

Chinua Achebe
Things Fall Apart



UNIT SYLLABUS
English 9: World Literature
Mr. Bierach

1. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*.

BACKGROUND and PREPARATION

In a team, you will conduct research, write a one-page summary of key background information, and present a seven to eight minute oral report on one of the following topics:

Things Fall Apart BACKGROUND TOPICS

- * **Historical and current geography of Nigeria and Ibo lands**
- * **Initial colonization of Nigeria**
- * **Impact of colonization on Ibo society, economy, and religion**
- * **Missionary activity in late nineteenth-century Nigeria**
- * **Nigeria's movement for and achievement of independence from Britain, 1960.**
- * **Literary biography of Chinua Achebe**
- * **Achebe's response to English literature on Africa. The poem below is the source of novel's title.**

"The Second Coming" (1921)

by William Butler Yeats

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.

Hint: As you read the novel, try to understand how Achebe's work is in part an answer to this poem.

2. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*.

Chapters 1 - 4.

Discussion Questions:

A) Characterize Okonkwo. What are his goals, his achievements, his flaws? How does he stand out from the rest of his clan? How do his values embody those of his clan, and how does Okonkwo violate his clan's values and rules?

B) Characterize the status of women in the clan? How are women treated, and how is this treatment justified and explained by the clan? Where do women fit within the Ibo power structure? How does Okonkwo treat his wives?

As you read the novel, identify and analyze Achebe's use of symbolism.

CENTRAL SYMBOLS:

While you read, identify and explore the significance of the novel's central symbols, including:

THE YAM

WAIST-BEADS

THE MACHETE

RAIN

Pay especially close attention to the symbols below. As you read, circle these symbols when you encounter them, and **be prepared to write a paper that explores Achebe's use of the following symbols:**

FIRE

WATER

3. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*.

Chapters 5 - 8.

Discussion Questions:

A) Continue to characterize Okonkwo. What are his greatest flaws? Assess Okonkwo from the following perspectives: Nwoye's, Ekwefi's, Umuofia's, Obierika's, and Okonkwo's.

B) Examine Ekwefi. Note her stories. What lessons and hopes reside in her stories.

C) How does Nwoye react to his father? What would you think if Okonkwo were your father? Where, specifically, does Okonkwo fail as a father?

D) How does Okonkwo view Ikemefuna? How should we interpret Okonkwo's killing of Ikemefuna?

E) How do Okonkwo and Obierika differ? How does Achebe use Obierika as a foil in which we can see Okonkwo more completely?

4. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*.

Chapters 9 - 11.

In-Class Essays:

The clan's system of justice.

- * What role do the *egwugwu* play? What role do the masks play?
- * Does the clan's system of justice work? What are its guiding principles?
- * How does the clan negotiate its relations with neighboring clans?
- * Analyze the treatment of crime, guilt, innocence, and punishment.

Ekwefi's Story: The Revenge of the Tortoise's Wife.

- * Based on your assessment of Ekwefi, and based on your analysis of the treatment of women in the novel, what role might Ekwefi's tale play?
- * Does the story offer female empowerment? If so, how?
- * What does Achebe's inclusion of the tale suggest about his view of women?

5. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*.

Chapters 12 - 14.

The Ibo Trial of Okonkwo

This will NOT be an American re-trial of Okonkwo. The trial will test your understanding of Ibo justice and social balance. You will play one of the roles listed below in a re-enactment of the trial of Okonkwo. As is the case in the novel, you should make your case as fully, passionately, and effectively as your character/role requires. The trial will also consider the 'sentencing' and 'post-sentencing' phases of the trial.

ROLES for PART I, The 'Trial':

- Ani, the earth-goddess** -- as ultimate arbiter, judge, and goddess.
- Egwugwu** -- call the meeting to order, maintain order, run the 'trial'
- Okonkwo** -- defend yourself, try to explain
- Obierika** -- defend both Okonkwo and the town's system of justice

ROLES for PART II, 'Punishment' and Lessons

- Umuofia townsmen** -- will enact the ruling and punishment
- Okonkwo's three wives** -- will endure and speak on the punishment their husband brought
- Uchendu** -- will explain the lessons that Okonkwo should learn as a good Ibo
- Okonkwo** -- will express his frustration and concerns once in exile.

