**THINGS FALL APART NOTES BY CHINUA ACHEBE.**

**Chinua Achebe Biography**

Albert Chinualumogu Achebe was born on November 16, 1930, in Ogidi, a large village in Nigeria. Although he was the child of a Protestant missionary and received his early education in English, his upbringing was multicultural, as the inhabitants of Ogidi still lived according to many aspects of traditional Igbo (formerly written as Ibo) culture. Achebe attended the Government College in Umuahia from 1944 to 1947. He graduated from University College, Ibadan, in 1953. While he was in college, Achebe studied history and theology. He also developed his interest in indigenous Nigerian cultures, and he rejected his Christian name, Albert, for his indigenous one, Chinua.

After receiving his B.A., Chinua Achebe taught and joined the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation in Lagos in 1954. In 1961, he was appointed director of External Broadcasting but resigned in 1966 to dedicate himself full-time to writing and teaching. Since then, he has taught at many universities around the world including African, American, Canadian, and British institutions. He has received a vast number of awards and honorary degrees and has come to be considered one of the leading African writers of his time.

In the 1950s, Achebe was one of the founders of a Nigerian literary movement that drew upon the traditional oral culture of its indigenous peoples. In 1959, he published *Things Fall Apart* as a response to novels, such as Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness,* that treat Africa as a primordial and cultureless foil for Europe. Tired of reading white men’s accounts of how primitive, socially backward, and, most important, language-less native Africans were, Achebe sought to convey a fuller understanding of one African culture and, in so doing, give voice to an underrepresented and exploited colonial subject.

The most important aspect of Achebe's writing is his dedication to the socio- political fabrics of the societies in which he lives and has lived—that of a colonial and post-colonial African society. Throughout the 1940s, fifties and sixties, there was a growing sense of self-determination among the African people who had been colonized by the English and French. It was evident that a new era would arise in which the colonized would want to claim their independence. And, those who were writers would want to "write back" to the colonizer. In other words, because the English in Nigeria, for example had instilled the English language and the tradition of English literature, Nigerian writers were beginning to write in the very same language of colonial rule, making the writing both more complex, and, in many ways, more powerful in its intent. However, this was no longer a literature about England—it was now a local African literature written in the complex tongue of the ruling English.

Achebe has become renowned throughout the world as a father of modern African literature, essayist, and professor of English literature at Bard College in New York. But Achebe’s achievements are most concretely reflected by his prominence in Nigeria’s academic culture and in its literary and political institutions. He was also quite influential in the publication of new Nigerian writers. In 1967, he co-founded a publishing company with a Nigerian poet named Christopher Okigbo and in 1971, he began editing *Okike,* a respected journal of Nigerian writing. In 1984, he founded *Uwa ndi Igbo,* a bilingual magazine containing a great deal of information about Igbo culture.

Achebe died after an illness in Boston, Massachusetts, and was laid to rest in Nigeria.

**Plot Overview**

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.*

**CHARACTERS.**

**Okonkwo** **-** Okonkwo, the son of the effeminate and lazy Unoka, strives to make his way in a world that seems to value manliness. In so doing, he rejects everything for which he believes his father stood. Unoka was idle, poor, profligate, cowardly, gentle, and interested in music and conversation. Okonkwo consciously adopts opposite ideals and becomes productive, wealthy, thrifty, brave, violent, and adamantly opposed to music and anything else that he perceives to be “soft,” such as conversation and emotion. He is stoic to a fault.

Okonkwo achieves great social and financial success by embracing these ideals. He marries three women and fathers several children. Nevertheless, just as his father was at odds with the values of the community around him, so too does Okonkwo find himself unable to adapt to changing times as the white man comes to live among the Umuofians. As it becomes evident that compliance rather than violence constitutes the wisest principle for survival, Okonkwo realizes that he has become a relic, no longer able to function within his changing society.

Okonkwo is a tragic hero in the classical sense: although he is a superior character, his tragic flaw—the equation of manliness with rashness, anger, and violence—brings about his own destruction. Okonkwo is gruff, at times, and usually unable to express his feelings (the narrator frequently uses the word “inwardly” in reference to Okonkwo’s emotions). But his emotions are indeed quite complex, as his “manly” values conflict with his “unmanly” ones, such as fondness for Ikemefuna and Ezinma. The narrator privileges us with information that Okonkwo’s fellow clan members do not have—that Okonkwo surreptitiously follows Ekwefi into the forest in pursuit of Ezinma, for example—and thus allows us to see the tender, worried father beneath the seemingly indifferent exterior.

**Nwoye** **-** Nwoye, Okonkwo’s oldest son, struggles in the shadow of his powerful, successful, and demanding father. His interests are different from Okonkwo’s and resemble more closely those of Unoka, his grandfather. He undergoes many beatings, at a loss for how to please his father, until the arrival of Ikemefuna, who becomes like an older brother and teaches him a gentler form of successful masculinity. As a result, Okonkwo backs off, and Nwoye even starts to win his grudging approval. Nwoye remains conflicted, however: though he makes a show of scorning feminine things in order to please his father, he misses his mother’s stories.

With the unconscionable murder of Ikemefuna, however, Nwoye retreats into himself and finds himself forever changed. His reluctance to accept Okonkwo’s masculine values turns into pure embitterment toward him and his ways. When missionaries come to Mbanta, Nwoye’s hope and faith are reawakened, and he eventually joins forces with them. Although Okonkwo curses his lot for having borne so “effeminate” a son and disowns Nwoye, Nwoye appears to have found peace at last in leaving the oppressive atmosphere of his father’s tyranny.

**Ezinma** **-** Ezinma, Okonkwo’s favorite daughter and the only child of Ekwefi, is bold in the way that she approaches—and even sometimes contradicts—her father. Okonkwo remarks to himself multiple times that he wishes she had been born a boy, since he considers her to have such a masculine spirit. Ezinma alone seems to win Okonkwo’s full attention, affection, and, ironically, respect. She and he are kindred spirits, which boosts her confidence and precociousness. She grows into a beautiful young woman who sensibly agrees to put off marriage until her family returns from exile so as to help her father leverage his sociopolitical power most effectively. In doing so, she shows an approach similar to that of Okonkwo: she puts strategy ahead of emotion.

**Mr. Brown** **-** Mr. Brown represents Achebe’s attempt to craft a well-rounded portrait of the colonial presence by tempering bad personalities with good ones. Mr. Brown’s successor, Reverend Smith, is zealous, vengeful, small-minded, and manipulative; he thus stands in contrast to Mr. Brown, who, on the other hand, is benevolent if not always beneficent. Mr. Brown succeeds in winning a large number of converts because he listens to the villagers’ stories, beliefs, and opinions. He also accepts the converts unconditionally. His conversation with Akunna represents this sympathetic stance. The derisive comments that Reverend Smith makes about Mr. Brown after the latter’s departure illustrate the colonial intolerance for any kind of sympathy for, and genuine interest in, the native culture. The surname Brown hints at his ability to navigate successfully the clear-cut racial division between the colonizers and the colonized.

**Ikemefuna** **-** Ikemefuna comes to Umuofia early in the book, as settlement for a dispute with a nearby village. Not knowing what else to do with him, Okonkwo lets Ikemefuna live with his first wife. Ikemefuna quickly becomes a well-loved member of the family. He serves as a role model for Okonkwo’s eldest son, Nwoye, and over time he also earns Okonkwo’s respect. But more important than the role he plays in Okonkwo’s family is the effect his death has on the unfolding events of the novel. When the village elders decide the time has come to kill Ikemefuna and finally settle the dispute with the neighboring village, Okonkwo insists on taking part in the execution, despite the fact that the boy calls him “father.” Okonkwo ends up killing Ikemefuna himself out of fear that his failure to take responsibility would make him look weak. Ikefuma’s death irreversibly harms the relationship between Okonkwo and Nwoye. His death is also a bad omen that has a symbolic connection to Okonkwo’s later exile from Umuofia. In this sense, the death of Ikemefuna signals the start of things falling apart.

**Unoka** **-** Unoka is Okonkwo’s father, who died ten years prior to the opening of the novel. Although Unoka is not physically present in the novel, he plays an important role in Okonkwo’s memory. Ever since he was a child, Okonkwo felt deeply ashamed of his father. For one thing, Unoka felt squeamish about blood. His fear of blood prevented him from becoming a warrior and earning the kind of title that would have won him distinction within the community. In fact, Unoka tended to be more of a drain on the community than an active contributor. He had a reputation for borrowing large sums from various people, and he rarely if ever repaid his debts. Unoka also was drawn to creative activities, such as music. To Okonkwo, his father’s aversion to violence and his preference for the arts marked him as an effeminate idler, precisely the opposite of what Okonkwo hoped to become. In the novel, Unoka’s negative reputation drives Okonkwo’s obsession with masculinity and personal achievement.

**Reverend James Smith -** The missionary who replaces Mr. Brown. Unlike Mr. Brown, Reverend Smith is uncompromising and strict. He demands that his converts reject all of their indigenous beliefs, and he shows no respect for indigenous customs or culture. He is the stereotypical white colonialist, and his behavior epitomizes the problems of colonialism. He intentionally provokes his congregation, inciting it to anger and even indirectly, through Enoch, encouraging some fairly serious transgressions.

**Uchendu -** The younger brother of Okonkwo’s mother. Uchendu receives Okonkwo and his family warmly when they travel to Mbanta, and he advises Okonkwo to be grateful for the comfort that his motherland offers him lest he anger the dead—especially his mother, who is buried there. Uchendu himself has suffered—all but one of his six wives are dead and he has buried twenty-two children. He is a peaceful, compromising man and functions as a foil (a character whose emotions or actions highlight, by means of contrast, the emotions or actions of another character) to Okonkwo, who acts impetuously and without thinking.

**The District Commissioner -** An authority figure in the white colonial government in Nigeria. The prototypical racist colonialist, the District Commissioner thinks that he understands everything about native African customs and cultures and he has no respect for them. He plans to work his experiences into an ethnographic study on local African tribes, the idea of which embodies his dehumanizing and reductive attitude toward race relations.

**Obierika -** Okonkwo’s close friend, whose daughter’s wedding provides cause for festivity early in the novel. Obierika looks out for his friend, selling Okonkwo’s yams to ensure that Okonkwo won’t suffer financial ruin while in exile and comforting Okonkwo when he is depressed. Like Nwoye, Obierika questions some of the tribe’s traditional strictures.

**Ekwefi -** Okonkwo’s second wife, once the village beauty. Ekwefi ran away from her first husband to live with Okonkwo. Ezinma is her only surviving child, her other nine having died in infancy, and Ekwefi constantly fears that she will lose Ezinma as well. Ekwefi is good friends with Chielo, the priestess of the goddess Agbala.

**Enoch -** A fanatical convert to the Christian church in Umuofia. Enoch’s disrespectful act of ripping the mask off an *egwugwu* during an annual ceremony to honor the earth deity leads to the climactic clash between the indigenous and colonial justice systems. While Mr. Brown, early on, keeps Enoch in check in the interest of community harmony, Reverend Smith approves of his zealotry.

**Ogbuefi Ezeudu -** The oldest man in the village and one of the most important clan elders and leaders. Ogbuefi Ezeudu was a great warrior in his youth and now delivers messages from the Oracle.

**Chielo -** A priestess in Umuofia who is dedicated to the Oracle of the goddess Agbala. Chielo is a widow with two children. She is good friends with Ekwefi and is fond of Ezinma, whom she calls “my daughter.” At one point, she carries Ezinma on her back for miles in order to help purify her and appease the gods.

**Akunna -** A clan leader of Umuofia. Akunna and Mr. Brown discuss their religious beliefs peacefully, and Akunna’s influence on the missionary advances Mr. Brown’s strategy for converting the largest number of clansmen by working with, rather than against, their belief system. In so doing, however, Akunna formulates an articulate and rational defense of his religious system and draws some striking parallels between his style of worship and that of the Christian missionaries.

**Nwakibie -** A wealthy clansmen who takes a chance on Okonkwo by lending him 800 seed yams—twice the number for which Okonkwo asks. Nwakibie thereby helps Okonkwo build up the beginnings of his personal wealth, status, and independence.

**Mr. Kiaga -** The native-turned-Christian missionary who arrives in Mbanta and converts Nwoye and many others.

**Okagbue Uyanwa -** A famous medicine man whom Okonkwo summons for help in dealing with Ezinma’s health problems.

**Maduka -** Obierika’s son. Maduka wins a wrestling contest in his mid-teens. Okonkwo wishes he had promising, manly sons like Maduka.

**Obiageli -** The daughter of Okonkwo’s first wife. Although Obiageli is close to Ezinma in age, Ezinma has a great deal of influence over her.

**Ojiugo -** Okonkwo’s third and youngest wife, and the mother of Nkechi. Okonkwo beats Ojiugo during the Week of Peace.

**Chapters 1–3**

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.  
—W. B. Yeats, “The Second Coming”*

**Summary: Chapter 1**

*Among the Igbo . . . proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten.*

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, including Okonkwo’s village, Iguedo. In his youth, he brought honor to his village by beating Amalinze the Cat in a wrestling contest. Until his match with Okonkwo, the Cat had been undefeated for seven years. Okonkwo is completely unlike his now deceased father, Unoka, who feared the sight of blood and was always borrowing and losing money, which meant that his wife and children often went hungry. Unoka was, however, a skilled flute player and had a gift for, and love of, language.

**Summary: Chapter 2**

One night, the town crier rings the *ogene,* or gong, and requests that all of the clansmen gather in the market in the morning. At the gathering, Ogbuefi Ezeugo, a noted orator, announces that someone from the village of Mbaino murdered the wife of an Umuofia tribesman while she was in their market. The crowd expresses anger and indignation, and Okonkwo travels to Mbaino to deliver the message that they must hand over to Umuofia a virgin and a young man. Should Mbaino refuse to do so, the two villages must go to war, and Umuofia has a fierce reputation for its skill in war and magic. Okonkwo is chosen to represent his clan because he is its fiercest warrior. Earlier in the chapter, as he remembers his past victories, we learn about the five human heads that he has taken in battle. On important occasions, he drinks palm-wine from the first head that he captured. Not surprisingly, Mbaino agrees to Umuofia’s terms. The elders give the virgin to Ogbuefi Udo as his wife but are not sure what to do with the fifteen-year-old boy, Ikemefuna. The elders decide to turn him over to Okonkwo for safekeeping and instruction. Okonkwo, in turn, instructs his first wife to care for Ikemefuna.

In addition to being a skilled warrior, Okonkwo is quite wealthy. He supports three wives and eight children, and each wife has her own hut. Okonkwo also has a barn full of yams, a shrine for his ancestors, and his own hut, called an *obi.*

Okonkwo fears weakness, a trait that he associates with his father and with women. When Okonkwo was a child, another boy called Unoka *agbala,*which is used to refer to women as well as to men who have not taken a title. Because he dreads weakness, Okonkwo is extremely demanding of his family. He finds his twelve-year-old son, Nwoye, to be lazy, so he beats and nags the boy constantly.

**Summary: Chapter 3**

Okonkwo built his fortune alone as a sharecropper because Unoka was never able to have a successful harvest. When he visited the Oracle, Unoka was told that he failed because of his laziness. Ill-fated, Unoka died of a shameful illness, “swelling which was an abomination to the earth goddess.” Those suffering from swelling stomachs and limbs are left in the Evil Forest to die so that they do not offend the earth by being buried. Unoka never held any of the community’s four prestigious titles (because they must be paid for), and he left numerous debts unpaid.

