THINGS FALL APART STUDY GUIDE

LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE 2013

Context

ALBERT CHINUA LUMOGU ACHEBE WAS BORN ON November 16, 1930, in Ogidi, a large village in Nigeria. Although he was the child of a Protestant missionary and received his early education in English, his upbringing was multicultural, as the inhabitants of Ogidi still lived according to many aspects of traditional Igbo (formerly written as Ibo) culture. Achebe attended the Government College in Umuahia from 1944 to 1947. He graduated from University College, Ibadan, in 1953. While he was in college, Achebe studied history and theology. He also developed his interest in indigenous Nigerian cultures, and he rejected his Christian name, Albert, for his indigenous one, Chinua.

In the 1950s, Achebe was one of the founders of a Nigerian literary movement that drew upon the traditional oral culture of its indigenous peoples. In 1959, he published Things Fall Apart as a response to novels, such as Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, that treat Africa as a primordial and cultureless foil for Europe. Tired of reading white men’s accounts of how primitive, socially backward, and, most important, language-less native Africans were, Achebe sought to convey a fuller understanding of one African culture and, in so doing, give voice to an underrepresented and exploited colonial subject.

Things Fall Apart is set in the 1890s and portrays the clash between Nigeria’s white colonial government and the traditional culture of the indigenous Igbo people. Achebe’s novel shatters the stereotypical European portraits of native Africans. He is careful to portray the complex, advanced social institutions and artistic traditions of Igbo culture prior to its contact with Europeans. Yet he is just as careful not to stereotype the Europeans; he offers varying depictions of the white man, such as the mostly benevolent Mr. Brown, the zealous Reverend Smith, and the ruthlessly calculating District Commissioner.

Achebe’s education in English and exposure to European customs have allowed him to capture both the European and the African perspectives on colonial expansion, religion, race, and culture. His decision to write Things Fall Apart in English is an important one. Achebe wanted this novel to respond to earlier colonial accounts of Africa; his choice of language was thus political. Unlike some later African authors who chose to revitalize native languages as a form of resistance to colonial culture, Achebe wanted to achieve cultural revitalization within and through English. Nevertheless, he manages to capture the rhythm of the Igbo language and he integrates Igbo vocabulary into the narrative.

Achebe has become renowned throughout the world as a father of modern African literature, essayist, and professor of English literature at Bard College in New York. But Achebe’s achievements are most concretely reflected by his prominence in Nigeria’s academic culture and in its literary and political institutions. He worked for the Nigerian Broadcasting Company for over a decade and later became an English professor at the University of Nigeria. He has also been quite influential in the publication of new Nigerian writers. In 1967, he co-founded a publishing company with a Nigerian poet named Christopher
Oigbo and in 1971, he began editing Okike, a respected journal of Nigerian writing. In 1984, he founded Uwa ndi Igbo, a bilingual magazine containing a great deal of information about Igbo culture. He has been active in Nigerian politics since the 1960s, and many of his novels address the post-colonial social and political problems that Nigeria still faces.

Plot Overview

OKONKWO IS A WEALTHY AND RESPECTED WARRIOR of the Umuofia clan, a lower Nigerian tribe that is part of a consortium of nine connected villages. He is haunted by the actions of Unoka, his cowardly and spendthrift father, who died in disrepute, leaving many village debts unsettled. In response, Okonkwo became a clansman, warrior, farmer, and family provider extraordinaire. He has a twelve-year-old son named Nwoye whom he finds lazy; Okonkwo worries that Nwoye will end up a failure like Unoka.

In a settlement with a neighboring tribe, Umuofia wins a virgin and a fifteen-year-old boy. Okonkwo takes charge of the boy, Ikemefuna, and finds an ideal son in him. Nwoye likewise forms a strong attachment to the newcomer. Despite his fondness for Ikemefuna and despite the fact that the boy begins to call him “father,” Okonkwo does not let himself show any affection for him.

During the Week of Peace, Okonkwo accuses his youngest wife, Ojiugo, of negligence. He severely beats her, breaking the peace of the sacred week. He makes some sacrifices to show his repentance, but he has shocked his community irreparably.

Ikemefuna stays with Okonkwo’s family for three years. Nwoye looks up to him as an older brother and, much to Okonkwo’s pleasure, develops a more masculine attitude. One day, the locusts come to Umuofia—they will come every year for seven years before disappearing for another generation. The village excitedly collects them because they are good to eat when cooked.

Ogbuefi Ezeudu, a respected village elder, informs Okonkwo in private that the Oracle has said that Ikemefuna must be killed. He tells Okonkwo that because Ikemefuna calls him “father,” Okonkwo should not take part in the boy’s death. Okonkwo lies to Ikemefuna, telling him that they must return him to his home village. Nwoye bursts into tears.

