

Isidore Okpewho's *The Last Duty*

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Isidore Okpewho is possibly the most interesting of all the Nigerian novelists who have written about the Biafran war. His remarkable novel, *The Last Duty*, deserves much greater attention than it has hitherto received.¹ This is one of the most accomplished African novels to date, a work which surely deserves a place in the front rank with *Things Fall Apart*, *The Interpreters*, *A Grain of Wheat*, *The Radiance of the King* and *The Joys of Motherhood*.² Okpewho has employed the best techniques suited to his themes and intention, and used them to brilliant effect. It is difficult to think of another African novel in which the artistry is more accomplished. Like most of the other war novels, *The Last Duty* presents the physical devastation and suffering caused by the war, but its real emphasis is on the havoc caused to human relationships and, in particular, the mental, physical, and emotional torture to which women were exposed.

The distinguishing aspect of the novel's artistry is the deft manipulation of language and point of view. The events of the novel are told in the first person, not by one narrator, but by several—by almost all the participants in the drama, in fact. The reader moves from Ali to Toje, to Odibo, to Aku, to Oghenovo, to Oshevire, and even to the seer Emuakpor and the sadistic soldier Okumagba. The events are therefore seen from all these points of view, some of them conflicting, and the reader is expected to build up his or her own picture of the complex truth through a resolution of the conflicting points of view. Of course the method is not new. It is as old as the novels of the eighteenth-century English writer Samuel Richardson. But it is the very first time this method has been used extensively in African fiction.

What is refreshing about Okpewho's use of the technique is his devising a unique style for each of these characters/narrators. And the kind of language the narrators use admirably suits their character and projects their personality. The novel starts with Ali's, the local military commander's, narrative and we immediately see how the language is being used to define the young man's character and personality: "Ali! Ali! Ali!" shouts the surging crowd as my Austin minimoke tries to wind its way through the people . . . The soldiers try to beat them back, but it is hard for us to check their overwhelming gesture of approval and goodwill. . . . For a soldier this is an hour of triumph. The war is still on and every moment is pregnant with danger. But I must confess I feel great joy this moment, as all over the town the entire population raise their fists in solidarity, jumping and shouting and

¹ Isidore Okpewho, *The Last Duty* (London: Longman, 1976) 3. All other page references are to this edition and are indicated in the text.

² Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958); Wole Soyinka, *The Interpreters* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1965); Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *A Grain of Wheat* (London: Heinemann, 1968); Camara Laye, *The Radiance of the King* (London: Fontana, 1956); Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* (New York: George Braziller, 1979).

showing in every way how much they welcome our presence and our efforts" (3)). It is the slightly restrained but confident tone of the successful military man that we have here. Ali speaks as such a military officer is expected to speak, like the man who is sure of himself and whose military competence has been demonstrated. The note of smug self-satisfaction also hints at a flicker of irony, which suggests that the author wishes to slightly undercut the picture of confidence and excellence that Ali tries to present. This becomes explicit later with the display of Ali's naivety.

Toje's narrative, which follows, changes the tone completely: "The first thing that the commander wanted to know was who the elders were. Of course my name could not have been left out after that of the Otota of Urukpe, our big chief. When the present commander took over about two years ago, he did the same thing. They were both certain that the success of their commands here depended on their being acceptable by people like me without whom this town would be nothing. I am a big man, and there is no question about it even if I have to say so over and over" (5). The language here is not just that of the confident man, but of the extrovert, the coarse, blustering braggart who is full of a sense of his own self-importance. While the forceful style does not suggest an uneducated man, it is nevertheless less polished and serene than Ali's. This is the language of a man who is prepared to ride roughshod over the feelings of all and sundry, to destroy his enemies if necessary, in order to assert his importance and to get his way.

