

Things Fall Apart

A Novel

By Chinua Achebe

Teacher's Guide written by Judith Moore Kelly

Penguin

Paperback | 9780385474542 | 224 pp | \$13.00

Reading Level: 11th-12th Grade

NOTE TO TEACHERS

Things Fall Apart is acclaimed as the finest novel written about life in Nigeria at the end of the 19th century. Published in 1958, it is unquestionably the world's most widely read African novel, having sold more than eight million copies in English and been translated into 50 languages. But it offers far more than access to pre-colonial Nigeria and the cataclysmic changes brought about by the British. It also can be a window into the story of the Aborigines in Australia, the Maori of New Zealand, and the First Nations of North, Central, and South America in the "falling apart" of the indigenous cultures of these and other places whose centers could not hold.

Chinua Achebe is the ideal teller of this story, born in Nigeria in 1930 and growing up in the Igbo town of Ogidi. He spoke Igbo at home and studied English in school, imbibing the dual culture. In an autobiographical essay, he describes his childhood as being "at the crossroads of cultures." In the course of a distinguished academic and literary career, much of it in exile, Achebe has been the recipient of many awards, beginning with the Margaret Wrong Memorial Prize in 1959 for *Things Fall Apart* and including more than 30 honorary doctorates.

Teacher's Guide

INCLUDES: SUMMARIES,
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS,
AND SUGGESTIONS FOR
FURTHER READING



NOTE TO TEACHERS

(CONTINUED)

Achebe uses that most English of literary forms, the novel, to make his story accessible to Westerners, and interlaces the narrative with Igbo proverbs and folktales. This novel challenges Western notions of historical truth, and prods readers into questioning our perception of pre-colonial and colonial Africa. More than half the novel is devoted to a depiction of Igbo culture, artfully drawn as we follow the rise to eminence of the protagonist. As a champion wrestler and a great warrior, Okonkwo is a natural leader. His flaw, however, is that he never questions the received wisdom of his ancestors. For this reason he is not drawn in a flattering light, but his culture is given a full and fair depiction.

Students might well keep journals in which they identify their own culture's equivalent to each Igbo folkway, discovering affinities as well as differences. There is no culture shock in discovering that Okonkwo's father has low status because of his laziness and improvidence. He would rather play his flute than repay his debts. It follows, then, that land, a full barn, expensive titles, and many wives confer status. Our protagonist is ambitious. Indeed, one of his flaws is his fear of failure, of becoming like his father.

Viewing society from the inside, students can make inferences about why a high value is accorded to clan solidarity, kinship, and hospitality, and the reasons for courtship and funeral customs. In a culture without written language, the arts of conversation and oration are prized. Wisdom is transmitted through proverbs, stories, and myths. The agrarian cycle of seasons, with their work and festivals, the judicious use of snuff and palm wine, the importance of music and dance, all could be noted and compared to similar Western mores. Law and justice keep the peace, pronouncing on a land dispute or the killing of a clansman. A priestess and masked tribesmen interpret the Oracle, speaking for ancestors and gods. They enforce taboos against twins and suicide, and offer explanations for high infant mortality.

The second and third parts of the novel trace the inexorable advance of Europeans. For years, stories told about white slavers are given little credence in Okonkwo's village. The first white man to arrive in a nearby village is killed because of an omen, and in retribution all are slaughtered by British guns. Christian missionaries seem to be madmen, their message of wicked ways and false gods attractive only to outcasts. But along with Christianity come hospitals and schools, converting farmers to court clerks and teachers. Trading stores pay high prices for palm oil. Government is closely linked to religion and literacy. A District Commissioner superimposes Queen Victoria's laws, and Africans from distant tribes serve as corrupt court messengers and prison guards.

Okonkwo, upholder of the ways of his ancestors, is inevitably cast in the role of tragic hero. His eldest son's early conversion merely hardens his belief in a rigid code of manly behavior. In exile during the first years of colonization, he has less understanding of the power of the Europeans than his now-passive kinsmen. His doom is swift and sure. By the novel's end, readers flinch when a British official reduces Okonkwo's life and death to a passing reference in a book he plans to write to be titled *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*.

Note: This guide uses the contemporary spelling, Igbo, rather than Ibo.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Things Fall Apart tells two overlapping, intertwining stories, both of which center around Okonkwo, a “strong man” of an Igbo village in Nigeria. The first story traces Okonkwo’s fall from grace with the tribal world in which he lives. It provides us with a powerful fable about the immemorial conflict between the individual and society. The second story, which is as modern as the first is ancient, concerns the clash of cultures and the destruction of Okonkwo’s world through the arrival of aggressive, proselytizing European missionaries.

These twin dramas are perfectly harmonized and they are modulated by an awareness capable of encompassing the life of nature, history, and the mysterious compulsions of the soul. *Things Fall Apart* is the most illuminating and permanent monument we have to the modern African experience as seen from within.