As he walks with the men of Umuofia, Ikemefuna thinks about seeing his mother. After several hours of walking, some of Okonkwo’s clansmen attack the boy with machetes. Ikemefuna runs to Okonkwo for help. But Okonkwo, who doesn’t wish to look weak in front of his fellow tribesmen, cuts the boy down despite the Oracle’s admonishment. When Okonkwo returns home, Nwoye deduces that his friend is dead.

Okonkwo sinks into a depression, neither able to sleep nor eat. He visits his friend Obierika and begins to feel revived a bit. Okonkwo’s daughter Ezinma falls ill, but she recovers after Okonkwo gathers leaves for her medicine.
The death of Ogbuefi Ezeudu is announced to the surrounding villages by means of the *ekwe*, a musical instrument. Okonkwo feels guilty because the last time Ezeudu visited him was to warn him against taking part in Ikemefuna’s death. At Ogbuefi Ezeudu’s large and elaborate funeral, the men beat drums and fire their guns. Tragedy compounds upon itself when Okonkwo’s gun explodes and kills Ogbuefi Ezeudu’s sixteen-year-old son.

Because killing a clansman is a crime against the earth goddess, Okonkwo must take his family into exile for seven years in order to atone. He gathers his most valuable belongings and takes his family to his mother’s natal village, Mbanta. The men from Ogbuefi Ezeudu’s quarter burn Okonkwo’s buildings and kill his animals to cleanse the village of his sin.

Okonkwo’s kinsmen, especially his uncle, Uchendu, receive him warmly. They help him build a new compound of huts and lend him yam seeds to start a farm. Although he is bitterly disappointed at his misfortune, Okonkwo reconciles himself to life in his motherland.

During the second year of Okonkwo’s exile, Obierika brings several bags of cowries (shells used as currency) that he has made by selling Okonkwo’s yams. Obierika plans to continue to do so until Okonkwo returns to the village. Obierika also brings the bad news that Abame, another village, has been destroyed by the white man.

Soon afterward, six missionaries travel to Mbanta. Through an interpreter named Mr. Kiaga, the missionaries’ leader, Mr. Brown, speaks to the villagers. He tells them that their gods are false and that worshipping more than one God is idolatrous. But the villagers do not understand how the Holy Trinity can be accepted as one God. Although his aim is to convert the residents of Umuofia to Christianity, Mr. Brown does not allow his followers to antagonize the clan.

Mr. Brown grows ill and is soon replaced by Reverend James Smith, an intolerant and strict man. The more zealous converts are relieved to be free of Mr. Brown’s policy of restraint. One such convert, Enoch, dares to unmask an *egwugwu* during the annual ceremony to honor the earth deity, an act equivalent to killing an ancestral spirit. The next day, the *egwugwu* burn Enoch’s compound and Reverend Smith’s church to the ground.

The District Commissioner is upset by the burning of the church and requests that the leaders of Umuofia meet with him. Once they are gathered, however, the leaders are handcuffed and thrown in jail, where they suffer insults and physical abuse.

After the prisoners are released, the clansmen hold a meeting, during which five court messengers approach and order the clansmen to desist. Expecting his fellow clan members to join him in uprising, Okonkwo kills their leader with his machete. When the crowd allows the other messengers to escape, Okonkwo realizes that his clan is not willing to go to war.

When the District Commissioner arrives at Okonkwo’s compound, he finds that Okonkwo has hanged himself. Obierika and his friends lead the commissioner to the body. Obierika explains that suicide is a grave sin; thus, according to custom, none of Okonkwo’s clansmen may touch his body. The commissioner, who is writing a book about Africa, believes that the story of Okonkwo’s rebellion and
death will make for an interesting paragraph or two. He has already chosen the book’s title: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger.*

**Analysis of Major Characters**

**Okonkwo**

Okonkwo, the son of the effeminate and lazy Unoka, strives to make his way in a world that seems to value manliness. In so doing, he rejects everything for which he believes his father stood. Unoka was idle, poor, profligate, cowardly, gentle, and interested in music and conversation. Okonkwo consciously adopts opposite ideals and becomes productive, wealthy, thrifty, brave, violent, and adamantly opposed to music and anything else that he perceives to be “soft,” such as conversation and emotion. He is stoic to a fault.

Okonkwo achieves great social and financial success by embracing these ideals. He marries three women and fathers several children. Nevertheless, just as his father was at odds with the values of the community around him, so too does Okonkwo find himself unable to adapt to changing times as the white man comes to live among the Umuofians. As it becomes evident that compliance rather than violence constitutes the wisest principle for survival, Okonkwo realizes that he has become a relic, no longer able to function within his changing society.