With Odibo's narrative the language changes once more: "*I know I am nothing. But why does he keep making me feel so bad? 'You gave her the parcel of clothes?' Toje asks. 'Yes is I did,' I reply. The way he looks at me it seems he does not believe that I did. He never seems to trust me. 'Are you quite sure?' 'I swear to God,' I say. 'Her son was there, and if—' 'All right! All right!' he shouts at me. I haven't asked you to give any witness. All I wanted to know was whether you gave her the parcel of clothes'" (6). This is the language of the man who is totally lacking in confidence, who is so completely aware of his inadequacy that he wishes to efface himself. It is the style of the man who feels small because he has been made to feel small. It is an index of his own sense of "nothingness" that most of his narrative consists of dialogue—of what other people say to him—while his own genuine and innermost thoughts (which are few and far between) are couched by the author in italics, almost as though he is only "daring" to think them. However, Odibo can very accurately capture the quality of Toje's tone and conversation in his account of the dialogue between them which suggests that, though lacking in confidence at the moment, he is not unintelligent. The fact that the narrative is mostly in the present tense heightens the effect of immediacy and the sense of dramatic conflict.*

Like Odibo's, Aku's language is simple, though it communicates an aura of sadness, a tone which is quite appropriate to Aku's situation. Both Odibo and Aku are self-effacing underdogs and victims, but Aku's style is slightly more polished and self-assured than Odibo's. Aku's narrative is also in the present tense and incorporates, like Odibo's, a great amount of dialogue. This gives the impression of someone who is less concerned with herself than with other people, and also helps to heighten the sense of drama. The most interesting style is probably Oghenovov's. By dispensing with capitals and normal punctuation Okpewho

realistically gives the impression of having penetrated a young boy's consciousness. The language is indisputably child's language and is managed by the author with great skill: "in the afternoon when my mother was sleeping, i sneaked away from the house and went to see Onome and i showed him the clothes that my father had sent to me from where he had travelled away to iddu, and he said it was a lie, that my father did not buy me any clothes, because he was in prison . . ." (14).

The switching of the point of view is extremely important in a novel in which it is essential to realize the complexity of some of the characters' motives. One action or mode of behavior might appear entirely different when seen from another character's point of view. One character's account of a scene might give more information and therefore enable the reader to see it in greater depth than another character's account of it. For instance, Aku's account, at the end of her first narrative, of the arrest of a soldier, which she sees as an event portending disastrous consequences for her and her son, is seen in Colonel Ali's account as part of the closing movement of a deadly love triangle, one of the numerous aspects of a situation which the Colonel must bring under control in order to reassure the citizens. But perhaps the most interesting effect of this switching of the point of view is that it enables us to see how characters appear to each other. This, for instance, is what Toje thinks of himself and what he thinks of the commanding officer, Colonel Ali: "Yes. This is power. This is happiness. Happiness is finding that a whole population looks up to you when a mighty thing like war has brought them low . . . But . . . I am not quite certain what this boy Ali has in mind. . . . I do not grudge him his federal concern. . . . But it does worry me when a misguided little monkey, just because he wears a uniform and carries a gun, gets up on his stilts to prescribe a code of morals for an entire population that was there long before he ever dreamed he would smell these borders" (26-27). And this is what Colonel Ali originally thinks of Toje: "He was all done up with his feathered hat and long beads, his white collarless long-sleeved shirt, embroidered check wrapper and brown leather shoes, and the stylish ivory walking stick hooked on to the bicycle handlebar. He was rattling those bells although there were no soldiers in the way . . . even after he had got through the check and I began wondering whether he was trying to be extra-cautious or being over-zealous in announcing his presence. . . . I was struck by the dignity of the man" (42-43). This is a passage with very interesting dynamics. Although Chief Toje is presented through the eyes of Colonel Ali, the latter does not fully grasp the implications of what he witnesses. The reader, however, does, thanks to Okpewho's brilliant rhetorical guidance. These bells are deliberately rattled by the Chief to impress the soldiers with his dignity and importance; in the process he appears not only pompous but slightly ridiculous. In other words, the portrait presented here, in spite of Ali's naivety and blinkered vision, is at odds with that presented by the Chief of himself. Later in the same scene, however, we see that even Ali begins to have doubts about the authenticity of this portrait: "I was sure the Chief was an honourable man. . . . But somehow I could not fight the feeling that I was taking a chance. What if there was something in all this? I tried to think back systematically over all that took place that morning between the Chief and me. And that poor woman's plight haunted my mind. For how much goodwill could the Chief have felt towards her, if he felt so badly about her husband's role during the rebel occupation of this town and even welcomed his detention?" (55-56). The brilliant irony of the reference to the Chief as an

