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NOTES ON CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART:*
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NOVEL 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. 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.*

Setting

Things Fall Apart takes place sometime in the final decade of the nineteenth century in Igboland, which occupies the southeastern portion of what is now known as Nigeria. Most of the action unfolds prior to the arrival of European missionaries. Accordingly, the geography of the novel is dictated by precolonial norms of political and social organization. In Igboland, clusters of villages band together to protect each other and guarantee their own safety. The action of *Things Fall Apart* centers on the fictional village of Umuofia, which is part of a larger political entity made up by the so-called "nine villages."

In Igboland, geography takes on gendered aspects depending on where a person's parents were born. For instance, Umuofia is Okonkwo's father's home village, which makes it Okonkwo's fatherland. When Okonkwo gets exiled for the crime of manslaughter, he and his family travel to another of the nine villages, Mbanta, which is Okonkwo's motherland—that is, the village where his mother was born. The gendering of geography plays an important symbolic role in the novel, since Okonkwo sees his seven-year exile in the motherland as an emasculating or weakening threat to his reputation.

Just as geography has meaning in *Things Fall Apart*, so too does time. The novel is set in the 1890s, at the beginning of the British colonial incursion into Igboland. The story takes place in a moment of rupture, as the old ways of the precolonial period come under threat from—and eventually buckle under the weight of—pressure from Europeans. The novel dramatizes the very beginnings of British imperialism in the region, which started not with guns but with Bibles. As Achebe depicts in the book, it was missionaries who arrived first, paving the way for the civil servants who would eventually wrest political control at the point of a pen or, if need be, a gun.

Although Achebe shows very little direct violence being perpetrated against the Igbo people, he implies the violence to come at the novel's end, when the District Commissioner contemplates his book in progress, titled *The Pacification of the Tribes of the Lower Niger*. As any reader with a knowledge of Nigerian history will know, this "pacification" would be achieved with a great deal of bloodshed and heartache.

Characters and characterisation

Okonkwo

Okonkwo

When he walked, his heels hardly touched the ground and he seemed to walk on springs, as if he was going to pounce on somebody. And he did pounce on people quite often.

In Chapter 1, the narrator describes Okonkwo as a physically intimidating man who exhibits a generally aggressive personality. Well-known for his wrestling prowess, Okonkwo seems to threaten attack even while walking. This quote offers one of the first suggestions that Okonkwo's violent tendencies border on being socially inappropriate.

Perhaps down in his heart Okonkwo was not a cruel man. But his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness. It was deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious gods and of magic, the fear of the forest, and of the forces of nature, malevolent, red in tooth and claw. Okonkwo's fear was greater than these. It was not external but lay deep within himself. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father.

In Chapter 2, the narrator speculates on the deep-seated motive behind Okonkwo's violent tendencies. Okonkwo acts from a place of fear, but his fear doesn't resemble the prevalent terrors of his clan, which relate to the supernatural world. Instead, Okonkwo suffers from the existential fear that he will not succeed in life and thus end up like his unremarkable father. Okonkwo's existential fear plays a major thematic role in *Things Fall Apart*, since it drives Okonkwo to perform several acts of tremendous violence.

"Okonkwo walked back to his obi to await Ojiugo's return. And when she returned he beat her very heavily. In his anger he had forgotten that it was the Week of Peace. His first two wives ran out in great alarm pleading with him that it was the sacred week. But Okonkwo was not the man to stop beating somebody half-way through, not even for fear of a goddess."

Here Okonkwo beats Ojiugo for failing to cook his evening meal, losing himself so thoroughly in anger that he refuses to stop even when reminded that such violence breaks the peace of the sacred week. The idea that Okonkwo does not fear divine wrath for his transgression is ironic, given that he's otherwise so committed to Igbo religion. Such an irony marks an important rift between Okonkwo's commitment to his clan and his commitment to his own power.

Somehow Okonkwo could never become as enthusiastic over feasts as most people. He was a good eater and he could drink one or two fairly big gourds of palm-wine. But he was always uncomfortable sitting around for days waiting for a feast or getting over it. He would be very much happier working on his farm.