As a result, Okonkwo cannot count on Unoka’s help in building his own wealth and in constructing his *obi.* What’s more, he has to work hard to make up for his father’s negative strikes against him. Okonkwo succeeds in exceeding all the other clansmen as a warrior, a farmer, and a family provider. He begins by asking a wealthy clansman, Nwakibie, to give him 400 seed yams to start a farm. Because Nwakibie admired Okonkwo’s hard-working nature, he gave him eight hundred. One of Unoka’s friends gave him another four hundred, but because of horrible droughts and relentless downpours, Okonkwo could keep only one third of the harvest. Some farmers who were lazier than Okonkwo put off planting their yams and thus avoided the grave losses suffered by Okonkwo and the other industrious farmers. That year’s devastating harvest left a profound mark on Okonkwo, and for the rest of his life he considers his survival during that difficult period proof of his fortitude and inner mettle. Although his father tried to offer some words of comfort, Okonkwo felt only disgust for someone who would turn to words at a time when either action or silence was called for.

We are introduced immediately to the complex laws and customs of Okonkwo’s clan and its commitment to harmonious relations. For example, the practice of sharing palm-wine and kola nuts is repeated throughout the book to emphasize the peacefulness of the Igbo. When Unoka’s resentful neighbor visits him to collect a debt, the neighbor does not immediately address the debt. Instead, he and Unoka share a kola nut and pray to their ancestral spirits; afterward, they converse about community affairs at great length. The customs regulating social relations emphasize their common interests and culture, diffusing possible tension. The neighbor further eases the situation by introducing the subject of debt through a series of Igbo proverbs, thus making use of a shared oral tradition, as Okonkwo does when he asks Nwakibie for some seed yams. Through his emphasis on the harmony and complexity of the Igbo, Achebe contradicts the stereotypical, European representations of Africans as savages.

Another important way in which Achebe challenges such stereotypical representations is through his use of language. As Achebe writes in his essay on Joseph Conrad’s novella *Heart of Darkness,*colonialist Europe tended to perceive Africa as a foil or negation of Western culture and values, imagining Africa to be a primordial land of silence. But the people of Umuofia speak a complex language full of proverbs and literary and rhetorical devices. Achebe’s translation of the Igbo language into English retains the cadences, rhythms, and speech patterns of the language without making them sound, as Conrad did, “primitive.”

Okonkwo is the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart,*and, in addition to situating him within his society, the first few chapters of the novel offer us an understanding of his nature. He is driven by his hatred of his father, Unoka, and his fear of becoming like him. To avoid picking up Unoka’s traits, Okonkwo acts violently without thinking, often provoking avoidable fights. He has a bad temper and rules his household with fear. Okonkwo associates Unoka with weakness, and with weakness he associates femininity. Because his behavior is so markedly different from his father’s, he believes that it constitutes masculinity. However, it strains his relationship with Nwoye and leads him to sin in Chapter 4 by breaking the Week of Peace. His rash behavior also causes tension within the community because he expresses disdain for less successful men. Ikemefuna later demonstrates that masculinity need not preclude kindness, gentleness, and affection, and Nwoye responds far more positively to Ikemefuna’s nurturing influence than to Okonkwo’s heavy-handedness.

Despite its focus on kinship, the Igbo social structure offers a greater chance for mobility than that of the colonizers who eventually arrive in Umuofia. Though ancestors are revered, a man’s worth is determined by his own actions. In contrast to much of continental European society during the nineteenth century, which was marked by wealth-based class divisions, Igbo culture values individual displays of prowess, as evidenced by their wrestling competitions. Okonkwo is thus able, by means of his own efforts, to attain a position of wealth and prestige, even though his father died, penniless and titleless, of a shameful illness.

**Chapters 4–6**

**Summary: Chapter 4**

The clan decides that Ikemefuna will stay with Okonkwo. Ikemefuna is homesick and scared at first, but Nwoye’s mother treats him as one of her own, and he is immediately popular with Okonkwo’s children. Ikemefuna knows many stories that the children have never heard before and he possesses many impressive skills, such as making flutes out of bamboo sticks and setting traps for little bush rodents. To Okonkwo’s delight, he also becomes like an older brother to Nwoye. Okonkwo himself grows quite fond of Ikemefuna, but he does not show any affection because he considers doing so a sign of weakness, which he refuses to tolerate in himself or others. Ikemefuna soon begins to call Okonkwo “father.”

During the Week of Peace, Okonkwo notices that his youngest wife, Ojiugo, has left her hut to have her hair braided without having cooked dinner. He beats her for her negligence, shamefully breaking the peace of the sacred week in a transgression known as nso-ani. The priest demands that Okonkwo sacrifice a nanny goat and a hen and pay a fine of one length of cloth and one hundred cowries (shells used as currency). Okonkwo truly repents for his sin and follows the priest’s orders. Ogbuefi Ezeudu observes that the punishment for breaking the Peace of Ani has become mild in Umuofia. He also criticizes another clan’s practice of throwing the bodies of all who die during the Week of Peace into the Evil Forest.

After the Week of Peace, the villagers begin to clear the land in preparation for planting their farms. Nwoye and Ikemefuna help Okonkwo prepare the seed yams, but he finds fault with their work. Even though he knows that they are too young to understand farming completely, he hopes that criticism will drive his son to be a great man and farmer. Ikemefuna settles into Okonkwo’s family and shares his large stock of folk tales.

**Summary: Chapter 5**

Just before the harvest, the village holds the Feast of the New Yam to give thanks to the earth goddess, Ani. Okonkwo doesn’t really care for feasts because he considers them times of idleness. The women thoroughly scrub and decorate their huts, throw away all of their unused yams from the previous year, and use cam wood to paint their skin and that of their children with decorative designs. With nothing to do, Okonkwo becomes angry, and he finally comes up with an excuse to beat his second wife, Ekwefi. He then decides to go hunting with his gun. Okonkwo is not a good hunter, however, and Ekwefi mutters a snide remark under her breath about “guns that never shot.” In a fit of fury, he shoots the gun at her but misses.

The annual wrestling contest comes the day after the feast. Ekwefi, in particular, enjoys the contest because Okonkwo won her heart when he defeated the Cat. He was too poor to pay her bride-price then, but she later ran away from her husband to be with him. Ezinma, Ekwefi’s only child, takes a bowl of food to Okonkwo’s hut. Okonkwo is very fond of Ezinma but rarely demonstrates his affection. Obiageli, the daughter of Okonkwo’s first wife, is already there, waiting for him to finish the meal that she has brought him. Nkechi, the daughter of Okonkwo’s third wife, Ojiugo, then brings a meal to Okonkwo.

**Summary: Chapter 6**

The wrestling match takes place on the village ilo, or common green. Drummers line the field, and the spectators are so excited that they must be held back. The wrestling begins with matches between boys ages fifteen and sixteen. Maduka, the son of Okonkwo’s friend Obierika, wins one match within seconds. As the wrestling continues, Ekwefi speaks with Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and Caves. The two women are good friends, and Chielo inquires about Ezinma, whom she calls “my daughter.” They conclude that Ezinma seems to have “come to stay” because she has reached the age of ten.**Analysis: Chapters 4–6**

Whereas the first few chapters highlight the complexity and originality of the Igbo language, in these chapters Achebe points out another aspect of Igbo culture that colonialist Europe tended to ignore: the existence of subcultures within a given African population. Each clan has its own stories, and Ikemefuna is an exciting addition to Umuofia because he brings with him new and unfamiliar folk tales. With the introduction of Ikemefuna, Achebe is able to remind us that the story we are reading is not about Africa but rather about one specific culture within Africa. He thus combats the European tendency to see all Africans as one and the same.

The religious values of the Igbo emphasize the shared benefits of peaceful, harmonious relations. The Igbo always consult the Oracle before declaring war, for they fear punishment from their gods should they declare war without just cause. Their religion also emphasizes the individual’s obligation to the community. When Okonkwo breaks the peace during the sacred week, the priest chastises him for endangering the entire community by risking the earth deity’s wrath. He refuses Okonkwo’s offer of a kola nut, expressing disagreement peacefully. This parrying of potential violence on the interpersonal level reflects the culture’s tradition of avoiding violence and war whenever possible.

Moreover, the belief in the *chi,* an individual’s personal god, also smooths possible tensions in the Igbo community. The*chi* allows individuals to attribute some portion of their failures and successes to divine influence, thus lessening the shame of the former and pride of the latter. This belief encourages respect between individuals; the men are thus able to settle a dispute between Okonkwo and a man whom he insults without resorting to personal attacks.

Although traditional Igbo culture is fairly democratic in nature, it is also profoundly patriarchal. Wife-beating is an accepted practice. Moreover, femininity is associated with weakness while masculinity is associated with strength. It is no coincidence that the word that refers to a titleless man also means “woman.” A man is not believed to be “manly” if he cannot control his women. Okonkwo frequently beats his wives, and the only emotion he allows himself to display is anger. He does not particularly like feasts, because the idleness that they involve makes him feel emasculated. Okonkwo’s frustration at this idleness causes him to act violently, breaking the spirit of the celebration.

Okonkwo’s extremely overactive desire to conquer and subdue, along with his profound hatred of all things feminine, is suggestive of impotence. Though he has children, Okonkwo is never compared to anything thriving or organic; instead, Achebe always associates him with fire, which consumes but does not beget. The incident in which he tries to shoot Ekwefi with his gun is likewise suggestive of impotence. After Ekwefi hints at Okonkwo’s inability to shoot properly, Okonkwo proves this inability, failing to hit Ekwefi. Impotence, whether or not it is an actual physical condition for him, seems to be a characteristic that is related to Okonkwo’s chauvinistic behavior.

**Chapters 7–8**

**Summary: Chapter 7**

*And at last the locusts did descend. They settled on every tree and on every blade of grass. . . .*

Ikemefuna stays with Okonkwo’s family for three years. He seems to have “kindled a new fire” in Nwoye, who, much to Okonkwo’s pleasure, becomes more masculine in his attitude. Okonkwo knows that his son’s development is a result of Ikemefuna’s influence. He frequently invites the two into his *obi* to listen to violent, masculine stories. Although Nwoye misses his mother’s stories, he knows that he pleases his father when he expresses disdain for women and their concerns.

To the village’s surprise, locusts descend upon Umuofia. They come once in a generation and will return every year for seven years before disappearing for another lifetime. The village excitedly collects them because they are good to eat when cooked. Ogbuefi Ezeudu pays Okonkwo a visit, but he will not enter the hut to share the meal. Outside, he informs Okonkwo in private that the Oracle has decreed that Ikemefuna must be killed. He tells Okonkwo not to take part in the boy’s death, as Ikemefuna calls him “father.” Okonkwo lies to Ikemefuna, telling him that he will be returning to his home village. Nwoye bursts into tears.

During the long walk home with the men of Umuofia, Ikemefuna thinks about seeing his mother. After hours of walking, a man attacks him with a machete. Ikemefuna cries to Okonkwo for help. Okonkwo doesn’t wish to look weak, so he cuts the boy down. When Okonkwo returns home, Nwoye intuits that his friend is dead. Something breaks inside him for the second time in his life; the first time was when he heard an infant crying in the Evil Forest, where newborn twins are left to die.

**Summary: Chapter 8**

Okonkwo sinks into a depression. He feels weak, and he cannot sleep or eat. When Ezinma brings him his evening meal three days later, she tells him that he must finish everything. He repeatedly wishes that she were a boy, and he berates himself for acting like a “shivering old woman.” He visits his friend Obierika and congratulates Maduka on his successful wrestling. Obierika, in turn, requests that Okonkwo stay when his daughter’s suitor arrives to determine a bride-price. Okonkwo complains to Obierika that his sons are not manly enough and says that he would be happier if Ezinma were a boy because she has “the right spirit.” He and Obierika then argue over whether it was right of Okonkwo to partake in Ikemefuna’s death.

Okonkwo begins to feel revived a bit. He decides that his unhappiness was a product of his idleness—if Ikemefuna had been murdered at a busier time of the year, he, Okonkwo, would have been completely undisturbed. Someone arrives to report the death of the oldest man in a neighboring village. Strangely, the old man’s wife died shortly thereafter. Okonkwo questions the man’s reputed strength once he learns how attached he had been to his wife.

Okonkwo sits with Obierika while Obierika bargains his daughter’s bride-price with the family of her suitor. Afterward, Obierika and his future son-in-law’s relatives talk about the differing customs in other villages. They discuss the practice of, and skill at, tapping palm trees for palm-wine. Obierika talks about hearing stories of men with skin as white as chalk. Another man, Machi, pipes in that such a man passes through the village frequently and that his name is Amadi. Those who know Amadi, a leper, laugh—the polite term for leprosy is “the white skin.”

**Analysis: Chapters 7–8**

Okonkwo disobeys the authority and advice of a clan elder in killing Ikemefuna. His actions are too close to killing a kinsman, which is a grave sin in Igbo culture. Okonkwo is so afraid of looking weak that he is willing to come close to violating tribal law in order to prove otherwise. No one would have thought that Okonkwo was weak if he had stayed in the village. In fact, Obierika’s opinion on the matter suggests that doing so would have been considered the more appropriate action. Instead, Okonkwo’s actions seriously damage both his relationship with Nwoye and Nwoye’s allegiance to Igbo society.

Nwoye shows promise because he voices chauvinist opinions, but his comments are really aimed at Okonkwo. In fact, Nwoye loves women’s stories and is pleased when his mother or Okonkwo’s other wives ask him to do things for them. He also seeks comfort in his mother’s hut after Ikemefuna’s death. Nwoye’s questioning of Ikemefuna’s death and of the practice of throwing away newborn twins is understandable: Obierika, too, frequently questions tradition. In fact, Obierika refused to accompany the other men to kill Ikemefuna, and Okonkwo points out that Obierika seems to question the Oracle. Obierika also has reservations about the village’s practice of tapping trees. Okonkwo, on the other hand, accepts all of his clan’s laws and traditions unquestioningly.

Interestingly, Obierika’s manliness is never questioned. The fact that Obierika is skeptical of some Igbo practices makes us regard Nwoye’s skepticism in a different light. We understand that, in Umuofia, manhood does not require the denigration of women. Like Nwoye, Ikemefuna is not close to his biological father. Rather, his primary emotional attachments to his natal village are to his mother and little sister.

Although he is not misogynistic like Okonkwo, Ikemefuna is the perfect clansman. He eagerly takes part in the community celebrations and integrates himself into Okonkwo’s family. Okonkwo and Ikemefuna love one another as father and son, and Ikemefuna is a good older brother to Nwoye. Most important, he is protective rather than critical. He does not allow Nwoye and his brothers to tell their mother that Obiageli broke her water pot when she was showing off—he does not want her to be punished. Ikemefuna illustrates that manliness does not preclude gentleness and affection.

In calling himself a “shivering old woman,” Okonkwo associates weakness with femininity. Although he denigrates his emotional attachment to Ikemefuna, he seeks comfort in his affectionate friendship with Obierika. Ezinma is likewise a source of great comfort to him. Because she understands him, she does not address his sorrow directly; rather, she urges him to eat. For all of Okonkwo’s chauvinism, Ezinma is his favorite child. Okonkwo’s frequently voiced desire that Ezinma were a boy seems to suggest that he secretly desires affectionate attachment with his actual sons, although he avoids admitting as much because he fears affection as a weakness. It is interesting to note that Okonkwo doesn’t wish that Ezinma were a boy because she exhibits desirable masculine traits; rather, it is their bond of sympathy and understanding that he values.

