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Things Fall Apart

by

Chinua Achebe

1958



MonkeyNotes Study Guide Edited by Diane Sauder

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The novel is set during the late 1800s/early 1900s in a small village called Umuofia situated in the southeastern part of Nigeria. The time period is important, as it was a period in colonial history when the British were expanding their influence in Africa, economically, culturally, and politically. Umuofia is an Igbo village with very well defined traditions. It is a village that is respected by those around it

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Okonkwo - The hardy and ambitious leader of the Igbo community. He is a farmer as well as a wrestler, who has earned fame and brought honor to his village by overthrowing Amalinze in a.....

Obierika - Okonkwo's close friend, he helps him with the crops during his period of exile, and keeps him informed of the radical changes taking place in the village. He is a.....

Ekwefi - Okonkwo's second wife, she is the mother of Ezinma, her only.....

Ezinma - Ekwefi and Okonkwo's daughter, she is born after many miscarriages and is loved and pampered by her mother. She has a special relationship with Chielo, the woman who acts as the voice of Agbala, the Oracle. Okonkwo is fond of her and often wishes that 'she were a boy.'

Nwoye - Okonkwo's son from his first wife. He is a sensitive young man who, much.....

Ikemefuna - A boy who is bought as hostage from Mbaino, and who lives with Okonkwo for.....

Chielo - The priestess of Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and Caves, who carries Ezinma on her back to the caves, saying that Agbala wants to see her.

Uchendu - Okonkwo's maternal uncle with whom he spends seven years of

Mr. Brown - The Christian missionary who first introduces the tenets of Christianity to the people to take them away from their superstitious and age-old customs. He is a kind and.....
Additional characters are discussed in the complete study guide.

CONFLICT

Protagonist - The protagonist of the novel is Okonkwo. The novel describes Okonkwo's rise and fall in a culture that is bound by tradition and superstitious. Okonkwo also has his faults, and it is these faults that lead to his downfall. His impatience and quick temper make him break the rules of the Week of Peace and eventually is ostracized from his village for his rash behavior. His headstrong.....

Antagonist - The antagonists are the Christian missionaries who wish to invade the content villages of Africa with their Western concepts and way of thinking and convert the people into Christianity. The customs of African culture are scorned and degraded. Gradually, many people are persuaded into.....

Climax - The climactic point in the novel arises when, Okonkwo, without his realizing it, shoots a young member of his community and kills him. Though this was an accident, Okonkwo has to abide with the law that deems he should be banished from his village for seven years. This is an.....

Outcome - The outcome of the novel is Okonkwo's return to his village after his exile and his self-destruction. He discovers that everything has changed when he is not given the kind of welcome he had expected. Too much has happened since Okwonko's departure and the villagers have.....

SHORT PLOT / CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

The novel deals with the rise and fall of Okonkwo, a man from the village of Unuofia. Okonkwo was not born a great man, but he achieved success by his hard work. His father was a lazy man who preferred playing the flute to tending the soil. Okonkwo was opposed to his father's way of life, and always feared failure. In order to prove his ability, he had overthrown the greatest wrestler in nine villages, set himself up with three wives, two barns filled with yams and a reputation for being a hard worker. The reader learns that he was also one of the *egwugwu*--the masked spirits of the ancestors. His importance is proved when he is sent as an emissary to Mbaino in order to negotiate for hostages, and he returns successfully with a boy, Ikemefuna and a virgin.

Okonkwo has his faults, one of them being his impatience of less successful men and secondly his pride over his own status. His stern exterior conceals a love for Ikemefuna, who lives with him; an anxiety over his son Nwoye, who seems to take after his father; and an adoration for his daughter Ezinma. His fiery temperament leads to beating his second wife during the Week of Peace. He even shoots at her with.....

THEMES

Major Themes

The major theme of the novel is that British colonization and the conversion to Christianity of tribal peoples has destroyed an intricate and traditional age-old way of life in Africa. The administrative apparatus that the British imposed on the cultures of Africa were thought to be just as well as civilizing although in reality they had the opposite effect of being cruel and inhumane practices that subjugated large native populations to the British. In conjunction with the colonizing practices, Western missionaries endeavored to move native peoples away from the superstitious practices that they perceived as primitive and inhumane and convert them to Christianity.

Another important theme that is explored in this book is the fallibility of a man like Okonkwo, who is ambitious and hardworking who believes strongly in his traditions. He wishes to.....

Additional themes are discussed in the complete study guide.

MOOD

The title of the book as well as the epigram sets the tone of the novel quite accurately. It comes from a W.B. Yeats's poem called "The Second Coming." Yeats was a late 19th century Irish poet, essayist, and dramatist. The actual verse that Achebe uses as his.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Born in 1930, Chinua Achebe occupies a significant place among non-native writers of English; he "is perhaps the most influential writer to have come out of Africa since the late 1950s." He is one of the most important of the African writers and has done much to promote writing in English by editing the African Writers series, published by Heinemann, that gives voice to many diverse voices in Africa.