Hint: continue to look for the use of FIRE and WATER symbols. Look ahead to the PAPER.

6. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*.

Chapters 15 - 19.

Discussion Questions:

- A) Why does Achebe wait until he has painted a complete portrait of Umuofia before he introduces the white man into his novel?
- B) Why does Nwoye become a Christian? What is the appeal for him? Why does he renounce his father?
- C) How do the missionaries gain adherents to their Christian faith? What are their methods?
- D) How do the missionaries characterize Ibo religion?
- E) What is Okonkwo's opinion on the missionaries? What is the basis for his view?
- F) If you were an elder in an Ibo clan, what opinion would you express about the missionaries? What course of action would you recommend, and why?

In-Class RELIGIOUS COMPARISON CHART:

On the board, you will chart a point-by-point comparison of Christianity vs. Ibo religion.

7. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*.

Chapters 20 - 25.

Discussion Questions:

- A) What crime and offense does Enoch commit, and why does he do it?
- B) In your opinion, is Achebe sympathetic to Christianity? Why, or why not?
- C) Compare Mr. Brown's tactics to those of Reverend Smith. Why does Achebe offer us two views of white missionaries?
- D) What offer, and what 'freedom of worship', does Ajofia offer Mr. Smith?

In-Class Discussion Groups:

In groups of three, you will analyze and outline an answer for TWO of the questions below. You will present your analysis in class during a discussion of the novel's major themes.

THE GROUP DISCUSSION/MAJOR THEME QUESTIONS:

1. OKONKWO AS TRAGIC HERO?

*If Okonkwo is a tragic hero, then what are his tragic flaws? What is the novel's central tragedy?

2. WHAT EXACTLY "...FALLS APART"?

*Does Okonkwo fall apart, or does the entire clan teeter on the brink of collapse?

*If you argue that Okonkwo, and not the clan, falls apart, then how is Okonkwo at odds with his own clan? Is he a threat to his own people?

*If you argue that the missionaries and whites destabilized Ibo culture, then how and why did they do so? What aspects of the clan's culture were damaged, and at what cost?

*If you argue that Okonkwo falls apart instead of his town, then identify the sources of strength and resilience within the clan that will allow the Ibo to survive and adapt.

3. MASCULINITY AND MISOGYNY

*Does Achebe deliver an indictment of the Ibo culture of masculinity? Does his drive for 'maleness' ruin Okonkwo and drive his son to the Christians?

*Would you want to be a woman in Ibo society?

*Does the clan's mistreatment and abuse of women weaken it to the point of being prone to missionary influence and 'cultural infiltration'?

*Does the Ibo imperative on masculinity drive men in the clan to the Christians?

4. NARRATOR'S VOICE VS. OKONKWO'S VOICE

*How does the novel's narrator differ from Okonkwo? What does the narrator think of Okonkwo? What is the narrator's opinion on the treatment of women, on Ibo justice, on the Christian missionaries?

*Why does the narrator stand apart from the novel's main character? What does this distance provide and allow?

*What if Achebe had narrated his novel solely from the point of view of Okonkwo? What view of Ibo culture would we see?

5. MAN VS. THE GODS. MAN VS. FATE.

*Compare Okonkwo to Odysseus. What is the price of defying the gods? Can you escape your fate? What are the limits to human power and will? What lessons on human limits reside in both *Things Fall Apart* and *The Odyssey*?

Web Vacation to 19th-Century Nigeria:

Need a break? Visit the VILLAGE OF UMUOFIA at literaryworlds.org/umuofia

8. PAPER ASSIGNMENT, FIRE AND WATER SYMBOLISM:

Write a three-page paper in answer to the following:

Analyze Chinua Achebe's use of fire and water symbolism in Things Fall Apart.

You will enjoy ONE paper work day. Lab location TBA.

9. FIRE AND WATER PAPER DUE

