

*A writer once said that the reader should be able to return to the first pages of a novel or short story and find the resonances of the entire work. With reference to at least two works you have studied, consider the importance of the beginning to the work as a whole.*

Openings introduce themes and also major characters to the readers for the first time. The question asks me to consider the techniques used to open novels, and the ways in which writers then use the openings to develop the plot. Therefore, this essay will consider the opening passages of two novels – *Passage to India* by E.M. Forster, and *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. In the opening of *Passage to India* (*Passage*), the writer uses personification of the landscape to describe the scene he sets. These personifications are repeated throughout the work. In *Passage* the location – India and Chandrapore – is very important to the work, as you can see from the title. In *Things Fall Apart* (*Things*), the main character, Okonkwo, is introduced through the use of two contrasting styles of narrative voice. One is an informal, storytelling tone, which delivers anecdotes that seem to assume the reader is familiar with Ibo culture. The other is a formal and distant tone, like a history text book. Both these narrative conventions are used throughout the texts and again at the end. Clearly, both Achebe and Forster saw the opening passages of their works as important to the work as a whole, as they used the first few pages to establish the important themes, ideas and characters of the rest of the novel.

The chosen openings of a novel set up the approach the writer makes to their subject material. Forster's novel is very focussed on the issues and concerns of colonisation, so his opening chapter is all about the land that has been colonised. India is a living being in *Passage*, as can be seen from Forster's method of description in the opening sentences. Chandrapore is described as 'it', in the descriptions "it trails the river". This personifies the town as an individual, which firstly seems to be following the river aimlessly, as if it has no idea what else to do, and then later seems to be the actual cause of the "rubbish" in the Ganges – rather than the people who live in the town. The trees of the town are later described in detail, and personified, as "greeting" one another, and "building cities for birds". The earth and the sky, are also described in this chapter, and personified, and the sky, which "settles everything", is given the power to make India beautiful or ugly. People are only mentioned once, when they are described as 'mud moving'. The overall impact is to strongly emphasise the importance of the landscape in Forster's novel, and to give it God like power, while people are made to seem unimportant and powerless. Forster regularly returns to this personification of the landscape throughout the novel; for example in the following chapters the soil of India is described as "hostile" to walkers, and the moon is spoken of as "she".

Achebe also chooses to write about colonisation and the effect it has on people who live in colonised lands; however, he takes a different approach to Forster, and you can see this straight away in his opening pages. Where Forster focuses on the landscape, Achebe begins chapter 1 of *Things* by introducing Okonkwo. Achebe uses flashbacks, presented in a humorous, storytelling tone, which he mixes with description of Ibo customs delivered in a scientific and formal tone to encourage the reader to feel great interest in, and yet also a kind of detachment from the main characters of the

novel. For example, Achebe opens the novel with a detailed account of Okonkwo's great wrestling victory, which seems to draw the reader in to Ibo life. The opening sentence, "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond", seems to assume that the reader knows where these nine villages are, and who lives there. Okonkwo's personality is then described by humorous description of his "bushy eyebrows", "severe look", loud breathing and the way he pounces on people. All of this description seems to assume the reader has a cultural familiarity with the Ibo culture as no explanation is offered for any of the Nigerian cultural references, such as "harmattan", or the sleeping arrangements of Okonkwo's "wives and children". This familiar tone is continued in the offering of the detailed personal anecdotes about Okonkwo's father, which make the reader feel sympathy for Okonkwo's fear of failure, and his surface hardness and coldness. This technique is regularly continued, and the writer returns repeatedly to Okonkwo's former victories. For example, the way in which Okonkwo came to meet his favourite wife, Ezinma's mother Ekwefi, is told as a very personal anecdotal flashback, at the end of which we are left with Okonkwo and Ekwefi about to make love for the first time.