Okonkwo is a tragic hero in the classical sense: although he is a superior character, his tragic flaw—the equation of manliness with rashness, anger, and violence—brings about his own destruction. Okonkwo is gruff, at times, and usually unable to express his feelings (the narrator frequently uses the word “inwardly” in reference to Okonkwo’s emotions). But his emotions are indeed quite complex, as his “manly” values conflict with his “unmanly” ones, such as fondness for Ikemefuna and Ezinma. The narrator privileges us with information that Okonkwo’s fellow clan members do not have—that Okonkwo surreptitiously follows Ekwefi into the forest in pursuit of Ezinma, for example—and thus allows us to see the tender, worried father beneath the seemingly indifferent exterior.

**Nwoye**

Nwoye, Okonkwo’s oldest son, struggles in the shadow of his powerful, successful, and demanding father. His interests are different from Okonkwo’s and resemble more closely those of Unoka, his grandfather. He undergoes many beatings, at a loss for how to please his father, until the arrival of Ikemefuna, who becomes like an older brother and teaches him a gentler form of successful masculinity. As a result, Okonkwo backs off, and Nwoye even starts to win his grudging approval. Nwoye remains conflicted, however: though he makes a show of scorning feminine things in order to please his father, he misses his mother’s stories.

With the unconscionable murder of Ikemefuna, however, Nwoye retreats into himself and finds himself forever changed. His reluctance to accept Okonkwo’s masculine values turns into pure embitterment toward him and his ways. When missionaries come to Mbanta, Nwoye’s hope and faith are reawakened, and he eventually joins forces with them. Although Okonkwo curses his lot for having borne so
“effeminate” a son and disowns Nwoye, Nwoye appears to have found peace at last in leaving the oppressive atmosphere of his father’s tyranny.

**Ezinma**

Ezinma, Okonkwo’s favorite daughter and the only child of Ekwefi, is bold in the way that she approaches—and even sometimes contradicts—her father. Okonkwo remarks to himself multiple times that he wishes she had been born a boy, since he considers her to have such a masculine spirit. Ezinma alone seems to win Okonkwo’s full attention, affection, and, ironically, respect. She and he are kindred spirits, which boosts her confidence and precociousness. She grows into a beautiful young woman who sensibly agrees to put off marriage until her family returns from exile so as to help her father leverage his sociopolitical power most effectively. In doing so, she shows an approach similar to that of Okonkwo: she puts strategy ahead of emotion.

**Mr. Brown**

Mr. Brown represents Achebe’s attempt to craft a well-rounded portrait of the colonial presence by tempering bad personalities with good ones. Mr. Brown’s successor, Reverend Smith, is zealous, vengeful, small-minded, and manipulative; he thus stands in contrast to Mr. Brown, who, on the other hand, is benevolent if not always beneficent. Mr. Brown succeeds in winning a large number of converts because he listens to the villagers’ stories, beliefs, and opinions. He also accepts the converts unconditionally. His conversation with Akunna represents this sympathetic stance. The derisive comments that Reverend Smith makes about Mr. Brown after the latter’s departure illustrate the colonial intolerance for any kind of sympathy for, and genuine interest in, the native culture. The surname Brown hints at his ability to navigate successfully the clear-cut racial division between the colonizers and the colonized.

**Themes, Motifs & Symbols**

**Themes**

*Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.*

**The Struggle Between Change and Tradition**

As a story about a culture on the verge of change, *Things Fall Apart* deals with how the prospect and reality of change affect various characters. The tension about whether change should be privileged over tradition often involves questions of personal status. Okonkwo, for example, resists the new political and religious orders because he feels that they are not manly and that he himself will not be manly if he consents to join or even tolerate them. To some extent, Okonkwo’s resistance of cultural change is also due to his fear of losing societal status. His sense of self-worth is dependent upon the traditional standards by which society judges him. This system of evaluating the self inspires many of the clan’s outcasts to embrace Christianity. Long scorned, these outcasts find in the Christian value system a refuge from the Igbo cultural values that place them below everyone else. In their new community, these converts enjoy a more elevated status.
The villagers in general are caught between resisting and embracing change and they face the dilemma of trying to determine how best to adapt to the reality of change. Many of the villagers are excited about the new opportunities and techniques that the missionaries bring. This European influence, however, threatens to extinguish the need for the mastery of traditional methods of farming, harvesting, building, and cooking. These traditional methods, once crucial for survival, are now, to varying degrees, dispensable. Throughout the novel, Achebe shows how dependent such traditions are upon storytelling and language and thus how quickly the abandonment of the Igbo language for English could lead to the eradication of these traditions.

