

Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

Things Fall Apart

by Chinua Achebe

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Part One

Chapter One

1. As you may know, William Butler Yeats was a famous Irish poet who lived from 1869 to 1939. Many parts from his poems are quoted even today, as witness the title of Chinua Achebe's novel. Below are other full or partial lines from Yeats' poems. Beside each write 1) the title of the poem from which the words come, and 2) in complete sentences, a paragraph which tells what that poem is about. The first one is given as a sample. Please follow that format. You may need to use the Internet.

- a. "Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart."
From: Easter, 1916

This poem is written about the Irish Rebellion against the ruling British in Ireland in 1916.

- b. "An aged man is but a paltry thing.
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless..."
From:

- c. "When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire..."
From:

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2. The author of *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe, though a superb writer, has never won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Between the years 1986 and 2003, however, there have been four African winners of the Nobel Prize for Literature. Research the names of these African winners. Beside each name list:
 - a. the year in which the writer won,
 - b. the country from which the writer has come, the name of one of the books that he or she has written.
3. If you leaf back through the pages of Chapter One, you will see that none of the unfamiliar words are explained. Many of the words are, of course, unique to Africa, and particularly to the country and time in which this novel is set, Nigeria in the late 1800s. Another African writer, J. M. Coetzee, in his latest book, *Elizabeth Costello*, has one of his character say the following:

“African novelists may write about Africa, about African experiences, but they seem to me to be glancing over their shoulder all the time they write, at the foreigners who will read them. Whether they like it or not, they have accepted the role of interpreter, interpreting Africa to their readers.”

Imagine you are asked to defend either of the opinions listed below in a class debate about the paragraph above in relation to *Things Fall Apart*. You may take a position of agreeing or disagreeing. Base your opinion on Achebe’s writing in the first chapter and on Coetzee’s comments. Write out the speech you would give to the class defending your opinion.

Choose either position to write about:

- A. *Things Fall Apart* seems to be written primarily for the enjoyment and understanding of African readers.
- B. *Things Fall Apart* seems more directed to non-African readers to bring them an understanding of Nigerian tribal society.

Chapter Two

4. The life of the village of Umuofia is simply but beautifully drawn in this novel. Look closely at this chapter to see how the pride in the values of the community is understated in describing its possessions and ways. To distinguish between that time and the present time, list the things which were present only in the African society of the 1890s. Beside it, list which equivalent things would be present in today's times. Please follow the format below, where the first item is given as a sample.

Past time

Palm oil lamp

Present time

Electric lamp

5. We all are deeply interested in how our country is governed as well as war and peace. In this chapter we see how the Umuofia people govern themselves and how peace or war is decided in the village. Imagine that you have firm views about how government should work in issues of war or peace. Keeping the way of the Umuofias in mind in these matters, write a letter to the President of the United States telling him of your feelings about our government today. You also might want to offer advice to him about any situation in the world. Be sure that your letter is respectful as you state your opinions. You could begin your letter as follows:

President _____
The White House
Washington, DC
Dear President _____,

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6. We read that “Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand.” We know also that Okonkwo is greatly admired for his strength in the village, but is also feared. There are examples in this chapter of how unkindly Okonkwo treats his wives and children. Imagine you are either one of Okonkwo’s wives or one of his children. Think of what you want to communicate to Okonkwo and write out what you would be telling him.

Chapter Three

7. Scholars often discuss the basis for different forms of literature. One type mentioned is the tradition of written literature found predominantly in European cultures. In Africa, however, it is different. An exception to this is the ancient literature of Ireland. Literature there has its basis in the oral tradition and was found more commonly among tribal cultures where the stories and history of the culture were spoken, remembered, and passed on orally instead of being written down in books. Reread Chapter Three. List two paragraphs in the chapter that you feel would be more pleasurable and important to hear out loud, in the oral tradition. When you finish that, write a few sentence telling why you feel your choice would work better if spoken aloud.
8. The language of the novel, is liberally laced with Ibo words and phrases. It is also written simply and directly in an English that is highly descriptive and dignified. This is so even if the story being told concerns the gods and goddesses of the Ibo and their unique tribal customs. Read the last two paragraphs of Chapter Three carefully. Try your hand at writing an added last paragraph in the manner of Achebe. Your paragraph could begin as follows:

Okonkwo felt his face becoming hot with his anger. He wished...

9. We learn that Okonkwo's tribe, as well as Okonkwo himself, believed that "Yam, the king of crops, was a man's crop." Research the history of the yam. You will find it interesting. Recap its history in a paragraph that would be easily understood by a young child so that he or she would also find it interesting. Finish up your paragraph by telling why you think some of the Ibo of Africa believed it to be the king of crops and "a man's crop."