"honourable man" is probably not consciously intended by the slow and plodding Ali, but by the end of his monologue he is beginning to see the inconsistencies in the Chief's conduct and this reinforces the question mark which the reader has already placed against the Chief's dignity.

The amorous Toje is even more ridiculous seen from Aku's point of view: "Over in the bedroom to the right was my big benefactor. I could hardly believe the picture I saw before me. A big old dandy, all done up and dozing in style" (67). But it is through the medicine man's Emuakpor's eyes that Toje's portrait experiences its most devastating deflation: "I looked at him as he rode away, and shook my head. Was this the omnipotent giant? I felt sorry for him. At one point during our conversation I was sure that if a little child pushed him with a stick, he would fall over" (169).

Generally speaking, we are provided with quite a sympathetic view of Aku's plight and of her general character and conduct. But we are also given the opportunity of seeing how her behavior might appear to the townspeople, particularly the males, who have not been granted the privilege of the information that we have. This, for instance, is how the brutal, semiliterate soldier Okumagba sees it: "She comes back much later, very close to curfew time: empty-handed sometimes, and at other times with some bundle trussed under her arm, yet at all times wearing signs that the missions she had been on could scarcely be described as honest. She enters the house, and a few moments later the cripple comes out and slinks his way home. . . . A rebel is bad enough. But a whoring rebel! *Hm* . . . (133). And later, after the tragic culmination of the story, this is the interpretation he places on the events: "For when I saw the woman fall down and begin to weep so passionately, my bowels were turned far less by anger at her shameless bad faith than by the realisation that the man had been so long a victim of a fate he never deserved. . . . If I ever get married, and I have to go anywhere without my family, I will plug my wife's cunt with a hand grenade" (232-233). Of course the basic incidents of both episodes had already been recounted for us in narratives by Odibo, Aku, and Ali. But here we have the point of view not just of the ordinary, maybe biased, inhabitant of Urukpe, but of the brusque soldier, putting across the male point of view in a male-oriented society where sympathy goes to the cuckolded husband.

Okpewho's narrative method further enhances the almost total obliteration of the author from the pages of the book and enables him to indulge occasionally in scintillating satire without seeming involved. A fine example of this is his presentation of the hot-headed pseudo-Marxist radical, Agbyegebe. The latter is seen almost entirely from the point of view of Oshevire, who presents him with an element of compassion, if not with sympathy. The fun we experience in the presentation is due to the fact that Okpewho himself is standing behind Oshevire, so to speak, making fun, through Agbeyegbe, of pseudo-Marxist radicals in general.

In addition to presenting the horrors of war and the exploitation, particularly of females, that is a dominant characteristic of the troubled times, *The Last Duty* also examines, as the title implies, the concept of duty. In what does duty consist? What is the relationship between duty and honor? Taken at its most simple, duty is that which one has to do, that which one must do. Hence the common

saying, "A man must do what he has to do," which is characteristically quoted by Ali in the novel (15). Of all the characters in the novel, Colonel Ali demonstrates the most obsessive preoccupation with the concept of duty, although his perception of its real significance may not necessarily be the most accurate. As a genuine and honest soldier Ali is obsessed with the idea of honor. Doing one's duty, therefore, is consistent, as far as he is concerned, with doing the honest and honorable thing. It also means bravely taking the consequences of one's actions, even if means facing the firing squad unflinchingly as the consequence of one's murder of a colleague. He also sees it as his duty to properly administer the town of which he is in command. The trouble with Ali is that, because of his limited range of vision, he cannot, in spite of the genuineness of his intentions, see clearly the line of action he must take in order to properly perform that duty.