Varying Interpretations of Masculinity

Okonkwo’s relationship with his late father shapes much of his violent and ambitious demeanor. He wants to rise above his father’s legacy of spendthrift, indolent behavior, which he views as weak and therefore effeminate. This association is inherent in the clan’s language—the narrator mentions that the word for a man who has not taken any of the expensive, prestige-indicating titles is agbala, which also means “woman.” But, for the most part, Okonkwo’s idea of manliness is not the clan’s. He associates masculinity with aggression and feels that anger is the only emotion that he should display. For this reason, he frequently beats his wives, even threatening to kill them from time to time. We are told that he does not think about things, and we see him act rashly and impetuously. Yet others who are in no way effeminate do not behave in this way. Obierika, unlike Okonkwo, “was a man who thought about things.” Whereas Obierika refuses to accompany the men on the trip to kill Ikemefuna, Okonkwo not only volunteers to join the party that will execute his surrogate son but also violently stabs him with his machete simply because he is afraid of appearing weak.

Okonkwo’s seven-year exile from his village only reinforces his notion that men are stronger than women. While in exile, he lives among the kinsmen of his motherland but resents the period in its entirety. The exile is his opportunity to get in touch with his feminine side and to acknowledge his maternal ancestors, but he keeps reminding himself that his maternal kinsmen are not as warlike and fierce as he remembers the villagers of Umuofia to be. He faults them for their preference of negotiation, compliance, and avoidance over anger and bloodshed. In Okonkwo’s understanding, his uncle Uchendu exemplifies this pacifist (and therefore somewhat effeminate) mode.

Language as a Sign of Cultural Difference

Language is an important theme in Things Fall Apart on several levels. In demonstrating the imaginative, often formal language of the Igbo, Achebe emphasizes that Africa is not the silent or incomprehensible country that books such as Heart of Darkness made it out to be. Rather, by peppering the novel with Igbo words, Achebe shows that the Igbo language is too complex for direct translation into English. Similarly, Igbo culture cannot be understood within the framework of European colonialist values. Achebe also points out that Africa has many different languages: the villagers of Umuofia, for example, make fun of Mr. Brown’s translator because his language is slightly different from their own.

On a macroscopic level, it is extremely significant that Achebe chose to write Things Fall Apart in English—he clearly intended it to be read by the West at least as much, if not more, than by his fellow
Nigerians. His goal was to critique and emend the portrait of Africa that was painted by so many writers of the colonial period. Doing so required the use of English, the language of those colonial writers. Through his inclusion of proverbs, folktales, and songs translated from the Igbo language, Achebe managed to capture and convey the rhythms, structures, cadences, and beauty of the Igbo language.

Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text’s major themes.

Chi

The concept of chi is discussed at various points throughout the novel and is important to our understanding of Okonkwo as a tragic hero. The chi is an individual’s personal god, whose merit is determined by the individual’s good fortune or lack thereof. Along the lines of this interpretation, one can explain Okonkwo’s tragic fate as the result of a problematic chi—a thought that occurs to Okonkwo at several points in the novel. For the clan believes, as the narrator tells us in Chapter 14, a “man could not rise beyond the destiny of his chi.” But there is another understanding of chi that conflicts with this definition. In Chapter 4, the narrator relates, according to an Igbo proverb, that “when a man says yes his chi says yes also.” According to this understanding, individuals will their own destinies. Thus, depending upon our interpretation of chi, Okonkwo seems either more or less responsible for his own tragic death. Okonkwo himself shifts between these poles: when things are going well for him, he perceives himself as master and maker of his own destiny; when things go badly, however, he automatically disavows responsibility and asks why he should be so ill-fated.

Animal Imagery

In their descriptions, categorizations, and explanations of human behavior and wisdom, the Igbo often use animal anecdotes to naturalize their rituals and beliefs. The presence of animals in their folklore reflects the environment in which they live—not yet “modernized” by European influence. Though the colonizers, for the most part, view the Igbo’s understanding of the world as rudimentary, the Igbo perceive these animal stories, such as the account of how the tortoise’s shell came to be bumpy, as logical explanations of natural phenomena. Another important animal image is the figure of the sacred python. Enoch’s alleged killing and eating of the python symbolizes the transition to a new form of spirituality and a new religious order. Enoch’s disrespect of the python clashes with the Igbo’s reverence for it, epitomizing the incompatibility of colonialist and indigenous values.

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, and colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

Locusts
Achebe depicts the locusts that descend upon the village in highly allegorical terms that prefigure the arrival of the white settlers, who will feast on and exploit the resources of the Igbo. The fact that the Igbo eat these locusts highlights how innocuous they take them to be. Similarly, those who convert to Christianity fail to realize the damage that the culture of the colonizer does to the culture of the colonized.

The language that Achebe uses to describe the locusts indicates their symbolic status. The repetition of words like "settled" and "every" emphasizes the suddenly ubiquitous presence of these insects and hints at the way in which the arrival of the white settlers takes the Igbo off guard. Furthermore, the locusts are so heavy they break the tree branches, which symbolizes the fracturing of Igbo traditions and culture under the onslaught of colonialism and white settlement. Perhaps the most explicit clue that the locusts symbolize the colonists is Obierika’s comment in Chapter 15: “the Oracle . . . said that other white men were on their way. They were locusts. . . .”