**Chapters 9–11**

**Summary: Chapter 9**

Ekwefi awakes Okonkwo very early in the morning and tells him that Ezinma is dying. Okonkwo ascertains that Ezinma has a fever and sets about collecting medicine. Ezinma is Ekwefi’s only child and the “center of her world.” Ekwefi is very lenient with her: Ezinma calls her by her first name and the dynamic of their relationship approaches equality.

Ekwefi’s nine other children died in infancy. She developed the habit of naming them symbolic things such as “Onwumbiko,” which means, “Death, I implore you,” and “Ozoemena,” which means, “May it not happen again.” Okonkwo consulted a medicine man who told him that an *ogbanje* was tormenting them. An *ogbanje* is a “wicked” child who continually re-enters its mother’s womb only to die again and again, causing its parents grief. A medicine man mutilated the dead body of Ekwefi’s third child to discourage the *ogbanje’*s return. When Ezinma was born, like most *ogbanje* children, she suffered many illnesses, but she recovered from all of them. A year before the start of the novel, when Ezinma was nine, a medicine man named Okagbue Uyanwa found her *iyi-uwa*, the small, buried pebble that is the *ogbanje’*s physical link to the spirit world. Although the discovery of the *iyi-uwa* ought to have solved Ezinma’s problems, every illness that Ezinma catches still brings terror and anxiety to Ekwefi.

**Summary: Chapter 10**

The village holds a ceremonial gathering to administer justice. The clan’s ancestral spirits, which are known as *egwugwu,* emerge from a secret house into which no woman is allowed to step. The *egwugwu* take the form of masked men, and everyone suspects that Okonkwo is among them. The women and children are filled with fear even though they sense that the *egwugwu* are merely men impersonating spirits.

The first dispute that comes before the *egwugwu* involves an estranged husband and wife. The husband, Uzowulu, states that the three brothers of his wife, Mgbafo, beat him and took her and the children from his hut but would not return her bride-price. The woman’s brothers state that he is a beastly man who beat their sister mercilessly, even causing her to miscarry once. They argue that Uzowulu must beg Mgbafo to return to him. If she agrees, the brothers declare, Uzowulu must understand that they will cut his genitals off if he ever beats her again. The *egwugwu* decide in favor of Mgbafo. One village elder complains that such a trifling matter should not be brought before them.

**Summary: Chapter 11**

Ekwefi tells Ezinma a story about a greedy, cunning tortoise. All of the birds have been invited to a feast in the sky and Tortoise persuades the birds to lend him feathers to make wings so that he can attend the feast as well. As they travel to the feast, Tortoise also persuades them to take new names for the feast according to custom. He tells the birds that his name will be “All of you.” When they arrive, Tortoise asks his hosts for whom the feast is prepared. They reply, “For all of you.” Tortoise proceeds to eat and drink the best parts of the food and wine. The birds, angry and disgruntled at receiving only scraps, take back the feathers that they had given to Tortoise so that he is unable to fly home. Tortoise persuades Parrot to deliver a message to his wife: he wants her to cover their compound with their soft things so that he may jump from the sky without danger. Maliciously, Parrot tells Tortoise’s wife to bring out all of the hard things. When Tortoise jumps, his shell breaks into pieces on impact. A medicine man puts it together again, which is why Tortoise’s shell is not smooth.

Chielo, in her role as priestess, informs Ekwefi that Agbala, Oracle of the Hills and Caves, wishes to see Ezinma. Frightened, Okonkwo and Ekwefi try to persuade Chielo to wait until morning, but Chielo angrily reminds Okonkwo that he must not defy a god’s will. Chielo takes Ezinma on her back and forbids anyone to follow. Ekwefi overcomes her fear of divine punishment and follows anyway. Chielo, carrying Ezinma, makes her rounds of the nine villages. When Chielo finally enters the Oracle’s cave, Ekwefi resolves that if she hears Ezinma crying she will rush in to defend her—even against a god. Okonkwo startles her when he arrives at the cave with a machete. He calms Ekwefi and sits with her. She remembers when she ran away from her first husband to be Okonkwo’s wife. When he answered her knock at his door, they exchanged no words. He led her to his bed and began to undo her clothing.

**Analysis: Chapters 9–11**

The relationship between Ekwefi and Ezinma is not a typical parent-child relationship; it is more like one between equals. Ekwefi receives a great deal of comfort and companionship from her daughter and, because she has lost so many children, she loves and respects her daughter all the more. Although motherhood is regarded as the crowning achievement of a woman’s life, Ekwefi prizes Ezinma so highly, not for the status motherhood brings her but, rather, for the love and companionship that she offers.

Mutually supportive interaction between women receives increasing focus as the novel progresses. For example, Okonkwo’s wives frequently try to protect one another from his anger. Before Ezinma’s birth, Ekwefi was not jealous of Okonkwo’s first wife; she only expressed bitterness at her own misfortune. While Okonkwo gathers medicine for the fever, his other wives try to calm Ekwefi’s fear. Ekwefi’s friendship with Chielo, too, is an example of female bonding.

The incident with Chielo creates a real dilemma for Ekwefi, whose fear of the possible repercussions of disobeying her shows that Chielo’s role as a priestess is taken seriously—it is not just ceremonial. But Ekwefi and Okonkwo’s love for their child is strong enough that they are willing to defy religious authority. Although she has lost nine children, Ekwefi has been made strong by suffering, and when she follows Chielo, she chooses her daughter over the gods. In doing so, Ekwefi contradicts Okonkwo’s ideas of femininity and demonstrates that strength and bravery are not only masculine attributes. Okonkwo also disobeys Chielo and follows her to the caves. But he, too, is careful to show respect to Chielo. She is a woman, but, as a priestess, she can order and chastise him openly. Her authority is not to be taken lightly.

Unlike the narration of Chielo’s kidnapping of Ezinma, the narration of the *egwugwu* ceremony is rather ironic. The narrator makes several comments to reveal to us that the villagers know that the *egwugwu* are not real. For example, the narrator tells us: “Okonkwo’s wives, and perhaps other women as well, might have noticed that the second *egwugwu* had the springy walk of Okonkwo. And they might have noticed that Okonkwo was not among the titled men and elders who sat . . . But if they thought these things they kept them within themselves.” The narration of the incident of the medicine man and the *iyi-uwa* seems likewise to contain a trace of irony. After discussing the *iyi-uwa* and *egwugwu* in a tone that approaches mockery on a few occasions, the narrator, remarkably, says nothing that seems to undermine the villagers’ perception of the strength of Chielo’s divine power.

The story that Ekwefi tells Ezinma about Tortoise and the birds is one of the many instances in which we are exposed to Igbo folklore. The tale also seems to prepare us, like the symbolic locusts that arrive in Chapter 7, for the colonialism that will soon descend upon Umuofia. Tortoise convinces the birds to allow him to come with them, even though he does not belong. He then appropriates all of their food. The tale presents two different ways of defeating Tortoise: first, the birds strip Tortoise of the feathers that they had lent him. This strategy involves cooperation and unity among the birds. When they refuse to concede to Tortoise’s desires, Tortoise becomes unable to overpower them. Parrot’s trick suggests a second course of action: by taking advantage of the position as translator, Parrot outwits Tortoise.

**Chapters 12–13**

**Summary: Chapter 12**

At dawn, Chielo exits the shrine with Ezinma on her back. Without saying a word, she takes Ezinma to Ekwefi’s hut and puts her to bed. It turns out that Okonkwo was extremely worried the night before, although he did not show it. He forced himself to wait a while before walking to the Oracle’s shrine. When he found it empty, he realized that Chielo was making her rounds to the nine villages, so he returned home to wait. In all, he made four trips to and from the caves. By the time he departed for the cave for the last time, Okonkwo was “gravely worried.”

Okonkwo’s family begins to prepare for Obierika’s daughter’s *uri*, a betrothal ceremony. The villagers contribute food to the festivities and Obierika buys a huge goat to present to his future in-laws. The preparations are briefly interrupted when the women retrieve an escaped cow and the cow’s owner pays a fine for setting his cows loose on his neighbors’ farms. The suitor’s family members arrive and settle the clan’s doubts about their generosity by bringing an impressive fifty pots of wine to the celebration. The women greet the visitors and the men exchange ceremonial greetings. The feast is a success.

**Summary: Chapter 13**

Ogbuefi Ezeudu’s death is announced to the surrounding villages with the ekwe, a musical instrument. Okonkwo shudders. The last time Ezeudu visited him was to warn him against taking part in Ikemefuna’s death. Since Ezeudu was a great warrior who took three of the clan’s four titles, his funeral is large and elaborate. The men beat drums and fire their guns. Okonkwo’s gun accidentally goes off and kills Ezeudu’s sixteen-year-old son.

Killing a clansman is a crime against the earth goddess, so Okonkwo must atone by taking his family into exile for seven years. Okonkwo gathers his most valuable belongings and takes his family to his mother’s natal village, Mbanta. According to the mandates of tradition, the men from Ezeudu’s quarter burn Okonkwo’s buildings and kill his animals to cleanse the village of his sin. Obierika questions why a man should suffer so much for an accidental killing. He then mourns the deaths of his wife’s twins, whom he was forced to throw away, wondering what crime they committed.

**Analysis: Chapters 12–13**

In the previous section, we see Okonkwo’s behavior the night of the incident with Chielo as it appears to Ekwefi: Okonkwo shows up with his machete and fulfills the role of the strong, manly protector. At the beginning of Chapter 12, though, the narrator focuses on Okonkwo’s internal state and we see his true feelings rather than his apparent ones. Because Okonkwo views affection as a sign of weakness, he forces himself to wait before following Chielo. Each time he makes the trip to the caves and finds her missing, he returns home again to wait. Not until his fourth trip does he encounter Ekwefi. Okonkwo is not the cruel, heartless man that he presents himself to be; rather, he is gravely worried about Ezinma’s welfare. His hyperbolic understanding of manliness—the result of his tragic flaw—prevents his better nature from showing itself fully. Chielo’s actions force Okonkwo to acknowledge how important his wife and child are to him.

The importance of kinship bonds in manifests itself in the ramifications of the violation of such bonds. When Ikemefuna enters Okonkwo’s family as a surrogate son, he begins to heal the tension that exists between Okonkwo and Nwoye as a result of Okonkwo’s difficulty in dealing with the memory of his father. Ikemefuna is thus presented as a possible solution to Okonkwo’s tragic flaw. But Okonkwo fails to overcome his flaw and, in killing the boy who has become his son, damages his relationship with Nwoye permanently. Moreover, he seriously injures Nwoye’s respect for, and adherence to, Igbo cultural tradition.

Okonkwo’s accidental killing of Ezeudu’s son seems more than coincidence. We sense that it is a form of punishment for his earlier violation of kinship bonds. Just before the ill-fated incident happens, the one-handed spirit calls out to Ezeudu’s corpse, “If your death was the death of nature, go in peace. But if a man caused it, do not allow him a moment’s rest.” Although the explosion of Okonkwo’s gun moments later is not evidence that Okonkwo is, in fact, responsible for Ezeudu’s death, it seems to suggest that Okonkwo’s killing of Ikemefuna has been hurtful to the well-being and solidarity of the clan and its traditions.

Okonkwo’s punishment emphasizes the importance of strong, harmonious relations within the community. Although Obierika questions the harsh punishment that Okonkwo receives for such an accident, the punishment, in a way, helps stave off anger, resentment, and, ultimately, revenge. Despite the accidental nature of the death of Ezeudu’s son, it is understandable for Ezeudu’s close relatives to be angry with Okonkwo. The burning of Okonkwo’s compound displaces this anger onto his property, while Okonkwo’s exile separates him temporarily from the offended community. Over a period of seven years, any remaining anger and resentment from Ezeudu’s close relatives will dissipate, and the offender’s place in the community will be restored.

**Chapters 14–16**

**Summary: Chapter 14**

Okonkwo’s uncle, Uchendu, and the rest of his kinsmen receive him warmly. They help him build a new compound of huts and lend him yam seeds to start a farm. Soon, the rain that signals the beginning of the farming season arrives, in the unusual form of huge drops of hail. Okonkwo works hard on his new farm but with less enthusiasm than he had the first time around. He has toiled all his life because he wanted “to become one of the lords of the clan,” but now that possibility is gone. Uchendu perceives Okonkwo’s disappointment but waits to speak with him until after his son’s wedding. Okonkwo takes part in the ceremony.

The following day, Uchendu gathers together his entire family, including Okonkwo. He points out that one of the most common names they give is Nneka, meaning “Mother is Supreme”—a man belongs to his fatherland and stays there when life is good, but he seeks refuge in his motherland when life is bitter and harsh. Uchendu uses the analogy of children, who belong to their fathers but seek refuge in their mothers’ huts when their fathers beat them. Uchendu advises Okonkwo to receive the comfort of the motherland gratefully. He reminds Okonkwo that many have been worse off—Uchendu himself has lost all but one of his six wives and buried twenty-two children. Even so, Uchendu tells Okonkwo, “I did not hang myself, and I am still alive.”

**Summary: Chapter 15**

During the second year of Okonkwo’s exile, Obierika brings several bags of cowries to Okonkwo. He also brings bad news: a village named Abame has been destroyed. It seems that a white man arrived in Abame on an “iron horse” (which we find out later is a bicycle) during the planting season. The village elders consulted their oracle, which prophesied that the white man would be followed by others, who would bring destruction to Abame. The villagers killed the white man and tied his bicycle to their sacred tree to prevent it from getting away and telling the white man’s friends. A while later, a group of white men discovered the bicycle and guessed their comrade’s fate. Weeks later, a group of men surrounded Abame’s market and destroyed almost everybody in the village. Uchendu asks Obierika what the first white man said to the villagers. Obierika replies that he said nothing, or rather, he said things that the villagers did not understand. Uchendu declares that Abame was foolish to kill a man who said nothing. Okonkwo agrees that the villagers were fools, but he believes that they should have heeded the oracle’s warning and armed themselves.

The reason for Obierika’s visit and for the bags of cowries that he brings Okonkwo is business. Obierika has been selling the biggest of Okonkwo’s yams and also some of his seed yams. He has given others to sharecroppers for planting. He plans to continue to bring Okonkwo the money from his yams until Okonkwo returns to Iguedo.

**Summary: Chapter 16**

Two years after his first visit (and three years after Okonkwo’s exile), Obierika returns to Mbanta. He has decided to visit Okonkwo because he has seen Nwoye with some of the Christian missionaries who have arrived. Most of the other converts, Obierika finds, have been *efulefu,* men who hold no status and who are generally ignored by the clan. Okonkwo will not talk about Nwoye, but Nwoye’s mother tells Obierika some of the story.

