

Desk Copy - Pollock

Things Fall Apart

by Chinua Achebe

Aims:

- To study the novel in detail and appreciate its plot, characterisation and themes.
- To understand the historical, social and cultural context of the novel.

Characters in the novel

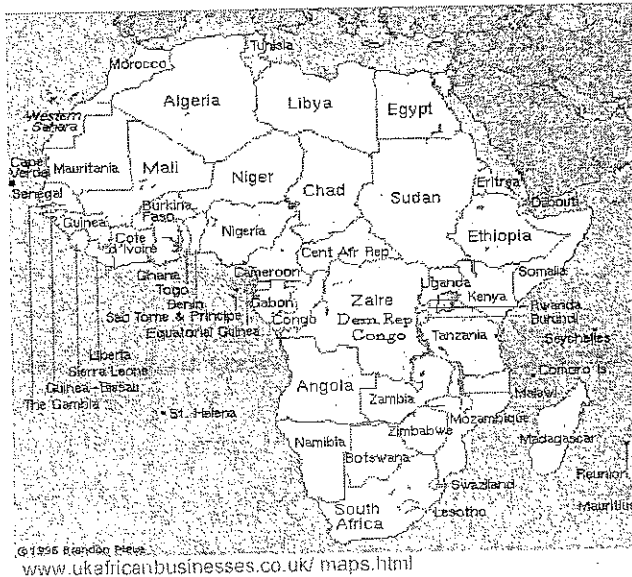
- ❑ Okonkwo (Oh-kawn-kwoh): The central character of Things Fall Apart, a leader of the African Igbo (or Ibo in English) community of Umuofia (Oo-moo-oh-fee-ah), known as a fierce warrior as well as a successful farmer, although he is a man still in his thirties. He has three wives and several children who live in their homes in his village compound. He is determined to overcome the stigma left by his father's laziness and wastefulness.
- ❑ Unoka (Ooh-no-kah): Okonkwo's father, known for his weakness and lack of responsibility.
- ❑ Nwoye (Nuh-woh-yeh): Okonkwo's oldest son, age twelve at the book's beginning. By nature, he is a sensitive young man. He later joins the missionaries and is rejected by his father.
- ❑ Ikemefuna (Ee-keh-meh-foo.nah): A boy of fourteen when he is given to Umuofia by a neighboring village to avoid war, he is a clever, resourceful young man. He is killed when the Oracle decides it.
- ❑ Ekwefi (Eh-kweh-fee): Okonkwo's second wife, mother of Ezinma, her only living child.
- ❑ Ezinma (Eh-zeen-mah): Daughter of Ekwefi and Okonkwo; Ekwefi's only surviving child. She is believed to be an ogbanje, or changeling child. She is Okonkwo's favourite and he wishes that she was a boy.
- ❑ Ojiubo (Oh-jee-ooh-boh): Okonkwo's third wife and Mother of several of Okonkwo's children.
- ❑ Obierika (Oh-bee-air-ee-kah): Okonkwo's best friend in Umuofia. He often represents the voice of reason. He is the father of Maduka (son) and Ekwuke (daughter).
- ❑ Chielo (Chee-eh-loh): A village widow who is also the priestess of Agbala.
- ❑ Agbala (Ahg-bah-lah): The Oracle of the Hills and the Caves, she influences all aspects of Umuofian life (based on the real Oracle at Awka who controlled Igbo life for centuries).
- ❑ Uchendu (Ooh-chen-du): Okonkwo's uncle who welcomes him to his mother's homeland of Mbanta when he has been exiled from Umuofia. He teaches Okonkwo to face the future without self-pity.
- ❑ Mr. Brown: The first white Christian missionary in Umuofia and Mbanta, an understanding and accommodating man, he is inclined to listen to the Igbos.
- ❑ Mr. Kiaga (Kee-ah-gah): The native interpreter for the missionaries, he is a teacher and a leader of the new church in Mbanta.
- ❑ The Reverend James Smith: A strict, stereotypical white Christian missionary, he takes over the church after Mr. Brown's departure.
- ❑ The District Commissioner: A stern, stereotypical white colonial administrator of Umuofia, he follows regulations to the letter and has little knowledge or understanding of the people for whom he tries to administer a new government.