Whereas "most people" feel enthusiastic about feast celebrations and enjoy the festivities in the company of others, Okonkwo feels driven to go back to working alone in the fields.

This passage in Chapter 5 reaffirms Okonkwo's aversion to idleness and how he never wants to appear weak or ineffectual. "As the man who had cleared his throat drew up and raised his machete, Okonkwo looked away. He heard the blow. The pot fell and broke in the sand. He heard Ikemefuna cry, "My father, they have killed me!" as he ran towards him. Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak."

This passage from Chapter 7 narrates Okonkwo's execution of Ikemefuna. This scene represents a tragic culmination of two contrasting emotions in Okonkwo. Okonkwo has grown to love Ikemefuna like a son, but this love amplifies Okonkwo's fear of being considered weak. In the end his fear wins out. Okonkwo's act also has significant implications for his future. Not only does the event mark a break in Okonkwo's relationship with his son Nwoye, who loved Ikemefuna, but the execution represents yet another instance when Okonkwo goes against the wisdom of the clan.

"I do not know how to thank you."

This dialogue concludes Chapter 15 and marks a rare moment of humor in the novel. When his good friend Obierika visits during his exile in Mbanta and brings him news of Umuofia, Okonkwo feels thankful and wants to express his gratitude. Obierika introduces an element of dark humor in response, which gives both men something to laugh about in an otherwise difficult time. However, the joke Obierika makes about Okonkwo killing himself foreshadows Okonkwo's tragic end. This moment of levity bears great symbolic weight.

Okonkwo felt a cold shudder run through him at the terrible prospect, like the prospect of annihilation. He saw himself and his fathers crowding round their ancestral shrine waiting in vain for worship and sacrifice and finding nothing but ashes of bygone days, and his children the while praying to the white man's god.

In Chapter 17 Okonkwo learns that Nwoye has converted to Christianity, the white men's religion. Initially enraged, Okonkwo's thoughts turn fearful as he imagines his clan's "annihilation" should all of Umuofia's sons forget their heritage. Okonkwo imagines himself in the afterlife among his forefathers, waiting in vain for his still-living sons to pay tribute to their ancestors. Okonkwo's anxious vision of a meager afterlife helps explain the depth of his existential fear: the annihilation of the clan means that Okonkwo will be completely abandoned in death.

"Let us not reason like cowards," said Okonkwo. "If a man comes into my hut and defecates on the floor, what do I do? Do I shut my eyes? No! I take a stick and break his head. That is what a man does."

In Chapter 18 Okonkwo responds to other clansmen who say that Umuofia has never fought on behalf of its gods and shouldn't do so now. Okonkwo argues that the white men pose an existential threat that could contaminate Umuofia's entire way of life. To make his point, Okonkwo likens Umuofia's situation to one in which a man bursts into another man's hut and contaminates the space. The only appropriate response to such an act is retaliation. However, Okonkwo doesn't convince the others to take a strong stand, and the longstanding difference in opinion between him and his fellow clansmen remains intact.

"If Umuofia decided on war, all would be well. But if they chose to be cowards he would go out and avenge himself. He thought about wars in the past. The noblest, he thought, was the war against Isike. In those days Okudo was still alive. Okudo sang a war song in a way that no other man could. He was not a fighter, but his voice turned every man into a lion".

After Okonkwo gets released from the white men's jail in Chapter 24, he commits himself to taking vengeance—even if the rest of the clan lacks the courage to do so. As he sits alone planning, Okonkwo's thoughts retreat to times past, when Umuofia was at its height and its warriors could be easily stirred into action. Okonkwo's reliance on idealized images of the past may suggest that, unlike his fellow clansmen, he has failed to reckon with the newness of

Umuofia's current problems. This failure of adaptation will have tragic consequences for Okonkwo.

Nwoye

Nwoye

"Okonkwo's first son, Nwoye, was then twelve years old but was already causing his father great anxiety for his incipient laziness. At any rate, that was how it looked to his father, and he sought to correct him by constant nagging and beating. And so Nwoye was developing into a sad-faced youth."

