

Chinua Achebe: *Things Fall Apart* Study Guide

Read the following poem, which is the source of the title of Achebe's novel:

William Butler Yeats: "The Second Coming" (1921)

Yeats was attracted to the spiritual and occult world and fashioned for himself an elaborate mythology to explain human experience. "The Second Coming," written after the catastrophe of World War I and with communism and fascism rising, is a compelling glimpse of an inhuman world about to be born. Yeats believed that history in part moved in two thousand-year cycles. The Christian era, which followed that of the ancient world, was about to give way to an ominous period represented by the rough, pitiless beast in the poem.

Turning and turning in the widening [gyre \(1\)](#)
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the [Second Coming \(2\)](#) is at hand;
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of [Spiritus Mundi \(3\)](#)
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That [twenty centuries \(4\)](#)
of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

Notes:

(1) Spiral, making the figure of a cone.

(2) Second Coming refers to the promised return of Christ on Doomsday, the end of the world; but in Revelation 13 Doomsday is also marked by the appearance of a monstrous beast.

(3) Spirit of the World.

(4) 2,000 years; the creature has been held back since the birth of Christ. Yeats imagines that the great heritage of Western European civilization is collapsing, and that the world will be swept by a tide of savagery from the "uncivilized" portions of the globe. As you read this novel, try to understand how Achebe's work is in part an answer to this poem.

General introduction to the novel:

Things Fall Apart, published in 1958, is the seminal African novel in English. Although there were earlier examples, notably by Achebe's fellow [Nigerian](#), Amos Tutuola, none has been so influential, not only on African literature, but on literature around the world. Its most striking feature is to create a complex and sympathetic portrait of a

traditional village culture in Africa. Achebe is trying not only to inform the outside world about Ibo cultural traditions, but to remind his own people of their past and to assert that it had contained much of value. All too many Africans in his time were ready to accept the European judgment that Africa had no history or culture worth considering.

He also fiercely resents the stereotype of Africa as an undifferentiated "primitive" land, the "heart of darkness," as Conrad calls it. Throughout the novel he shows how African cultures vary among themselves and how they change over time. Look for instances of these variations as you read.

As a young boy the "African literature" he was taught consisted entirely of works by Europeans about Africa, such as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*, which portrays a comic African who slavishly adores his white colonist boss, to the point of gladly being shot to death by him. Achebe has said that it was his indignation at this latter novel that inspired the writing of *Things Fall Apart*. Try to see in what ways his novel answers Cary's. He also wrote a famous attack on the racism of *Heart of Darkness* which continues to the subject of heated debate.

The language of the novel is simple but dignified. When the characters speak, they use an elevated diction which is meant to convey the sense of Ibo speech. This choice of language was a brilliant and innovative stroke, given that most earlier writers had relegated African characters to pidgin or inarticulate gibberish. One has the sense of listening to another tongue, one with a rich and valuable tradition.

In this edition, a glossary of Ibo words and phrases is printed at the end of the book. Be sure to consult it whenever you encounter a new Ibo word or phrase.

Chapter One:

Note how Achebe immediately establishes his perspective from inside Umuofia (which is Ibo for "people of the forest") in the first sentence. The wider world consists of the group of nine related villages which comprise Umuofia and certain other villages like Mbaino. What are Okonkwo's main characteristics as he is depicted in the first few chapters? List as many as you can, being as specific as possible. What were the characteristics of his father which affect him so powerfully?

Kola is a mild stimulant, comparable to tea or coffee, which is served on most social occasions in this culture. It is also one ingredient after which [Coca Cola](#) is named. Note how the ritual for sharing kola is described without being explained. Why do you think Achebe does this? He will continue to introduce Ibo customs in this fashion throughout the novel.

One becomes influential in this culture by earning titles. As with the Potlatch Indians of our region and many other peoples, this is an expensive proposition which involves the dispersing most of one's painfully accumulated wealth. What do you think are the social functions of such a system?

One of the most famous lines in the novel is "proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten." What does this mean? Palm oil is a rich yellow oil pressed from the fruit of certain palm trees and used both for fuel and cooking. Look for other proverbs as you read. Cowry shells threaded on strings were traditionally used as a means of exchange by many African cultures. The villages' distance from the sea makes them sufficiently rare to serve as money. Cowries from as far away as Southeast Asia have been found in sub-Saharan Africa.