The various characters have differing perceptions of the nature of duty. Even the ruthless soldier Okumagba knows that the minute he sees rebel soldiers it is his duty to take up a strategic position and cut them down mercilessly. Aku has her own perception of duty: "For I think too that I must stay on to prove that I have faith in my man, that if they are truly going to do anything drastic to him in the end, his wife has a duty to live through it all. . . . I am constantly reminded of my duty to love and cherish the memory of a man to whom that much attention is due" (65). But it is Oshevire's concept of duty which comes closest to the ideal. It is similar to Ali's in that Oshevire also believes that doing one's duty means doing the honest and honorable thing. But he goes beyond this to imply that doing one's duty involves standing up to one's enemies in defence of the cause of honesty, justice, and truth, no matter what the consequences: "The important thing is to be able to stand up to the situation and bear it all like a man. To be able to prove to your enemies that the forces of truth and honesty are stronger than any burden they will unjustly have laid upon you. To be able to vindicate the cause of justice, and, even if they succeed in taking your life in the end, prove to them all too clearly that theirs was an idle victory" (32-33). In a sense, the question the novel forces the reader to ask is, which of all these characters is the most successful in the end in performing his or her duty?

Oshevire's view that to do one's duty is to stand up to the situation like a man, to be a real man, suggests the relationship between duty, honor, and manliness and introduces the important theme of manhood in the novel. This is inextricably linked with the ideas of duty and honor. As there are various conceptions of duty, so are there various conceptions of manhood. There is Toje's manhood; then there is the manhood of the private who finds his girlfriend in bed with his superior officer and, considering his manhood affronted, kills the sergeant. Rather appropriately, he only succeeds in getting the upper hand over the sergeant by kicking at the latter's testicles; that is where he thinks his manhood resides and where he considers him to be most vulnerable. There is also the lorry driver who does not want to do anything against the dictates of his manhood. For most of these people manhood is closely associated with male pride or male sexual power. Colonel Ali, the honest soldier, however, has a slightly different conception. For him real manhood is almost to be identified with stoicism and courage. This is why he is impressed with Oshevire's bearing when the latter is informed about the sordid affair involving his wife. His conception of manhood is nearer to the author's than any of those we have yet seen, but as usual the unperceptive Ali

slightly misunderstands the full implications of what he sees, for Oshevire does not, in the end, turn out to be the model of stoicism Ali thinks he is. He shows in the end that he cannot really bear it all "like a man." He loses his nerve, burns his house, and leads his wife and child in a mad race through the forest, probably intending to do violence to all three, but is himself needlessly cut down by overzealous soldiers.

One of the major questions posed by the novel is, in fact, whether Oshevire behaves like a real man in the end. At the start of the novel Oshevire's conception of manhood is arguably the most acceptable. He is far from associating manhood with crude male pride and sexual potency: "Outside, the light of day is as clear as truth. All that gives me satisfaction, all I really care about, is that God sees through my conscience. Need I then feel or act otherwise than in accordance with the dictates of a clear conscience and a just manhood?" (42) For the early Oshevire, then, real manhood has both a moral and religious dimension. It means much more than physical strength, male pride and sexual potency. It means acting according to the dictates of truth, honesty, and one's conscience, and being right with one's God. It means having the courage to see the truth, speak it, and stand by it. Unfortunately, Oshevire does not remain consistent. He allows himself in the end to be blinded by passion from seeing the real truth, the truth that the readers have been privileged to be shown all along, the truth that his wife is not a disloyal whore, but a loving, devoted, and truly faithful wife who has done her best to stand by him during his detention. Oshevire can only see himself now as the cuckolded husband who will be the object of public ridicule. In other words, it is his male pride, his sense of reputation that is affronted, and he thus moves significantly away from his early conception of manhood to a position approximating that of the private and the lorry driver. In the end Oshevire refuses to face up to the truth and lacks the courage to accept the totality of the situation. His wife Aku's situation is similar to Mumbi's in Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* and his own is almost identical with that of Gikonyo, Mumbi's husband's. But after his initial anger, Gikonyo behaves much more wisely and bravely in understanding his wife's situation and accepting the position. And in his case the visible proof of his wife's "shame" is there; it is not the subject of speculation. But in the end his action shows that he is more of a real man than Oshevire.