ABOUT THIS AUTHOR**Other Works by Chinua Achebe**

- *Anthills of the Savannah*
- *Girls at War and Other Stories*
- *A Man of the People*

Essays:

- *Home and Exile*
- *Morning Yet on Creation Day*
- *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays*

DISCUSSION AND WRITING**Structure, Technique and Plot**

1. The novel is structured in three parts. What do the divisions reflect about the stages of life of the protagonist? How do the divisions move toward and illustrate the collapse of Igbo society?
2. What is the point of view of the narrator? How does the point of view contribute to our understanding of the conflicting cultures? What techniques does the narrator use to evoke a participatory role for the reader?
3. In the novel’s opening, Okonkwo is wrestling. How does this contrast with the ending, when Okonkwo is deliberating about an adequate response to the British humiliation of the Igbo elders in jail?
4. Achebe uses storytelling flashbacks to describe the relationship of Okonkwo and Unoka. What do the flashbacks reveal about their relationship? What is the effect of the use of storytelling to illustrate the flashbacks?
5. In Chapter One, how does Achebe foreshadow the presence (and ultimate fate) of Ikemefuna?
6. Describe the judicial function of the egwugwu and its relationship to the living, particularly to Igbo women. Why is it also related to the spiritual world? How does Achebe illustrate the blending of the spiritual and real worlds?
7. How does the killing of Ikemefuna foreshadow the fall of Okonkwo?

DISCUSSION AND WRITING
(CONTINUED)

8. Why is Okonkwo exiled? Why is the exile ironic? Compare to Okonkwo's participation in the killing of Ikemefuna and its lack of consequences.
9. When and how is the white man introduced? Trace the chronology of the Igbo people's responses to the arrival and settlement of the white man. What attitudes toward the Igbo people do the white men bring and how do their attitudes determine their treatment of the Igbo people?
10. How does Achebe use incidents to paint the general character of the white colonizers?

Character and Conflict

1. How does Okonkwo achieve greatness as defined by his culture?
2. Why is Unoka, who suffers from a swelling in the stomach, left to die in the evil forest?
3. How does Okonkwo differ from his father? What are his feelings toward his father? How does his father shape Okonkwo's character and actions as an adult male? Cite examples in the attitude and actions of Okonkwo that show the Igbo division of what is considered manly and what is considered womanly.
4. Why is Okonkwo unhappy with his son and heir? How do his feelings toward Nwoye compare with his feelings toward Ikemefuna? How do Okonkwo's feelings affect Nwoye?
5. Why is Ikemefuna killed? Why does Okonkwo participate in the slaughter in spite of an elder's advice not to become involved in the sacrifice? How does Nwoye react to the sacrifice?
6. Okonkwo changes significantly after the killing of Ikemefuna. Describe those changes and tell how they reflect Okonkwo's struggle with his feminine side.
7. Consider Okonkwo's relationship to his daughter Ezinma and how he regards her compared to how he regards Nwoye.
8. During Okonkwo's exile, Obierika proves to be his friend. How do Obierika's actions show true friendship?
9. Describe actions that depict Obierika as Okonkwo's alter ego.
10. Why does Nwoye convert to Christianity? How does his conversion affect his relationship with his father?
11. Describe Mr. Brown. How is his portrayal different from the Igbo characters? Compare and contrast him with other white colonists.
12. Describe Enoch. How do his actions show disdain for Igbo traditions?
13. How does the Reverend Smith's personality differ from that of Mr. Brown? What is the impact of Reverend Smith's personality on the village?

DISCUSSION AND WRITING

(CONTINUED)

Setting and Society

1. The novel begins in Umuofia and ends in Umuofia. Describe this village. What surprises you about life in an African tribal community? What preconceptions did you bring to your reading that were either reinforced or changed?
2. Why do the community celebrations make Okonkwo unhappy? How do Okonkwo's feelings conflict with the culture of his community? Cite examples.
3. Igbo culture is patriarchal. What is the role of women in the community? Does their role make them less valuable than men? How does wife beating reflect the community attitude toward women? Cite examples.
4. Near the beginning of the novel, we learn that Okonkwo has several wives. Describe the polygamous structure of Okonkwo's family. What does this arrangement reveal about family life in the community?
5. An African proverb states, "It takes a village to raise a child." How does this statement reflect the care of children in the Igbo community?
6. Describe the Igbo extended family system. How does it help Okonkwo to survive his exile in Mbanta?
7. Compare and contrast Umuofia and Mbanta. How do their similarities and differences add to an understanding of the Igbo culture?
8. A significant social marker in Igbo society is the honorific title system. Describe how the use of titles allows Igbo members to compare themselves with each other.
9. What is the symbolic meaning of the Week of Peace for the Igbo people? How does Okonkwo's anger violate the custom and what are the consequences of his action?
10. Agriculture is important in the Igbo community. How does sharecropping contribute to the prosperity of the community? How does it affect individuals?
11. What is the significance of the yam? What is the purpose of the New Yam Festival? How is it related to the religion of the community?
12. Explain the concept of *ogbanje*. Show how it is reflected in the relationship of Ekwefi and Ezinma.
13. How do the Igbo marriage negotiations and rituals compare with other 19th-century cultures in which the bride's family pays a dowry? What do these rituals reveal about the level of sophistication of pre-colonial Igbo civilization?
14. Obierika, a close friend, mourns the exile of Okonkwo, yet participates in the destruction of Okonkwo's property. Explain how Obierika's response to the exile signals a questioning of community traditions.
15. How does pre-colonial life in Umuofia differ from Western society? Are there similarities? Cite examples of any similarities and differences.