As these words from Chapter 2 demonstrate, Okonkwo places great pressure on his eldest son from an early age. Okonkwo's anxiety about Nwoye's laziness relates directly to Okonkwo's disappointment in his father, Unoka, who had lived a life of unproductivity. To prevent Nwoye from taking after Unoka, Okonkwo resorts to verbal and physical violence. Okonkwo's treatment seems to alienate and sadden Nwoye more than motivate him.

"Okonkwo encouraged the boys to sit with him in his obi, and he told them stories of the land—masculine stories of violence and bloodshed. Nwoye knew that it was right to be masculine and to be violent, but somehow he still preferred the stories that his mother used to tell, and which she no doubt still told to her younger children—stories of the tortoise and his wily ways, and of the bird *eneke-nti-oba* who challenged the whole world to a wrestling contest and was finally thrown by the cat."

In addition to treating Nwoye harshly, Okonkwo indoctrinates his son into a traditional understanding of masculinity. As indicated here in Chapter 7, such indoctrination involves regaling Nwoye with violent stories, even though Nwoye actually prefers the more creative tales his mother tells. Nwoye's strong draw to traditionally feminine stories marks an important difference between him and Okonkwo—a difference that foreshadows Nwoye's eventual abandonment of Igbo ways for the Christian religion.

"As soon as his father walked in, that night, Nwoye knew that Ikemefuna had been killed, and something seemed to give way inside him, like the snapping of a tightened bow. He did not cry. He just hung limp."

This moment, recounted in Chapter 7, represents a turning point for Nwoye in *Things Fall Apart*. Nwoye cannot live up to Okonkwo's high expectations, and the execution of Ikemefuna further opens the rift between Nwoye's personal values and the values of Umuofia. Nwoye loved Ikemefuna like a brother, and Okonkwo had effectively become the boy's father. The fact that the clan would kill Ikemefuna despite his integration into Umuofia social life causes something to break inside Nwoye.

"Nwoye had heard that twins were put in earthenware pots and thrown away in the forest, but he had never yet come across them. A vague chill had descended on him and his head had seemed to swell, like a solitary walker at night who passes an evil spirit on the way. Then something had given way inside him. It descended on him again, this feeling, when his father walked in, that night after killing Ikemefuna."

Shortly after learning of Ikemefuna's death in Chapter 7, Nwoye reflects on an Igbo custom in which newborn twins are abandoned in the forest to die. Just as he had experienced discomfort at learning about this tradition, Nwoye experiences a similar feeling when he learns of Ikemefuna's execution at the hands of the clan, indicating that his own moral compass may not align with that of his society. The rift between Nwoye and Umuofia—and between Nwoye and Okonkwo—continues to grow.

"It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow. The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul—the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed. He felt a relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul. The words of the hymn were like the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry palate of the panting earth."

The conclusion of Chapter 16 describes what Nwoye finds appealing about the Christian religion. Although Nwoye doesn't understand the basic theological principles of the new religion, such as the idea of the Holy Trinity, he feels emotionally drawn to the beautiful hymns. Much like the tales his mother

used to tell him, the hymns satisfy his desire for storytelling, and more significantly, they answer questions that had previously remained mysterious for Nwoye, such as why Ikemefuna had to be killed.

Ezinma

Ezinma

"You have not eaten for two days," said [Okonkwo's] daughter Ezinma when she brought the food to him. "So you must finish this." She sat down and stretched her legs in front of her. Okonkwo ate the food absent-mindedly. "She should have been born a boy," he thought as he looked at his ten-year-old daughter."

Okonkwo has a resect for his daughter Ezinma that he does not have for any of his sons. In Chapter 8, Ezinma performs a traditionally feminine duty when she brings her father food. However, when she commands Okonkwo to finish his food and sits down to make sure he follows her order, Ezinma demonstrates a sense of self-possession and assertiveness that Okonkwo considers masculine and wishes his sons had.

"Ezinma did not call her mother Nne like all children. She called her by her name, Ekwefi, as her father and other grown-up people did. The relationship between them was not only that of mother and child. There was something in it like the companionship of equals, which was strengthened by such little conspiracies as eating eggs in the bedroom."