The narrator tells the story of Nwoye’s conversion: six missionaries, headed by a white man, travel to Mbanta. The white man speaks to the village through an interpreter, who, we learn later, is named Mr. Kiaga. The interpreter’s dialect incites mirthful laughter because he always uses Umuofia’s word for “my buttocks” when he means “myself.” He tells the villagers that they are all brothers and sons of God. He accuses them of worshipping false gods of wood and stone. The missionaries have come, he tells his audience, to persuade the villagers to leave their false gods and accept the one true God. The villagers, however, do not understand how the Holy Trinity can be accepted as one God. They also cannot see how God can have a son and not a wife. Many of them laugh and leave after the interpreter asserts that Umuofia’s gods are incapable of doing any harm. The missionaries then burst into evangelical song. Okonkwo thinks that these newcomers must be insane, but Nwoye is instantly captivated. The “poetry of the new religion” seems to answer his questions about the deaths of Ikemefuna and the twin newborns, soothing him “like the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry palate.”

**Analysis: Chapters 14–16**

Okonkwo’s exile forces him into his motherland. He doesn’t deal well with his misfortune because he is so intent on being as successful and influential as his father was poor and powerless. His initial lack of gratitude toward his mother’s kinsmen is a transgression of Igbo cultural values. His exile also upsets him because it forces him to spend time in a “womanly” place. He remains unwilling to admit to, or come to terms with, the feminine side of his personality.

Unoka’s words regarding the bitterness of failing alone are important considering Okonkwo’s present situation. Like Unoka, Uchendu reminds Okonkwo that he does not suffer alone. Uchendu laments the loss of five of his wives, openly expressing his strong attachment to the women who have shared his life and borne his children. He mentions that his remaining wife is a young girl who “does not know her left from her right.” Youth, beauty, and sexual attractiveness are not the only things one should value in a wife, he argues. Uchendu also values wisdom, intelligence, and experience in a wife. Each and every death has caused him pain. Although we would not know it from Okonkwo, a father grieves for lost children just as a mother does.

The introduction of the European missionaries is not presented as a tragic event—it even contains some comical elements. The villagers, for example, mock the interpreter’s dialect. They neither perceive the missionaries as a threat nor react violently like the village of Abame, even though the missionaries call their gods “false” outright. And the missionaries do not forcibly thrust Christianity on the villagers.

Considering the emphasis that the Igbo place on careful thought before violent action, Okonkwo’s belief that the people of Abame should have armed themselves and killed the white men reflects a rash, violent nature that seems to clash with fundamental Igbo values. Throughout *Things Fall Apart,*Igbo customs and social institutions emphasize the wisdom of seeking a peaceful solution to conflict before a violent solution. Uchendu voices this social value when he states that the killing of the first white man was foolish, for the villagers of Abame did not even know what the man’s intentions were.

The language that Achebe uses to describe the pleasure that Nwoye finds in Christianity reflects Umuofia’s seeming need to be soothed physically as well as spiritually. Achebe sets up, from the beginning of the novel, a system of images that accentuate both the dry land and the tense atmosphere in the village. The image of the words of the hymn as raindrops relieving Nwoye’s “parched soul” refers not only to relief from the arid, desertlike heat with which Africa is commonly associated but also to the act of bringing Nwoye out of his supposed ignorance and into enlightenment through Christianity. It begins to quench his thirst for answers that Igbo religion has not been able to provide him.

**Chapters 17–19**

**Summary: Chapter 17**

The missionaries request a piece of land on which to build a church. The village leaders and elders offer them a plot in the Evil Forest, believing that the missionaries will not accept it. To the elders’ amazement, the missionaries rejoice in the offer. But the elders are certain that the forest’s sinister spirits and forces will kill the missionaries within days. To their surprise, however, nothing happens, and the church soon wins its first three converts. The villagers point out that sometimes their ancestral spirits will allow an offending man a grace period of twenty-eight days before they punish his sins, but they are completely astounded when nothing happens after twenty-eight days. The church thus wins more converts, including a pregnant woman, Nneka. Her four previous pregnancies produced twins, and her husband and his family are not sorry to see her go.

One of Okonkwo’s cousins notices Nwoye among the Christians and informs Okonkwo. When Nwoye returns, Okonkwo chokes him by the neck, demanding to know where he has been. Uchendu orders him to let go of the boy. Nwoye leaves his father’s compound and travels to a school in Umuofia to learn reading and writing. Okonkwo wonders how he could ever have fathered such an effeminate, weak son.

**Summary: Chapter 18**

The church wins many converts from the *efulefu*(titleless, worthless men). One day, several *osu,* or outcasts, come to church. Many of the converts move away from them, though they do not leave the service. Afterward, there is an uproar, but Mr. Kiaga firmly refuses to deny the outcasts membership to the church. He argues that they will not die if they cut their hair or break any of the other taboos that have been imposed upon them. Mr. Kiaga’s steadfast conviction persuades most of the other converts not to reject their new faith simply because the outcasts have joined them. The *osu* soon become the most zealous members of the church. To the clan’s disbelief, one boasts that he killed the sacred royal python. Okonkwo urges Mbanta to drive the Christians out with violence, but the rulers and elders decide to ostracize them instead. Okonkwo bitterly remarks that this is a “womanly” clan. After announcing the new policy of ostracism, the elders learn that the man who boasted of killing the snake has died of an illness. The villagers’ trust in their gods is thereby reaffirmed, and they cease to ostracize the converts.

**Summary: Chapter 19**

Okonkwo’s seven years of exile in Mbanta are drawing to an end. Before he returns to Umuofia, he provides a large feast for his mother’s kinsmen. He is grateful to them but secretly regrets the missed opportunity to have further increased his status and influence among his own clan. He also regrets having spent time with such un-masculine people. At the feast, one man expresses surprise that Okonkwo has been so generous with his food and another praises Okonkwo’s devotion to the kinship bond. He also expresses concern for the younger generation, as Christianity is winning people away from their families and traditions.

**Analysis: Chapters 17–19**

Nwoye is drawn to Christianity because it seems to answer his long-held doubts about his native religion, specifically the abandonment of twin newborns and Ikemefuna’s death. Furthermore, Nwoye feels himself exiled from his society because of his disbelief in its laws, and the church offers refuge to those whom society has cast out. The church’s value system will allow twins to live, for example, which offers comfort to the pregnant woman who has had to endure the casting away to die of her four sets of newborn twins. Similarly, men without titles turn to Christianity to find affirmation of their individual worth. The *osu* are able to discard others’ perception of them as members of an ostracized caste and enter the church as the equals of other converts.

Okonkwo, on the other hand, has good reason to reject Christianity. Should Mbanta not drive the missionaries away, his killing of Ikemefuna would lose part of its religious justification. The damage to his relationship with Nwoye also seems more pointless than before. Both matters become his mistake rather than the result of divine will. Moreover, men of high status like Okonkwo view the church as a threat because it undermines the cultural value of their accomplishments. Their titles and their positions as religious authorities and clan leaders lose force and prestige if men of lower status are not there—the great cannot be measured against the worthless if the worthless have disappeared.

Nwoye’s conversion devastates Okonkwo. Although he has always been harsh with his son, Okonkwo still believes in Nwoye’s potential to become a great clansman. Nwoye’s rejection of Igbo values, however, strikes a dire blow to Okonkwo’s hopes for him. Additionally, Nwoye’s actions undermine Okonkwo’s own status and prestige. It is, as Okonkwo thinks at the end of Chapter 17, as though all of Okonkwo’s hard work to distance himself from the legacy of his father has been destroyed. He sighs and thinks to himself: “Living fire begets cold impotent ash.”

Despite the challenges that the church represents, Mbanta is committed to peace and remains tolerant of the church’s presence. Even with the converts’ blatant disrespect of Umuofia’s customs—rumor has it that a convert has killed a royal python—the clan leaders vote for a peaceful solution, deciding to ostracize rather than attack the Christians. Okonkwo is not happy with their decision and advocates a violent reaction. His mentality is somewhat ironic: he believes that the village should act against its cultural values in order to preserve them.

The arrival of the white colonists and their religion weakens the kinship bonds so central to Igbo culture. Ancestral worship plays an important role in Igbo religion, and conversion to Christianity involves a partial rejection of the Igbo structure of kinship. The Christians tell the Igbo that they are all brothers and sons of God, replacing the literal ties of kinship with a metaphorical kinship structure through God. The overjoyed response of a missionary to Nwoye’s interest in attending school in another village—“Blessed is he who forsakes his father and his mother for my sake”—illustrates that the Christian church clearly recognizes Igbo kinship bonds as the central obstacle to the success of its missionaries.

Achebe does not present a clear-cut dichotomy of the white religion as evil and the Igbo religion as good. All along, the descriptions of many of the village’s ceremonies and rituals have been tongue-in-cheek. But the Christian missionaries increasingly win converts simply by pointing out the fallacy of Igbo beliefs—for example, those about the outcasts. When the outcasts cut their hair with no negative consequence, many villagers come to believe that the Christian god is more powerful than their own. Achebe himself is the son of Nigerian Christians, and it is hard not to think of his situation, in Chapter 17, when the narrator points out Okonkwo’s worry: “Suppose when he died all his male children decided to follow Nwoye’s steps and abandon their ancestors?”

**Chapters 20–21**

*How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us?*

**Summary: Chapter 20**

Okonkwo has planned since his first year in exile to rebuild his compound on a larger scale. He also wants to take two more wives and get titles for his sons. He has managed to get over Nwoye’s disgraceful departure, but he still regrets that Ezinma is a girl. He asked that she wait to marry in Umuofia, after his exile, to which she consented. She even persuaded her sister, Obiageli, to do the same. Okonkwo hopes to attract interest when he returns with two beautiful, marriageable daughters.

However, Umuofia is much changed after seven years. The church has grown in strength and the white men subject the villagers to their judicial system and rules of government. They are harsh and arrogant, and Okonkwo cannot believe that his clan has not driven the white men and their church out. Sorrowfully, Obierika explains that the church has weakened the ties of kinship and that it is too late to drive the white men out. Many of the clansmen are now on the white man’s side. Okonkwo observes that the white man is very shrewd because he came in peace and appeared to have only benevolent interests in the Africans, who thus permitted him to stay. They discuss the story of Aneto, who was hanged by the government after he killed a man with whom he had a dispute. Aneto had been unsatisfied with the new court’s ruling on the dispute because it ignored custom. Obierika and Okonkwo conclude their discussion on a fatalistic note, sitting in silence together.

**Summary: Chapter 21**

Many people of Umuofia are not entirely unhappy with the white men’s influence on their community. They have set up trading posts, and money is flowing into the village. Mr. Brown, the white missionary, restrains his flock from antagonizing the clan. He and Akunna, one of the clan’s leaders, meet often to debate and discuss their respective religious views. Akunna explains that the clan also has just one god, Chukwu, who created the world and the other gods. Mr. Brown replies that there are no other gods. He points to a carving and states that it is not a god but a piece of wood. Akunna agrees that it is a piece of wood, but wood created by Chukwu. Neither converts the other, but each leaves with a greater understanding of the other’s faith.

Mr. Brown builds a hospital and a school. He begs the villagers to send their children to school and warns them that if they do not, strangers who can read and write will come to rule them. His arguments are fairly effective and his hospital wins praise for its treatments. When Okonkwo first returns to Umuofia, Mr. Brown goes to tell him that Nwoye is in a training college for teachers. Okonkwo chases him away with threats of violence. Not long afterward, Mr. Brown’s health begins to fail, and, sad, he leaves his flock.

Okonkwo’s daughters attract many suitors, but to his grave disappointment, his clan takes no particular interest in his return. The ozo initiation ceremony occurs only once in three years, meaning that he must wait two years to initiate his sons. He deeply regrets the changes in his once warlike people.

**Analysis: Chapters 20–21**

Okonkwo’s status as a warrior and farmer and his clan’s perception of him have changed since his exile. His increasing loss of power and prestige brings him great anxiety. Any remaining doubt that Okonkwo is slightly crazy is quelled when we learn that he has been fantasizing about, and seriously planning for, his triumphant return to his village since his departure. Okonkwo has great expectations for himself—in Chapter 20 we are told that, “he saw himself taking the highest title of the land.”

Although Okonkwo still wishes that Ezinma were a boy, she remains a comfort to him throughout his troubles. Ironically, she best understands the dilemma of compromised manhood that her father faces. She sees how important her marriage is to Okonkwo’s position in the community, and she has considerable influence over her sister, who quickly agrees to postpone her marriage as well. After Nwoye’s departure, Okonkwo shows no sign of changing his practice of lecturing his sons about the rash and violent nature of true masculinity, showing his continued refusal to accept the fact that aggressiveness and pensiveness are not gender-defined, mutually exclusive traits.

Already having dealt with the missionaries in Mbanta, Okonkwo is now forced to deal with them in his own village. However, Mr. Brown, their leader, is far more enlightened than the average white colonist. Although he doesn’t really understand Igbo beliefs, he is capable of respecting them, and he does not want his flock to antagonize the clan. In a rare occurrence of cross-cultural understanding, he seems to share the clan’s value of peaceful, harmonious relations, and he debates religion with Akunna without insults or violence. His influence is largely benevolent, and Achebe uses Mr. Brown as a foil for the missionary who eventually takes his place, the more radical Reverend Smith.

*Things Fall Apart* is not one-sided in its portrayal of colonialism. It presents the economic benefits of cross-cultural contact and reveals the villagers’ delight in the hospital’s treatment of illnesses. The sympathetic Mr. Brown urges the Igbo to send their children to school because he knows that the colonial government will rob the Igbo of self-government if they do not know the language. In essence, he urges the Igbo to adapt so that they won’t lose all autonomy. Nevertheless, it is difficult to view colonialism in a tremendously positive light: suddenly the Igbo must relate to the colonial government on European terms. The story of Abame and the discussion of the new judicial system show how different the European frame of reference is from that of the *egwugwu*. The colonial government punishes individuals according to European cultural and religious values. For example, without first making an effort to understand the cultural and religious tradition behind the practice, the government pronounces the abandonment of newborn twins a punishable crime.

At the end of Chapter 20, Obierika points out that there is no way that the white man will be able to understand Umuofia’s customs without understanding its language. This idea mirrors one of Achebe’s purposes in writing *Things Fall Apart*: the book serves not only to remind the West that Africa has language and culture but also to provide an understanding of Igbo culture through language. Achebe shows us the extent to which cultural and linguistic structures and practices are intertwined, and he is able to re-create in English the cadences, images, and rhythms of the speech of the Igbo people. By the time things begin to “fall apart,” it becomes clear that what the colonialists have unraveled is the complex Igbo culture.

**Chapters 22–23**

**Summary: Chapter 22**

Reverend James Smith, a strict and intolerant man, replaces Mr. Brown. He demands the utmost obedience to the letter of the Bible and disapproves of Mr. Brown’s tolerant and unorthodox policies. 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 to the ground. They then gather in front of the church to confront Reverend Smith and his fellow Christians. They tell the Christians that they only wish to destroy the church in order to cleanse their village of Enoch’s horrible sin. Smith replies that he will stand his ground. He forbids them to touch the church, but his interpreter alters Smith’s statement for fear that the unvarnished truth will be too harsh and that he will suffer as the messenger of bad news. He tells the *egwugwu* that Smith demands that they leave the matter in his hands. They ignore Smith’s orders and burn the church.