Chapter Two

What effect does night have on the people? What do they fear? How do they deal with their fear of snakes at night? Palm-wine is a naturally fermented product of the palm-wine tree, a sort of natural beer. What is the cause and nature of the conflict with Mbaino? Beginning with this chapter, trace how women are related to the religious beliefs of the people. What is the purpose of the taking of Ikemefuna? Note how Achebe foreshadows the boy's doom even as he introduces him.

In what ways does Okonkwo overcompensate for his father's weaknesses? In what ways is he presented as unusual for his culture? What is his attitude toward women? Why does he dislike his son Nwoye so much?

In this polygamous culture each household is enclosed in a compound. Each wife lives in a hut with her children, and the husband visits each wife in turn, though he has his own hut as well. Children are often cared for more or less communally. What do you think the advantages and disadvantages of this form of social structure are?

What seems to be Achebe's attitude toward this culture so far? Is his depicting it as an ideal one? Can you cite any

passages which imply a critical attitude?

Chapter Three

The priestess of Agbala is introduced at the beginning of this chapter. She is a very significant figure in this book. What effect does her status have on your judgment of the roles played by women in the culture? The *chi* or personal spirit (rather like the daemon of Socrates) is a recurring theme in the book. The term "second burial" presumably refers to a custom in which the bones are disinterred after the flesh has rotted away and ceremonially reburied.

How is awareness of rank observed in the drinking of the palm wine? Note that this chapter contains another proverb about proverbs. How does share-cropping work? What is the relationship of women to agriculture? Note that a customary way of committing suicide in this culture is hanging. How does Okonkwo react to "the worst year in living memory?"

Chapter Four

What are Okonkwo's virtues? What are his faults? What does this proverb mean, "When a man says yes his chi says yes also"? What is Okonkwo's relationship with Ikemefuna like? What is the crime that causes Okonkwo's to be reprimanded? What does it tell you about the values of the culture? Note that according to Ezeani, wife-beating is wrong even at other times. Achebe portrays this aspect of traditional Nigerian life in a very different fashion from [Buchi Emecheta](#), who we will read later. What evidence is there in this chapter that customs have changed over time? That customs differ among contemporary cultures? What are the limits of the power of the village rain-maker? Note Nwoye's affection for Ikemefuna. It will be significant later.

Chapter Five

What is Okonkwo's attitude toward feasts? Note that it is women who are chiefly responsible for decorating the houses. In many African cultures they are also the chief domestic architects, and the mud walls are shaped by them into pleasing patterns. Guns were brought into Sub-Saharan Africa early on by Muslim merchants, but would have been fairly unusual. Briefly summarize the story of Ikwefi. What kind of a woman is she? What do you think is the significance of women having to sit with their legs together?

Chapter Six

This chapter introduces a much-discussed aspect of Ibo belief. As in most pre-modern cultures, the majority of children died in early childhood. If a series of such deaths took place in a family it was believed that the same wicked spirit was being born and dying over and over again, spitefully grieving its parents. They tended to be apprehensive about new children until they seemed to be likely to survive, thus proving themselves not to be feared ogbanje. What roles does Chielo play in the village?

Chapter Seven

How has Nwoye begun to "act like a man"? What values does Okonkwo associate with manliness? How does Nwoye relate to these values? "Foo-foo" is pounded yam, the traditional staple of the Ibo diet. How does the village react to the coming of the locusts? Achebe is doubtless stressing the contrast with other cultures here, familiar to African readers from the Bible, in which locusts are invariably a terrible plague. Why is Okonkwo asked not to take part in the killing of Ikemefuna? Why do you suppose they have decided to kill the boy? Why do you think Achebe does not translate the song that Ikemefuna remembers as he walks along? A machet is a large knife (Spanish *machete*). Why does Okonkwo act as he does?