Toje's view of manhood is rather more conventional than Oshevire's. For him real manhood has something to do with social importance. The real man is the big man. When Toje says, "It's a curse to be a small man" (119), he really means that a man without any social standing cannot really talk of his manhood because no matter what is his integrity and honesty, he couldn't really earn the respect of the community. And such a man can never possibly improve his standing in the eyes of the community because "small men must always think small and act small" (118). For Toje, therefore, manhood has a lot to do with one's position in the community and one's standing in the eyes of the community. There is a clear relationship between manhood and power—power in the community and power in the home. Manhood is also equated with the possession of certain qualities, particularly sexual potency and sexual prowess: "Otherwise, how can a man reconcile himself to that title when it seems very clear to him that he no longer possesses, has completely lost—strange as it may sound to a normal mind—that power which gives the title its very definition" (24). In Toje's eyes, therefore, Odibo the cripple

is doubly deficient in the quality of manhood; he is physically maimed since he has only one arm, but because of this deficiency he couldn't possibly be attractive to a woman and so he is apparently automatically bereft of sexual potency; he is a small and insignificant man. Toje therefore scoffs at Odibo's manhood.

The irony is that in spite of his position and power, essential ingredients for manhood as far as he is concerned, Toje, by his own definition, is not really a man, since he has lost his sexual potency. A reassertion of his manhood which is necessary to his pride of place involves the regaining of his potency. This is why Aku is important to him. According to his own conception of manhood Toje is himself becoming a smaller man, having lost his sexual potency. But far from realizing it he continues to insult other men he considers small and to insist on his former prerogatives as a "big" man. Unfortunately for Toje, others do not share his conception of manhood. Thus they can see that he is much less of a man than he thinks he is and they can also recognize the manhood in some men that Toje thinks are not real men. Thus, in spite of Odibo's lowly status and his loss of an arm, Aku realizes quite early that he is a real man: "As he came nearer and nearer, I noticed that he was bare to the waist, with his cloth wrapped round his loin. He came closer and closer to my bed. I could now see him in full view. The stump of what should have been his left arm. His imposing build. The swell of his shoulders and of the biceps of his right arm. The taper of his trunk. . . . He was every inch a man—his manhood scarcely faulted by the unfortunate loss of an arm" (162).

Odibo himself accepts, at the start, the conventional view of manhood and allows himself to be brainwashed by Toje's conception: "But things have changed. Ever since Toje became mixed up with Oshevire's wife. Calling me names in her very presence. Telling me I am no use, to my very hearing. Pointing to my crippled arm and saying what I can do with only one arm. . . . It is not fair, to try to disgrace me in the presence of somebody else, and a woman at that. I know I am not much use, but he should at least allow me a little pride" (60). But Odibo's conception begins to change when he realizes that Aku takes an interest in him and he successfully mates with her. He begins to realize that the loss of certain physical powers does not necessarily mean the total erosion of one's manhood. This signals the beginning of his gradual move away from Toje and the discovery is truly liberating: "How much does it take to be a *man*, knowing that someone takes good healthy notice of your manhood, and you come out and receive the fresh, beautiful morning air full in your face without fearing that some other man would take you to task for it? . . . After that woman let me into her body, and I experienced a release of my long pent-up passion, I felt my whole body—my whole personality—loosen, and my entire being change. Now when Toje calls me a useless mass I am simply going to swallow his words without a care" (179-180). The exhilaration and confidence that Odibo now feels after his sexual encounter with Aku are clearly reflected in the language he uses here, which is a marked advance on his former halting, hesitant style. By surrendering herself to the lowly Odibo, Aku has taught the latter that real manliness has nothing to do with social status, nor does it have anything to do with physical deformity. This discovery is liberating for Odibo who now sees the world anew, discovers a new identity, and feels he can now look the whole world, including Toje, in the face. It is only now that he truly can be said to begin to live. But though he has moved significantly away from the effects of Toje's brainwashing and has shed much of the latter's conception of "manhood," he still

shares Toje's notion that manhood has a lot to do with sexual potency and therefore masculine pride. This will have a significant bearing on Odibo's changing relations with both Aku and Toje and on his conduct at the end.