This description in Chapter 9 further demonstrates Ezinma's unusual status in Okonkwo's household. Just as Okonkwo sees Ezinma as possessing the strength of a boy, Ekwefi sees Ezinma as possessing the maturity of a peer. Ezinma's status as an equal to the parents rather than a subordinate child signifies just how exceptional her reputation is in Umuofia.

"Everybody knew she was an ogbanje. These sudden bouts of sickness and health were typical of her kind. But she had lived so long that perhaps she had decided to stay. Some of them did become tired of their evil rounds of birth and death, or took pity on their mothers, and stayed. Ekwefi believed deep inside her that Ezinma had come to stay."

Ezinma's unusual status in Okonkwo's household and Umuofia partly relates to the suspicion that she is an *ogbanje*—a child who repeatedly goes through cycles of death and rebirth. An *ogbanje* is notoriously difficult to raise to adulthood, since it leaves its parents at a young age, only to be reborn and die young again, almost never surviving to adolescence. Therefore, the possibility that Ezinma could be a rare example of an *ogbanje* who decides to stay among the living marks her as exceptional.

Mr. Brown

Mr. Bn

"In the matter of religion there was a growing feeling that there might be something in it after all, something vaguely akin to method in the overwhelming madness. The growing feeling was due to Mr. Brown, the white missionary, who was very firm in restraining his flock from provoking the wrath of the clan…Mr. Brown preached against such excess of zeal…so Mr. Brown came to be respected even by the clan, because he trod softly on its faith."

The narrator introduces the white missionary Mr. Brown in Chapter 21. Although Okonkwo takes an unrelenting stance against the white Christians' encroachment, here the narrator describes how Mr. Brown's efforts to keep the peace between the Europeans and the Igbo made the missionaries' work seem less threatening for many Umuofians. Mr. Brown's careful approach makes him seem unthreatening, turning his missionary work that much more effective.

"You say that there is one supreme God who made heaven and earth," said Akunna on one of Mr. Brown's visits. "We also believe in Him and call Him Chukwu. He made all the world and the other gods."

"There are no other gods," said Mr. Brown. "Chukwu is the only God and all others are false."

As suggested by this dialogue in Chapter 21, Mr. Brown earns respect from Umuofia's clansmen by spending time with them, learning about their beliefs. Mr. Brown disagrees respectfully with Akunna's religious views but doesn't press his disagreement aggressively. Mr. Brown appears less invested in gaining converts than he really is. Mr. Brown puts the Umuofians at ease, but the Umuofians' comfort will ultimately contribute to things falling apart, as the novel's title suggests.

Mr. Brown learned a good deal about the religion of the clan and he came to the conclusion that a frontal attack on it would not succeed. And so he built a school and a little hospital in Umuofia.

Although Mr. Brown earns respect from many in Umuofia for treading softly on Igbo beliefs, this quote from Chapter 21 indicates that Mr. Brown remains intent on destroying traditional Igbo values. The narrator's use of the language of war (i.e., "a frontal attack") shows that Mr. Brown is a strategist, and that he conceives his strategy for converting Umuofia to Christianity in militaristic terms. Even when presented with a kind face, Mr. Brown has ulterior intentions in his mission.

Ikemefuna

Ikemefuna

"Ikemefuna was by nature a very lively boy and he gradually became popular in Okonkwo's household, especially with the children. Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, who was two years younger, became quite inseparable from him because he seemed to know everything."

Ikemefuna comes to Umuofia as a sacrifice for his home village after a Umuofian is unjustly murdered there. As this quote from Chapter 4 indicates, however, Ikemefuna's outsider status quickly dissipates as he develops close emotional ties with the members of Okonkwo's household. Ikemefuna grows especially close to Nwoye. The boys' friendship improves Nwoye's well-being, softening the harsh effects of Okonkwo's high expectations, but Nwoye's attachment to Ikemefuna increases the emotional ramifications when Umuofia's elders decide to execute Ikemefuna.

"Okonkwo never showed any emotion openly, unless it be the emotion of anger. To show affection was a sign of weakness; the only thing worth demonstrating was strength. He therefore treated Ikemefuna as he treated everybody else—with a heavy hand. But there was no doubt that he liked the boy. Sometimes when he went to big village meetings or communal ancestral feasts he allowed Ikemefuna to accompany him, like a son, carrying his stool and his goat-skin bag. And, indeed, Ikemefuna called him father."