Most traditional cultures have considered twins magical or cursed. Twins are in fact unusually common among the Ibo, and some subgroups value them highly. However, the people of Ikemefuna do not. Note how the introduction of this bit of knowledge is introduced on the heels of Ikemefuna's death. Nwoye serves as a point of view character to criticize some of the more negative aspects of Umuofia culture. This incident will have a powerful influence on his reaction to changes in the culture later.

Chapter Eight

What is Okonkwo's attitude toward his daughter Ezinma?" Bride-price is the converse of dowry. Common in many African cultures, it involves the bridegroom's family paying substantial wealth in cash or goods for the privilege of marrying a young woman. Do you think such a custom would tend to make women more valuable than a dowry system where the woman's family must offer the gifts to the bridegroom's family? How do you think such a system would affect the women themselves? Note again the emphasis on differing customs, this time as it applies to palm-

wine tapping.

Young women were considered marriageable in their mid-teens. Why do you think this attitude arose? It is worth noting that European women commonly married between 15 and 18 in earlier times. There is nothing uniquely African about these attitudes.

Note the continued treatment of the theme of the variability of values. How is the notion of white men first introduced into the story? Why might Africans suppose that they have no toes? What sorts of attitudes are associated with white men in this passage?

Chapter Nine

The story of the mosquito is one of several West African tales which explain why these insects buzz irritatingly in people's ears. Why does Ekwefi prize her daughter Ezinma so highly? In this chapter the notion of the ogbanje is treated at length. What attitudes toward children does it reflect? Note how it balances against the "throwing away" of twins. Does Achebe seem to validate the belief in ogbanje?

Chapter Ten

The *egwugwu* ceremony of the Ibo has been much studied. The women clearly know on some level that these mysterious beings are their men folk in disguise, yet they are terrified of them. What do you think their attitude toward the *egwugwu* is? What seem to be the main functions of the ceremony? How does Evil Forest refute the argument of Uzowulu that he beat his wife because she was unfaithful to him? How are problems like this affected by the fact that whole families are involved in marriage, unlike in American culture where a man and woman may wed quite independently of their families and even against their families' wishes? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each system?

Chapter Eleven

What is the moral of the fable of the tortoise? What values does it reflect? What does the incident involving the priestess of Agbala reflect about the values of the culture?

Chapter Twelve

Notice the traditional attitudes of all small villagers toward large marketplaces like Umuike. How is the importance of family emphasized in the *uri* ceremony? Notice that the song sung at the end of the chapter is a new one. Achebe often reminds us that this is not a frozen, timeless culture, but a constantly changing one.

Chapter Thirteen

Having shown us an engagement ceremony, Achebe now depicts a funeral. We are being systematically introduced to the major rituals of Ibo life. How does the one-handed *egwugwu* praise the dead man? Okonkwo has killed people before this. What makes this incident so serious, though it would be treated as a mere accident under our law?

Chapter Fourteen

In Part One we were introduced to an intact and functioning culture. It may have had its faults, and it accommodated deviants like Okonkwo with some difficulty, but it still worked as an organic whole. It is in Part Two that things begin to fall apart. Okonkwo's exile in Mbanta is not only a personal disaster, but it removes him from his home village at a crucial time so that he returns to a changed world which can no longer adapt to him.

What is the significance of comparing Okonkwo to a fish out of water? Note the value placed on premarital chastity in the engagement ceremony. In many African cultures virginity is not an absolute requirement for marriage but it is highly desirable and normally greatly enhances the value of the bride-price that may be paid. Thus families are prone to assert a good deal of authority over their unmarried daughters to prevent early love affairs. How does Okonkwo's lack of understanding of the importance of women reflect on him?

Chapter Fifteen

How does the story of the destruction of Abame summarize the experience of colonization? Movie Indians call a train engine an "iron horse," but the term here refers to a bicycle. Note that although the people of Abame acted rashly, they had a good deal of insight into the significance of the arrival of the whites. Note how the Africans treated the white man's language as mere noise; a mirror of how white colonizers treated African languages. What sorts of stories had Okonkwo heard about white men before? In the final exchange with Okonkwo Obierika is good-

naturedly refusing to accept Okonkwo's thanks by joking with him.