The changing relations between Odibo and Toje are a very interesting feature of the book. At the start we see that the abusive and arrogant Toje is utterly contemptuous of and insensitive toward the suffering Odibo largely because he considers him to be something less than a man, a mere creature: "You are just a dumb mass of body ambling about without any sense in your head" (7). He abuses Odibo's manhood in Aku's presence, and since he does not feel that Odibo has any manhood worth talking about he cannot see that Odibo has any right, or that it would occur to him, to look at a woman's body. As far as he is concerned Odibo is little better than a eunuch. Odibo, for his part, almost accepts Toje's judgment about his manhood, convinces himself that he must be useless, and resigns himself to total subservience to Toje. However, the reader is allowed to see that Odibo is not as unintelligent as Toje thinks, and with his distaste for Toje growing, he can see through the latter's schemes: "I am beginning to be sick of his mean old ways, and my aversion is now strengthened by a growing feeling that I am being degraded merely because he is carrying on a sinister affair with Oshevire's wife. It is all very plain. . . . And I wonder why, if he has all that stature that he talks about, I wonder why he does not take the woman to his own house and put that great big stature to the test" (138). Indeed Odibo begins to see through Toje's schemes long before the educated Ali does. Moreover, this passage shows that he is beginning to see that Toje is much smaller in stature than he pretends to be. Toje, however, continues to speak brusquely to Odibo, not realizing the full implications of the deflation that is taking place in his personality consequent on his failure to achieve consummation with Aku, and failing to see that Odibo's perception of him is gradually changing.

The major turning point in relations between the two men comes after Odibo's successful mating with Aku, something that Toje, the "complete" man, had failed to achieve. Their positions are now, in a sense, completely reversed. For Odibo has superlatively demonstrated his manhood, even in Toje's terms, where Toje clearly has not. Not only does Odibo clearly see what Toje has been up to with Oshevire's wife, he also now realizes that it was Toje who had psychologically and physically enslaved him, who had enslaved his mind in order to enslave him physically, and had induced him to a totally wrong interpretation of his father's statement that "God never leaves a job half done" (62). The image of enchaining and imprisonment becomes dominant at this stage. After the mating with Aku, for instance, he tells us that he scuttled off to his room "like a dog fresh-loosed from the halter" (181). Later he tells us that he began to feel his mind liberated from its habitual prison. It is Toje, of course, who has been the agent of imprisonment, and Odibo's newly found liberation and self-confidence are shown by his determination to stand up to Toje and, if necessary, expose him. The complete reversal in the positions of the two men is underscored in the final violent confrontation between them when Odibo, who has now already demonstrated his superior manhood in sexual terms, proceeds to a triumphant affirmation of that manhood in physical terms, by completely subduing and fatally wounding the now completely emasculated Toje. The language in which Odibo narrates his confrontation with Toje is now a far cry from that of the early Odibo. It is now

almost like the language of the early Toje without the bluster and the pompous self-importance. It is the tough, hard-hitting, no-nonsense language of a man who is strong and knows it. It is now he who glowers down on the helpless, utterly useless Toje floundering on the floor: "In my present mood, I am quite prepared to send him to the floor a second time should he try to stand. . . . I am now hardened against any further softness or consideration for the fool on the floor" (213).