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THE SETTING

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The novel is set in Nigeria towards the end of the Nineteenth century, in the period just before the arrival of the white man. It centres on the tribe of people known as the Ibo.



THE STYLE OF THE NOVEL

Achebe has written this novel in order to show us what life was like in Nigeria in a specific historical period. He uses a number of techniques in order to make the writing authentic and you will need to comment on the effect of these when you are writing about the novel.

Simple sentences

Achebe uses a simple style of writing in most of the novel, because he wants to tell the story in the way that it might be told by a member of the Ibo tribe. The beginning of the novel shows this clearly.

Imagery

Achebe uses many similes and metaphors to bring the narrative to life and he uses the sorts of comparisons that relate to the Ibo experience, for example:

'Okonkwo's fame had grown like a bush fire in the harmattan.'

(Simile in chapter 1)

'Proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten.'

(Metaphor in Chapter 1)

'He grew rapidly like a yam tendril in the rainy season.'

(Simile in Chapter 7)

Proverbs

These wise sayings are very important as they are used to comment on human behaviour and they show the importance of oral communication within the community. Achebe uses them throughout the book to reflect this and they are drawn from Ibo experience or religious beliefs, for example:

'The sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them.'

'A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing.'

Folk Tales

These are another important feature of Achebe's novel, they are important because they relate to the events of the novel and they show us the values of the society. Examples are:

- The Mosquito and the Ear (Chapter 9)
- The Tortoise and the birds (Chapter 11)

RELIGION

The religious beliefs of the Ibo people are very different from Christian beliefs. In summary they believe in :

- The Supreme God or deity (Chukwu) who is most powerful and controls fertility and creation. He is represented by many other minor gods and sacrifices are made through them.
- Personal Gods (Chi) which are believed to be in control of the person's destiny.
- Ancestors, these are often represented by masked men (egwugwu) at social gatherings and are greatly respected and worshipped. There is constant interaction between the worlds of the living and the dead.

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Study Guide Student Copy

PART ONE

Chapter One

Vocabulary

improvident – rash, careless

kite – bird of prey

impending – upcoming

plaintive – sad

prowess – strength

harmattan – a hot, dry wind

1. List four physical characteristics that separate Okonkwo's appearance from that of the other men in his village.
2. How did Okonkwo bring honor to his village as a young man? What other achievements make him an important man?
3. Why does Okonkwo have no patience with his own father, Unoka? What good qualities does Unoka have that his son fails to appreciate?
4. Find an example of a proverb in this first chapter.
5. Locate a simile on the first page and explain it.

Chapter Two

Vocabulary

discerned – figured out
imperious – domineering
emissary – ambassador
capricious – impulsive

1. What is the general truth stated in the following proverb : “When the moon is shining the cripple becomes hungry for a walk”? (Pg. 10)
2. How does Okonkwo reaffirm his greatness as a warrior to the people of his village?
3. What is the “normal course of action” when a member of a neighboring clan murders one of the Ibo?
4. How does the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves prevent the powerful Umuofia from going to war with their neighbors?
5. Why does Okonkwo behave as a cruel man when, “perhaps down in his heart Okonkwo is not a cruel man”? (Pg. 13)
6. Briefly describe the physical layout of Okonkwo’s compound.
7. What does the reader know about Ikemefuna’s fate by the end of the second chapter? What literary term is employed?