Achebe was born in the Igbo (formerly spelled Ibo) town of Ogidi in southeastern Nigeria. His father was a missionary instructor in catechism where Achebe started his education at the Church Missionary Society's school. For two years the language of instruction was Igbo and it was not until later when he was eight, Achebe started learning English. Because of this late introduction of English in his life, he was able to

develop a pride in his culture and also appreciate his native language. While his father's library was full of books in English, his mother instilled in him a love for traditional storytelling. Nigeria was still a British colony during much of Achebe's youth and because his family spoke English, they held much power in the town.

Achebe was educated at Government College, Umuahia and then at University College, Ibadan, where he studied liberal arts. His first stories were published during this period and.....

LITERARY INFORMATION

The importance of this text can be seen in its worldwide distribution as an authentic narrative about the horrors of the colonialist experience from the eyes of the colonized. This daring perspective brought to the world the figure of Okonkwo, a powerful and respected village elder who cannot single-handedly repel the invasion of foreign culture into his village. The book has been taught in a variety of contexts from cultural history to anthropology to literature and world history classes. Its application to such a number of fields reveals its historical importance in the world.

Things Fall Apart is a tragic and moving story of Okonkwo and the destruction of the village of Umuofia by the colonialist enterprise. This novel reveals colonialism as a traumatic experience common to all former colonial territories. The administration that was implemented endeavored to shift

Post Colonialist Literature

An interesting trend of literature that has emerged in the past thirty years is post colonialism. It is not just a trend but can also be considered a literary style. This kind of writing emerged after the de-colonization of various African, Asian and South American nations by erstwhile European colonial powers Portugal, Spain, France, Germany and Britain and hails from those nations that were.....

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Africa has been seen by the Western world as a 'dark' continent and very little was known about its land or people. Geological explorations showed that the Sahara desert was initially a fertile area, overflowing in lush vegetation, animal and men. Climatic changes were responsible for the formation of the desert. Africa, therefore, came to be known as an inhospitable place, in spite of areas of with great rivers, thick forests and vast green-lands. This was mainly because the greater part of the continent was separated from Mediterranean civilization and was not open to outside influences.

The people in Africa learned to live in harmony with Nature's changes. They developed a culture based on religion and nature. They worshipped many different gods and goddesses who represented elements of the natural world. They had priests who were capable of physical and psychic.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES / ANALYSIS

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

Summary

The novel begins with the introduction of Okonkwo, a young man famed throughout for his strength as well as other personal achievements. At the age of eighteen, he had brought honor to his village by overthrowing Amalinze, the cat. Okonkwo was a tall man, with bushy eyebrows and a wide nose. He had risen to his present state of prominence because of his ambitious nature and hatred of failure. His father, Unoka had always been a failure and a debtor. He was more interested in playing his flute than working in the fields. Because of this, his family never had enough to eat and he became a source of shame to Okonkwo. Once

when a neighbor called Okoye had come to him to request him to return his money, Unoka had laughed at him and said that he would first pay the others whom he owed more money.

After his father's death, Okonkwo, though young, won fame as the greatest wrestler. Since then, he has become a wealthy farmer, with two barns full of yams. He also had three wives and two honorific titles and was a great warrior. Everybody respected him in the village for his achievements.

Notes

Set in the late nineteenth century, the novel covers a tumultuous period in African history as the encroachment of British civilization into many parts of Nigeria in the form of missionaries, explorers, and eventually an administrative apparatus disrupted and ultimately destroyed the economic and social systems of traditional cultures such as the Igbo. In the first chapter, the reader is exposed to some of the nuances of traditional Igbo culture and its precepts as well as the protagonist of the novel, Okonkwo.

Some of the traditions and cultural aspects of Igbo life introduced in this chapter are social rituals such as the treatment of a guest. A guest always visits a house with his goat skin, which he unrolls and sits on. A small wooden disc containing a kola nut, some alligator pepper and a lump of white chalk is brought out, and the disc is passed to the guest. The disc is then broken and some lines are drawn on the floor. After eating the kola nut, they have conversation on various subjects. A number of proverbs are used while speaking. These proverbs are wise sayings that reflect on the morals and customs of their society as well as provide a very particular meaning within Igbo society. They are "the palm oil with which words are eaten." As well as social rituals, marriage customs such as having more than one wife, honorific titles, economic indicators such as yams and cowries (shells) and legends are detailed to reveal the complex culture the Igbo have.