Chapter Sixteen

The British followed a policy in their colonizing efforts of designating local "leaders" to administer the lower levels of their empire. In Africa these were known as "warrant chiefs." But the men they chose were often not the real leaders, and the British often assumed the existence of a centralized chieftainship where none existed. Thus the new power structures meshed badly with the old. Similarly the missionaries have designated as their contact man an individual who lacks the status to make him respected by his people.

Why do you think Nwoye has become a Christian? Note how Achebe inverts the traditional dialect humor of Europeans which satirizes the inability of natives to speak proper English by having the missionary mangle Ibo. What is the first act of the missionaries which evokes a positive response in some of the Ibo? Achebe focuses on the doctrine of the Trinity, the notoriously least logical and most paradoxical basic belief in Christianity. How does this belief undermine the missionaries' attempts to discredit the traditional religion? Why does the new religion appeal to Nwoye?

Chapter Seventeen

What mutual misunderstandings are evident in this chapter between the missionaries and the people of the village? How does the granting to the missionaries of a plot in the Evil Forest backfire? What does the metaphor in the next to the last sentence of the chapter mean?

Chapter Eighteen

The outcaste *osu* are introduced in this chapter. Why do you suppose Achebe has not mentioned them earlier? Their plight was indeed a difficult one, and is treated by Achebe elsewhere. In India the lowest castes were among the first to convert to faiths which challenged traditional Hinduism; and something similar seems to happen here.

Chapter Nineteen

Note how traditional Umuofian custom can welcome back an erring member once he has paid for his crime. In many cultures Okonkwo would be treated as a pariah, but this culture has ways of accommodating such a person without destroying him, and in fact encouraging him to give of his best. What does the final speaker say is the main threat posed by Christianity?

Chapter Twenty

Okonkwo's relationship to the newcomers is exacerbated by the fact that he has a very great deal at stake in maintaining the old ways. All his hopes and dreams are rooted in the continuance of the traditional culture. The fact that he has not been able gradually to accustom himself to the new ways helps to explain his extreme reaction. The missionaries have brought British colonial government with them. Missionaries were often viewed as agents of imperialism. There is a saying common to Native Americans and Africans alike which goes like this: "Before the white man came, we had the land and they had the Bible. Now we have the Bible and they have the land."

What clashes in values are created by the functioning of the British courts? Note the final phrase of Obierika's last speech, alluding to the title of the novel.

Chapter Twenty-One

Why do some of the villagers even those who are not converts to Christianity welcome the British? The missionaries try to refute what they consider idolatry with the simplistic argument that the animist gods are only wooden idols; however the villagers are perfectly aware that the idol is not the god in a literal sense, any more than the sculpture of Christ on the cross in a Christian church is God. This sort of oversimplification was a constant theme of Christian arguments against traditional faiths throughout the world as the British assumed that the natives were fools pursuing childish beliefs who needed only a little enlightenment to be converted. Mr. Brown here learns better. It is worth noting that Achebe, like his fellow Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka, was raised a Christian; but both rejected the faith and have preferred to affirm certain aspects of traditional beliefs in their own lives. Note how Akunna shrewdly senses that the head of the Church is in England rather than in heaven. Note the recurrence of the phrase "falling apart" in the last sentence of the chapter."

Chapter Twenty-Two

How is Rev. Smith different from Brown? What is the result of his black and white thinking?

Chapter Twenty-Three

What does the District Commissioner say is the motive of the British in colonizing the Africans?

Chapter Twenty-Four

Once again Okonkwo uses his matchet rashly, bringing disaster on his head. But he could be viewed as a defiant hero defending his people's way of life. What do you think of his act?

Chapter Twenty-Five

Why do you think Okonkwo kills himself? What is your reaction to the final paragraph of the book? Analyze it.

Achebe went on to write two sequels to *Things Fall Apart* featuring descendants of Okonkwo. In *The Arrow of God* (1964) he further explores the failure of the British to understand traditional beliefs and values, and in *No Longer at Ease* (1967) he shows how postcolonial Nigeria became corrupted by a government which was not the organic creation of its people, but an alien structure imposed upon them. He has also published several other novels, a volume of short stories, and many poems and essays, and currently teaches at [Bard College](#) in New York. Like many Nigerian authors, he is an exile from his homeland where a military dictatorship is in power.

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