Some readers might well be repelled by Odibo's harshness toward Aku at this stage. He shows very little consideration for the feelings of the woman who is embarrassingly and involuntarily caught in this love triangle and faces the possibility of a scandal. No impression of love is conveyed in this scene, no concern for the dignity and feelings of the woman; only sheer masculine self-assertion and aggressive self-assurance. Some readers might feel that this is out of keeping with the character of the Odibo who had shown so much feeling for Aku. But it is precisely in making Odibo behave like this that Okpewho shows his mastery and psychological understanding. Odibo is not the tender chivalrous lover; he is a traditional man who has just discovered his manhood and power and feels that it is consistent with that manhood to be brusque, sharp, and authoritative with a woman. Taking his cue from Toje, his concept of manhood had included sexual prowess and physical strength, not honor or gentleness. He now behaves to Aku as he thinks a real man should behave in the circumstances. But according to the wider, all-embracing concept of manliness, he shows himself at his hour of triumph to be something less than a total man.

The development of the complex relationship between Aku and Toje on the one hand and Aku and Odibo on the other is similarly handled with great skill. We are convincingly shown that Aku succumbs to Odibo, not out of licentiousness or infidelity, but because Toje has aroused and failed to satisfy feelings in her which had long remained submerged. At the start she is determined not to shame her husband and give in to Toje. But when she decides to let him have his way with her it is largely because she has no choice. Toje offers the only protection she has in a very dangerous situation and only he stands between her and starvation. It is Toje who is to be condemned for exploiting a defenceless woman. Right from the start, Toje appears ridiculous in Aku's eyes. The first encounter between them is presented with great skill and sensitivity. The scene is very powerfully realized. Aku does not put up much resistance both because she has no choice and because after years of deprivation she is powerfully aroused as a woman. With Odibo, Aku is reserved at first, but having been aroused by Toje, she now recognizes Odibo's good looks and his sheer masculine appeal, in spite of his stump: "And what a fine man he was too. In the negligence of sleep he had not covered up his stumped arm properly, for it stuck out from under a fold of the cloth with which he had so anxiously hidden it when he had first entered. But the rest of his body bespoke a man—now that, happily, sleep had stripped him of his pretences and thrown him bare to my stolen gaze" (73-74). As she begins to be aware of his masculinity the relationship between them begins to change.

In the meantime Toje's deflation continues as he still fails to achieve consummation with Aku after repeated attempts. The "big old dandy" has now become a mere drooling figure of a man who has totally lost Aku's respect. But the more Toje is deflated, the more Odibo's stock rises. Okpewho shows with great psychologi-

cal realism how Aku, who has been aroused by Toje's manual fumbblings after years of sexual deprivation, now needs to have her inflamed desires satisfied and is therefore in a position to be responsive toward Odibo. Where Toje has totally failed her as a man she now realizes that Odibo is every inch a man. It is superbly ironic that the woman whom Toje used to insult Odibo's manliness should be the means of displaying his true manhood, at precisely the moment when Toje's is shown to be nonexistent.

In a sense, *The Last Duty* is about the gradual opening of people's eyes to the reality of others' characters and of the totality of the situation. In this regard, the role of Colonel Ali is very important. Not only must he come to a clear perception of Toje's real character and conduct and of the real significance of the relationship between him and Aku, he must also be brought to understand the true nature of his own impact on the community that has been placed in his charge. In that superbly controlled opening narrative Okpewho succeeds in conveying the impression of a conscientious but self-satisfied officer who is anxious to make a good impact both on his superiors and on the people under his command. The speech is almost stereotypical; it sounds like a prepared statement and is full of clichés. Okpewho's ironic presentation undercuts the Colonel's confidence and suggests that he is rather deluded and is not making quite the impression he imagines. The events that will unfold certainly do not suggest the atmosphere of calm, understanding, and mutual respect the Colonel talks about. The military execution which follows further underscores the Colonel's naivety and confirms our impression that he is liable to misunderstand the significance of events and to overestimate his own importance. Colonel Ali sees the execution as a tremendous set piece, as an occasion of moment which should be accorded the full military attendance it deserves. Not only does he request the federal Chief of Staff that it be public, he also requests the attendance of the military top brass. But the Chief of Staff quite properly regards the matter as a local affair belonging to the XVth Brigade and neither he nor the Military Governor of the state turns up. Clearly, they do not attach the same importance to the event that Colonel Ali does.