One of the main indicators of a person's wealth and success is the number of yams a man has grown and stored in his barns, as well as the number of titles he has taken. A title is taken when a man has reached a certain economic status and buys his recognition through initiation fees to others who share that title. There are four titles to be gained in Igbo society, each one more expensive than the other. With these titles comes power within the tribe. These economic indicators allow those who are not born into wealth such as Okonkwo to amass fortunes through hard work and gain a prestige that is not based on inheritance or nobility.

Okonkwo is portrayed as a dynamic protagonist, who has immense belief in success and who resents failure. He is a self-made man who has risen above his father's disreputable life to achieve success and power in his village. "He had no patience with his father." In this chapter, his father, Unoka is portrayed as a lazy man who enjoyed his life and was happiest when he played on his flute. Okonkwo's fear of failure is deeply ingrained in him and throughout the novel, he fears his father's deeds coming back to him.

Using the familiar structure and traditions of Greek tragedy, Achebe developed his character Okonkwo as a tragic hero and *Things Fall Apart* can be interpreted within this form as a tragedy. Although Okonkwo is admirable and represents the best qualities including physical feats and economic success, he also has a tragic flaw or *harmartia*. In chapters to come, the reader can see Okonkwo's flaw reveal itself in subtle yet inexorable ways.

Lastly, mention is made of Ikemefuna, a young man who will be part of Okonkwo's household, and who will have a significant impact on Okonkwo's personal tragedy.

CHAPTER 2

Summary

Okonkwo had just prepared for bed when the town crier's voice is heard. The message is that every man of Umuofia is to meet at the market place the following morning. He wonders whether Umuofia will go to war and thinks how fearful his father was of war and how he himself has been a great warrior in the past, bringing home his fifth human head.

The next morning, the marketplace is full of people, and Ogbuefi Ezeugo, a powerful orator, informs them that a daughter of their village had been murdered by some men from Mbaino, the adjoining village, when she visited its market. An ultimatum is given to Mbaino, asking them to choose between war and an offering of a young man and a virgin as compensation. Okonkwo is sent to negotiate. Umuofia is highly feared by its neighbors for its power; therefore Mbaino chooses the latter proposal and Ikemefuna, a young lad of fifteen and a virgin are sent to Umuofia. The girl is sent to the murdered woman's husband to replace her and Okonkwo is requested to keep the lad for the time being while the villagers decide what to do with him. Okonkwo hands over the lad in the care of his most senior wife, mother of his oldest son, Nkoye. Ikemefuna is frightened, as he does not understand why he has been separated from his family.

Okonkwo fears being called weak and therefore he rules his house with a stern hand. Everybody fears his explosive temper. Okonkwo's house has a large compound. He has his own hut, or obi and each of his three wives also have their own huts. They also have a 'medicine house' or shrine where the wooden symbols of Okonkwo's personal gods are kept. Okonkwo works in his farm for long hours and he expects others to do the same.

Notes

The stratification of labor based on gender is one of the most significant traditions of Igbo society seen in this chapter. What are womanly and what are manly actions will have repercussions in the chapters to follow, but here it is seen to be strictly divided. Men are respected and successful, which is often shown in the number of wives they have whereas, woman are restricted to household activities and childcare.

Okonkwo is seen here as a man fearful of being seen as womanly or *agbala*, a word that not only means woman but represents a lack of economic success. The two are equated and therefore reveal the little power woman have in this society. So frightened is he of being seen as soft, Okonkwo exaggerates his manly qualities, being severe and tyrannical and not containing any emotions that are not associated with masculinity.

Okonkwo's rules his house in a tyrannical manner. This is mainly because of his desire to distance himself from the kind of weakness his father used to exhibit. Keeping weakness of any kind at bay becomes an obsession with Okonkwo and is his tragic flaw and pushes him to "extract" respect from his family members. That his eldest son Nwoye, is lazy causes Okonkwo extreme anxiety, though the boy was only twelve years old. This obsession with masculine behavior will result not only in personal tragedy but will affect Igbo society as a whole with the invasion of British culture.

The concept of revenge and the justification for war is also shown in this chapter in the town meeting. If any woman of the village is defiled or murdered by a man from another village, revenge is taken in the form of a war or an offering. When the orator speaks about the murdered woman, the entire crowd is swept with anger. Any man or woman of the village is considered to be part of its family and therefore the villagers demand revenge. This scene is a typical example of a ceremonial town meeting where the speaker greets the crowd while turning in all four directions.

The division of the sexes is not just in social behavior but manifests itself physically as in the set up of individual obis, or huts, with the man's obi being the central focus of his unit while the wives form a circle

around his. Also, the Igbo worship the gods with an offering of kola nut, food and palm wine. These gods may take the form of wooden objects representing not only personal gods but ancestral spirits as well.

Certain superstitions of Igbo culture have been portrayed in this chapter. It is said that in the night, dangerous animals become even more sinister, so a snake should never be called by its name since it can hear but should instead be called a string. The powerful aspects of language are shown here to have both good and bad qualities.