Chapter Three

Vocabulary

tendrils – threads

contemptible – horrible

dregs – the worst parts

malicious – evil

1. Describe the entrance to the shrine called Agbala. How does a worshipper get a message from the gods? What is a chi?
2. What proverb does Okonkwo use to compliment Nwakibie?
3. Describe the custom of wine sharing presented in this chapter.
4. Find a proverb describing why the palm-wine tapper gives up his trade, a proverb Okonkwo uses to convince Nwakibie to give him some yams, and a proverb Nwakibie uses to explain why he is stingy with his yams.
5. State a general theme for this story using the piece of wisdom about failure that Unoka offers his son. Why does Okonkwo not listen to his father's words?
6. List the crops that the women are responsible for in the Ibo clan.

Chapter Four

Vocabulary

brusqueness – rudeness

benevolent – kind

plait – hair braid

repentant – sorry

valediction – leaving

deftly – skillfully

arduous – difficult

poignant – moving or touching

1. Comment on the general truth Okonkwo learns from the following Ibo proverb:
“When a man says yes his chi says yes also. Okonkwo said yes very strongly;
so his chi agreed.” (Pg. 27)

2. What are Ikemefuna’s special skills that make him popular with Nwoye?

3. What is the importance of the Week of Peace to the Ibo clan? In the past, how did the clan punish a man for breaking the peace? What is Okonkwo’s punishment?

4. What sentence in this chapter indicates that Nwoye’s life is greatly influenced by Ikemefuna’s presence in their household?

Chapter Five

Vocabulary

reveled – celebrated

tentative – not fully worked out

pottage – soup or stew

calabashes – gourds

1. Why is Ani the most important deity in the lives of the Ibo people? What is the New Yam Festival?
2. What story is always told at the New Yam Festival? Why is it an example of a legend?
3. In what ways do you think Okonkwo's second wife both respects and dislikes her husband?
4. What is the purpose of the drums beating the day of the New Yam Festival? What might these drums symbolize?
5. What does Okonkwo say to criticize his daughter Ezinma, even though he really is fond of her? Why do you think he is so harsh?

Chapter Six

Vocabulary

grandeess – rulers

taut – tight

disembodied – without a body

fronds – leaves of plants like ferns and palm trees

prophesied – predicted the future

1. How do the drums reflect the emotions of the crowds at the wrestling match?

2. Why do you think Ezinma's mother says to the priestess "Perhaps she has come to stay"?
(Pg. 48)

3. Prove the following statement with incidents from the story: Physical strength is greatly admired by the Ibo people.

Chapter Seven

Vocabulary

feign – fake

rebuked – scolded

harbinger – omen of the future

copiously – a great deal of

amiss – wrong

tendrils – thin, new growth on a plant

wily – clever, sneaky

espied – saw

1. How is Nwoye changed after Ikemefuna's arrival?
2. Why do you think Nwoye's mother tells the story about the Earth and the Sky? Why is this story considered a myth? What is Nwoye's dilemma?
3. What advice does Ezeudu give to Okonkwo regarding Ikemefuna's death?
4. Why does Okonkwo kill Ikemefuna? How does this action also destroy his relationship with his son Nwoye?
5. Find a metaphor in this chapter.

Chapter Eight

Vocabulary

coiffure – hairdo

snuff – tobacco

succulent – full and firm

1. How does Okonkwo feel about his role in Ikemefuna's death?
2. What do we learn about the role of women in the Ibo society by the death of Ogbuefi Ndulue?
3. Why is Obierika sometimes sorry he has the title of *ozo*?
4. What general truth is found in the following proverb?
"When mother-cow is chewing grass its young ones watch its mouth." (Pgs. 70-71)
5. How is Akueke's bride price settled? Find a proverb explaining the negotiating process.
6. What do the Ibo people think about white men in general? What other evidence has there been in the story proving the existence of white men in Nigeria?

Chapter Nine

Vocabulary

specious – false

agility – skill

devoid – minus or empty

manifest – made clear

audacity - boldness

wont — accustomed

1. What is an ogbanje? How does Okonkwo deal with it? What does the medicine man do to ensure Ezinma does not return to the spirit world?
2. What lesson is taught by the fable about the snake lizard and his mother?
3. What evidence is there that male children are important to Ibo women?