Fire

Okonkwo is associated with burning, fire, and flame throughout the novel, alluding to his intense and dangerous anger—the only emotion that he allows himself to display. Yet the problem with fire, as Okonkwo acknowledges in Chapters 17 and 24, is that it destroys everything it consumes. Okonkwo is both physically destructive—he kills Ikemefuna and Ogbuefi Ezeudu's son—and emotionally destructive—he suppresses his fondness for Ikemefuna and Ezinma in favor of a colder, more masculine aura. Just as fire feeds on itself until all that is left is a pile of ash, Okonkwo eventually succumbs to his intense rage, allowing it to rule his actions until it destroys him.

SIGNIFICANT PASSAGES

Chapters 1–3

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.
—W. B. Yeats, “The Second Coming”

EXPLANATION OF THE QUOTATION

Achebe uses this opening stanza of William Butler Yeats’s poem “The Second Coming,” from which the title of the novel is taken, as an epigraph to the novel. In invoking these lines, Achebe hints at the chaos that arises when a system collapses. That “the center cannot hold” is an ironic reference to both the imminent collapse of the African tribal system, threatened by the rise of imperialist bureaucracies, and the imminent disintegration of the British Empire. Achebe, writing in 1959, had the benefit of retrospection in depicting Nigerian society and British colonialism in the 1890s.
Yet Achebe’s allusion is not simply political, nor is it ironic on only one level. Yeats’s poem is about the Second Coming, a return and revelation of sorts. In Things Fall Apart, this revelation refers to the advent of the Christian missionaries (and the alleged revelation of their teachings), further satirizing their supposed benevolence in converting the Igbo. For an agricultural society accustomed to a series of cycles, including that of the locusts, the notion of return would be quite credible and familiar.

The hyperbolic and even contradictory nature of the passage’s language suggests the inability of humankind to thwart this collapse. “Mere anarchy” is an oxymoron in a sense, since the definition of anarchy implies an undeniably potent level of radicalism. The abstraction in the language makes the poem’s ideas universal: by referring to “[t]hings” falling apart as opposed to specifying what those collapsing or disintegrating things are, Yeats (and Achebe) leaves his words open to a greater range of interpretations. It is worth noting, in addition, that Achebe cuts away from the poem just as it picks up its momentum and begins to speak of “innocence drowned” and “blood-dimmed” tides. It is a measure of Achebe’s subtlety that he prefers a prologue that is understated and suggestive, rather than polemical, ranting, and violent.

THE SECOND COMING “YEATS POETRY 8SPARKSNOTES)

“The Second Coming”

Summary

The speaker describes a nightmarish scene: the falcon, turning in a widening “gyre” (spiral), cannot hear the falconer; “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold”; anarchy is loosed upon the world; “The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned.” The best people, the speaker says, lack all conviction, but the worst “are full of passionate intensity.”

Surely, the speaker asserts, the world is near a revelation; “Surely the Second Coming is at hand.” No sooner does he think of “the Second Coming,” then he is troubled by “a vast image of the Spiritus Mundi, or the collective spirit of mankind: somewhere in the desert, a giant sphinx (“A shape with lion body and the head of a man, / A gaze as blank and pitiless as the sun”) is moving, while the shadows of desert birds reel about it. The darkness drops again over the speaker’s sight, but he knows that the sphinx’s twenty centuries of “stony sleep” have been made a nightmare by the motions of “a rocking cradle.” And what “rough beast,” he wonders, “its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?”

Form

“The Second Coming” is written in a very rough iambic pentameter, but the meter is so loose, and the exceptions so frequent, that it actually seems closer to free verse with frequent heavy stresses. The rhymes are likewise haphazard; apart from the two couplets with which the poem opens, there are only coincidental rhymes in the poem, such as “man” and “sun.”
Commentary

Because of its stunning, violent imagery and terrifying ritualistic language, "The Second Coming" is one of Yeats's most famous and most anthologized poems; it is also one of the most thematically obscure and difficult to understand. (It is safe to say that very few people who love this poem could paraphrase its meaning to satisfaction.) Structurally, the poem is quite simple—the first stanza describes the conditions present in the world (things falling apart, anarchy, etc.), and the second surmises from those conditions that a monstrous Second Coming is about to take place, not of the Jesus we first knew, but of a new messiah, a "rough beast," the slouching sphinx rousing itself in the desert and lumbering toward Bethlehem. This brief exposition, though intriguingly blasphemous, is not terribly complicated; but the question of what it should signify to a reader is another story entirely.