**Summary: Chapter 23**

Okonkwo is almost happy again, despite the fact that his clan did not agree to kill the Christians or drive them away. Even so, he and the rest of the villagers are on their guard, and for the next two days they arm themselves with guns and machetes. The District Commissioner returns from his tour and requests that the leaders of Umuofia meet with him. They go, taking only their machetes because guns would be “unseemly.” The commissioner talks to them in condescending terms and says that they should discuss the church’s burning “as friends.” No sooner have they put their machetes on the floor than a group of soldiers surprises them. They are handcuffed and thrown in jail for several days, where they suffer insults and physical abuse. A kind of bail is set at two hundred bags of cowries. The court messengers tell the people of Umuofia that they must pay a fine of two hundred and fifty bags of cowries or their leaders will be hanged—by upping the price these messengers will make a profit as intermediaries. The town crier announces an emergency village meeting. Even Ezinma returns home from her twenty-eight-day visit to her future in-laws. The next morning they decide to collect the cowries necessary to pay the fine.

**Analysis: Chapters 22–23**

Reverend Smith causes a great deal of conflict between the church and the clan with his refusal to understand and respect traditional Igbo culture. Mr. Brown, by contrast, is far more lenient with the converts’ retention of some of their old beliefs and doesn’t draw as clear a line between the converts and the Igbo community. Smith, however, demands a complete rejection of the converts’ old religious beliefs. The text ironically comments that he “sees things as black and white.” While on the one hand this comment refers simply to an inability to grasp the gradations in a given situation, it also refers, of course, to race relations and colonial power. Interestingly, Achebe has named Smith’s predecessor “Brown,” as if to suggest that the latter’s practice of compromise and benevolence is in some way related to his ability to see the shades between the poles of black and white. Smith, by contrast, is a stereotypical European colonialist, as the generic quality of his name reflects. His inability to practice mutual respect and tolerance incites a dangerous zealous fervor in some of the more eager converts, such as Enoch. Smith’s attitude encourages Enoch to insult traditional Igbo culture.

That Enoch is the son of the snake-priest makes his suspected killing of the sacred python all the more dire a transgression. Enoch’s conversion and alleged attack on the python emblematize the transition from the old order to the new. The old religion, with its insistence on deism and animal worship, is overturned from within by one. In its place comes the new religion, which, for all its protestations of love and harmony, brandishes a fiery logic and fierce resolve to convert the Igbo at any cost.

Enoch figures as a double for Okonkwo, although they espouse different beliefs. They are similar in temperament, and each man rebels against the practices and legacies of his father. Like Okonkwo, Enoch feels above all others in his tradition. He also feels contempt for them—he imagines that every sermon is “preached for the benefit of his enemies,” and, in the middle of church, he gives knowing looks whenever he feels that his superiority has been affirmed. Most important, in his blind and unthinking adherence to Christianity, Enoch allows his violent desires to take over, just as Okonkwo is prone to do.

The language barrier between the colonists and the villagers enables a crucial misunderstanding to take place. Unawareness of his interpreter’s attempt to appease the villagers, Smith considers the burning of the church an open show of disrespect for the church and his authority. The power that the interpreter holds highlights the weaknesses and vulnerability created by the language gap, reinforcing Mr. Brown’s belief that reading and writing are essential skills for the villagers if they hope to maintain their autonomy. This miscommunication reminds us of Parrot’s trickiness in Ekwefi’s story about Tortoise.

Okonkwo’s desire to respond violently to the Christian church is not completely motivated by a desire to preserve his clan’s cultural traditions. He has been fantasizing for many years about making a big splash with his return to his village, but the church has changed things so much that his return fails to incite the interest that he has anticipated. He has also hoped that his daughters’ marriages would help to bring him some reflected glory but, again, his daughters’ suitors did not cause Umuofia to notice him. The opportunity to once again be a warrior represents Okonkwo’s last chance to recapture some of his former glory. His motivations for wanting revenge, including his humiliation in the jail, are deeply personal.

**Chapters 24–25**

**Summary: Chapter 24**

After their release, the prisoners return to the village with such brooding looks that the women and children from the village are afraid to greet them. The whole village is overcome with a tense and unnatural silence. Ezinma takes Okonkwo some food, and she and Obierika notice the whip marks on his back.

The village crier announces another meeting for the following morning, and the clan is filled with a sense of foreboding. At sunrise, the villagers gather. Okonkwo has slept very little out of excitement and anticipation. He has thought it over and decided on a course of action to which he will stick no matter what the village decides as a whole. He takes out his war dress and assesses his smoked raffia skirt, tall feather headgear, and shield as in adequate condition. He remembers his former glories in battle and ponders that the nature of man has changed. The meeting is packed with men from all of the clan’s nine villages.

The first speaker laments the damage that the white man and his church have done to the clan and bewails the desecration of the gods and ancestral spirits. He reminds the clan that it may have to spill clansmen’s blood if it enters into battle with the white men. In the middle of the speech, five court messengers approach the crowd. Their leader orders the meeting to end. No sooner have the words left the messenger’s mouth than Okonkwo kills him with two strokes of his machete. A tumult rises in the crowd, but not the kind for which Okonkwo hopes: the villagers allow the messengers to escape and bring the meeting to a conclusion. Someone even asks why Okonkwo killed the messenger. Understanding that his clan will not go to war, Okonkwo wipes his machete free of blood and departs.

*He had already chosen the title of the book . . . The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger.*

**Summary: Chapter 25**

When the District Commissioner arrives at Okonkwo’s compound, he finds a small group of men sitting outside. He asks for Okonkwo, and the men tell him that Okonkwo is not at home. The commissioner asks a second time, and Obierika repeats his initial answer. The commissioner starts to get angry and threatens to imprison them all if they do not cooperate. Obierika agrees to lead him to Okonkwo in return for some assistance. Although the commissioner does not understand the gist of the exchange, he follows Obierika and a group of clansmen. They proceed to a small bush behind Okonkwo’s compound, where they discover Okonkwo’s body dangling from a tree. He has hanged himself.

Obierika explains that suicide is a grave sin and his clansmen may not touch Okonkwo’s body. Though they have sent for strangers from a distant village to help take the body down, they also ask the commissioner for help. He asks why they cannot do it themselves, and they explain that his body is evil now and that only strangers may touch it. They are not allowed to bury it, but again, strangers can. Obierika displays an uncharacteristic flash of temper and lashes out at the commissioner, blaming him for Okonkwo’s death and praising his friend’s greatness. The commissioner decides to honor the group’s request, but he leaves and orders his messengers to do the work. As he departs, he congratulates himself for having added to his store of knowledge of African customs.

The commissioner, who is in the middle of writing a book about Africa, imagines that the circumstances of Okonkwo’s death will make an interesting paragraph or two, if not an entire chapter. He has already chosen the title: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger.*

**MAIN IDEAS**

**Themes -** *Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.*

**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.

**Varying Interpretations of Masculinity -** 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 the silent or incomprehensible continent that books such as *Heart of Darkness* made it out to be. 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 -** *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.

**Plot Analysis**

The narrative structure of *Things Fall Apart* follows a cyclical pattern that chronicles Okonkwo’s youth in Umuofia, his seven-year exile in Mbanta, and his eventual return home. Each of the novel’s three parts covers one of these periods of Okonkwo’s life. The novel’s three parts also map onto a gendered narrative structure that follows Okonkwo from fatherland to motherland back to fatherland. This gendered narrative structure functions in counterpoint with Okonkwo’s ongoing obsession with his own masculinity. Despite every attempt to gain status and become an exemplar of traditional Igbo masculinity, Okonkwo suffers from a feeling of relentless emasculation. Okonkwo’s struggle to achieve recognition repeatedly draws him into conflict with his community, eventually leading both to his own downfall and to that of Umuofia and the nine villages.

Part One of *Things Fall Apart* emphasizes Okonkwo’s coming-of-age and his attempts to distance himself from the disreputable legacy of his father, Unoka. Okonkwo’s tireless efforts and singular drive, along with his local fame as a wrestling champion, go a long way in securing him a place among the titled men of Umuofia. Yet Okonkwo’s zeal frequently leads him astray, as when he executes Ikemefuna, the young boy who became his surrogate son after being surrendered to Umuofia by another village to settle a violent dispute. When the clan elders decide it is time for Ikemefuna’s execution, an elder named Ogbuefi Ezeudu warns Okonkwo that he should “not bear a hand in [Ikemefuna’s] death.” Despite this warning, a moment of panic ultimately drives Okonkwo to bring his machete down on his surrogate son: “He was afraid of being weak.” At other points in Part One, Okonkwo shows himself quick to anger with his wives and short in patience with his children. His obsession with upward mobility and traditional masculinity tends to alienate others, leaving him in a precarious social position.

In addition to narrating Okonkwo’s struggle to build a distinguished reputation, Part One also provides a broad view of the precolonial Igbo cultural world. Achebe showcases numerous Igbo cultural values, religious beliefs, and ritual practices to provide the reader with a sense of the Igbo world. By the end of Part One, however, both Okonkwo’s life and the life of his community teeter on the brink of disaster. The first blow comes with the death of Ogbuefi Ezeudu, the oldest man in the village, and the same man who warned Okonkwo against killing Ikemefuna. The second blow comes when, during Ezeudu’s nighttime burial, Okonkwo’s gun misfires and kills Ezeudu’s sixteen-year-old son. The ominous manslaughter of Ezeudu’s son forces the remaining village elders to burn Okonkwo’s huts, kill his livestock, and send him and his family into exile for seven years.

Exiled for committing a “feminine” (i.e., accidental) crime, Okonkwo retreats from his fatherland to the land of his mother’s kin, a retreat that Okonkwo finds deeply emasculating. This personal sense of emasculation parallels larger cultural and historical changes, as white Christian missionaries begin to infiltrate the lower Niger region, including both Umuofia and Okonkwo’s site of exile, Mbanta. The personal and historical senses of emasculation come to a head when an old friend from Umuofia visits Okonkwo in Mbanta to inform him that his eldest son, Nwoye, has abandoned traditional Igbo beliefs and joined the Christian faith. Realizing that this event constitutes a major rupture in his patrilineal line, Okonkwo disowns Nwoye.

By the time Okonkwo and his family leave Mbanta, the growing presence of foreigners in Umuofia has already created deep internal divisions. In addition to the missionaries who arrived in his absence, government officials also begin to filter in, installing a foreign rule of law. The changes in Umuofia compromise Okonkwo’s homecoming, which he hoped would represent a new start. Finding himself once again in a passive, emasculated position, Okonkwo grows increasingly furious with his fellow Umuofians, who refuse to take violent action against the missionaries and force them out. Whereas others praise the British for providing increased access to resources along with medicine and education, Okonkwo sees the British as a cancer whose presence will eventually kill Umuofia and the nine villages.

Following another emasculating incident where colonial officers throw Okonkwo and others in jail and set a steep bail, Okonkwo takes an uncompromising position in favor of tradition. His final acts of violence—murder and suicide—cement the novel’s tragedy. This tragedy is, once again, deeply gendered. In the law of Umuofia, an intentional killing constitutes a “masculine” crime. Although Igbo tradition does not explicitly code suicide as a “feminine” crime, killing himself is an unspeakable act that strips Okonkwo of all honor. Thus, his suicide brings a final instance of emasculation, as he will be denied the honor of a proper burial.

**Protagonist**

Okonkwo is the novel’s protagonist. He’s a gifted athlete and a well-respected warrior, and he possesses a drive to achieve personal distinction among his peers. However, Okonkwo’s drive also leads him to act aggressively and to champion an inflated interpretation of masculinity. Okonkwo’s personality frequently brings him into conflict with others. For instance, his excessive commitment to masculinity comes to a head when he takes responsibility for executing his own adopted son, Ikemefuna. The killing of Ikemefuna has familial and communal repercussions. For one thing, it breaks the heart of Okonkwo’s eldest son, Nwoye, who had loved Ikemefuna like a brother and feels betrayed by his father’s brutal action. The killing of Ikemefuna also has a symbolic connection to the event that leads to Okonkwo’s exile—an event that affects the Umuofia community at large. Prior to Ikemefuna’s execution, Ogbuefi Ezeudu had warned Okonkwo against participating in the killing. Okonkwo ignores this advice. After Ezeudu dies, Okonkwo accidentally shoots and kills Ezeudu’s son during the burial. The ominous manslaughter of Ezeudu’s son represents a crime against the earth goddess that can only be cleansed by burning Okonkwo’s compound and forcing him into exile.

Over the course of the novel, Okonkwo grows increasingly at odds with the other members of Umuofia and the rest of the nine villages. As European missionaries and civil servants begin to infiltrate the region, Okonkwo wants to protect Igboland against foreign influences. While he longs to maintain traditional values and defend his people’s pride, other members of the nine villages feel increasingly attracted to what the Europeans have to offer. Okonkwo cannot accept the sense of emasculation that comes with the invasion of Europeans into Igbo territory, and he becomes furious as his fellow villagers flock to the missionaries to take advantage of health care and education. This conflict reaches its climax following the most emasculating event Okonkwo experiences in the novel, when the British arrest him and several other villagers. For Okonkwo the arrest is the last straw, and he wants the villages go to war. But when Okonkwo draws first blood by killing a British messenger, Okonkwo’s peers reject the act, signaling that Okonkwo and his values are no longer relevant. Sensing his final defeat, Okonkwo takes his own life.

**Antagonist**

*Things Fall Apart* does not have an obvious, single antagonist. In some sense, the whole world seems to be against Okonkwo. His family consistently fails to live up to his high expectations. His fellow villagers also let him down, preferring to cower before the Europeans rather than fight to preserve their own cultural traditions. By the end of the novel Okonkwo stands alone, at once “choked with hate” and overcome by sadness:

Okonkwo was deeply grieved. And it was not just a personal grief. He mourned for the clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart, and he mourned for the warlike men of Umuofia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women.

Although he feels betrayed by everyone in his community, Okonkwo may be his own worst enemy. His inflexible understanding of traditional Igbo masculinity leads him to develop an aggressive and unforgiving personality. Okonkwo’s personality allows no room for nuance or change, and alienates others. In the end, the fact the Okonkwo clings perhaps too desperately to traditional norms may qualify him as the novel’s main antagonist.

In addition to the antagonists that are internal to the Igbo world, the increasing European presence in Igboland represents a significant external antagonist. While the novel explores the numerous internal reasons why things in Umuofia fall apart, the historical occasion for this falling apart is ultimately the arrival of British missionaries and civil servants. In this sense, the more abstract antagonist of the novel is the foreign invasion. The arrival of the British sets in motion the long, violent process of colonialism that subverts and subjugates indigenous cultures and peoples. Okonkwo recognizes the threat the British pose from the very beginning, but others in the nine villages have mixed feelings. On the one hand, they know the foreigners are powerful and therefore dangerous. On the other hand, they also feel drawn to European medicine, education, and religion. The villagers’ mixed feelings speak to the contradiction of the so-called “civilizing mission” of European imperialism, which offers the gift of progress, but wrapped in violence. This contradiction makes the British a formidable antagonist.

**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 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.

**Motifs -** *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 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.

**Genre**

**Tragedy** - *Things Fall Apart* fits the definition of tragedy because it documents both the personal downfall of Okonkwo and the broader erosion of the Igbo cultural world that Okonkwo wishes to defend. From the very beginning of the novel, Achebe clarifies the extent to which Okonkwo’s status and sense of self-worth depend on normative Igbo ideas of masculinity. Okonkwo struggles to free himself from his father’s disreputable legacy and earn a place among the elders of Umuofia. His zealous pursuit of fame and recognition frequently brings him into conflict with others. Life is tough enough for Okonkwo before the incursion of Christian missionaries and British colonial forces, but the foreigners’ arrival in the nine villages marks the end of Igbo autonomy, as well as the end of any possibility for Okonkwo to earn honor as a clan elder. With this double deprivation leaving Okonkwo with no way out, he succumbs to despair and commits suicide, the most abominable act an Igbo man can perform.

