers’ perceptions of the residence. The large room was “ high-ceilinged with pale walls”, and “ chaste as a cell in a honey comb”. Even when describing persimmons, the narrator meticulously offers a highly

precise account of the appearance of the fruit, in their being shaped like “ a young woman’s breasts”, with their “ deep, rich, golden-colour”. The vivid visual and tactile imagery can be found in the previous example, but the importance of this second example is found in how the writing style remains constant in the highly detailed accounts accorded to each description- in the short 5 pages which the text occupies, the large amounts of attention to detail are always present, and do not vary.

In addition to the contrasts in writing styles examined above, there is a noteworthy point to be found in the comparisons of the different texts, in that the employment of different narrative techniques, whether they are first- or third-person techniques, all serve an important purpose. For example, in the first example, the sparing account of the stools would have been appropriate for a scene of judgement, where excessive elaboration on trivial stools would merely be distracting for the reader from the process of judgement itself. Latterly, Achebe’s rich account of the setting however, would serve to enhance our perceptions of the setting, to be contrasted with the setting after the rain had fallen. And in *The Persimmon Tree*, Barnard’s rich accounts of the settings- the room and the persimmons- are highly suitable for the very private and personal experience of convalescing- during which our observations become so much more comprehensive- which is what the main character of *The Persimmon Tree* is going through.

Another comparison can be found in the fact that both authors make extensive use of similes and metaphor in their works to set the mood and atmosphere of a scene. In Chapter Six of *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe describes

a tense atmosphere, coupled with a pervasive mood of anticipation, at the village wrestling match through the use of metaphor and simile. When the drummers took a break from their duties at the match, the air, which had been “ stretched taut with excitement, relaxed again.” The metaphor of air being “ stretched” enhances readers’ perception of the scene; the tension expressed by the crowd and the drumbeats is so strong that the air itself is subject to unusual tautness.

This vivid visual imagery is continued later in the chapter, when the drummers return to their drums, and “ the air shivered and grew tense like a tightened bow”. The metaphor of the air being able to “ shiver” and simile comparing the air to a “ tightened bow” both have the effect of enhancing the visual imagery present in the text, and thereby Achebe also gives us a measure of how tense the atmosphere really was; it was in fact as taut as what might be found on a “ tightened bow”. Achebe’s use of metaphors and simile thus serves to augment the visual imagery of the setting, creating an atmosphere of great tension.

Barnard makes similar use of metaphors and simile to generate vivid visual imagery in *The Persimmon Tree*, evoking an atmosphere of tranquillity. The narrator of the story slowly reminisces over her childhood, particularly over her memories of the persimmon trees near her home. The rich and careful descriptions of colour- the trees “ blazed deep red”- are further enhanced through Barnard’s use of simile; the “ rosy light” they cast onto one side of the house was “ as if a fire were burning outside”. To further elevate the intensity of the visual imagery used, Barnard even uses the metaphor of “

Hesperidean trees” as an alternative name for the persimmon trees. That the persimmon trees might be likened to such mythical entities from The Islands of the blessed gives the trees an otherworldly quality, and adds depth to the visual imagery created through such comparisons.

The use of such similes and metaphors, and particularly the choice of diction within these literary devices themselves- with many words being related to light; “ blazed”, “ rosy”, “ fire”, “ burning”- all serve to paint a brilliant setting full of colour, while at the same time serving to create a mood of tranquillity. This is created by virtue of the fact that the narrative at this point is focussed entirely upon the appearance of the persimmon trees, which in themselves are hardly images of violence or savagery, but when so richly described take on a decidedly pastoral quality, rendering them images of calm and serenity. This thus gives the text at this point an atmosphere of tranquillity.

However, another noteworthy point where Barnard’s use of metaphor goes beyond what Achebe has done would be in her comparison of the persimmon trees to “ Hesperidean trees”. She uses this metaphor to create a sense of separation between the trees and the readers, as the trees possess a mythical quality which readers are unable to perceive- myths are fiction after all. However, this sense of separation is important to the text, in that Barnard thus gives readers a feel for what the narrator herself might be feeling; the narrator similarly feels a sense of separation from the trees, as they only exist within her memory. Through her skilful use of metaphor, Barnard thus adds realism to the narrator’s experience of reminiscence, in

that readers are able to perceive a crucial part of the experience themselves; that of separation from the objects in the recollections.

In conclusion, despite the differences in narrative technique, both Achebe and Barnard have made full use of the techniques chosen, and within the limitations of that technique have varied their attention to detail accordingly. In both their writing styles, extensive use of similes and metaphors have been made to set the mood and atmosphere for the respective texts, but differences in the use of such literary devices do exist, as illustrated by Barnard's deft use of metaphor.