Yeats spent years crafting an elaborate, mystical theory of the universe that he described in his book A Vision. This theory issued in part from Yeats's lifelong fascination with the occult and mystical, and in part from the sense of responsibility Yeats felt to order his experience within a structured belief system. The system is extremely complicated and not of any lasting importance—except for the effect that it had on his poetry, which is of extraordinary lasting importance. The theory of history Yeats articulated in A Vision centers on a diagram made of two conical spirals, one inside the other, so that the widest part of one of the spirals rings around the narrowest part of the other spiral, and vice versa. Yeats believed that this image (he called the spirals "gyres") captured the contrary motions inherent within the historical process, and he divided each gyre into specific regions that represented particular kinds of historical periods (and could also represent the psychological phases of an individual's development).

"The Second Coming" was intended by Yeats to describe the current historical moment (the poem appeared in 1921) in terms of these gyres. Yeats believed that the world was on the threshold of an apocalyptic revelation, as history reached the end of the outer gyre (to speak roughly) and began moving along the inner gyre. In his definitive edition of Yeats's poems, Richard J. Finneran quotes Yeats's own notes:

The end of an age, which always receives the revelation of the character of the next age, is represented by the coming of one gyre to its place of greatest expansion and of the other to its place of greatest contraction... The revelation [that] approaches will... take its character from the contrary movement of the interior gyre...

In other words, the world’s trajectory along the gyre of science, democracy, and heterogeneity is now coming apart, like the frantically widening flight-path of the falcon that has lost contact with the falconer; the next age will take its character not from the gyre of science, democracy, and speed, but from the contrary inner gyre—which, presumably, opposes mysticism, primal power, and slowness to the science and democracy of the outer gyre. The "rough beast" slouching toward Bethlehem is the symbol of this new age; the speaker's vision of the rising sphinx is his vision of the character of the new world.
This seems quite silly as philosophy or prophecy (particularly in light of the fact that it has not come true as yet). But as poetry, and understood more broadly than as a simple reiteration of the mystic theory of A Vision, “The Second Coming” is a magnificent statement about the contrary forces at work in history, and about the conflict between the modern world and the ancient world. The poem may not have the thematic relevance of Yeats’s best work, and may not be a poem with which many people can personally identify; but the aesthetic experience of its passionate language is powerful enough to ensure its value and its importance in Yeats’s work as a whole.

CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY

Okonkwo is a wealthy and respected warrior of the Umuofia clan, a lower Nigerian tribe that is part of a consortium of nine connected villages, including Okonkwo’s village, Iguedo. In his youth, he brought honor to his village by beating Amalinze the Cat in a wrestling contest. Until his match with Okonkwo, the Cat had been undefeated for seven years. Okonkwo is completely unlike his now deceased father, Unoka, who feared the sight of blood and was always borrowing and losing money, which meant that his wife and children often went hungry. Unoka was, however, a skilled flute player and had a gift for, and love of, language.

Summary: Chapter 2

One night, the town crier rings the ogene, or gong, and requests that all of the clansmen gather in the market in the morning. At the gathering, Ogbuefi Ezeugo, a noted orator, announces that someone from the village of Mbaino murdered the wife of an Umuofia tribesman while she was in their market. The crowd expresses anger and indignation, and Okonkwo travels to Mbaino to deliver the message that they must hand over to Umuofia a virgin and a young man. Should Mbaino refuse to do so, the two villages must go to war, and Umuofia has a fierce reputation for its skill in war and magic. Okonkwo is chosen to represent his clan because he is its fiercest warrior. Earlier in the chapter, as he remembers his past victories, we learn about the five human heads that he has taken in battle. On important occasions, he drinks palm-wine from the first head that he captured. Not surprisingly, Mbaino agrees to Umuofia’s terms. The elders give the virgin to Ogbuefi Udo as his wife but are not sure what to do with the fifteen-year-old boy, Ikemefuna. The elders decide to turn him over to Okonkwo for safekeeping and instruction. Okonkwo, in turn, instructs his first wife to care for Ikemefuna.

In addition to being a skilled warrior, Okonkwo is quite wealthy. He supports three wives and eight children, and each wife has her own hut. Okonkwo also has a barn full of yams, a shrine for his ancestors, and his own hut, called an obi.

Okonkwo fears weakness, a trait that he associates with his father and with women. When Okonkwo was a child, another boy called Unoka agbala, which is used to refer to women as well as to men who have not taken a title. Because he dreads weakness, Okonkwo is extremely demanding of his family. He finds his twelve-year-old son, Nwoye, to be lazy, so he beats and nags the boy constantly.
Summary: Chapter 3

Okonkwo built his fortune alone as a sharecropper because Unoka was never able to have a successful harvest. When he visited the Oracle, Unoka was told that he failed because of his laziness. Ill-fated, Unoka died of a shameful illness, “swelling which was an abomination to the earth goddess.” Those suffering from swelling stomachs and limbs are left in the Evil Forest to die so that they do not offend the earth by being buried. Unoka never held any of the community’s four prestigious titles (because they must be paid for), and he left numerous debts unpaid.