*Things Fall Apart* even has a tragic-sounding title. The title is a quote from W. B. Yeats’s ominous poem “The Second Coming.” The reference to Yeats provides the novel with a sense of tragic inevitability. Achebe subtly underscores this sense of inevitability by echoing the language of Yeats’s poem throughout the story. Achebe echoes one line in particular: “Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.” The refrain *loosed upon the world* appears at two significant moments in *Things Fall Apart*. The first comes when Ekwefi disobeys a priestess’s command not to follow her to the oracle’s cave. In the terrifying dark of the night, Ekwefi recalls “those evil essences loosed upon the world by the potent ‘medicines’ which the tribe . . . had now forgotten how to control.” The second moment comes just before Okonkwo is cast out of Umuofia for the crime of manslaughter: “[If] the clan did not exact punishment for an offense against the great goddess, [the Earth goddess’s] wrath was loosed on all the land and not just on the offender.” In both cases, refrains of Yeats’s *loosed upon the world* indicate the threat of ultimate tragedy.

**Historical Fiction**

Historical fiction encompasses any narrative that takes place at a particular time in the past. Achebe’s novel fits into this broad genre since it tells a story set in the precolonial period, leading up to first contact with the British. Achebe does not make the precise timeframe of *Things Fall Apart*clear, which makes sense since precolonial Igbo people did not use the European system of months and years. Nevertheless, we can date the story to sometime in the mid to late nineteenth century, when British colonial forces slowly gained influence in the lower Niger delta region where Achebe locates the fictional village of Umuofia. Achebe offers a detailed portrait of precolonial Igbo customs, and he carefully avoids presenting an idealized picture of what village life was like before contact with Europeans. Written in the years just before Nigerian independence, Achebe’s historical vision carried political weight. Despite being fiction, *Things Fall Apart* insists on the rich reality of Igbo history, which European historical accounts tend to erase.

**Allusions**

**Chapter Two**

**Literary -** 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.

The phrase “red in tooth and claw” is an allusion to the poem “In Memoriam A. H. H.” (1849) by the nineteenth-century British poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson.

**Chapter Seven**

**Religious -** In this way the moons and the seasons passed. And then the locusts came.

This is an allusion to the biblical story of the plague of locusts told in the Book of Exodus.

**Religious -** 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 is an allusion to the biblical story of God testing Abraham’s faith by asking him to sacrifice his son, Isaac, as told in the Book of Genesis.

**Chapter Sixteen**

**Religious -** He told them . . . [e]vil men and all the heathen who in their blindness bowed to wood and stone were thrown into a fire that burned like palm-oil. But good men who worshipped the true God lived forever in His happy kingdom. “We have been sent . . . so that you may be saved when you die[.]”

This is an allusion to the Christian theological ideas of heaven, hell, and redemption.

**Religious -** It was a story of brothers who lived in darkness and in fear, ignorant of the love of God. It told of one sheep out on the hills, away from the gates of God and from the tender shepherd’s care.

This is an allusion to the biblical story of Cain and Abel as told in the Book of Genesis.

**Chapter Seventeen**

**Religious -** “Let us give them a portion of the Evil Forest. They boast about victory over death. Let us give them a real battlefield in which to show their victory.”

This is an allusion to the Christian belief in Jesus Christ’s victory over death by sacrificing himself to save humankind, thereby opening the gates of heaven for humans to live an everlasting life.

**Chapter Eighteen**

**Religious -** But they have cast you out like lepers.

This is a biblical allusion to the lepers who are healed by Jesus Christ.

**Chapter Twenty-One**

**Religious -** He had just sent Okonkwo’s son, Nwoye, who was now called Isaac, to the new training college for teachers in Umuru.

This is a biblical allusion to Abraham’s son, Isaac, who Abraham intended to sacrifice to God in a test of faith.

**Chapter Twenty-Two**

**Religious -** He believed in slaying the prophets of Baal.

This is an allusion to the worship of the pagan god Baal described in the Old Testament.

**Religious -** Enoch had killed an ancestral spirit, and Umuofia was thrown into confusion.

This is an allusion to the biblical story of Cain and Abel in the Old Testament, in which Cain establishes a line of evil in the world by murdering his brother, Abel. Cain’s first son is named Enoch.

**Chapter Twenty-Three**

**Historical/Political -** “We have a court of law where we judge cases and administer justice just as it is done in my own country under a great queen.[”]

This is an allusion to Queen Victoria, the reigning head of the British Empire from 1837 to 1901.

**Chapter Twenty-Four**

**Historical/Political -** He thought about wars in the past. The noblest, he thought, was the war against Isike.

This is an allusion to Chief Isike, a leader of the Nyamwezi people of Tanzania, who fought against German colonization.

**Style -** Throughout *Things Fall Apart* Achebe uses straightforward diction and simple sentence structures. His style creates a sense of formality befitting a historical narrative told from a third-person omniscient point of view. In keeping his language direct and to the point, Achebe invests his prose with the feeling of neutral reportage. Take, for example, the novel’s opening sentences:

Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honor to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino.

Although non-Igbo readers may stumble over the unfamiliar names, the sentences don’t pose particular difficulty in terms of grammar or vocabulary. Nor do the sentences contain unnecessary embellishments. Achebe uses simple verbs, with little variation. His tendency to rely on forms of the verb “to be” subtly underscores the sense of historical realism, encouraging the reader to believe in the Igbo cultural world the author so carefully depicts.

In contrast to Achebe’s use of basic grammar and vocabulary is his frequent incorporation of words, phrases, and even songs in the Igbo language. The inclusion of Igbo-language text demonstrates the specificity of the Igbo cultural world. Take, for instance, the term *ogbanje*, which refers to a child who dies over and over, only to return to its mother’s womb to be reborn. Or consider the *egwugwu* masqueraders who impersonate ancestral spirits. Both of these terms, along with many others in the novel, indicate specific beliefs and cultural practices that are not easily translatable and must appear in their original language. Aside from individual words, Achebe also includes longer sections of Igbo-language text. Sometimes he offers direct translations, as in the example of a proverb from chapter 12: “*Oji odu achu ijiji-o-o! (The one that uses its tail to drive flies away!)*” Other times the meaning of the text remains obscure, as in the example of a song from chapter 7:

*Eze elina, elina!  
Sala  
Eze ilikwa ya  
Ikwaba akwa oligholi  
Ebe Danda nechi eze  
Ebe Uzuzu nete egwu  
Sala (60)*

Regardless of whether Achebe translates them, the presence of Igbo-language words, phrases, and songs has the overall effect of situating *Things Fall Apart* within the rich and culturally specific world of the Igbo people.

**Point of View -** *Things Fall Apart* takes a third-person omniscient perspective, which means that the narrator knows and communicates the thoughts and feelings of all the characters. The narrator refuses to judge characters or their actions. For instance, despite Okonkwo’s resolute rejection of his father, the narrator presents Unoka’s story neutrally: “Unoka was never happy when it came to wars. . . . And so he changed the subject and talked about music, and his face beamed.” Although Unoka deviates from cultural norms dictating that men should be fearless warriors, the narrator does not judge him for his deviance, and instead indicates his love of music. Likewise, despite Okonkwo’s outward harshness, the narrator explains that his disagreeable characteristics obscure a deeper sensitivity: “Down in his heart Okonkwo was not a cruel man.” The narrator extends the same objectivity to European characters, such as the missionaries and the District Commissioner. Notably, however, given that the bulk of the narrative centers on Igbo perspectives, the reader has a difficult time feeling sympathetic with European perspectives, even if the narrator presents them objectively.

One curious aspect of point of view in *Things Fall Apart* is the ethnographic perspective threaded throughout the novel. At many points, the narrator inserts commentary to explain certain elements of Igbo culture. Take one example from early in the novel, when the skilled orator Okoye asks Unoka to repay a debt: “Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten.” Instead of presenting the exact proverbs Okoye uses to request that Unoka pay him back, the narrator simply informs the reader about the cultural importance of such rhetoric. The reader learns that proverbs function to diminish the impact of difficult conversations and can then apply this lesson when encountering other proverbs later in the story. Similar examples of an ethnographic perspective occur throughout the novel, and although they serve an explanatory, contextualizing purpose, they also impose a certain narrative distance. When the narrator explains, “Darkness held a vague terror for these people,” the use of the phrase “these people” creates added distance that situates the implied reader outside of the Igbo cultural world. The narrator therefore serves as a cultural intermediary.

**Tone** - The tone of *Things Fall Apart* is generally objective, meaning that the narrator presents a clear and straightforward account of events. Achebe provides no evidence that the reader should distrust the narrator, whose only embellishments tend to be explanatory, commenting on certain cultural practices that may be foreign to non-Igbo readers. The apparent reliability of the narrator plays a significant role in the novel. The tone allows Achebe to present a view of a dynamic and complex cultural world that fully supports the social, religious, and political life of its inhabitants. This representation works against Euro-American conceptions of African cultures as socially backward, superstitious, and politically disorganized. On the other hand, the novel’s objective tone amplifies the tragedy of the ending, when the British District Officer reduces the entire story into a single paragraph in a book meant to glorify the British Empire. Readers understand that, despite its pretense to historical accuracy, *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger* actually erases Igbo history, just as British colonialism threatens to erase the Igbo cultural world the novel presents.

The objective tone of *Things Fall Apart* also invites readers to make their own judgments about the characters and their actions. Achebe portrays characters and events with complexity and objectivity, enabling readers to judge for themselves whether Okonkwo is wrong to pursue status so single-mindedly, or whether Nwoye is right to follow his heart into the arms of Christian fellowship. Achebe also empowers non-Igbo readers to make informed judgments across cultural and historical divides. Although the world of *Things Fall Apart* is foreign to most readers, Achebe embeds enough context in the novel for us to understand how and when characters follow, go against, or exceed Igbo cultural norms. In the end, the objective yet nuanced tone of the novel allows readers to see that things fall apart not solely because of British colonial infiltration, but also because of internal divisions among the Igbo.

**Foreshadowing -** Foreshadowing in *Things Fall Apart* begins with the novel’s title, which indicates that the story to come does not end well. Achebe amplifies this sense of impending doom by prefacing Part One with an epigraph containing the quote from W. B. Yeats’s poem “The Second Coming” from which the novel gets its name. Yeats’s poem presents a deeply ominous vision of some mysterious future event, which its speaker envisions arising from the chaos and anarchy that characterizes the present moment. It is not at all clear, however, whether this future event bodes well or ill: “[W]hat rough beast,” the speaker asks, “Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?” Achebe’s use of Yeats is significant. Yeats wrote his poem at the start of the Irish War of Independence, when Ireland sought its freedom from British colonialism. While Yeats envisions an obscure future beyond the horror of colonialism, Achebe uses Yeats to signal not the end but the beginning of colonialism in Nigeria.

**The Arrival Of The British** - In addition to the title and the epigraph from Yeats, Achebe uses other strategies to foreshadow the arrival of the British. Take, for instance, the coming of the locusts. The narrator explains how the first swarm of locusts that came was small: “They were the harbingers sent to survey the land” before the rest descended. The locusts prefigure the missionaries, who in turn prefigure the eventual coming of colonial governance. The narrator makes this connection explicit later in the novel, when Obierika informs Okonkwo of the oracle’s prophecy following the first appearance of a white man in the nine villages: “It said that other white men were on their way. They were locusts, it said, and that first man was their harbinger sent to explore the terrain.” The narrator also uses proverbs to accomplish a similar effect. For instance, after the accident that results in Okonkwo’s exile, the narrator makes an ominous nod to proverbial wisdom: “As the elders said, if one finger brought oil it soiled the others.” This sentence appears at the very end of Part One and suggests the challenges that will arise throughout Parts Two and Three.

**Nwoye’s Conversion** - Although Nwoye’s conversion to Christianity comes as a surprise to Okonkwo, the narrator foreshadows this event by frequently underlining Nwoye’s frustration both with his father’s harsh expectations and with certain Igbo cultural practices he finds morally questionable. One clear instance of foreshadowing comes in Nwoye’s love for the tales his mother tells. Okonkwo dismisses these as “women’s” stories and forces Nwoye to listen to “masculine stories of violence and bloodshed” instead. When Nwoye later hears “the poetry of the new religion,” it captivates him like his mother’s stories and lays the groundwork for his conversion. In addition to its poetry, the Christian tradition also illuminates aspects of Igbo culture that trouble Nwoye. For example, “The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question . . . of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed.” These questions first haunted Nwoye many years earlier, which was the first time “something [gave] away inside of him,” foreshadowing his eventual decision to abandon Igbo customs.

**Okonkwo’s Suicide** - Just as clues predict Nwoye’s conversion, clues also predict Okonkwo’s suicide. The first clue comes early in the novel, when a farmer succumbs to despair following a particularly devastating yam harvest: “One man tied his cloth to a tree branch and hanged himself,” just like Okonkwo will do at the novel’s conclusion. A second clue comes much later, when Okonkwo is exiled in Mbanta and Obierika comes to deliver the profits from his friend’s yam harvest. In a morbid, joking exchange, Okonkwo expresses that he does not know how to thank Obierika. When Okonkwo indicates that it would not even be enough to kill one of his sons in gratitude, Obierika suggests an alternative: “Then kill yourself.” Although meant as a joke, the reader recalls this grim suggestion ten pages later when Obierika returns to Mbanta to inform Okonkwo of Nwoye’s conversion to Christianity. Okonkwo has a premonition of doom: “[He] felt a cold shudder run through him at the terrible prospect, like the prospect of annihilation.” The sense of doom Okonkwo feels here speaks at once to the annihilation of the Igbo world and to his own future suicide.

**Key Facts**

**Full Title:** *Things Fall Apart*

**Author:** Chinua Achebe

**Type Of Work:** Novel

**Genre:** Postcolonial critique; tragedy

**Language:** English

**Time And Place Written:** 1959, Nigeria

**Date Of First Publication:** 1959

**Publisher:** Heinemann Educational Books

**Narrator:** The narrator is anonymous but shows sympathy for the various residents of Umuofia.

**Point Of View:** The narration is in the third person, by an omniscient figure who focuses on Okonkwo but switches from character to character to detail the thoughts and motives of various individuals.

**Tone:** Ironic, tragic, satirical, fablelike

**Tense:** Past

**Setting (Time):** 1890s

**Setting (Place):** Lower Nigerian villages, Iguedo and Mbanta in particular

**Protagonist:** Okonkwo

**Major Conflict -** On one level, the conflict is between the traditional society of Umuofia and the new customs brought by the whites, which are in turn adopted by many of the villagers. Okonkwo also struggles to be as different from his deceased father as possible. He believes his father to have been weak, effeminate, lazy, ignominious, and poor. Consequently, Okonkwo strives to be strong, masculine, industrious, respected, and wealthy.

**Rising Action -** Enoch’s unmasking of an *egwugwu,* the *egwugwu’*s burning of the church, and the District Commissioner’s sneaky arrest of Umuofian leaders force the tension between Umuofia and the colonizers to a breaking point.

**Climax -** Okonkwo’s murder, or *uchu,* of a court messenger

**Falling Action -** The villagers allow the white government’s messengers to escape, and Okonkwo, realizing the weakness of his clan, commits suicide.