Ali's account of the actual execution is also presented with ironic detachment. He suggests that the condemned soldier was unrepentant and defiant. But the picture we actually have is of a soldier who squirms before his execution, who has to be dragged by force to the place of execution, strapped to the pole, and shot. He is anything but brave and defiant. No doubt Ali wishes to convey the impression of the courageous soldier bravely meeting his end. But this is not what we experience. The implication is that Ali, at best, is totally incapable of understanding the full import of the situation, and at worst distorts the account for the purpose of military propaganda. We are thus warned that in spite of being generally well-meaning and wishing to do the best for the people in the area under his command, Ali can easily be deluded. Indeed, it can be said that some of the disasters in the novel stem from the fact that Ali is hopelessly deluded about people's characters and the significance of events. For in nothing is Ali more deluded than in his estimate of Toje and his conduct. Toje actually dupes him into providing protection and cover for his sordid designs on Aku. Seen through the deluded Ali's eyes, Toje at the start is an honorable man. Even when this supposedly "honorable" man speaks crudely to him "with the kind of language I could hardly associate with a man of good intentions" (42) he is merely "baffled" and in the next breath mentions

that he was struck by the "dignity" of the man. But this dignity he talks of is in fact associated with a man who in order to impress everyone with his importance keeps on rattling his bicycle bells even after he has got through the checkpoint.

The interview which follows between Toje and Ali should reveal to any but the most blinded that the former is nothing but a corrupt braggart and bully; one, moreover, who is trying to manipulate the Colonel into providing a cover for his immoral activities. But far from seeing this the Colonel feels sorry for Toje and thinks that he deserves more respect than the military have accorded him. Ali is so easily deceived by appearances. He talks of the great air of knowledge and grandeur about Toje as the latter wipes his glasses with an ear of his wrapper; "I was impressed," he says. And later he exclaims: "Allah, that man is something!" (55). The inconsistency in Toje's now wishing to protect a woman whose husband he had denounced as a collaborator does puzzle Ali, but even so he misreads the situation, merely envisaging the remote possibility that Toje might wish to have the woman destroyed. So he decides to detail a private to guard her house, thus unwittingly helping to do Toje's dirty work for him. It is only much later that Ali begins to see through Toje, when he sees that Toje is wrongheaded about some things, and has the confidence to tell him so, when he can see panic in his looks "as of someone pleading for a last desperate chance" (108). It is then he is able to break off a conversation between Toje and himself and tell the latter that he is a busy man who has other things to attend to. Then, significantly, Toje begins to appear small to him and as he drives away the view of Toje's premises "gets smaller and smaller in the rear-mirror" (112). It is now that he really suspects that there is something fishy going on between Toje and Aku.

But in a sense Ali does not fully understand even at the end. It is true that the reality of Toje's nature and conduct becomes clear to him. But he is now deluded about Oshevire. This is how he describes Oshevire's reaction to the sordid revelations: "So when I came to put the whole history before him he was already wise to the shape of things. But he neither said a word nor changed the look on his face—that was when he won my respect. *Kai*, he's a man alright!" (235) Once more, Ali is deceived by appearances. He mistakes Oshevire's silence for a commendable stoicism, courage, and resignation to the events as they are, not realizing that it could mask an inner turmoil which could lead to terrible decisions and disastrous actions. It shows also that although Ali is more progressive in his conception of manhood than most, he is not aware of the most all-embracing conception of manhood. The real man is not just the one who can behave stoically and keep his feelings tightly under control, but one who, inter alia, can behave honorably and with sympathy, compassion, and understanding.

When the High Command relieves Ali of his post, it is not an unjust or harsh act toward one who has dutifully tried to do his best; it is the penalty he must pay for allowing himself to be lulled by overconfidence into a false sense of security both about the military situation and about people, and for totally misunderstanding the full implications of the whole situation, with disastrous consequences.