DISCUSSION AND WRITING

(CONTINUED)

Themes and Motifs

1. Describe the Igbo concept of chi and how the concept relates to Okonkwo's desired success in life.
2. How is the theme of fate or destiny illustrated through the actions of the characters?
3. Fear is pervasive throughout the novel. How does fear affect the actions of Okonkwo? Of Nwoye? How does fear influence Okonkwo's relationship with others?
4. How is the concept of change and the response to change presented in the novel? What is the significance of the song sung at the end of Chapter 12? How does this new song convey the theme of change?
5. Who is Chukwu? How does Chukwu compare with the Christian concept of a supreme being? Use the conversation between Akunna and Mr. Brown to support your comparison.
6. How is Christianity depicted? Why does Achebe focus on the Trinity?
7. How does education advance Christianity among the Igbo people?
8. What are the human consequences of the collision between the two cultures? Describe both the societal and personal clashes.
9. At the end of Chapter 20, Obierika tells Okonkwo, "He [the white man] has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart." Explain the significance of this statement.
10. How does Okonkwo's suicide represent a break in the traditional Igbo culture?

Imagery and Language

1. Achebe seamlessly merges Igbo vocabulary into the general text. Explain how he helps readers to understand Igbo words and concepts that have no English language equivalents.
2. Achebe's characters tell traditional folk tales and intersperse their conversation with Igbo words, phrases and sayings. How does this use of language convey a sense of Igbo culture?
3. Explain the importance of folktales in the informal education of the children. Why does Nwoye like the tales of his mother better than those of his father?
4. How does the legend of the old woman with one leg help to explain why the other clans fear Umuofia?
5. How does the language of the women and children differ from that used by the priests, diviners, and titled men? What is the significance of this difference?
6. Wrestling is a recurring image. In addition to the literal match at the beginning of the novel, what are other examples of the theme of wrestling and how do they contribute to the overall theme?

DISCUSSION AND WRITING (CONTINUED)

7. What is the significance of the drums in communication among the villages of Umuofia? Why are they esoteric?
8. What is the significance of the pidgin English that is used for communication between the Igbo people and the colonists?

For Discussion and Assignment

1. The title of the novel comes from a line in “The Second Coming” by William Butler Yeats. Read this poem and apply it to the breakdown of African society as described in the novel.
2. What is the significance of the three proverbs in Chapter One? What is Achebe’s purpose in using Igbo proverbs in the novel? How do proverbs promote the narrative action in the novel? What do they reveal about Igbo culture? Locate additional proverbs in the novel and explain their meaning and how they foster Igbo tradition.
3. How does the plot in *Things Fall Apart* follow the conventions of the Western tragedy, such as when major actions of the protagonist or hero create disastrous outcomes? Is Okonkwo a tragic hero? Compare Okonkwo with Oedipus, who is punished for the inadvertent murder of his father. How do they attempt to escape their fate? What are the tragic flaws that cause their downfalls? How do they evoke both pity and fear?
4. In what ways is *Things Fall Apart* a response to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* or other works of literature that contain demeaning stereotypes?
5. Achebe does not paint a clear view of good versus evil in either the Igbo culture or colonialism. How does Achebe show value in both systems?
6. In an interview shortly after the publication of *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe stated that his goal for writing the novel was: “. . . to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the denigration and self-abasement.” Explain how he did or did not meet his goal.
7. In pre-colonial Nigeria, there were many spellings of the name Igbo. By the time Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart*, the spelling was being standardized. Why do you think Achebe uses the archaic spelling, Ibo, instead of the contemporary spelling, Igbo?

BEYOND THE BOOK

No Longer at Ease by Chinua Achebe (1960) is the sequel to *Things Fall Apart*. It carries the reader forward in the lives of the descendants of Okonkwo. The novel focuses on Obi Okonkwo, whose downfall is caused by his inability to deal with the conflicting value systems of Igbo culture and his English training. *No Longer at Ease* is set in the late 1950s.

Arrow of God by Chinua Achebe (1964) takes place during the era between *No Longer at Ease* and *Things Fall Apart*. It is the story of an Igbo priest who copes with change by compromising his values and traditions. He sends his son to a mission school and testifies against his people in a land dispute. The result is that the Igbo people turn from the Igbo priest to the religion of the mission church. Again, Achebe shows how African tradition loses to European culture.

OTHER TITLES OF INTEREST

- *Mister Johnson*, Joyce Cary
 - *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad
 - *Chinua Achebe*, Ezenwa-Ohaeto
 - *Omalinze: A Book of Igbo Folk-tales* edited by E. Nolue Emenanjo (Oxford University Press, 1977)
 - *The Growth of the African Novel*, Eustace Palmer
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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

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