“Cell One” by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie:  
An Analysis

Plot:
“Cell One” begins with about six pages of backstory and ends with present action. The move from exposition to present action begins with page seven’s “It was the season of cults” and is then clearly marked by a space break on page nine and, even more explicitly, by the narrator beginning the next paragraph with “This is how it happened” (9) – “it” being the present action of the story.

Backstory: The narrator lives with her brother, Nnamabia, and their parents on the campus of University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Their generation, given an English education and relatively isolated from the rest of Nigeria, has been experiencing growing pains. Three years ago Nnamabia, inspired by a rash of thefts performed by boys on campus slightly older than himself, faked a break-in and stole his mother’s jewellery. His guilt quickly became clear but he went mostly unpunished. His mother especially has been making excuses for his misbehavior since he was eleven. Recently gang violence has come to the campus; Nnamabia’s relationship to the gangs is ambiguous.

Present action: Nnamabia, now twenty, is arrested and detained in the Enugu police station. The narrator and her parents make a series of visits to him there. For a week he is unfazed, even excited, but in the second week he is upset by the treatment of an old man who has entered his cell. Due to his criticism of the old man’s treatment, he is transferred, first to Cell One, a room in the station associated with terrible violence, then to a nameless facility on the outskirts of town. He is retrieved by his family, perhaps just in time.

Character:
Nnamabia is the main character. He is both transparent and a mystery to the narrator, his sister: “I knew my brother so well” (4), she says, and later “I could not always tell from my brother’s gracious, smiling face what it was he really felt” (7).

We learn more about Nnamabia’s physical appearance than about any other character’s. He shares some features with his mother: “that honey-fair complexion, large eyes, and a generous mouth that curved perfectly” (6); he has “a carefully tended beard” (5); his eyelashes are “long and thick” (8-9). More than once the narrator mentions his “good looks” (6): Nnamabia’s face is “even more beautiful with a new pimple-like insect bite on his forehead” (11); he is “the handsome boy from the university” (21); she calls him “my handsome brother” (19). (This last construction is used repeatedly: Nnamabia is also “my amenable brother” (11),...
“my worldly brother” (16), and “my charming brother” (21).

The narrator is not uniquely attracted to her brother; his attractiveness is an objective, almost universal fact. In a mix of half-scene and summary, the narrator tells us

Nnamabia was very popular. Boys yelled out his nickname – “The Funk!” – and shook his hand whenever he passed by, and girls, especially the popular Big Chicks, hugged him for too long when they said hello. He went to all the parties, the tame ones on campus and the wilder ones in town, and he was the kind of ladies’ man who was also a guy’s guy, the kind who smoked a pack of Rothmans a day and was reputed to be able to finish a carton of Star beer in a sitting. (8)

The narrator’s mother, too, is clearly attracted to her son. For almost a decade now, she has been making excuses for his indiscretions, from lost library books to exams stolen from his father. She “took a mischievous and joyful responsibility for Nnamabia’s good looks” (6), and she refuses to force him to take responsibility for his actions.

We know much less about the narrator. We know nothing of her habits, her likes and dislikes, her ambitions, her values. Of a boy she had a crush on, she says “He never noticed me” (6), and it is almost possible for the reader to forget her presence in the events she describes. Her parents, certainly, take little notice of her. Indeed, she has to smash the window of their Volvo to get their attention. Otherwise she seems to lurk in the background of events, a quiet observer. We know that her skin is darker than her brother’s or mother’s only through inference: in the market, “traders would call out, ‘Hey! Madam, why did you waste your fair skin on a boy and leave the girl so dark?’” (6). And we come to know her only through her attitudes to others. She is disgusted by her mother’s reaction to Nnamabia’s theft – “I wanted to slap her” (4) – and she’s not quite disgusted but certainly unimpressed by her “professor father” and his desire to have “things written down and nicely documented” (5). Her parents’ reactions to Nnamabia’s troublemaking and then arrest are roughly similar. Her ambivalence to these events marks her as different.

Upon learning that Nnamabia is in Enugu, the narrator and her parents are all “gripped” (11) by fear. But while her father thinks Nnamabia has been “shaken” (11) by his arrest, the narrator thinks he seems fine; when Nnamabia freaks out about prison conditions, the narrator wants “to ask him to shut up” (13); while the narrator’s parents take it for granted that they must visit Nnamabia every day, the narrator thinks “it would not hurt Nnamabia to fend for himself for a day” (14). And yet, as Nnamabia becomes more subdued, more humbled, and as his physical condition deteriorates, the narrator, rather than gloating or feeling vindicated, feels “tenderness” (16) for him. Her mother especially seems to favour her son, but this does not hinder the narrator’s affection and concern for her brother.
Tone:
The narrator’s detached, almost journalistic tone reinforces the impression that she is an observer, an almost objective presence. When she launches into the present action by stating “This is how it happened” (9), the reader has no doubt that what follows will be factually accurate. But the narrator is so detached, so removed from her parents and her community, that her tone occasionally becomes frustrated and even angry. Just as she is disgusted by her mother’s reaction to Nnamabia’s theft, she is disgusted by the “professor parents” of young thieves who continue to “moan about riffraff from town coming onto their sacred campus to steal” (5) when they know it is their own children who are the thieves. Moreover, her detachment does not help her understand the rise of gang violence on the Nsukka campus. She describes this violence in an uncharacteristically long and almost out-of-control, almost absurd sentence, then follows this sentence with a simple, bewildered statement:

Cult wars had become common: a boy would leer at a girl who turned out to be the girlfriend of the Capone of the Black Axe, and that boy as he walked to a kiosk to buy a cigarette later, would be stabbed in the thigh, and he would turn out to be a member of the Buccaneers, and so his fellow Buccaneers would go to a beer parlor and shoot the nearest Black Axe boy in the shoulder, and then the next day a Buccaneer member would be shot dead in the refectory, his body falling against aluminum bowls of soup, and that evening a Black Axe boy would be hacked to death in his room in a lecturer’s Boy’s Quarters, his CD player spattered with blood. It was senseless. (7-8)

Finally, the narrator is capable of both coldly indicting her brother for his penchant for entertaining, even in prison, and sympathizing with his plight. In the last sentence of the story, the narrator’s voice is sad and admiring.

Time Management:
The present action of the story covers about a week and a half. The closest it comes to approximating real time is in the account of the family’s visit to Nnamabia at the beginning of his second week in prison. Elsewhere the story is mostly comprised of summary and half-scene. Space breaks are sometimes used to skip years or days: the first space break moves the story three years ahead; the fifth covers two days.

The story moves chronologically except for two short flashes forward. The first section ends with reference to the family’s “first visit to the police station” (9), and the second section begins a few hours before his arrest. And on page eighteen the narrator suspends her account of the day the family was reunited with Nnamabia to tell us “Later I would realize that at that moment each of us suspected privately that Nnamabia had been killed…” This flash forward briefly delays our discovery of whether or not Nnamabia is alive and does not indicate whether the family’s suspicions – which the reader must at this point share – are accurate. As a result, it subtly increases the suspense that has been building since the first space break.
Suspense:
The story’s opening might be read as amusing, even playful: a boy steals artefacts of 1980s pop culture from his neighbours, a son skips church to ineptly stage a robbery in his own house. It’s not until the end of the first section that it become clear that the story is not, in fact, playful, and that whatever humour is in it is incidental. The major dramatic question is established as the narrator concludes the story of Nnamabia’s theft: “The robbery might never have been mentioned again if Nnamabia had not been arrested three years later” (7) – why was Nnamabia arrested?

This question is answered quickly, in the next, short section: he was in a bar with some cult boys. But as soon as the question is answered, the problems become more complex. Is Nnamabia a gang member, is he guilty? Where is he being held? How will his family help him in this foreign place? How will he cope with this new environment? How will he deal with the way the old man is treated?

The story is not immediately, intensely suspenseful, then. Its suspense builds slowly, just as the characters’ fear and uncertainty builds, just as the danger Nnamabia is in intensifies, until finally the question is: is Nnamabia alive? This question, too, is answered quickly and quietly: “But the policeman came out with Nnamabia. There he was…” (19). The reader is left wondering how Nnamabia’s experience has changed him, and how it will change his family.

Dialogue:
When characters speak in Igbo, dialogue is usually given indirectly, in translation. Dialogue is almost entirely absent in the first and second sections. As the story progresses it appears more frequently. As the stakes of the conversations become higher, more time is given to dialogue, until on page nineteen, where Nnamabia’s whereabouts are unclear, even dialogue tags are dispensed with altogether.

Inner story:
In the end, “Cell One” is a story about a sister’s love for her brother, and that brother’s coming of age. Until he meets the old man, Nnamabia is, despite his physical appearance, an unattractive figure. He’s selfish and self-absorbed: he exploits his parents’ passivity, he ignores the curfew imposed on the campus, and he is excited by and glamorizes his stint in prison. His encounter with the old man, however, and the breakdown of the Buccaneer he was arrested with, finally force him to begin growing up. The latter event teaches him a lesson he should have learned much earlier: “the Incredible Hulk was really just green paint” (12). And the former forces him to think of someone other than himself, to struggle with his own powerlessness, and to risk his own well-being. When the story ends, he is through with dramatizing his escapades.

When the story ends, too, the narrator is still detached, still distant, but her love for her brother, which had been challenged by his behaviour, is clear. The conclusion that she imagines to Nnamabia’s story casts her brother as an almost tragic hero. And again, rather than taking pleasure in his comeuppance, she observes him with tenderness.
“Cell One” also about gaps between generations and between classes. The parents on the Nsukka campus have done their best to isolate their children and themselves from the Nigeria around them. Their children have “grown up watching Sesame Street, reading Enid Blyton, eating cornflakes for breakfast…” (5), and the parents have maintained this sort of fantasy world in part by bribing the authorities around them. Their children, however, are experimenting with increasingly violent forms of criminality, and are increasingly vulnerable to outside influences and dangers; the distance between affluent Nsukka and “anonymous” (10) Enugu is shrinking, the power of the authorities the parents rely on is diminishing, and the parents are doing their best to remain oblivious to these realities. The narrator seems most aware of the world around her and her place in it; her brother finally learns his place in the world at the end of the story; and the adults in their lives look like lost causes. On a macro level, then, the story is about a Nigeria that is changing fast, that is forcing privileged sons to grow up, and that is leaving members of an older, isolated, upper-class generation behind.