Although Okonkwo habitually guards himself against expressing emotions, this description in Chapter 4 demonstrates that Okonkwo's lack of expressiveness doesn't mean he lacks affection. In this instance, Ikemefuna inspires feelings of fatherly love in Okonkwo, who in turn treats Ikemefuna like a favored son. The fact that Ikemefuna accompanies Okonkwo to village meetings and feasts demonstrates that Ikemefuna has become an increasingly important member of Umuofia society, and not just of Okonkwo's home. Ikemefuna's favored status makes his eventual execution both more surprising and more tragic.

"Although he had felt uneasy at first, he was not afraid now. Okonkwo walked behind him. He could hardly imagine that Okonkwo was not his real father."

Here, a group of men pretend to escort Ikemefuna back to his home village, all the while planning to execute him on the way. Ikemefuna senses that something is not right, but he overcomes this fear by convincing himself that Okonkwo, who has treated him like his son and who has effectively become his father, would not allow anything bad to befall him. Ikemefuna's

justification increases the tension of the scene and amplifies the tragic moment when Okonkwo strikes Ikemefuna's death blow.

Unoka

Unoka

"He always said that whenever he saw a dead man's mouth he saw the folly of not eating what one had in one's lifetime. Unoka was, of course, a debtor, and he owed every neighbor some money, from a few cowries to quite substantial amounts."

Okonkwo's father, Unoka, had an easygoing philosophy about life, which the narrator describes here in Chapter 1. The basic premise of Unoka's life philosophy was this: a person must take full advantage of life while still alive. As sound as this philosophy may seem, the next sentence undercuts it with subtle irony, indicating that Unoka's way of living resulted in him becoming a debtor and therefore a drag on society. The irony of this passage underscores Okonkwo's frustration with his father's apparent laziness.

"Unoka was never happy when it came to wars. He was in fact a coward and could not bear the sight of blood. And so he changed the subject and talked about music, and his face beamed. He could hear in his mind's ear the blood-stirring and intricate rhythms of the ekwe and the udu and the ogene, and he could hear his own flute weaving in and out of them, decorating them with a colorful and plaintive tune."

Compared to Okonkwo, who has proven himself a formidable wrestler and fierce warrior, Unoka never excelled in any context that demanded violence. Instead, Unoka strongly preferred the arts, and he was a particularly enthusiastic musician. Okonkwo looks down on Unoka for his failure to live up to masculine standards, but here the narrator offers an alternative perspective, enabling the reader to see how music profoundly affected Unoka's sense of well-being. Thematically, Unoka's love for music connects him to his grandson, Nwoye, whom Okonkwo also demonizes for his apparent laziness and love of feminine activities.

"Unoka was an ill-fated man. He had a bad chi or personal god, and evil fortune followed him to the grave, or rather to his death, for he had no grave. He died of the swelling which was an abomination to the earth goddess. When a man was afflicted with swelling in the stomach and the limbs he was not allowed to die in the house."

Unoka dies from abdominal swelling, which the Igbo interpret as an abomination. To prevent divine wrath, Unoka's family has to banish him from the house, so he dies outside and remains there unburied. The conditions of Unoka's death make it seem that Unoka's personal god betrays him. This description goes some way to justify Okonkwo's harsh evaluation of his father.

Themes

Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work. They can take the form of problems, challenges, conflicts, or issues dealt with predominantly in a literary text.

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.

Masculinity or Manliness

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 a silent or incomprehensible continent. 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.

Generational Divide/Conflict

Things Fall Apart spotlights two significant generational divides. The first divide separates Okonkwo from his father, Unoka. Unlike his son, Unoka is not a warrior, nor has he distinguished himself as a man in any other way. Instead, Unoka prefers to drink and play music with friends. For a hypermasculine man like Okonkwo, Unoka's lack of drive is shameful, and Okonkwo dismisses his father as a coward.