As a result, Okonkwo cannot count on Unoka’s help in building his own wealth and in constructing his obi. What’s more, he has to work hard to make up for his father’s negative strikes against him. Okonkwo succeeds in exceeding all the other clansmen as a warrior, a farmer, and a family provider. He begins by asking a wealthy clansman, Nwakibie, to give him 400 seed yams to start a farm. Because Nwakibie admired Okonkwo’s hard-working nature, he gave him eight hundred. One of Unoka’s friends gave him another four hundred, but because of horrible droughts and relentless downpours, Okonkwo could keep only one third of the harvest. Some farmers who were lazier than Okonkwo put off planting their yams and thus avoided the grave losses suffered by Okonkwo and the other industrious farmers. That year’s devastating harvest left a profound mark on Okonkwo, and for the rest of his life he considers his survival during that difficult period proof of his fortitude and inner mettle. Although his father tried to offer some words of comfort, Okonkwo felt only disgust for someone who would turn to words at a time when either action or silence was called for.

Analysis: Chapters 1–3

We are introduced immediately to the complex laws and customs of Okonkwo’s clan and its commitment to harmonious relations. For example, the practice of sharing palm-wine and kola nuts is repeated throughout the book to emphasize the peacefulness of the Igbo. When Unoka’s resentful neighbor visits him to collect a debt, the neighbor does not immediately address the debt. Instead, he and Unoka share a kola nut and pray to their ancestral spirits; afterward, they converse about community affairs at great length. The customs regulating social relations emphasize their common interests and culture, diffusing possible tension. The neighbor further eases the situation by introducing the subject of debt through a series of Igbo proverbs, thus making use of a shared oral tradition, as Okonkwo does when he asks Nwakibie for some seed yams. Through his emphasis on the harmony and complexity of the Igbo, Achebe contradicts the stereotypical, European representations of Africans as savages.

Another important way in which Achebe challenges such stereotypical representations is through his use of language. As Achebe writes in his essay on Joseph Conrad’s novella Heart of Darkness, colonialist Europe tended to perceive Africa as a foil or negation of Western culture and values, imagining Africa to be a primordial land of silence. But the people of Umuofia speak a complex language full of proverbs and literary and rhetorical devices. Achebe’s translation of the Igbo language into English retains the cadences, rhythms, and speech patterns of the language without making them sound, as Conrad did, “primitive.”
Okonkwo is the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart*, and, in addition to situating him within his society, the first few chapters of the novel offer us an understanding of his nature. He is driven by his hatred of his father, Unoka, and his fear of becoming like him. To avoid picking up Unoka’s traits, Okonkwo acts violently without thinking, often provoking avoidable fights. He has a bad temper and rules his household with fear. Okonkwo associates Unoka with weakness, and with weakness he associates femininity. Because his behavior is so markedly different from his father’s, he believes that it constitutes masculinity. However, it strains his relationship with Nwoye and leads him to sin in Chapter 4 by breaking the Week of Peace. His rash behavior also causes tension within the community because he expresses disdain for less successful men. Ikemefuna later demonstrates that masculinity need not preclude kindness, gentleness, and affection, and Nwoye responds far more positively to Ikemefuna’s nurturing influence than to Okonkwo’s heavy-handedness.

Despite its focus on kinship, the Igbo social structure offers a greater chance for mobility than that of the colonizers who eventually arrive in Umuofia. Though ancestors are revered, a man’s worth is determined by his own actions. In contrast to much of continental European society during the nineteenth century, which was marked by wealth-based class divisions, Igbo culture values individual displays of prowess, as evidenced by their wrestling competitions. Okonkwo is thus able, by means of his own efforts, to attain a position of wealth and prestige, even though his father died, penniless and titleless, of a shameful illness.

For further material on chapter summary and analysis (Chapter 3 onwards) go to www.sparknotes.com

**Key Facts**

- **FULL TITLE** · *Things Fall Apart*
- **AUTHOR** · Chinua Achebe
- **TYPE OF WORK** · Novel
- **GENRE** · Postcolonial critique; tragedy
- **LANGUAGE** · English
- **TIME AND PLACE WRITTEN** · 1959, Nigeria
- **DATE OF FIRST PUBLICATION** · 1959
- **PUBLISHER** · Heinemann Educational Books
- **NARRATOR** · The narrator is anonymous but shows sympathy for the various residents of Umuofia.
- **POINT OF VIEW** · The narration is in the third person, by an omniscient figure who focuses on Okonkwo but switches from character to character to detail the thoughts and motives of various individuals.
TONE · Ironic, tragic, satirical, fable-like

TENSE · Past

SETTING (TIME) · 1890s

SETTING (PLACE) · Lower Nigerian villages, Iguedo and Mbanta in particular

PROTAGONIST · Okonkwo

MAJOR CONFLICT · On one level, the conflict is between the traditional society of Umuofia and the new customs brought by the whites, which are in turn adopted by many of the villagers. Okonkwo also struggles to be as different from his deceased father as possible. He believes his father to have been weak, effeminate, lazy, ignominious, and poor. Consequently, Okonkwo strives to be strong, masculine, industrious, respected, and wealthy.