Also at the beginning of the novel and mixed in with the anecdotal flashbacks, Achebe takes a different tone and narrative approach that seems designed to distance the reader from the Ibo. For example, when Achebe explains the ritual of conversation between Unoka (Okonkwo's father) and Okeye, he says: "Among the Ibo". This is used again in the description of Okonkwo which comes after the stories about Unoka. The expression, "among these people" is used to introduce an explanation of Ibo values. The expression makes the reader feel separate to Okonkwo and the Ibo, creating a feeling that you are observing the action of the story. The effect of this is to make the reader feel like they are some sort of anthropologist. This is important to Achebe, as it seems that he would also wish his readers to judge Okonkwo – and the Ibo – and see their merits and value without any emotion. Achebe uses this scientific tone again in the last sentence of the book, when the district commissioner uses it, this time unfairly and in contrast to the reader's own 'scientific' understanding, when he dismisses Okonkwo's life as only worthy of a paragraph in his own book, "The pacification of the tribes of the upper Niger".

Forster repeats actual words, images and structures from his opening throughout the novel, regularly using the personification of the landscape, which he makes seem eternal and enormously powerful. Forster uses the same descriptive tone and approach to set the scene at the opening of each section of the novel. The first section is called "Temple". The second section, called "Caves", also opens with a detailed description of the timeless, hostile landscape of the Marabar caves. As in the opening of "Temple" the human characters of the book are not mentioned. In the opening chapter of "Caves", the power of the Marabar hills is described in terms of infinite nothingness. Even the opening paragraph emphasises that the land around the Marabar hills has been covered by "no ocean", and that even Buddha who once passed through the region left "no legend of struggle or victory" on the Marabar hills. When speaking of the caves themselves, Forster uses immediate repetition (epizeuxis) of the word 'nothing' several times to describe and emphasise what they contain, and what they are worth. Yet these are the caves that have the power to destroy the lives

and dreams of the characters presented in the book. The caves reduce all speech and language to the sound “Ou-boum”, which is the most important image presented in the novel. The physical landscape of India has the power to destroy everything – even Mrs Moore’s belief in God. This echo is again personified, as Mrs Moore imagines the caves whispering that courage and faith are the same as filth, and the personification makes the message Forster wants readers to take from the book seem even bigger and more frightening. The power of the landscape is also given the final word in the novel, when the landscape of India seems to break the friendship of Aziz and Fielding, during their final horse ride together.

It can therefore be seen that in these two novels the writers seem to have agreed with the writer quoted in the question that the opening of the work is important to the rest of the work. Achebe’s uses contrasting narrative tones to create a contrasting attitude in his readers. In this way Achebe causes his readers to experience the ‘falling apart’ of the old culture of the Ibo nation from both an external, anthropological viewpoint, and from a deeply personal involved viewpoint. The final words of the book come from the District Commissioner, and they are cold, analytical and present a kind of heartless judgement of the Ibo as a people to be pacified. These words contrast with the words of Obierika, Okonkwo’s best friend, who expresses the sorrow and anger the reader feels at Okonkwo’s manner of death. The reader can also experience both the sorrow and anger at the passing of the old, but also a sense of belief and hope in the strength of people to make a new culture. Some of the main characters who survive Okonkwo show that they are more resilient than he is, and that they will be able to make the invading culture part of their own. Thus the final words of the District Commissioner are not as ‘final’ as he clearly thinks, and the reader feels scorn and amusement at his arrogance.

Forster leaves the reader with a final sentence containing images and ideas from the opening pages. Aziz and Fielding have been making a final horse ride together. Aziz tries to embrace Fielding, saying “then you and I shall be friends”. “But the horses didn’t want it-they swerved apart; the earth didn’t want it, sending up rocks through which the riders must pass single file”. The list of landscape items that “do not want” the friendship of Aziz and Fielding continues, ending with the sky which, as in chapter one, “settles everything”. The sky “speaks” the final words: “no, not here”, which officially ends the friendship of the two men. The land cannot be taken over by any one race of people, because it is eternal, as the central image of the echo in the Marabar cave shows. Forster makes the reader think about the insignificance of humans, and the stupid pointlessness of racial and religious divisions. The actions of Forster’s characters, both good and bad, are made to seem meaningless against the backdrop of the eternal landscape, which actually is in control of both Indians and colonisers alike. As with Achebe’s text, the final words of Forster’s text pick up images and ideas from the beginning. So you can see that the beginnings of these works are important to the whole.