

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Things Fall Apart

by Chinua Achebe

written by Michelle Ryan

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Things Fall Apart

Objectives

By the end of this unit, the student will be able to:

1. understand how African literature and literary traditions influence Achebe's writing style.
2. respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
3. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
4. offer a close reading of *Things Fall Apart* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel.
5. discuss the dramatic development of the narrative in terms of exposition, conflict, climax, and resolution.
6. demonstrate a literal, personal, interpretive, and critical understanding of the text.
7. explain the importance of the title as a theme in the novel.
8. explain the central conflicts in the narrative, and explain the nature of the internal and external conflicts with which various characters cope.
9. understand the novel as an exploration of the ramifications of Colonialism.
10. examine Okonkwo as a tragic hero.
11. analyze the importance of literary elements like dramatic irony, foreshadowing, and suspense on the development of the story.
12. trace and discuss recurring imagery.
13. discuss the use of proverbs in the narrative and how they contribute to the overall effect of the novel.
14. analyze how point of view influences the literary narrative.
15. explain how Achebe uses character foils to illuminate the differences between the principal characters.

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Lecture

I. Achebe and His Times

Chinua Achebe, full name Albert Chinualumogu Achebe, was born in Nigeria. His father was a teacher in a missionary school; Achebe was raised as a Protestant. As a youth, Achebe attended the Government College of Umuahia and the University College of Ibadan. While in college, Achebe reclaimed his cultural name and no longer used his christened name, Albert, after Prince Albert of England. While in school, Achebe studied English, history, and theology.

Achebe began writing in the 1950s; much of his work centers on the political and social problems that face his nation, particularly during the time of unrest that came when Britain influenced the government and religion of Nigeria. His writing explores the ramifications of Colonialism. Achebe went on to found a publishing company with a fellow Nigerian writer. He since has published many other novels, short stories, and essays.

II. About the Book

Things Fall Apart, published in 1958, was Achebe's first novel. With it, Achebe established that he is one of the foremost Nigerian writers and has managed to incorporate his African heritage into English-language novels. Achebe's literature draws on African oral tradition as well as societal traditions to create a text that is accepted not only for its reflection of the human condition, but also its ability to reflect African culture.

Things Fall Apart follows Okonkwo, a powerful leader in a traditional Ibo tribe in the village of Umuofia. The story takes place in a traditional village in the 1880s before European missionaries and other outsiders have arrived. The clan is traditional in its practice of religion, sacrifice, the supernatural, and relationships among the tribal community. Driven by the memory of his lazy and unsuccessful father, Okonkwo spends his life using his strength and power to earn the respect of his fellow tribesmen. However, the novel depicts the changes that can occur when a tribal leader is banished from the community, despite the respect that he has earned from his tribesmen, and outsiders attempt to alter cultural traditions.

On October 1, 1960, Nigeria received its independence from British colonial rule. Achebe wrote this novel two years before this event. His goal was to illustrate for non-African audiences what Nigeria was like before colonization.

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The Main Allusion

Chinua Achebe's title, *Things Fall Apart*, is an allusion to "The Second Coming" by William Butler Yeats, a Nobel-Prize-winning, Irish poet and dramatist. In this poem, Yeats relates his vision of the apocalyptic end of one culture and the rise of another. Notice that, in the early lines, the passing of the current age is accompanied by a loss of control, the end of traditional authority. In the final lines, the envisioned new age is frightful.

Clearly, Achebe's Okonkwo, witnessing the end of civilization as he knows it, experiences the same emotions as Yeats's speaker below:

The Second Coming

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,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.
Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming!
Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

– William Butler Yeats, *January 1919*

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Part One

Chapter One

1. Reread the first sentence of the novel. What purposes does this sentence serve?

2. Explain the rhetorical strategies used in the first two paragraphs.

3. Explain the use of figurative devices in the following line: "Amalinze was a wily craftsman, but Okonkwo was as slippery as a fish in water."

4. Explain the imagery in the following line: "That was many years ago, twenty years or more, and during this time Okonkwo's fame had grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan."

5. What is the rhetorical effect used in the following line: "The drums beat and the flutes sang and the spectators held their breath." What effect does it create?

Chapter Five

1. Achebe begins Chapter Five by describing the Feast of the New Yam. What does the reader learn about Umuofian culture through this description?

2. Who is responsible for the major preparations for the Feast of the New Yam? What does this tell the reader about Ibo culture?

3. Why does Okonkwo become angry before the New Yam Festival? Was his anger directed in the right place? Why or why not?

4. For what reason does Achebe repeat the word “beautiful” when describing the way the women decorate their bodies and cut their children’s hair into patterns?

5. What is Ekwefi’s favorite part of the festival? Why?

6. When people call for one another, why do they respond “Is that me?”

Chapter Ten

1. Explain the disconnect between the chapters. Why would Achebe choose to do this?

2. Read the following lines:

“It was clear from the way the crowd stood or sat that the ceremony was for men. There were many women, but they looked on from the fringe like outsiders.”

What does this excerpt suggest about the role of women? What is significant about the placement of this passage relative to what has come immediately before, and what will come immediately after?

3. Explain the irony of the trial in this chapter. Is justice served in the *egwugwu's* judgment?

4. How does the case brought before the *egwugwu* parallel Okonkwo's life?

Part Two

Chapter Fourteen

1. What does Okonkwo learn about family in his transition to life in Mbanta?

2. Cite several literary devices that Achebe uses when describing nature after the first rains and analyze the effect Achebe creates with their use.

3. How does Okonkwo compare beginning life as an older person to beginning life as a young man?

4. Why is Okonkwo unable to deal with his punishment? How does he seem to be behaving by sitting in “a silent half-sleep”?

5. Explain the significance of being “cast out of his clan like a fish onto a dry, sandy beach, panting.”

6. What does Okonkwo find discouraging about his *chi*?

Chapter Twenty

1. The first part of the novel focuses on Okonkwo and how he rises to prominence in his society. The first part also details customs and traditions among the people. The second part of the novel depicts Okonkwo's exile, and the beginning of both his decline and the potential decline of Ibo culture. Chapter Twenty is the beginning of Part Three. What do you think Part Three will be about?

2. Explain the meaning of the following simile: "The clan was like a lizard; if it lost its tail it soon grew another."

3. What effect does Achebe achieve with his use of anaphora in the first page of this chapter?

4. Why is it ironic that Okonkwo now blames his *chi* for his losses, especially the "tragedy of his first son"?

5. Why, according to Obierka, did the village not resist the white man's initial encroachment? Why won't he agree to fight now that Okonkwo has returned?

Chapter Twenty-Five

1. Why has Okonkwo committed suicide?

2. Given his role as the tragic hero in the novel, is it inevitable that Okonkwo commit suicide?

3. On what kind of note does the novel end?