RISING ACTION · Enoch’s unmasking of an egwugwu, the egwugwu’s burning of the church, and the District Commissioner’s sneaky arrest of Umuofian leaders force the tension between Umuofia and the colonizers to a breaking point.

CLIMAX · Okonkwo’s murder, or uchu, of a court messenger

FALLING ACTION · The villagers allow the white government’s messengers to escape, and Okonkwo, realizing the weakness of his clan, commits suicide.

THEMES · The struggle between tradition and change; varying interpretations of masculinity; language as a sign of cultural difference

MOTIFS · Chi, animal imagery

SYMBOLS · The novel is highly symbolic, and it asks to be read in symbolic terms. Two of the main symbols are the locusts and fire. The locusts symbolize the white colonists descending upon the Africans, seeming to augur good but actually portending troublesome encounters. Fire epitomizes Okonkwo’s nature—he is fierce and destructive. A third symbol, the drums, represents the physical connection of the community of clansmen in Umuofia, and acts as a metaphorical heartbeat that beats in unison, uniting all the village members.

FORESHADOWING · The author’s initial description of Ikemefuna as an “ill-fated boy,” which presages his eventual murder by Okonkwo; the arrival of the locusts, which symbolizes the eventual arrival of the colonizers; Obierika’s suggestion that Okonkwo kill himself, which foretells Okonkwo’s eventual suicide
Study Questions & Essay Topics

Study Questions

1. Why does *Things Fall Apart* end with the District Commissioner musing about the book that he is writing on Africa?

   **Answer for Study Question 1 >>**
   
   The novel's ending is Achebe's most potent satirical stab at the tradition of Western ethnography. At the end of Okonkwo's story, Achebe alludes to the lack of depth and sensitivity with which the Europeans will inevitably treat Okonkwo's life. Achebe shows that a book such as *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*, which the commissioner plans to write, reveals much more about the writers—the colonialists—than about the subjects supposedly being studied. The title of the book is also ironic, as it reflects the utter lack of communication between the Europeans and the Africans. Although the Commissioner thinks he has achieved the “[p]acification” of these tribes, he has only contributed to their unrest and increasing lack of peace.

   Additionally, the artifice of wrapping up the narrative as fodder for an ethnographic study hearkens back to the close of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. As Marlow, the teller of the main story in *Heart of Darkness*, concludes his tale about colonization in Africa, the initial narrator, waiting with Marlow to sail out to sea, returns and ponders the water, leaving the reader to wonder what atrocities beyond those in Marlow's story the British Empire will commit. The conclusion of *Things Fall Apart* gives the impression of a similar story-within-a-story structure. When the account of how the colonizers have imposed themselves upon Umuofia concludes, the commissioner contemplates the account, leaving little doubt that he will now proceed to impose European values on his version of the account.

2. What is the nature of Okonkwo's relationship with Ezinma?

   **Answer for Study Question 2 >>**
   
   Although Okonkwo is generally misogynistic, his favorite child is his daughter Ezinma. Of all Okonkwo's children, Ezinma best understands how to handle her father's anger. One example of her sensitivity to his needs is her comforting of him after he has killed Ikemefuna. Ezinma can tell that Okonkwo is depressed but, not wanting to upset him, she doesn't address his sorrow directly. Instead, she brings him food and urges him to eat. His frequent remarks that he wishes Ezinma were his son because she has the "right spirit" suggest that he desires an affectionate attachment with his sons, so long as it is not openly shown or acknowledged. He values Ezinma not because she exhibits desirable masculine traits but because of their tacit bond of sympathy and understanding.

3. What does the repetition of the number seven suggest about the novel?

   **Answer for Study Question 3 >>**
   
   In several places (Mr. Brown's conversations with Akunna, for example), the novel explicitly focuses on the theological and moral similarities between Christianity and Igbo religion. The repetition of the number
seven—symbolically important to both religions—is another way of highlighting the similarities between the two cultures. The text seems to draw a parallel between the apparent randomness of the symbolic number often chosen by the Igbo and the determinism of Christianity's reliance on the number seven in the Bible and in the myth of creation. Indeed, the text explicitly refers to resting on the seventh day; this return to the number seven marks a similarity between the two cultures' belief systems.