Just as Okonkwo is divided from his father, he is also divided from his eldest son, Nwoye. Nwoye has much in common with his grandfather Unoka, especially with regard to his lack of interest in war and his love of the arts. Nwoye resists his father's expectation that he become an accomplished warrior. He also feels drawn to his mother's stories, which Okonkwo sees as an effeminate waste of time. Eventually, Nwoye escapes his father's expectations and his wrath by running away and converting to Christianity. Although Okonkwo feels ashamed of both his father and his son, the novel suggests that Okonkwo is perhaps more of an anomaly than either Unoka or Nwoye.

Pride

Okonkwo's greatest weakness is his pride, which is constantly under threat both from within his community and from without. Okonkwo takes pride in his achievements. This pride is justifiable, since he has accomplished a lot. Not only has he proven himself among Umuofia's fiercest warriors, but he has also climbed Umuofia's social ladder faster than any of his peers. Yet Okonkwo's pride also makes him quick to disdain others who don't live up to his high standards. For instance, Nwoye's apparent lack of masculine qualities leads Okonkwo to worry about his own legacy and be aggressive towards Nwoye.

Okonkwo's exile in Mbanta also deals a serious blow to his pride. When he returns to Umuofia he wants to restore his pride by defending his home against European influence. Okonkwo explains his position with an analogy: "If a man comes into my hut and defecates on the floor, what do I do? Do I shut my eyes? No! I take a stick and break his head." Okonkwo eventually resorts to violence to defend his pride, and this violence leads to his tragic downfall.

Repression

Throughout *Things Fall Apart* Okonkwo struggles with repressing his emotions. He represses his emotions because, more than anything else, he fears appearing weak and effeminate. Over and over in the novel Okonkwo's inner struggle to quash all emotional responses leads him to express himself with excessive cruelty. The narrator comments on this internal tug-of-war frequently. In Chapter 4, for instance, the narrator explicitly addresses the theme of repression: "Okonkwo never showed any emotion openly, unless it be the emotion of anger. To show affection was a sign of weakness; the only thing worth demonstrating was strength." Okonkwo's belief that anger is the only appropriate emotion for a man to show causes significant problems for him, his family, and ultimately his community.

For example, when Okonkwo kills Ikemefuna against the advice of Ogbuefi Ezeudu, he does so because "He was afraid of being thought weak." But Okonkwo's brutal killing of his adopted son breaks the heart of his blood son, Nwoye. This act deepens an already-existing

wound between Okonkwo and Nwoye, one that never gets healed. Throughout the novel, emotional repression leads to damaging—and eventually, for Okonkwo, tragic—outbursts of anger and violence.

Drum Language

Drums play an important role in Umuofia. Throughout *Things Fall Apart* the narrator emphasizes drums' ability to generate excitement and even communicate specific information. Drums often signal the initiation of a ceremony. For example, a persistent drum beat sets Umuofia's annual wrestling match in motion, and the sound fills the village until "their sound was no longer a separate thing from the living village. It was like the pulsation of its heart." The narrator explains that drums speak in their own "esoteric language," a language that villagers learn early in life. In one telling example, the narrator transcribes the drum language phonetically: *"Go-di-di-go-go-di-go. Di-go-go-di-go. It was the ekwe talking to the clan."* The narrator waits several sentences before translating the drum's message: "Somebody was dead." But more important than the message is the medium. By transcribing the drum language, the narrator elevates it to a status similar to the other languages that appear in the novel: English and Igbo.

Ethnographic Distance

The term "ethnographic distance" refers to a method in anthropology where the anthropologists distance themselves from the culture they are studying in order to make sense of that culture. At several points in the novel, the narrator, who otherwise seems fully immersed in Igbo culture, takes a step back in order to explain certain aspects of the Igbo world to the reader. For example, when Okonkwo's first wife calls out to Ekwefi in chapter five, Ekwefi calls back from inside her hut, "Is that me?" This response may seem strange to non-Igbo readers, so the narrator explains the cultural logic of Ekwefi's response: "That was the way people answered calls from outside. They never answered yes for fear it might be an evil spirit calling." The Igbo world is full of spirits that may have evil intentions, and answering "Yes" to a call from outside could inadvertently invite one such spirit inside. Throughout the book the narrator uses ethnographic distance to clarify elements of Igbo culture to a non-Igbo reader. The narrator borders two worlds: one African and one European.

Literary Devices

Motifs

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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

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.