



Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Chinua Achebe's

Things Fall Apart

from

Multiple Critical Perspectives™

by

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General Introduction to the Work

Chinua Achebe: The Author and His Work

THINGS FALL APART WAS PUBLISHED in 1959, the first novel by a young Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe. He has since published numerous novels, poems, and other works and has become an acclaimed voice in African literature. This novel, which he was hesitant to publish at the outset, is now considered the seminal novel about Africa by an African—the first modern African novel. It has been translated into dozens of languages from its original English.

Achebe was born in 1930 in Ogidi in eastern Nigeria, in what was then a British colony. The son of Christian parents of the Ibo ethnic group, he was educated at schools developed and run by the British. He learned English as a child and read classic English writers such as Charles Dickens and Robert Louis Stevenson. Early on, he absorbed the stereotypical European view of Africans in literature as primitive and uncultured, but he eventually came to realize that what he was reading did not reflect African culture as he knew it to be. After graduating from University in 1954, Achebe worked for the Nigerian Broadcasting Corp. and began his writing career.

In an essay on Achebe, the late John Povey of UCLA, founder of The John Povey Centre for the Study of English in Southern Africa, quotes Achebe: “First I had to tell Europe that the arrogance on which she sought to excuse her pillage of Africa, i.e., that Africa was the Primordial Void, was sheer humbug; that Africa had a history, a religion, a civilization. ... Actually it was not to Europe alone that I spoke. I spoke also to that part of ourselves that had come to accept Europe’s opinion of us,” (<http://biography.jrank.org/pages/4085/Achebe-Chinua>). His fiction was deeply entwined with his political views as Nigeria gained independence from Britain in 1960 and moved toward civil war. The Ibo attempted to form their own nation of Biafra in 1967 and Achebe served as Biafra’s ambassador. After a bloody war, the effort collapsed in 1970. Achebe continued writing and teaching.

Achebe came to the U.S. in 1972 to teach English at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. He returned to the University of Nigeria in 1976 and continued to write and publish novels. A car accident in 1990 left him confined to a wheelchair with spinal damage and precipitated a return to the U.S., where he teaches at Bard College in New York. He won the prestigious Man Booker International Prize for literature in 2007.

New Historicism Applied to *Things Fall Apart*



Notes on New Historicism

A COMMON TENDENCY IN THE STUDY of literature written in, and/or set in, a past or foreign culture is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as presented in the text and as it really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons.

First, the “truth” of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the “truth” is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the “losers” of history hardly ever get heard. The culture that is dominated by another is often lost to history because it is the powerful who have the resources to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Nazi story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture of power and should be included in any world view. Since they often contradict “traditional” (i.e., the winner’s) history, there is no way to really know the absolute truth.

Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it is set), it also *participates* in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it “reflects.” To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the South during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of, and change certain elements of, that culture.



Activity One

Placing *Things Fall Apart* into A Historical Context

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: *Things Fall Apart*: New Historicist Activity One Timeline and Placing the Events of *Things Fall Apart* into a Historical Context.
2. Assign students to pairs or small groups.
3. Have each group examine the timeline and the novel.
4. Then have them speculate *when* certain key plot events in the novel probably took place. In the spaces provided, have them state the evidence from the timeline on which they are basing their speculation.

NOTE: Emphasize to students that they have neither time nor room to try to place every discrete plot event on the chart, but if they can infer from the novel and the timeline, for instance, that Hugh Clifford's term as colonial governor began during Okonkwo's exile, then they can hypothesize that that exile began c. 1916 - 1917.

5. Reconvene the class and allow each pair or small group to report its findings.
6. Discuss any key discrepancies.

NOTE: Students do not need to agree or even come to consensus, unless the discrepancy is the result of a blatant misread of either the novel or the timeline.

7. Discuss any significant problems (for example, are there instances in which the chronological order of the novel seems to contradict the chronology of events on the time sheet?).
8. As a class, discuss the following questions:
 - How intentional is Achebe in creating a historical background for his novel?
 - How closely aligned is the novel to actual movements and events?
 - What kind of view of historical events beyond Umuofia do we get from the novel?
 - Does Achebe's purpose seem more to report or persuade? Why do you think that?
 - How effective is he in achieving his purpose? Why?
 - What evidence is there in the novel that Achebe was writing primarily for a European audience?

Feminist Theory Applied to *Things Fall Apart*



Notes on the Feminist Theory

Feminism is an evolving philosophy, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.



Activity One

Examining the Portrayal of Women in the Novel

1. As a class, identify the most notable female characters in the book (e.g., Ekwefi, Ezinma, etc.)
2. Still in full-class discussion, list the various social and cultural roles filled by women in the novel (e.g., nurture the young, serve as priestess/oracle, etc.).
3. Divide the class into an even number of groups.
4. Assign half of the groups (or allow them to choose) to examine the book for evidence of a positive attitude toward women. The other half will examine the book for evidence of a negative attitude toward women.
5. Reconvene the class and allow each group to report its findings.
6. As a class, discuss whether *Things Fall Apart* presents generally a positive or misogynistic portrayal of women.
 - Does the novel's portrayal of women reflect more the society about which Achebe has written or Achebe's own attitudes and values? Why?

NOTE: Students do not need to agree or come to consensus. The point is for them simply to examine the issue.

Mythological/Archetypal Criticism Applied to *Things Fall Apart*



Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all closely related. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who examine texts from a mythological/archetypal standpoint are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is “a figure...that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested.” He believed that human beings were born with an innate knowledge of certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology, long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe. Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.). Every culture has a creation story, a life-after-death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When looking for archetypes or myths, critics take note of general themes, characters, and situations that recur in literature and myth. In modern times, traditional literary and mythological archetypes are successfully translated to film. For example, Jane Austen's *Emma* was adapted into the popular Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to feel that they know the characters in a work with very little background information. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!



Activity One

Examining Okonkwo's Exile as the Quest

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: *Things Fall Apart*: Archetypal Activity One: Information Sheet and *Things Fall Apart* Archetypal Activity One: Graphic.
2. Have students, either individually or in pairs, consider Okonkwo's exile, the events surrounding it, and its aftermath and complete the graphic to indicate which events and characters correspond to the elements of the hero's quest.
3. Reconvene the class and have groups report their findings.
4. As a class, discuss how students have compared Okonkwo's exile to a quest, and then discuss the following questions:
 - What motivates Okonkwo's exile (both the physical reason and any emotional, psychological, and/or spiritual factors that may be seen to have contributed to it)?
 - What is the archetypal significance of the family's journey to Okonkwo's *Motherland*?
 - What is significant about Okonkwo's reaction to his exile? Does Okonkwo ever grow or change from his initial reaction?
 - What is the ultimate result of Okonkwo's exile? Why is this significant?
 - Given Okonkwo's nature and the events surrounding his exile, can Okonkwo be considered a type of Hero? Why or why not?