**Themes -** The struggle between tradition and change; varying interpre-tations of masculinity; language as a sign of cultural difference

**Motifs -** *Chi,* animal imagery

**Symbols -** The novel is highly symbolic, and it asks to be read in symbolic terms. Two of the main symbols are the locusts and fire. The locusts symbolize the white colonists descending upon the Africans, seeming to augur good but actually portending troublesome encounters. Fire epitomizes Okonkwo’s nature—he is fierce and destructive. A third symbol, the drums, represents the physical connection of the community of clansmen in Umuofia, and acts as a metaphorical heartbeat that beats in unison, uniting all the village members.

**Foreshadowing -** The author’s initial description of Ikemefuna as an “ill-fated boy,” which presages his eventual murder by Okonkwo; the arrival of the locusts, which symbolizes the eventual arrival of the colonizers; Obierika’s suggestion that Okonkwo kill himself, which foretells Okonkwo’s eventual suicide

**Important Quotes Explained**

**Quote 1**

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.*

Achebe uses this opening stanza of William Butler Yeats’s poem “The Second Coming,” from which the title of the novel is taken, as an epigraph to the novel. In invoking these lines, Achebe hints at the chaos that arises when a system collapses. That “the center cannot hold” is an ironic reference to both the imminent collapse of the African tribal system, threatened by the rise of imperialist bureaucracies, and the imminent disintegration of the British Empire. Achebe, writing in 1959, had the benefit of retrospection in depicting Nigerian society and British colonialism in the 1890s.

Yet Achebe’s allusion is not simply political, nor is it ironic on only one level. Yeats’s poem is about the Second Coming, a return and revelation of sorts. In *Things Fall Apart,* this revelation refers to the advent of the Christian missionaries (and the alleged revelation of their teachings), further satirizing their supposed benevolence in converting the Igbo. For an agricultural society accustomed to a series of cycles, including that of the locusts, the notion of return would be quite credible and familiar.

The hyperbolic and even contradictory nature of the passage’s language suggests the inability of humankind to thwart this collapse. “Mere anarchy” is an oxymoron in a sense, since the definition of anarchy implies an undeniably potent level of radicalism. The abstraction in the language makes the poem’s ideas universal: by referring to “[t]hings” falling apart as opposed to specifying what those collapsing or disintegrating things are, Yeats (and Achebe) leaves his words open to a greater range of interpretations. It is worth noting, in addition, that Achebe cuts away from the poem just as it picks up its momentum and begins to speak of “innocence drowned” and “blood-dimmed” tides. It is a measure of Achebe’s subtlety that he prefers a prologue that is understated and suggestive, rather than polemical, ranting, and violent.

**Quote 2** **-** *And at last the locusts did descend. They settled on every tree and on every blade of grass; they settled on the roofs and covered the bare ground. Mighty tree branches broke away under them, and the whole country became the brown-earth color of the vast, hungry swarm.*

This passage from Chapter 7 represents, in highly allegorical terms, the arrival of the colonizers. The locusts have been coming for years, but their symbolic significance in this passage lies in the inevitable arrival of the colonizers, which will alter the landscape and psychology of the Igbo people irreparably. The repetition of the phrase “They settled,” an example of the rhetorical device anaphora (in which a clause begins with the same word or words with which the previous clause begins), in addition to the repetition of the word “every,” reflects the suddenly ubiquitous presence of the locusts. The choice of the verb “settle,” of course, clearly refers to the colonizers. The branches that break under the weight of the locusts are symbols of the traditions and cultural roots of Igbo society, which can no longer survive under the onslaught of colonialism and white settlement. Ironically, the “vast, hungry swarm” is not white but rather brown like the earth; the emphasis, however, remains on the locusts’ consumptive nature and inescapable presence.

**Quote 3** **-** *Among the Igbo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten.*

This quote, from the narrator’s recounting, in Chapter 1, of how Unoka calmly interacted with someone to whom he owed money, alludes to the highly sophisticated art of rhetoric practiced by the Igbo. This rhetorical formalness offers insight into the misunderstandings that occur between the Igbo and the Europeans. Whereas the latter value efficiency and directness in their dealings, the Igbo value an adherence to their cultural traditions, which include certain patterns of dialogue considered inefficient by Western standards. The metaphor of words as food is highly appropriate, given the almost exclusively agricultural nature of Igbo society. They award the same value that they place on food, the sustenance of life, to words, the sustenance of interaction and hence community.

**Quote 4** **-** *He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger.*

This sentence, which concludes the novel, satirizes the entire tradition of western ethnography and imperialism itself as a cultural project, and it suggests that the ethnographer in question, the District Commissioner, knows very little about his subject and projects a great deal of his European colonialist values onto it. The language of the commissioner’s proposed title reveals how misguided he is: that he thinks of himself as someone who knows a great deal about pacifying the locals is highly ironic, since, in fact, he is a primary source of their distress, not their peace. Additionally, the notion of “[p]acification” is inherently offensive—a condescending conception of the natives as little more than helpless infants. Similarly, the label “[p]rimitive” comes across as a patronizing insult that reflects the commissioner’s ignorance about the Igbo and their complexly ritualized and highly formalized mode of life. The assertion that the commissioner has come up with a title “after much thought” accentuates the fact that the level of attention he has paid to his own thoughts and perceptions well exceeds that paid to the actual subject of the study.

**Quote 5** **-** *“Does the white man understand our custom about land?” “How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.”*

This exchange occurs at the end of Chapter 20 during the conversation between Obierika and Okonkwo. In the discussion, which centers on various events that have come to pass since the arrival of the colonialists, Obierika seems to voice Achebe’s own thoughts on colonialism. Upset by the fact that the white men have come and completely disregarded the Igbo sense of justice, Obierika points out the impossibility of the colonialists understanding anything about the Umuofians without speaking their language. He points out the ludicrousness of denigrating unfamiliar customs.

Yet, Obierika does not lay the blame wholly on the side of the white man. He feels also that the Umuofians who have converted to Christianity have consciously and wrongly turned their backs on their own “brothers.” This assessment complicates our understanding of the novel, as Achebe prevents us from seeing matters in clear-cut terms of good (black) versus bad (white). Indeed, Achebe elsewhere attempts to demonstrate the validity of some questions about Igbo culture and tradition. If religion and tradition are the threads that hold the clan together, and if that religion is flawed and that tradition vulnerable, it becomes hard to determine who is at fault for the resulting destruction. Certainly, Achebe does not blame the villagers. But, while this quotation displays his condemnation of the colonialists for their disrespect toward Igbo customs, it also shows his criticism of some clan members’ responses to the colonial presence.

**Generational divide**

*[Okonkwo] was a man of action, a man of war. Unlike his father he could stand the look of blood.*

When Umuofia’s town crier beats his drum one night to call the village to a meeting in the morning, Okonkwo speculates that the meeting may be about a clash with a neighboring clan. The narrator insists that such a prospect does not disturb Okonkwo, who has proven himself many times as “a man of war.” Okonkwo’s achievements in battle distinguish him from his father, Unoka, who does not possess the same masculine drive as his son, and whom Okonkwo sees as a coward.

*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.*

Okonkwo recognizes Nwoye’s predilection for the kinds of folktales his mother tells, and Okonkwo sees this as a cause for concern. In order to grow into a proper man, Okonkwo believes that Nwoye, along with his other sons, should be brought up on “masculine stories of violence and bloodshed.” For his part, Nwoye understands what his father expects of him, yet he secretly maintains his preference for stories that do not foreground violence. This fundamental disagreement points to the emotional distance between father and son, and prefigures Nwoye’s eventual conversion to Christianity.

*“I have only a short while to live, and so have Uchendu and Unachukwu and Emefo. But I fear for you young people because you do not understand how strong is the bond of kinship. You do not know what it is to speak with one voice.”*

The man who speaks these words is an unnamed elder from Okonkwo’s umunna (i.e., his mother’s clan). This elder addresses a group of young men and expresses his concerns about the obsolescence of Igbo traditions and the consequent dissolution of cultural and familial bonds. These words powerfully foreshadow the experience Okonkwo will have when he returns to Umuofia following his exile and finds his fatherland increasingly divided as more and more villagers flock to the Christian mission.

**Pride**

*Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements.*

These are the first two sentences of the novel, and they provide a memorable image of Okonkwo as an achievement-oriented individualist who has won great respect through impressive feats of valor. Okonkwo’s individual achievements not only provide him with the elevated status he desires in his community. These achievements also bolster Okonkwo’s personal sense of pride. But Okonkwo’s pride is his greatest weakness. Throughout the novel, Okonkwo frequently comes into conflict with others when he feels that they expect him to compromise his pride and abandon his values. In such moments, Okonkwo digs his heels in deeper.

*‘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.’*

Okonkwo speaks these words during a clan assembly in Mbanta, when the men of the village convene to decide what action to take against a Christian convert who killed the royal python. In frustrated response to the other clan members’ pacifism, Okonkwo argues that the Christians must be forced out. The language he uses in this quotation underscores how his intolerance of the Christians represents an issue of pride. In order to maintain one’s pride, Okonkwo implies, a man cannot allow another man to desecrate his home. Instead, he must “take a stick and break [the other man’s] head.”

*Okonkwo’s return to his native land was not as memorable as he had wished. It was true his two beautiful daughters aroused great interest among suitors and marriage negotiations were soon in progress, but, beyond that, Umuofia did not appear to have taken any special notice of the warrior’s return.*

After spending the bulk of the novel attempting to build his status and maintain his personal pride, Okonkwo returns to Umuofia from seven years of exile to find that, in the end, his efforts have largely failed. Despite the fact that his two daughters are likely to marry well and help him forge significant new ties within the community, little remains of the recognition he enjoyed prior to his sojourn in Mbanta. With this major blow to his pride, Okonkwo seems fated for a downward spiral.

**Repression**

*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.*

The narrator makes this comment early in the novel, immediately after describing how Okonkwo’s fiery temperament inspires fear in his family members, and particularly in his children. In this quotation, the narrator does not simply distinguish between Okonkwo’s outward behavior and his internal thoughts. Instead, the narrator suggests that Okonkwo does not fully know his own thoughts and feelings, and that his life is unknowingly dominated by fear. This means that Okonkwo represses his fear, and his outward cruelty results directly from this 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.*

Here the narrator slightly revises the earlier implication that Okonkwo does not know his own thoughts and feelings. This quotation suggests, alternatively, that Okonkwo does have some awareness of an emotional life rooted solely in the “masculine” expression of anger. In this case, the narrator points to Okonkwo having a soft spot for his children, and particularly for his adopted surrogate son, Ikemefuna. Despite the affection he feels, however, Okonkwo’s long-held assumptions about masculine behavior prevent him from externalizing that affection, so he overcompensates with unkindness.

*Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut [Ikemefuna] down. He was afraid of being thought weak.*

Despite the deep affection that Okonkwo has for Ikemefuna, his deep fear of failure and weakness ultimately wins out. Achebe renders the moment of Ikemefuna’s execution concisely, but with great psychological complexity. Before Okonkwo brings down his machete, Ikemefuna has already been struck by another man. In his shock, the boy turns to Okonkwo for help. At once feeling and fearing the filial bond that he has developed with Ikemefuna, Okonkwo instinctively resorts to a demonstration of strength that violently represses his affection.

**Drum language**

*The drums were still beating, persistent and unchanging. Their sound was no longer a separate thing from the living village. It was like the pulsation of its heart. It throbbed in the air, in the sunshine, and even in the trees, and filled the village with excitement.*

The opening ceremony for Umuofia’s great annual wrestling match has begun, and the drums resound throughout the village. The persistent drums signal the initiation of the event. But the drumbeat also builds anticipation, and everyone in Okonkwo’s family feels anxious to get to the village ilo and watch the spectacle. Okonkwo’s second wife, Ekwefi, has a longstanding love of wrestling, and Okonkwo himself “trembled with the desire to conquer and subdue.” In this quotation Achebe captures the pervasive sense of excitement by characterizing the drumbeat as a language that speaks not in words but in the community’s lifeblood.

*The drum sounded again and the flute blew. The egwugwu house was now a pandemonium of quavering voices: Aru oyim de dededei! filled the air as the spirits of the ancestors, just emerged from the earth, greeted themselves in their esoteric language.*

Drums once again call a large crowd to assemble, this time for a ceremony in which the titled men of Umuofia will settle a marriage dispute. This ceremony features the egwugwu, or ancestral spirits who appear in the form of masked impersonators, and the drums serve to activate the “pandemonium of quavering voices” emanating from the nearby structure where the egwugwu have gathered. In this moment, then, the drum language functions in contrast with the “esoteric language” of the spirits, stirring up a sense of excitement and mystery among the observers who eagerly await their appearance.

*Go-di-di-go-go-di-go. Di-go-go-di-go. It was the ekwe talking to the clan. One of the things every man learned was the language of the hollowed-out instrument.*

This transcription of drum language opens chapter thirteen. Instead of translating the message of the “talking” drum, the narrator begins by informing the reader that such a message is readily understandable among the Igbo people, who become fluent in drum language early on. The narrator leaves the reader in suspense for several sentences before revealing the meaning of the ekwe’s rhythmic message: “Somebody was dead.” By actually transcribing the drum language here, the narrator elevates it to a status similar to the other languages that appear in the novel: English and Igbo.

**Ethnographic distance**

*‘Is that me?’ Ekwefi called back. That was the way people answered calls from outside. They never answered yes for fear it might be an evil spirit calling.*

When Okonkwo’s first wife calls out from her hut, Ekwefi answers, “Is that me?” This response will seem odd for non-Igbo readers, and the narrator seems to know it, which explains why the narrator goes on to describe the cultural logic behind Ekwefi’s response. In a world populated by potentially malign spirits, it is best to avoid inadvertently inviting such a spirit into one’s home. According to the narrator, answering “Yes” to a call from outside one’s hut could have very bad consequences indeed.

*Behind [the elders] was the big and ancient silk-cotton tree which was sacred. Spirits of good children lived in that tree waiting to be born. On ordinary days young women who desired children came to sit under its shade.*

With drums beating, the people of Umuofia turn out in the central village green, or ilo, where the annual wrestling match is about to begin. The narrator describes how the drummers sit in front of the spectators, and how all of them face the elders. The narrator then observes that the sacred silk-cotton tree that stands behind the elders functions as a symbol for fertility, and that women sit in its shade to improve their chances at getting pregnant. This ethnographic observation, though seemingly tangential, represents the meaningfulness of the Igbo cultural world.

*Okonkwo’s wives, and perhaps other women as well, might have noticed that the second egwugwu had the springy walk of Okonkwo. And they might also have noticed that Okonkwo was not among the titled men and elders who sat behind the row of egwugwu. But if they thought these things they kept them within themselves.*

As the narrator indicates elsewhere in this scene, the egwugwu are ancestral spirits that manifest in the flesh of masqueraders, which means that the individual identities of the masqueraders themselves effectively disappears. In this moment, however, the narrator points out that the Igbo are capable of holding both identities (i.e., spirit, man) in mind at the same time, even if these identities appear contradictory. In addition to being an instance of the narrator’s ethnographic distance, this moment also demonstrates that the Igbo are not “superstitious” in the sense that the Christian missionaries will declare later in the novel.