In moonlight however, the tempo is different and the old remember their youth. One of the Ibo proverbs to define this was “When the moon is shining the cripple becomes hungry for a walk”. This saying represents the belief of the moonlight being the protector in contrast to the darkness.

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Okonkwo - Okonkwo plays a major role in the novel and is projected as a heroic figure and a wrestler who is constantly at war with others, with his ‘chi’, his legacy of his father whom he despises, his own character and finally, with the white man. Okonkwo’s world consists of the nine villages from Umuofia to Mbaino and areas outside of these boundaries have little significance to him, belonging simply to that vague realm “beyond.” He gives a lot of importance to personal achievements as he believes that these achievements bring honor to the village which in turn emphasizes the close tie between the individual and society.

Yet Okonkwo has his weakness and it is these weaknesses that ultimately destroy the life he has created for himself. His self-determination is not only controlled by internal but external forces as

Nwoye - Nwoye is Okonkwo’s son from his first wife, and Okonkwo has a great deal of expectations for him. Okonkwo has kept a firm control on him, since he wants him to grow into a tough young man “capable of ruling his father’s household when he was dead and gone to join the ancestors.” But the reader sees Nwoye’s inner confusion and turmoil at the beginning of the novel when he prefers listening to the more female-oriented stories such as the tortoise or the bird Eneke, rather than to the.....

Additional characters are analyzed in the complete study guide.

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

The novel *Things Fall Apart* is divided into three parts, the first is the longest, and the third, the shortest.

The first part deals with the vindication of tribal life in Africa and the rise in power and authority of Okonkwo. Okonkwo, the protagonist is introduced, along with the intricacies and rituals of the Igbo culture that serve as his backdrop. The author highlights his strengths as well as his obsession with success. Okonkwo does not show any love in dealing with his three wives and children. This part reveals that Okonkwo’s actions are often irrational and imprudent, which will be the cause of his eventual fall.

The reader learns about the traditions, superstitions and religious faiths of the villagers. The reader also learns about the life of the tribals, their agricultural pattern, the importance of.....

THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

The immediate subject of Chinua Achebe’s novels is the tragic consequence of the European encounter with African civilization. His novels deal with the social and psychological conflicts created by the invasion of the white man and his culture into the hitherto self-contained world of African society, and the disarray of the African consciousness that has followed.

In *Things Fall Apart*, the theme is the colonization of Africa by the British and the negative and violent changes this brought about in the lives of the African tribes. Along with colonization was the arrival of the missionaries whose main aim was to spread the message of Christianity and to convert people to their religion. These missionaries eventually establish a strong foothold in the tribe which then allows a government as well as law court for administering justice to become.....

THE TRAGIC FAULTS OF OKONKWO

Okonkwo, for all his greatness, has his faults, which ultimately lead to his downfall. His greatest fault, or hamartia, as seen in the protagonist of a typical Greek tragedy, is his pride. His own success as a self-made man, makes him impatient of others who are not as successful. For example, at a meeting of the tribe's elders, he calls another man a woman and says, "This meeting is for men." This man who had contradicted.....

THE LIFE OF THE TRIBE

Throughout his novel *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe has attempted to describe the intricacies of the lifestyle of the Igbo, a thriving culture living in Nigeria. The novel produces impressive and beautiful artifacts in music, dance and above all, in conversation. "Proverbs are the palm-oil with which the words are eaten." Many interesting and meaningful proverbs have been injected into the narrative of the novel. For example. "The sun will shine on those who stand, before it shines on those who kneel under them", and "A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing", "Eneke the bird says that since men have.....

Additional themes are analyzed in the complete study guide.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Trace the tragic element in *Things Fall Apart*.
2. Draw a character sketch of the hero and show how he is symbolic of his culture.
3. Examine the role superstition and religion plays in the life described in *Things Fall Apart*.
4. Outline the tragic errors or faults in Okonkwo that finally lead to his downfall.
5. Describe the gradual entry of the British administration into the tribal society and its final take-over of Umuofia. What aspects of their culture allowed the British to take over?
6. Examine Nwoye's role in the novel and his relationship to his father.
7. Analyze the title *Things Fall Apart* in terms of the destruction of the tribal ways and customs. How do 'things fall apart'?
8. Interpret the suicide of Okonkwo. Why did he take his own life after killing the messenger?
9. Examine Okonkwo's concept of masculinity. What does it entail and why does he think this way?
10. Discuss the differences between the two missionary figures, Mr. Brown and Mr. Smith. What are their attitudes towards the Igbo's customs and religion? Give examples.
11. What contribution do women make to Igbo culture? Why are these contributions important to the survival of the culture?
12. How is the colonialist system more primitive than the Igbo system which is perceived that way by the District Commissioner?
13. How does Okonkwo contribute to his own demise? How does the colonialist enterprise contribute to his death?

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