**Chapters 1–3**

* [Okonkwo] had a slight stammer and whenever he was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough, he would use his fists. He had no patience with unsuccessful men. He had no patience with his father.
* Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered. As the elders said, if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings.
* Umuofia was feared by all its neighbors. It was powerful in war and in magic, and its priests and medicine men were feared in all the surrounding country. Its most potent war-medicine was as old as the clan itself. Nobody knew how old.
* Yam, the kind of crops, was a man’s crop.

**Chapters 4–6**

* ‘Looking at a king’s mouth,’ said an old man, ‘one would think he never sucked at his mother’s breast.’
* Nwoye always wondered who Nnadi was and why he should live all by himself, cooking and eating. In the end he decided that Nnadi must live in that land of Ikemefuna’s favorite story where the ant holds his court in the splendor and the sands dance forever.
* [S]omehow 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.
* Okonkwo cleared his throat and moved his feet to the beat of the drums. It filled him with fire as it had always done from his youth. He trembled with the desire to conquer and subdue. It was like the desire for woman.
* The drummers stopped for a brief rest before the real matches. Their bodies shone with sweat, and they took up fans and began to fan themselves. They also drank water from small pots and ate kola nuts. They became ordinary human beings again, talking and laughing among themselves and with others who stood near them.

**Chapters 7–8**

* [Okonkwo] wanted [Nwoye] to be a prosperous man, having enough in his barn to feed the ancestors with regular sacrifices. And so he was always happy when he heard him grumbling about women. That showed that in time he would be able to control his women-folk. No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children (and especially his women) he was not really a man.
* They were returning home with baskets of yams from a distant farm across the stream when they heard the voice of an infant crying in the thick forest. A sudden hush had fallen on the women, who had been talking, and they had quickened their steps. 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 chick that will grow into a cock can be spotted the very day it hatches. I have done my best to make Nwoye grow into a man, but there is too much of his mother in him.

**Chapters 9–11**

* As [Ekwefi] buried one child after another her sorrow gave way to the despair and then to grim resignation. The birth of her children, which should be a woman’s crowning glory, became for Ekwefi mere physical agony devoid of promise. The naming ceremony after seven market weeks became an empty ritual.
* After the death of Ekwefi’s second child, Okonkwo had gone to a medicine man, who was also a diviner of the Afa Oracle, to inquire what was amiss. This man told him that the child was an ogbanje, one of those wicked children who, when they died, entered their mothers’ wombs to be born again.
* Everybody knew [Ezinma] 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.

**Chapters 12–13**

* The land of the living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors. There was coming and going between then, especially at festivals and also when an old man died, because an old man was very close to the ancestors. A man’s life from birth to death was a series of transition rites which brought him nearer and nearer to his ancestors.
* The crime [of murder] was of two kinds, male and female. Okonkwo had committed the female, because it had been inadvertent. He could return to the clan after seven years.
* Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offense he had committed inadvertently? But although [Okonkwo] thought for a long time he found no answer. He was merely led into greater complexities. He remembered his wife’s twin children, whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed?

**Chapters 14–16**

* [Okonkwo] had been cast out of his clan like a fish onto a dry, sandy beach, panting. Clearly his personal god or *chi* was not made for great things. A man could not rise beyond the destiny of his *chi*. The saying of the elders was not true—that if a man said yea his *chi* also affirmed. Here was a man whose *chi* said nay despite his own affirmation.
* A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland.
* ‘I am greatly afraid. We have heard stories about white men who made the powerful guns and the strong drinks and took slaves across the seas, but no one thought the stories were true.’
* That was a source of great sorrow to the leaders of the clan; but many of them believed that the strange faith and the white man’s god would not last. None of his converts was a man whose word was heeded in the assembly of the people. None of them was a man of title. They were mostly the kind of people that were called *efulefu*, worthless, empty men.
* ‘Your gods are not alive and cannot do you any harm,’ replied the white man. ‘They are pieces of wood and stone.’

**Chapters 17–19**

* An “evil forest” was, therefore, alive with sinister forces and powers of darkness. It was such a forest that the rulers of Mbanta gave to the missionaries. They did not really want them in their clan, and so they made them that offer which nobody in his right senses would accept.
* Now that [Okonkwo] had time to think of it, his son’s crime stood out in its stark enormity. To abandon the gods of one’s father and go about with a lot of effeminate men clucking like old hens was the very depth of abomination.
* Although he had prospered in his motherland Okonkwo knew that he would have prospered even more in Umuofia, in the land of his fathers where men were bold and warlike.

**Chapters 20–21**

* The clan was like a lizard; if it lost its tail it soon grew another.
* There were many men and women in Umuofia who did not feel as strongly as Okonkwo about the new dispensation. The white man had indeed brought a lunatic religion, but he had also built a trading store and for the first time palm-oil and kernel became things of great price, and much money flowed into Umuofia.
* 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.
* Okonkwo was deeply grieved. And it was not just a personal grief. He mourned for the clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart, and he mourned for the warlike men of Umuofia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women.

**Chapters 22–23**

* Mr. Brown’s successor was the Reverend James Smith, and he was a different kind of man. He condemned openly Mr. Brown’s policy of compromise and accommodation. He saw things as black and white. And black was evil.
* One of the greatest crimes a man could commit was to unmask an *egwugwu* in public, or to say or do anything which might reduce its immortal prestige in the eyes of the uninitiated. And this was what Enoch did.
* The leaders of the Christians had met together at Mr. Smith’s parsonage on the previous night. As they deliberated they could hear the Mother of Spirits wailing for her son. The chilling sound affected Mr. Smith, and for the first time he seemed to be afraid.
* Umuofia was like a startled animal with ears erect, sniffling the silent, ominous air and not knowing which way to run.

**Chapters 24–25**

Okonkwo slept very little that night. The bitterness in his heart was now mixed with a kind of childlike excitement. Before he had gone to bed he had brought down his war dress, which he had not touched since his return from exile. He had shaken out his smoked raffia skirt and examined his tall feather head-gear and his shield. They were all satisfactory, he thought.

If we fight the stranger we shall hit our brothers and perhaps shed the blood of a clansman. But we must do it. Our fathers never dreamed of such a thing, they never killed their brothers. But a white man never came to them. So we must do what our fathers would never have done.

Okonkwo stood looking at the dead man. He knew that Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action. He discerned fright in that tumult.

That was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog.

In the many years in which he had toiled to bring civilization to different parts of Africa he had learned a number of things. One of them was that a District Officer must never attend to such undignified details as cutting a hanged man from the tree. Such attention would give the natives a poor opinion of him. In the book which he planned to write he would stress that point.

**Key Questions and Answers**

**1) How does Ikemefuna become Okonkwo’s adopted son?**

Ikemefuna becomes Okonkwo’s adopted son through a dispute between the village of Umuofia and a neighboring village, Mbaino. After a woman from Umuofia is murdered in the Mbaino market, Okonkwo travels to Mbaino and demands that the village surrender a virgin and a young man in order to avoid war with Umuofia. Mbaino complies, and upon return to Umuofia, Okonkwo turns the young man, Ikemefuna, over to his first wife for safekeeping.

**2) Why is Ezinma so special to Okonkwo?**

Ezinma is the only child of Okonkwo’s second wife, Ekwefi, and she is also Okonkwo’s favorite daughter. Okonkwo feels drawn to Ezinma for her precocious intelligence and her strong will. More than any of Okonkwo’s other children, Ezinma possesses all of the personality traits required to grow into a distinguished member of society. In other words, she is the most masculine of Okonkwo’s children, and Okonkwo frequently laments that she was not born a boy.

**3) Why does Nwoye convert to Christianity?**

Nwoye converts to Christianity largely to reject the excessive standard of masculinity his father wants him up to uphold. Nwoye is not at all like his father, and Okonkwo constantly punishes him for being different. Stifled by his father’s expectations, Nwoye runs away and joins the European church. Nwoye’s conversion also provides him an opportunity to learn reading and writing, which, along with the poetry of the Bible, feeds his love of storytelling.

**4) What causes Okonkwo’s exile from Umuofia?**

Okonkwo’s gun goes off unexpectedly during Ogbuefi Ezeudu’s funeral, accidentally killing the dead man’s son. Killing a clansman, even unintentionally, constitutes a crime against the earth goddess. To compensate for the crime and protect the rest of the villagers from the earth goddess’s wrath, Ezeudu’s descendants burn Okonkwo’s compound, slaughter his livestock, and banish him from the village for a period of seven years.

**5) Why does Okonkwo hang himself?**

After Okonkwo and others return from a period of imprisonment by the Europeans, members of the nine villages gather to discuss a course of action. Four European messengers appear and try to stop the meeting, and Okonkwo immediately kills one of them. But instead of applauding the murder, as he expects they will, Okonkwo’s clansmen grow furious. Okonkwo sees his clansmen’s reaction as a sign that no one will stand with him in defense of the nine villages. Rather than face the ultimate emasculation of succumbing to the white men, Okonkwo returns to his compound and hangs himself.

**6) Why are the villagers shocked when Okonkwo beats his wife during the Week of Peace?**

The villagers are shocked when Okonkwo beats his wife during the Week of Peace because these days mark a sacred time during which the villagers of Umuofia honor the earth goddess and secure her protection and blessings for the year. As the narrator explains, “It was unheard of to beat somebody during the sacred week.” Any violation of peace during the week puts the community at risk for a bad harvest—or worse. For his crime, Okonkwo is fined one length of cloth and one hundred cowries, and he is asked to sacrifice one of his goats and one of his hens.

**7) Why are the villagers excited whenever the locusts come?**

The villagers are excited whenever the locusts come because the locusts are a delicious, plentiful source of food. For this reason, the villagers view the locusts as a blessing rather than a nuisance. According to the elders, the locusts are guarded in a cave by a race of “stunted men” who release the locusts once a year for seven years, one time per generation.

**8) Why does Nwoye admire Ikemefuna?**

Nwoye admires Ikemefuna because Ikemefuna possesses many skills Nwoye lacks and Ikemefuna is an engaging presence to be around. Nwoye looks up to Ikemefuna as an older brother. Ikemefuna knows how to set traps to capture rodents and make flutes out of bamboo sticks. Even though Nwoye knows most of the folk tales Ikemefuna tells, Ikemefuna’s versions have a fresh spin to them since he comes from a different clan, and this fascinates Nwoye.

**9) What warning does Ogbuefi Ezeudu give Okonkwo about killing Ikemefuna?**

Ogbuefi Ezeudu, a village elder, warns Okonkwo that he should not kill Ikemefuna because Ikemefuna regards Okonkwo as his father and to kill him would be a sin. Ogbuefi Ezeudu clarifies the warning by adding that even though the Oracle sanctioned Ikemefuna’s death and Ikemefuna is not Okonkwo’s biological son, Okonkwo should not bear a hand in the boy’s death since the “boy calls [him] father.” Okonkwo would essentially be committing an act of filicide by killing the boy.

**10) Why does Okonkwo kill Ikemefuna?**

Okonkwo kills Ikemefuna because he doesn’t want to appear weak in front of his fellow clansmen. Ogbuefi Ezeudu, a village elder, informs Okonkwo that the Oracle has decreed that Ikemefuna must be killed but that Okonkwo should not be the one to kill him, since Ikemefuna regards Okonkwo as a father. When Okonkwo and a group of clansmen take Ikemefuna to the woods to be killed, a clansman’s blow fails to do the job, and the clansman yells to Okonkwo for help. Afraid of appearing weak, Okonkwo deals the fatal blow to Ikemefuna despite Ogbuefi Ezeudu’s warning.

**11) Why do the villagers burn Okonkwo’s buildings and kill his animals?**

The villagers burn Okonkwo’s buildings and kill his animals to purge the village of his sin, which was the accidental killing of a village elder’s son, an act the villagers view as a crime against the earth goddess. In order to cleanse the earth of Okonkwo’s wrongdoing, his belongings must be burned and his animals destroyed. Even though the villagers’ actions seem to be a form of revenge or punishment, there is no malicious intent in their actions; they are merely “taking care of business.”

**12) Why are the villagers confused by Mr. Brown’s ideas?**

The villagers are confused by Mr. Brown’s ideas because his ideas are, on the surface, illogical. Mr. Brown’s explanation of the Christian concept of the Holy Trinity, which states that God exists in three forms—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—confuses the villagers. They do not understand how the Holy Trinity, essentially three beings, can be accepted as one god. The villagers also do not understand why Mr. Brown condemns their worshipping of multiple gods as sacrilege but worships what they view as three gods himself.

**13) What is an *egwugwu*, and why are the villagers horrified when Enoch unmasks one?**

According to tradition, any village ancestor who has been buried in the earth returns during an annual ceremony as an *egwugwu*. In reality, an *egwugwu* is a clansman wearing a mask representing an ancestor who has come back from the dead. As such, unmasking an *egwugwu* is viewed as the equivalent to killing the returned ancestral spirit and “reduc[ing] its immortal prestige in the eyes of the uninitiated.” For this reason, the villagers are shocked and horrified when Enoch unmasks one of the *egwugwu*.

**14) Why does Okonkwo kill the District Commissioner’s messenger?**

Okonkwo kills the District Commissioner’s messenger to rebel against the Commissioner and the missionaries. Prior to this event, the Commissioner tricked the clansmen and put them in jail for burning down his church. Knowing the clansmen might retaliate, the Commissioner sent court messengers to try to stop Okonkwo and the other clansmen from organizing an uprising against him. Okonkwo’s killing of the messenger sends a clear message to the Commissioner.

**15) Why can’t Okonkwo be buried?**

Okonkwo can’t be buried because he committed suicide. As the clansman tells the District Commissioner, “It is an abomination for a man to take his own life . . . an offense against the Earth.” For this reason, the clansman cannot bury Okonkwo’s body since it is now considered “evil.” Putting something evil into the ground is an offense to the earth goddess and would most certainly curse the ground and the clan.

**What Does the Ending Mean?**

**Summary** What Does the Ending Mean?

*Things Fall Apart* ends with two related tragedies. The first tragedy is Okonkwo’s death. Following an outburst of unsanctioned violence in which he kills a European messenger who tries to stop a meeting among clan elders, Okonkwo realizes that he is no longer in sync with his society. No one applauds his action, and Okonkwo sees that he alone wishes to go to war with the Europeans. Caught between his rage that the nine villages would succumb to European rule and the futility of fighting the Europeans alone, Okonkwo retreats to his compound and hangs himself. With this act, Okonkwo lives up to his role as a tragic hero whose struggles with society ultimately lead to death. Okonkwo’s death also has another, culturally specific implication. As the narrator explains, the Igbo consider suicide a “feminine” rather than a “masculine” crime. Okonkwo’s suicide is an unspeakable act that strips him of all honor and denies him the right to an honorable burial. Okonkwo dies an outcast, banished from the very society he fought to protect.

The novel’s second tragedy occurs on the broader level of history. Achebe signals this second tragedy by ending the novel with a shift from an African to a European perspective. In the novel’s final two pages, the District Commissioner reflects on how he will depict the events surrounding Okonkwo’s death in the book he’s working on, titled *The Pacification of the Tribes of the Lower Niger*. The District Commissioner threatens to erase the specificity of Okonkwo’s tragedy by removing the events from their context and simplifying them into a tale meant to entertain his readers: “The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading.” Even more troubling, the District Commissioner threatens to reduce Okonkwo’s story to a fleeting anecdote in the European history of conquest: “One could almost write a whole chapter on [this man]. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate.” Decontextualized and stripped of all complexity and nuance, Okonkwo’s story will be tragically lost to history.